

REVOLUTION THROUGH SYNTHESIS:

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF CHAIM ZHITLOVSKY

?

1817-1917

NEJS 166b

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May 26, 1969

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The demands of a social revolution are the same everywhere, but the forms in which they are expressed will be entirely different among different peoples, determined not by the will of individuals or groups but by particular situations and particular historical precedents.

M. Bakunin, 1870

B
It's good, especially in its critical parts, but it leaves unanswered too many questions that arise in the course of the presentation concerning the historical + biographical genesis of the man's positions. Even if you can't answer, you could consider the questions specifically + suggest possibilities.

Lucy Davidowicz, in her excellent introduction to The Golden Tradition, characterizes Eastern European Jewry by its desire for and its occasional realization of synthesis. By 1870, Western Jewry had achieved political emancipation, while its Eastern European counterpart was just beginning self-consciously to enter into the political arena. The former had become fully Europeanized and identified with their country, while the latter remained an ethnic religious com- pound. Western Jewish intellectuals in search of "synthesis" had to turn to Eastern Europe for a paradigm of Jewish ethnicity (Buber, Rosenzweig) while the Eastern European intellectuals saw visible evidence of Jewish life styles throughout their entire involvement in secular, non-Jewish causes.

choice of words?

not noticeably

Syntax

For the Eastern European Jews to attempt a synthesis was no mean undertaking, considering that they were separated from the Gentile world linguistically, religiously and emotionally. A small group of Jewish intellectuals entered the revolutionary struggle in its formative years (1861-1878), but found the gap between Jew and non-Jew so great that they abandoned the ^{Jewish?} fold altogether.¹

The year 1861 marked the true beginning of Russian revolutionary activity. That year saw the freeing of the serfs, Pisarev's "nihilistic" formulations in Russkoe Slovo, Herzen's call to the intellectuals to "return to the people" in Kolokol, Shelgunov/Mikhailov's appeal To the Young Generation² and the appearance of the first organized revolutionary cells (like the first Zemlya i Volya [Land and Liberty]). Most revolutionary activity in the early

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years centered upon the Populist ideology, Narodnichestvo. Populism instilled in the Russian intelligentsia a sense of guilt and debt to the people. The people, in this case, meant the peasants whose labour supported the Russian economy and who now deserved to be repaid in full. The Narodniki believed that inherent in peasant society, particularly in the obschina, the collective settlements, were true Socialist ideals.

Two main proponents of this philosophy were Piotr Lavrov and N. Mikhailovsky. Lavrov was mainly interested in the intelligentsia and saw them as the sole carrier of true knowledge. In his highly influential Historical Letters of 1868-69, he appealed to the conscience of the intellectuals, not on political grounds but on ethical and social grounds. Both he and Mikhailovsky, a decade later, expounded a "subjective sociology," a point of view which saw it as necessary for sociology to assign moral values to phenomena. Mikhailovsky set up a conflict between personality (the work of conscience) and organized society (the work of honour).³ To them, Socialism had an individualistic character which was dictated by the heart and not by hard and fast economic principles.

Populism expanded in the years 1873-74 into a veritable movement of "Going to the People" whereby hundreds of students left the universities to live and agitate among the peasant class. Instead of encouragement, they encountered indifference and hostility among the peasants and disillusioned, the students turned to more activist tactics. In 1878 the second "Zemlya i Volya" was created, which split a year later between the moderates and the advocates of

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terrorism. The splinter group was influenced by the writings of Bakunin, particularly by his Statism and Anarchism published in 1873. Bakunin decided that it was no good looking to a gradual evolution of the traditional forms of peasant life. Attention should be paid instead to the revolutionary forces within Russian society, namely, to the ever-growing proletariat. Only they would be able to destroy the oppression which for centuries had held up all progress.⁴ The destruction of the absolutist monarchy as a prerequisite for social change became the central platform of the Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will), while the Chërnyy Perdel (Black Partition) supported the fundamental demands of the peasants that all land should be divided up equally and that it should be partitioned among those labourers who had previously been serfs.⁵

It is ^{again?} with the background of this intensive revolutionary activity that Chaim Zhitlovsky entered the political arena. His eclectic political theories tried to incorporate and synthesize as many ideologies and doctrines as possible, sometimes leading him to absurd conclusions. Zhitlovsky contributed little originality to the ideological discussions of the period preceding the Bolshevik revolution. He limited himself to programmatic articles and pamphlets that never allowed him to explore any issue in all its ramifications. Even when he did contribute an original insight (the synthesis of Socialism and Diaspora nationalism), ~~his~~ contemporary thinkers were to explore the same theory far more methodically and render his formulations uninformative.

