

Zimmerman, Joshua D.: *Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality. The Bund and the Polish Socialist Party in Late Czarist Russia, 1892-1914*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2004. ISBN: 0-299-1946-47; XV, 360 S.

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Since the Second World War, the history of the Jewish Labor Bund has captured significant scholarly attention with important works by Jonathan Frankel, Gertrud Pickhan, Daniel Blatman, Henry Tobias, and Yoav Peled leading the field.<sup>1</sup> Most of these studies appeared in the 1980s and 1990s as interest in Polish-Jewish history started to increase substantially. With the emergence of two key journals in the 1970s and 1980s, „Polin“ and „Gal-Ed“, a number of mostly North American and Israeli historians have worked on an array of topics related to the history of Jews in Poland.<sup>2</sup> Recently, Polish historians, particularly those associated with the Mordechai Anielewicz Center for Researching and Teaching the History and Culture of Jews in Poland at the University of Warsaw, have added to this growing interest in Polish-Jewish history with a number of publications that have appeared in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>3</sup> In „Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality“, Joshua D. Zimmerman, Associate Professor of History at Yeshiva University, makes an important contribution to both this growing literature on the Polish-Jewish past and to the history of the Jewish Labor Bund. Based on his dissertation completed at Brandeis University under the direction of Antony Polonsky (one of the leading historians of Polish-Jewish history and editor of „Polin“), Zimmerman examines an aspect of the Bund’s history that has largely been overlooked by historians: its complex, entangled, and often tense relationship with the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, or PPS).

In particular, Zimmerman explores the ways in which the relationship between the PPS and the Bund shaped how both parties dealt with the problem of Jewish nationality: Jewish claims to extraterritorial cultural autonomy and distinctiveness. At first, both the

PPS and the Bund rejected the notion of Jewish cultural autonomy and adopted a largely integrationist approach. Established in 1892, the PPS combined socialism with the Polish revolutionary tradition and called for the creation of a breakaway federal republic of the Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian nations. But Jews were not considered a „nation“ in this vision of a future Polish state. Although the PPS argued that Jews would be granted full civil rights as citizens, it hoped that they would eventually lose their „Jewishness“ and assimilate into Polish culture.

During the first years after its founding in 1897, the Bund took a similar assimilationist stance toward the problem of Jewish nationality. As Zimmerman clearly shows, the first Jewish socialist leaders in Tsarist Russia initially intended to turn workers into conscious Social Democrats so that they could assist in the Russian revolutionary movement. Distinctly Jewish issues were simply not on their minds. As one contemporary recalled, „we were assimilationists who did not even dream of a separate Jewish mass movement. We saw our task as preparing cadres for the Russian revolutionary movement and acclimatizing them to Russian culture“ (p. 44). In the first few years after the Bund’s founding, this integrationist stance remained largely unchanged except for that the party did begin to produce propaganda leaflets in Yiddish in order to

<sup>1</sup> Frankel, Jonathan, *Prophecy and Politics. Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews*, Cambridge 1981; Pickhan, Gertrud, *Gegen den Strom. Der Allgemeine Jüdische Arbeiterbund „Bund“ in Polen, 1918-1939*, Stuttgart 2001; Tobias, Henry, *The Jewish Bund in Russia from Its Origins to 1905*, Stanford 1972; Peled, Yoav, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale. The Political Economy of Jewish Workers’ Nationalism in Late Imperial Russia*, New York 1989; Blatman, Daniel, *For our Freedom and Yours. The Jewish Labor Bund in Poland, 1939-1949*, Portland 2003, (English translation of original 1996 Hebrew version).

<sup>2</sup> Looking through recent issues of both „Polin“ and „Gal-Ed“ is the best way to become familiar with the wide range of the literature. See also the articles published in „Kwartalnik Historii Żydów“ (formerly „Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego“).

<sup>3</sup> For a masterful analysis of the study of Jewish topics in Poland, including a discussion of some of the most important titles, see the introductory essay by Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic in their edited volume, *The Neighbors Respond. The Controversy of the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, Princeton 2004.

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reach Jewish workers. But this did not change the fact that the Bund was still „neutral“ on the issue of Jewish nationality at this point.

Indeed, it was not until 1901 that the Bund changed its position. At its historic fourth congress, the Bund decided to embrace explicitly secular Jewish nationalism, stating that „the term nationality should also apply to the Jewish people“ (p. 120). What caused such a dramatic shift in thinking? In what is the most important claim of the book, Zimmerman argues - and his rich and meticulous research bears him out - that the Bund's „ideological transformation“ emerged directly from its competition with the PPS. As the Bund moved into Congress Poland and began to compete actively with the PPS for Jewish workers (who had generally been attracted to the PPS before the Bund's arrival), the party was forced to legitimize its existence and increasingly did so by arguing that the Bund was the only voice that could possibly represent the distinctive needs of the Jewish working class. The PPS was naturally furious with such a line of reasoning and the general threat the Bund posed to its appeal among Jewish workers. In response, it strongly attacked the Bund and argued that Jewish interests would best be served only by linking them to the broader struggle for Polish freedom.

Zimmerman argues that the ensuing conflict between the PPS and the Bund forced both organizations to develop a clearer stance on Jewish nationality. Fearful of losing Jewish workers to the Bund, the PPS developed a Yiddish press and even established its own Jewish section. Most importantly, the party recognized Jewish claims to extraterritorial cultural autonomy. In one of the most original parts of the book, Zimmerman shows that, contrary to what has normally been assumed, the PPS included in its platform in 1905 the right for Jews to have „full freedom of cultural development,“ becoming the first European non-Jewish socialist party to recognize Jewish cultural autonomy (p. 210). But not all party members agreed to this affirmation of Jewish cultural autonomy. Zimmerman is careful to note important divisions within the PPS, paying considerable attention to the PPS's split into both Right and Left factions in 1906. Each faction had different approaches to Jewish na-

tionality, with the PPS Left arguing for the extension of complete cultural-national autonomy to Jews and the PPS Right embracing a classic integrationist-assimilationist stance on the Jewish question.

Although in the end the PPS did not remain united in affirming Jewish cultural autonomy, its sustained effort to gain the support of Jewish workers played a crucial role in the ideological development of the Bund during its early, formative years. By the mid-1900s, the Bund, largely in response to the PPS, had become a distinctly Jewish national party. In the decade before World War I, it became involved in developing „Yiddish culture“ - in setting up schools and in defending the rights of Yiddish. As Zimmerman succinctly puts it, „by 1907 the party's assimilationist wing had disappeared. That the Bund's political program should have a national component was no longer questioned“ (p. 253).

The evidence Zimmerman has gathered to support this argument - based mostly on party documents and newspapers written in Yiddish and Polish - is generally impressive (his knowledge of English, German, Russian, and Hebrew also gives him unparalleled access to secondary works on the Bund and Polish-Jewish history). In several places, he mentions that the PPS experienced a „declining influence“ (e.g. p. 87) among Jewish workers. Such a decline is, of course, crucial to his argument about how each party shaped the other vis-à-vis the question of Jewish nationality. But it is not entirely clear how much the PPS perceived such a loss or actually experienced it. How dramatically did support for the PPS among Jewish workers decline in the first years of the Bund's formation? Zimmerman does not offer any concrete answers - perhaps because of a lack of sources - but some quantitative history would have been useful and probably only would have buttressed his argument. Nevertheless, Zimmerman has written a highly useful and important book that deserves to be read by historians not only of Jewish history, but also those interested in the PPS and, more broadly, those working on issues of nationality in late-nineteenth-century East Central Europe.

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