Gods, Humans and Religions 16

The Myth of Jewish Communism

André Gerrits

Introduction

Few historians would deny that "Jewish Communism", a variant of the "Jewish World Conspiracy", has been one of the most powerful and destructive political myths in early-20th century Europe. The myth would have a tremendous impact on European Jewry and, to a lesser extent, on communism. The cry of the Jewish communist conspiracy added new fuel to existing anti-Jewish sentiments. The identification of the corporate Jew with the two gravest political dangers of those times – communism and the Soviet Union – proved to be the "most potent weapon of inter-war official anti-Semitism" (Lendvai 1971: 46). It was the nucleus of Hitler's *Weltanschauung*.

The identification of Jews with communism coloured the perceptions of Jews in general and of the Jewish question in particular. It turned traditional, often religiously inspired anti-Jewish sentiments into a murderous, politically motivated rampage. Additionally, the myth of Jewish Communism was not only mobilised against the communist movement but, by a macabre twist of history, also became a prominent means of agitation and propaganda in the hands of communist regimes themselves, who used it against their enemies within and outside of the Party. After the death of Stalin, when bitter infighting marked the initial phase of de-Stalinisation, communist leaders in East Central Europe invented their own variant of "Judeo-Communism": the myth of "Jewish Stalinism". Communism was supposedly true, honest, and national; while Stalinism was imposed upon the nations of East Central Europe by outside forces, by "non- or anti-national" elements, in other words: by Jews! The rather pitiful traces of this once powerful idea can still be found at little bookstalls in some of Moscow's metro stations. Old men and women, clearly not among the most privileged groups in Russia's post-communist society, sell booklets with sinister titles like *The Red Kabbalah*, *Wars by Dark Forces*, or *The Fifth Column in Russia* (Klimov 1992; Markov 1993; Dyakonov 1995). The Bolshevik Revolution and communist rule were a Jewish conspiracy against the Russian people. Communism is Jewish. Harmless as these poor old street vendors are, they epitomise the remarkable durability of the Jewish Communist stereotype. The notion still serves its purpose: blame others for the communist disaster; externalise guilt.

Jewish Communism was a powerful and persistent myth. Based on the attractive combination of two widespread political sentiments,

namely anti-communism and anti-Semitism, it would attract a considerable number of supporters. The myth of Jewish Communism was not merely a fancy of the lunatic fringe, certainly not during times of revolutionary turmoil and communist expansion, as in the aftermath of the Great War, during the first decade of Bolshevik rule in Russia and revolutionary chaos in East Central Europe, and from the mid 1940s to the early 1950s, when communist dictatorships were established in most other countries in the eastern part of the continent. The "creative role" of the Jews in Bolshevism was the "burning topic of the day all over the world" (Bulaschow 1923: 2) wrote Bernard Segel, a Russian exile in interwar Germany with strong anti-communist leanings, under the pseudonym of Dimitri Boulaschow. Apart from Nazi-Germany, where Judeo-Bolshevism became the centrepiece of state ideology, the myth of Jewish communism achieved its greatest poignancy in the countries of East Central Europe. An awkward combination of tradition, modernity, and fortuitous contingency explains the vehemence of Jewish Communism in the region: strong national identities in insecure national states; conditions of rapid and dramatic political change culminating in communist dictatorship, a history of religiously inspired anti-Jewish prejudices; relatively large, mostly orthodox and isolated Jewish communities going through processes of change, and Jews entering non-Jewish society in increasing numbers.