Zhitlovsky's ideological meanderings reflect the entire panorama of Jewish secular thought "from assimilationism

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until Poale Zion" (the title of one of his brochures). As a tender lad of fourteen, he changed his name to Yefim Ossipovitch and identified himself completely with the Russian people. In 1882, heeding the call to "go to the people," Zhitlovsky went to the village of Tule and lived a completely Russified existence there for 1½ years. In 1884 he came to Vitebsk (not far from his home) where he began to rediscover his Jewish roots while intensifying his revolutionary activity.⁶ In 1886 Zhitlovsky went off to St Petersburg to study Jewish history and published his first work a year later: Thoughts About the Historical Fate of the Jews (in Russian). In it he argued:

1. that the Jewish people survived not thanks to persecution but thanks to its own will power,
2. that Rabbinism, although it upheld Judaism in the past, must give way to free thought; the new historical movement would of necessity be secular;
3. that a return to the revolutionary spirit of the Essenes and the Prophets was necessary to liberate the Jews from their parasitic existence and
4. the crux of the issue: would the Jewish people continue to be productive and culturally creative in line with progressive, universal ideals?

Here, in schematic form, were the central motifs of Zhitlovsky's ideology: secularism, the proletarianization of the Jewish masses and the commitment to "progressive, universal ideals." Zhitlovsky was not concerned with Jewish survival for its own sake, but rather with a Jewish existence in line with Socialist principles. This was an unqualified application of Socialist doctrine to the Jewish condition. He shared, with Aaron Liberman, the conviction that "because we Jews are a part of humanity, our salvation can come only through the redemption of all of humanity."⁷

In 1887, Zhitlovsky moved to Zurich where he stayed

Why then?

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This does not follow from the evidence presented

Why?

until 1893, and from then until 1904--in Bern. Switzerland was the haven for Russian emigrés since 1867. Here they could publish revolutionary pamphlets that were then smuggled into Russia and they could engage in heated discussions and call conferences to work out their "party line." This was Zhitlovsky's heyday as an active revolutionary theoretician. There were two warring factions among the Jewish emigrés in Zurich: one, the "hard-line" Marxists lead by Pavel Axelrod, and the Populist faction led by Zhitlovsky. As a result of their endless debates (one is supposed to have lasted for 72 consecutive days!), Zhitlovsky crystallized his position vis-à-vis that of his opponents.

Yes. But
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position, however
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In line with the Narodnaya Volya, he singled out the Czar as the chief enemy of progress and therefore, of the Jews. He rejected the "white liberal" solution which would bring emancipation but would not solve the economic dilemma of the Jews and would even aggravate antisemitic sentiment. The only effective solution was for the Jews to return to the soil and create a "healthy mass peasantry".⁸ Obviously, Zhitlovsky was applying the Populist formula in its entirety to the Jewish problem.

How did
this view
arise?

OK

In Switzerland, Zhitlovsky confronted the question of granting minority rights. Already in the late 80's, the local Socialist circles in Zurich were discussing minority rights and the need to guarantee them in a democratic regime. Zhitlovsky independently expanded the idea of political "minority rights" to national rights-- especially in the realm of the cultural and linguistic life of a people. Drawing an analogy with the Swiss situation, Zhitlovsky asked himself whether a national minority, even though also spread over

and Austria

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the entire country, through some sort of democratic institution of national self-determination (i.e. elections), could be united into one national unit.⁹ Equal civil rights was the goal of the bourgeoisie because that opened the way to assimilation. Equal national rights was the goal of the Socialist revolutionary.

Zhitlovsky called his own position Socialist Internationalism, a position which assumed the right of national self-determination.¹⁰ Humanity was a brotherhood of independent nations. The individual knew he belonged to a nation and the nation knew it belonged to a larger, all-encompassing unit. He contrasted his position to Cosmopolitanism which denied the validity of any national expression and to nationalism which saw its own nation as paramount and denied the existence of a universal human culture. Internationalism accepted the existence of this culture but did not deny the importance of national forms of expression. Moreover, the internationalist tried to fill the national creative forms with that universal content.¹¹

In the light of twentieth century developments, this compromise position appears highly questionable. In Zhitlovsky's native Russia, the formula of universal content in a national form was carried out in the 1930's, with patriotic Communist sentiment taking the place of "universal content." Zhitlovsky's concept of Jewish creativity seems highly superficial. Was Yiddish secular culture merely to transcribe the "universal human culture" that he championed without ever defining? Was language the extent of national expression? In 1898 Zhitlovsky called for the establishment of independent Jewish educational institutions on all levels,

not only that Jews might develop an indigenous, modern culture on foreign soil, but also "so that the Gentile peoples will see that we are no worse than they are, and that we are also capable of incorporating the best fruits of European civilization."¹² This smacks of the brand of apologetics advocated by the Maskilim some two decades before.

