

## Jews and the Russian Revolution

History 286C/386C  
Jewish Studies, 286C/386C  
Spring 2013  
Th 3:15-5pm  
Math 380-381U  
Professor Steven Zipperstein  
Bldg 200, rm 207  
Phone: 55660/szipper@stanford.edu

This undergraduate/graduate colloquium, taught for the first time at Stanford, examines a chronologically brief, but exceptionally turbulent period between 1917-21, with a backward glance at the history of Jewish radicalism in Russia since the 1870s and '80s. Much like what the French Revolution did for so much of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia's revolution set down the regnant paradigms with which all political convulsions for the next hundred years, perhaps until the Arab Spring, were understood. And Jews – as political actors, as objects of pity or animus, as leaders, followers, and victims – played an exceptionally prominent role.

Most of Russia's five million and more Jews were part working poor with only inchoate politics but a visible slice of its young, often its best educated women and men gravitated toward the political left especially after the violence that convulsed the Russian empire starting in 1903 until 1906. In the Second Party Congress of Russia's Social Democrats -- the meeting of Russia's most devoted Marxists -- close to half the delegates were Jews.

In the midst of the violence that erupted in Romanov Russia in its last decades, Jews were time and again among its most targeted victims with counter-revolution and anti-Semitism linked as kindred spirits, both born of a toxic admixture of reaction and loathing for all that wasn't intrinsically Russian. The attacks spawned a new militancy in Jewish youth, the rise of "Samsons" as they were often called, female and male heroes lauded by many Jews who bore no allegiance to radicalism but saw revolutionaries -- Socialist Revolutionists, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, leftwing Zionists, and especially the Jewish Socialist Labor Bund (by far, the largest Marxist in the empire by 1905) -- as protectors who managed to transmute would-be pogroms into veritable battlegrounds.

Radicalism's popularity was also the byproduct of the absence in Russia of a robust liberalism. Jews, who enjoyed a higher level of education of the vast majority of Russians and who were concentrated overwhelmingly in towns and cities were more likely to be drawn into the world of radicalism which exerted its greatest influence on students, workers, and artisans. By 1917, opposition to anti-Semitism would be one of the cardinal principles of the revolution with Jew-hatred – in Russian right-wing circles eventually translated into the huge,

worldwide popularity of the Russian-generated *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – a fixture of anti-revolutionary sentiment. In the revolution's wake, and beleaguered by wave after wave of attacks from anti-Bolsheviks Whites, Ukrainian military, bandits, ideological anarchists, as well as roughnecks with guns and opportunity, most Jews in Russia gravitated toward Bolshevism which promised stability, at least protection from attack.

In the first, heady years of the revolution, cultural expression of all sorts, Jewish included, was given support with newspapers, theaters, literature of all kinds rising to great prominence, and often real distinction. Yiddish literature and theater continued to thrive into the 1930s, and later, with the Communist leaders squashing essentially all political opposition and nearly all potentially disruptive cultural activity already in the early and late '20s.

The course – designed for as a colloquium for undergraduates and graduate students – explores this period in all its fascinating ramifications, focusing mostly on its political and cultural history with the use of historical and ideological texts, literature written originally in Russian as well as Yiddish, artistic work, and many other sources. We'll study the finest of all Russian revolutionary writers, we'll seek to connect the mystical yearnings of the dramatist and folklorist S. Ansky with his eclectic, populist-inflected politics, and we'll examine the rise of the young Chagall in one of his most creative moments just before and after 1917.

Many still-regnant myths regarding the desire of Jews for world domination were either created, or given considerable impetus by the convulsions of 1917 with the rise of so many Jews, or half-Jews (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev) in the Bolshevik leadership, rumors that Lenin, too, had Jewish ancestral roots (just recently discovered to be not inaccurate), the sudden emergence of Jews on the political stage of the world's largest, and one of its most mysterious, empires. Trotsky himself suddenly emerged not only as one of the world's most powerful orators and theoreticians but also as a military genius. Antisemitic literature abounded in the midst of these convulsions, and we'll examine it and its echoes in the recent, influential work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and elsewhere.

#### Required books

Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*  
S. A. Smith, *The Russian Revolution*  
Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The Five*  
Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*  
Joshua Rubenstein, *Leon Trotsky*  
Grisha Freidin, *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings*

All other readings listed in syllabus will be available on the class website.

Undergraduate requirements: In-class oral reports on readings: 10-12 page analysis of one item (book, short story, pamphlet, poster, film, art work, etc) dating back to Russia in 1917-20.

Graduate requirements: Review essay of 12-15 pages on a text not assigned for the class. The syllabus may be adjusted somewhat for grad students, or others, able to read Russian, Yiddish, or Hebrew.

1. April 4. Introduction – Russian Jews at the Cusp of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. No reading requirement for this meeting
2. April 11. Living Radical. Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, pp. 1-134; Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky*, pp. 95-148; Tony Michels, "Exporting Yiddish Socialism: New York's Role in the Jewish Workers' Movement, *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 16/1, Fall 2009, pp. 1-26
3. April 18. Jews and Radicalism. Leonard Shapiro, "The Role of Jews in the Russian Revolutionary Movement, pp. 266-89; Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banner: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry*, pp. 91-140; Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Red Wheel*, pp. 453-629

Film evening, April 18 (or another date, if inconvenient for students),  
Showing of "Reds" over dinner at Professor Zipperstein's home

4. April 25, Continued. Jabotinsky, *The Five*
5. May 2. Revolution. Smith, *The Russian Revolution*; Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between Reds and Whites, 1917-1920*, pp. 34-68; Anita Shapira, "'Black Night – White Snow': Attitudes of the Palestinian Labor Movement to the Russian Revolution, 1917-29," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol 4, 1988, pp. 144-171
6. May 9. Class meeting at Hoover Institution to review revolutionary posters, photographs, etc. Rubenstein, *Leon Trotsky*
7. May 16. Continued. Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, pp. 204-372
8. May 23. Culture, Art, and Revolution. Kenneth Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution*, pp. 60-141; Jackie Wullschulager, *Chagall*, pp. 222-252
9. May 30. Civil War. Budnitskii, pp. 216-274; Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, in Freiden, ed., *Isaac Babel's Selected Writings*, pp. 94-183
10. Wednesday evening, June 5, last session of class over dinner. Babel, *1920 Diary*, Freiden, pp. 184-250; Serge, *Memoirs*, pp. 135-83; Michael Hagameiser, "The Antichrist as a Imminent Political Possibility: Sergei Nilus and the Apocalyptic Reading of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" in *The Paranoid Apocalypse*, pp. 79-91.