Given the historical impact of Jewish Communism, remarkably little research has been conducted on the subject. The issue is mentioned routinely in many histories of East European Jewry or anti-Semitism, but among the thousands of studies on the modern history of East European Jewry one searches in vain for a book-length analysis of Jewish Communism. Why? My argument is that the notion of Jewish Communism has been beset with too many political, emotional, ethical, and empirical questions for historians to blithely raise the subject. The myth of Jewish Communism has always been a highly controversial, contentious phenomenon. Apart from a lack of data on the precise role of people of Jewish heritage in the communist movement or on their ambitions and motivations, many historians have preferred not to deal with the uncomfortable, uneasy, and widely exploited "element of truth" it may have represented. A myth is a myth – an exaggerated and maliciously exploited prejudice. This does not necessarily imply, however, that it is void of any reality. Anti-Semitic narratives come in various forms. The sensitive nature of the notion of Jewish Communism seems at least partly related to the actual behaviour of Jews. Jews who were active in the communist movement in East Central Europe constituted only a tiny minority of the Jewish population at large, but these communists of Jewish origin formed a substantial part of the otherwise small

and inconsequential early communist membership in the region. In addition, their significance within communist parties often notably outweighed their numbers within society at large. In other words, there may have been few communists among the Jews of East Central Europe, but Jews were overrepresented among the communists in the region and, initially at least, conspicuously so.

Another reason why the notion of Jewish Communism has remained so contentious is the obvious difficulty historians faced in reconciling it with the "traditional" interpretation of Jewish history. "*Leiden und Lernen*", suffering and learning, is how the 19th century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz once characterised the history of his people in the Diaspora (Graetz 1975: 136). It became a "model" of Jewish history and historiography. The participation of Jews in the (early) communist regimes of Eastern Europe, however, was an uneasy deviation from this pattern. It proved to be very difficult to reconcile with the dual paradigm of powerlessness and suffering of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and its admirable political and cultural vitality and creativity on the other.

This book centres around three questions: first, how to explain the relative absence of the issue of Jewish Communism in both contemporary (Jewish) accounts and in the works of professional historians? Second, how to interpret the myth's widespread appeal, especially in East Central Europe? And third, how did one of the two target groups of the stereotype of Jewish Communism, namely the communists, deal with this issue? Although the answers are mainly structured in three chapters, my analysis floats relatively freely throughout the book. The focus in the first two chapters is on the controversy, which a seemingly disproportionate number of Jews (in relation to their share of the general population and the total number of communists) sparked among their contemporaries and later historians. The historians' debate on the identification of Jews with communism took place within the context of a much wider discussion on the specific nature of East European Jewish history. To structure my analysis, I distinguish between a "traditional" approach (epitomised by Graetz' paradigm of "suffering and learning") and a "revisionist" model. This is an ideal-typical distinction and in this specific case it only serves to explain the notable discrepancy between the actual historic relevance of the myth of Jewish Communism and the fact that so few historians were concerned with it. In simple dichotomous terms: the ambiguous relationship between Jews and political radicalism can be neither discussed nor understood within the context of a traditional approach to Jewish history.

Most contemporary Jewish publicists preferred to ignore the myth too, whether or not they were aware of its threatening dimension. This

not only reflected their opinion that an ideological construct of such lunacy as the myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy or Jewish Communism was essentially immune to rational arguments. It also revealed the ambivalence and ambiguity with which the Bolshevik Revolution and the civil war in Russia were met by many prominent Jewish leaders and organisations. Not all Jewish publicists accepted the awkward silence surrounding the issue, however, and many among them vehemently criticised their apostate brethren, the communists of Jewish descent. They forged the notion of the non-Jewish Jew: an interpretation of Jewish radicalism which would later dominate the scholarly debate on Jewish communism. The communist Jews were renegades. They supposedly had no relationship whatsoever with Jews or with the Jewish community. They should not even be considered Jews. Reality, as I will argue, was not so conveniently one-dimensional. Many Jews were perfectly capable of adopting more than a single identity.

In the first two chapters, the myth of Jewish Communism will be traced from the traditional anti-Jewish prejudices on which it built, to the various modern, political connotations and considerations, which provided its widespread appeal. Jewish Communism became especially influential after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917 and the ensuing years of unprecedented political turmoil and volatility in Europe. Adolf Hitler was among the many contemporaries during the early 1920s who believed that the Jewish World Conspiracy was neither an ominous idea nor a pending threat – it was real, as was proven by what was actually happening in Europe.