Zhitlovsky's position by the end of the 19th century can be summarized as follows:

1. an unequivocal commitment to the proletarian revolution, which ultimately was the only hope for the Jews, to be effected by:
 - a) Jewish support of the Russian revolutionary effort and
 - b) by the proletarianization of the Jewish masses through settlement on the land;
2. national self-determination was not incompatible with Socialism
3. the Jewish intelligentsia must work towards national rights for the Jewish people in the Diaspora by creating a modern, secular culture in Yiddish.

Zhitlovsky had no practical solutions in mind. Jewish autonomy was seen in generalized, cultural terms, while Jewish economic liberation was to be achieved through agrarian work (to be achieved how?). He rejected the Hoveve Zion position as an empty dream, contending that theirs was an artificial movement perpetuated by government-led pogroms in Russia and through antisemitic pogroms in Europe.¹³ Zhitlovsky did not realize until 1903, with the Kishinev pogroms, that even the Russian working class was not immune to the antisemitic germ.

1903 was the turning point in his nationalist theory. At this point Zhitlovsky was won over to the Territorialist view that a national Jewish territory was a prerequisite of Jewish survival. Now he tried to synthesize this view

Why?

with everything that he believed in before.

In 1904, Zhitlovsky was sent to America to collect money for the Socialist-Revolutionaries. In New York he became the co-editor of the Socialist Territorialt publication Dos Folk. In 1906 he returned to Europe and was elected to the ill-fated second Duma a year later. In 1908 he organized and participated in the Czernowitz Language Conference which proclaimed Yiddish as a national Jewish language. That same year he returned to New York and lectured extensively throughout the United States and Canada. In 1916-17, he formally joined the Poale Zion party.

You could have been more specific about his prominent connection with this group

By the beginning of this century, Eastern European Jewry was undergoing an extreme polarization of political opinion. Political Zionism made inroads both in the East and the West. Bundism emerged as its foremost opponent with a large mass following that carried out impressive strike actions and demonstrations. Various splinter parties of Socialist revolutionaries and Territorialists together with the first Jewish converts to Bolshevism completed the left-wing spectrum. Zhitlovsky tried to bridge the gap between them through a personal reevaluation of his previous stand, rejecting those theories that were mutually exclusive and ~~by~~ underlining the similar goals where they could be found.

First of all, he rejected the materialistic philosophy of history that reduced all phenomena to an analysis of the means of production. In an essay entitled "Economic Materialism and the National Question" (1908), he compared humanity to a checkerboard which divided horizontally into classes and vertically into nations. In "Nationalism and the Class Politics of the Proletariat" (1908-10?), he analysed

the antagonism that could develop between national and class interests. He concluded that class solidarity could be achieved only when each nation was free and independent. It was the goal of every worker, therefore, to try and achieve national rights within the framework of the general workers' party in his native country.¹⁴ The state had to be rebuilt according to a nationally federated system (à la Switzerland).

How
related
to Bundist
position at
the time

Here he parted company with the Bund that still followed a rigid Marxist party-line, namely, that the Jewish Socialist shared the same problems with all persecuted peoples in Russia, since the Jewish people were ruled by universally applicable economic principles. Zhitlovsky reminded the Bundists that Marx advocated proletarianization as necessity for societies but not for nations.¹⁵ Zhitlovsky realized that in each economic organism in which the Jewish people were a minority in the whole population, the Jewish proletariat would be a minority of the Jewish population.¹⁶ Thus even if the Bund were right in believing that anti-semitism would disappear when all Jews became workers, that condition could never be achieved under the existing circumstances.

Zhitlovsky came to these insightful conclusions when he began to analyse the causes for antisemitism. "Antisemitism is a human tragedy that must appear in every case of a large number of Jews imposing themselves onto a foreign organism."¹⁷ Antisemitism arose because Jews were not economically self-sufficient. Jewish farmers and manual labourers were almost non-existent, he wrote, and thus, the Jewish merchant and professional class had to exploit foreign labour instead of their own. The continued existence of antisemitism redared

the dream of emancipation, of assimilation through equal rights impossible. In this respect he agreed with Pinsker's thesis. The uncontrovertable fact of a separate, national Jewish existence was the main cause of antisemitism. Zhitlovsky even went so far as to accept German racist theories about the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish blood.¹⁸ The Jew simply could not assimilate. The solution? To isolate the Jew economically so that only a small group of entrepreneurs would act as intermediaries in direct economic and spiritual contact with the Gentile world. The Jew should share universal culture with the other peoples, but should develop his own culture in isolation from them.¹⁹ Zhitlovsky never elaborated on the practical implementation of this untenable plan, probably because he himself was none too sure about it.

Instead he adopted the Territorialist platform (and later that of the Zionists) as the only real solution. At the conclusion of his essay "The Bitter Truth" (1911-12), he formulated the following programme which was characteristic of his eclecticism:

- 1.. The need for a national home; not an ingathering of the exiles there, but the creation of a cultural reservoir which would "feed" the entire people in the Diaspora (diluted Ahad Haamism);
- 2.. In the Diaspora: an economic revolution was called for whereby the Jews would become economically self-sufficient and
- 3.. a spiritual revolution would take place bringing the Jewish intelligentsia back to the people (Populism).

Four years later, Zhitlovsky accepted Palestine as the "national home" and tried to prove that Poale Zion combined the best elements of Socialism, Diaspora Nationalism and Territorialism. The details of this ambitious but non-innovative synthesis shall be left to another study.

Zhitlovsky embodied the complex searchings of the Eastern European intellectual. He began with a total rejection of religion and ethnicity, unequivocally embraced the revolutionary struggle of the Russian people and then slowly began the process of return, trying to make his newly acquired ideology compatible with his commitment to Jewish survival. Zhitlovsky rejected emancipation because to him it represented the assimilation of bourgeois values. He applied Populist Socialism to the Jewish problem, advocating a return to the soil and a "return to the people" on the part of the Jewish intelligentsia. His main influence was in making a commitment to national survival fashionable among the Jewish radicals with assimilationist tendencies. Zhitlovsky was highly influential in introducing a national platform into the Bund that fluctuated with the idea until 1905. Although he was the first to advocate Diaspora Nationalism on a Socialist foundation, Zhitlovsky never explored the practical implications of the theory and discussed it rather as a broad cultural phenomenon. In America he advocated a position that would now be termed "cultural pluralism" and was probably the first Jewish leader here to question the desirability of the "melting pot."

Where did this come from?

How did this happen, as they were Marxists & he was a Social Revolutionary

Had Zhitlovsky been born in Western Europe, he probably would have joined the ranks of Steinschneider and Moritz Lazarus and would have produced a many-volumed "Spiritual History of the Jewish People" (a project he actually contemplated doing all his life), and would have made his mark in the annals of Jewish thought. But Zhitlovsky, a man of a definite philosophical bent (and training), was born into a milieu of social turmoil and addressed his energy

to the political struggle of his age. He represents, in his political activities, the valiant but quixotic attempt of the Jew to create a niche for himself in a world about to be overturned by revolution. Zhitlovsky hailed the events of 1917 with great enthusiasm, little suspecting the price that would be paid for Jewish revolutionary involvement.

Notes

1. For a detailed account of Jewish participation in the revolutionary movement of the 1860's and 70's, see A. Tsherikover, "Yidn-revolutsyonern in rusland in di 60er un 70er yorn," Historishe shriftn, YIVO, vol. iii, Vilna-Paris, 1939, pp. 60-172.
2. Franco Venturi, Roots of Revolution, trans. Francis Haskell, N.Y. 1960, pp. 246-248.
3. Berdyaev, "Sense of Guilt and Debt to the People," in M. Confino, Ha-intelighentsia veba-zramim haruhaniim hamidiniim beRusia bemeya ha-19, Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 379-82.
4. Venturi, op. cit., p. 431.
5. Ibid., p. 657.
6. Zhitlovsky pinpoints this date as the beginning of his conversion to Yiddishism, "In a yidisher medine," in Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn, vol. i, N.Y. 1935, p. 117. Actually, Zhitlovsky did not formulate a "Yiddishist" position until 1897. In 1884-85 he was still devoted to the cause of Russian Populism, and helped create a cell of Narodnaya Volya in Vitebsk.
7. Aaron S. Liberman (1876). Quoted in Historishe shriftn, vol I, Vilna, 1929, p. 51.
8. Chaim Zhitlovsky, "A yid tsu yidn," in the Gezamlte Shriftn, N.Y. 1917, vol. IV, p. 52. Zhitlovsky even argued for the creation of Jewish obschina as a basis of progressive labour.
9. Chaim Zhitlovsky, "Voluntary National Unification or States Rights Autonomy," in Abraham Menes, Der yidisher gedank in der nayer tsayt, N.Y. 1957, pp. 201-202. This formulation was written in retrospect many years later and as far as we can ascertain, was not published during Zhitlovsky's "Swiss period." Even so, it does not betray very definite plans as to how national rights will be achieved.
10. Zhitlovsky, Socialism and the National Question, N.Y. 1899, pp. 7-14.
11. Ibid, p. 83.
12. Zhitlovsky, "Zionism or Socialism," Gezamlte Verk, vol. V p. 74. Originally published in the Bundist press in 1899. Significantly, these comments, of a nationalistic nature, were omitted when the Bund republished the essay in a separate brochure.
13. Zhitlovsky, "A yid tsu yidn," op. cit., (1892), p. 51.
14. Zhitlovsky, "Nationalism and the Class Politics of the Proletariat," vol. VI, p. 156.