The myth of Jewish Communism came in many shapes and forms. Some authors used racist and biological metaphors; others employed primarily religious arguments; while still others approached the identification of Jews with communism (or political radicalism in general) from a predominantly political perspective. Some authors kept to the facts as closely as their prejudicial ideas would allow them, whilst others concocted grandiose conspiracy theories to sustain their arguments.

In the third chapter I raise the question of how communist parties and regimes coped with the politically sensitive and dangerous notion of communism as an international Jewish conspiracy. Communists, Jews and non-Jews alike, were aware of the explosive mixture of traditional anti-Jewish ideas with modern anti-communist sentiments. They generally saw Jewish Communism as a dangerous weapon in the hands of the counter-revolution, as a pre-eminently damaging notion in terms of popular legitimacy and support. In fact, the identification of Jews with communism, as rude and as unfounded as the equation was, always remained a taboo in communist East Central Europe, even after the last prominent Jew had been removed from the parties' ranks.

The anxiety of the communists-in-power reflected real political change, as did the apprehension of their opponents. There may have been few Jews left in East Central Europe after the Second World War, but among those who survived the Holocaust, many seemed to be more prominent and powerful than individual Jews had ever been before. Whatever the merits or lack thereof of the communists' attitudes towards Jews or towards the Jewish question, in most countries of East Central Europe, Russia included, communism offered the first real opportunity for Jews to participate in national politics on a wide scale. And this was a striking phenomenon in itself, as uncomfortable and awkward as the communist leaders (again: the Jews as well as non-Jews) may have felt about the conspicuous presence of leading activists of Jewish descent among them. How did they cope with the issue? Were the anti-Semitic political campaigns of the late 1940s inspired by the uncomfortable presence and visibility of Jewish communists? And were Jewish communists disproportionately victimised during the late-Stalinist and early post-Stalinist purges because they were Jewish, because they were Stalinist, or both?

This book's findings are based on a combination of primary sources and secondary literature. To reconstruct the myth of Jewish Communism is not particularly complicated. I have gone through hundreds of relevant anti-Semitic publications, which can be found in the main historical libraries worldwide. To do research on the actual presence of Jews in the communist movement, on the role the Jewish question played in internal party debates and external party policies, is an altogether different matter. Data are scattered, incomplete and unreliable. My analysis is based on the information other historians have collected over the last few decades. Language formed another problem. The myth of Jewish Communism was a phenomenon of truly international proportions. Given the fact that I had the intention to write a comparative analysis, language barriers have inevitably tilted my research to specific countries. Whenever possible I read books from other countries in translation: in English, French, German, Russian, Polish, or Dutch.

The primary geographical focus is that of East Central Europe. The main timeframe is the interwar years and the first post-war decade. The Soviet Union is occasionally taken into account, to the extent that it is needed to comprehend developments in Poland, Hungary and the other neighbouring countries of East Central Europe. The same goes for Nazi-Germany. A study on the historic relevance of the myth of Jewish Communism cannot exclude Germany from consideration. Both during the early 1920s, when notions of the Jewish World Conspiracy and of Jewish Communism reached their peak, and from 1933 onwards, when it became the nucleus of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* and one

of the major motivations of the Holocaust, Germany was the "heartland" of the myth. Moreover, particularly during the 1920s, publications from Germany, France, and, to a lesser extent, the Anglo-Saxon world, strongly influenced anti-Semitic writers and activists in East Central Europe. Books and brochures crossed borders easily and were frequently translated.

This book is limited in time and place, as well as in subject matter. It is a historical interpretation of a very specific and by now largely extinct phenomenon: the identification of Jews with communism. The issue has lost most of its earlier ferocity. It can still arouse emotions, but it essentially remains where it belongs: confined to the realm of historical writing. I hope *The Myth of Jewish Communism* fills in some of the remaining blank spots in the three fields of research to which it belongs: the histories of anti-Semitism, of East European Jewry, and of communism.