15. Zhitlovsky, "Der biterer emes," vol. VI, p. 229. Only a decade before Zhitlovsky himself advocated proletarianization as the main source of Jewish redemption.
16. Ibid., p. 234.
17. Ibid., p. 177.
18. Ibid., p. 199. Quoting the racist historian Werner Sombart. In Socialism and the National Question, Zhitlovsky spoke of hereditary national characteristics.
19. Ibid., pp. 205-208.

You should read

[illegible]

I'm not
sure of the title
but it's some thing
like that.

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- _____, "Territorialism--bemuzumen oder oyf barg," (1906), vol. V.
- _____, "Economic Materialism and the National Question," (1908), vol. VI.
- _____, "Nationalism and Progress," (1909), vol. IV.
- _____, "About Unification: Bundism or Zionism," (1909), vol. IV, N.Y., 1912.
- _____, "Nationalism and the Class Politics of the Proletariat," vol. VI.
- _____, "The New Platform of the 'United Party'," (1909-1910), vol. IV.
- _____, "To the Theory of Nationality," (1910), vol. IV.
- _____, "The Bitter Truth," (1911-1912), vol. VI.
- _____, From Assimilationism to Poale Zion, N.Y. 1919.

CHAIM ZHITLOVSKY: FROM SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARY

TO JEWISH AUTONOMIST

(A bibliographical outline)

NEJS 166b

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March 24, 1969

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PURPOSE: To analyze the ideological transition in Zhitlovsky's life and thought from his initial involvement with Narodnaya Volya to his own autonomist formulations. Analysis of the social and political influences on his thought; his position vis-à-vis Jewish Socialist, Zionist and Autonomist critics.

I Russian Revolutionary Movements

1. E. Tcherikover "Peter Lavrov and Jewish Socialist Emigrés", YIVO Annual VII (1952).

Franco Venturi, Roots of Revolution, N.Y. 1960 (esp. last four chapters.)

II Jewish Socialist Revolutionary Movements

3. Kalmen Marmer ed., Arn Libermans Briv, YIVO. 1951
(1842-44-1880)
4. E. Tcherikover, "Der onheyb fun der yidisher sotsyalistisher bavegung", Historishe Shriftn, YIVO, I, 512ff.

5. Viktor Tshernov, Yidishe tuer in der partey Sotsyalistn-Revolutsyonern, N.Y. 1948.

III Nationalism

6. Solomon Bloom, World of Nations
7. Simon Dubnov, Nationalism and History, (ed. Koppel Pinson), J.P.S. 1958.
8. Oscar Janowsky, Nationalities and National Minorities N.Y. 1945, ~~PAAC~~ V.

IV Zhitlovsky's Essays

9. Der sotsyalizm un di natsyonale frage, N.Y. 1908 (originally in German, 1899).
10. Gezamlte Shriftn: Vol IV, 1912, (esp. "Natsyonalitet un progres" on Otto Bauer and "Tsu der teorye fun natsyonalitet".)
11. Vol. V, 1917, In kamf far folk un shrpakh.
12. Vol. VI, 1917, esp. "A Yid tsu Yidn" (originally in Russian, 1892, and "Der ekonomisher matreyalizm u n

di natsyonale frage" (1908).

13. Fun asimilatsye biz Poaley-Tsionism, 1919.
14. Zhitlovsky Zamlbuk, Warsaw, 1920.
15. Zikhroynes fun mayn lebn, I, 1935. N.Y.
16. M. Confino, Ha-inteligentsia vehazramim haruhaniim -hamidiniim
berusia bemeya ha-19, Jerusalem 7'58
17. ~~Abraham~~ Michael C. Geschichte ~~fun der Freyland-Lige~~
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17. Abraham Menes^{ed.} Der yidisher gedank in der nayer tsayt
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