

The Saga of Modern Judaism 5:

Revolutionary Yiddishland and Mitteleuropa's Golden Age

Part 1: The Bund

"We Bundists wish to shatter the existing economic frameworks and show the Jewish masses how a new society can be built not by escape but by struggle. We link the essence of the Jewish masses' life to that of humankind."

Viktor Alter, Neyer Folkseytung, February 19, 1937.



“There, where we live, there is our country! A democratic republic! Full political and national rights for Jews. Ensure that the voice of the Jewish working class is heard at the Constituent Assembly.” Yiddish poster, Kiev, ca. 1918. (YIVO)

In 1939 police had just led a pogrom in Bretz, Poland and Goldstein, a leading Bund activist and militia leader, smuggled himself into the city. He found a Jewish community paralyzed by the knowledge that, at any moment, the pogrom might explode again. In the deserted Jewish quarter, Goldstein meets a Polish comrade. As the two worked out a battle plan, they saw the glow of Sabbath candles in a window.

“I explained to Dąbrowski the meaning of the Sabbath candles... deep in somber thought, we both walked silently through the pogromized, empty streets... a Jewish and a Polish Socialist. Perhaps, I thought, hope resides in this, that we two, Dąbrowski and I, walk here together with a single purpose.”

Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland

Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland (The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia), known simply as the Bund, was founded in Vilna in 1897, the same year as the first Zionist congress, by a small group of Jews who were profoundly influenced by Marxism. Their goal was to attract East European Jews to the emergent revolutionary movement. In the interwar years, the Polish Bund’s success came from its call to maintain cultural autonomy, including preserving Yiddish language and culture, its aggressive defense of the Jewish community, as well as its militant fight for the rights of workers and the poor.

In the words of Molly Crabapple, “The Bund was a sometimes-clandestine political party whose tenets were humane, socialist, secular, and defiantly Jewish. Bundists fought the Tsar, battled

pogroms, educated shtetls, and ultimately helped lead the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Though the Bund was largely obliterated by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the group's opposition to Zionism better explains their absence from current consciousness....they irreconcilably opposed the establishment of Israel as a separate Jewish homeland in Palestine. The diaspora was home, the Bund argued. Jews could never escape their problems by the dispossession of others. Instead, Bundists adhered to the doctrine of *do'ikayt* or "Here-ness" [as opposed to "There-ness", which is what they called Zionism-M]. Jews had the right to live in freedom and dignity wherever it was they stood."

The History of The Bund

By the end of the nineteenth century the growing Jewish working class faced higher levels of discrimination than any other ethnic group in Eastern Europe. Hunger, widespread disease, and the absence of medical insurance placed Jewish manual laborers on the lowest rungs of the Jewish communities' economic and social ladders. It was this group who affiliated with the Bund.

The Bund was Socialist, but was heavily influenced by Marxist and Anarchist ideas. "Socialism" is a broad category that includes many different theories for how society should be rationally planned around the values of justice and equality as opposed to capital (money). The more radical wing was Anarchist, who believed that society should be formed of voluntary cooperation and should operate without state-enforced coercion. On the other side was Marxism, which advocated for a democratic state where the proletariat- workers, as opposed to owners, bosses and investors,- would own resources and direct their own lives through democratic means. One thing shared among these forms of radicalism was an optimistic view of human nature which argued that cooperation was just as much as a natural human trait as competition and that society should take cooperation, not competition, as its basic organizing principle.

Marx argued that a “revolutionary vanguard” of professional activists should lead the revolution and create a temporary “dictatorship of the proletariat” until the transition to a completely democratic, classless society could be created. Later, after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, would develop that side of Marx’s views into a defense of a strongly centralized one- party government which would forcefully re-organize society, controlling it until it was ready for democracy. Stalin would then take that a step forward, creating a fully Fascist version of “socialism” which looked nothing at all like what Marx had envisioned. Lenin and Stalin would be fought on these developments by several Jewish radicals right from the start, most prominently Marxist Rosa Luxembourgh in Germany, Anarchist and Feminist Emma Goldman in America, and Marxist Leon Trotsky in Russia (both Luxembourgh and Trotsky were assassinated, Luxembourgh by German right-wingers and Trotsky by Stalin; Goldman died peacefully after a life of militant anarchism in Toronto).

As well as the Bund, Jews were heavily involved in socialist and communist movements and the creation of communist governments in Eastern Europe. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was an uprising on a scale we can scarcely imagine- hundreds of thousands of people collaborated across a giant country landscape to bring down the tyrannical and callous government of the Tsar. For a brief time after the revolution Russia became a paradise for Jews, and Jews were prominent political theorists, bureaucrats, artists, and writers in the early days of the Soviet. One joke plays on the large role Jews played in the burgeoning Russian comedy scene....

As Lenin moved to create dogmatic “homogeneity” in the new state the situation began to sour. The Bolsheviks became increasingly authoritarian and dogmatic, which included opposing “separatist” parties like the Bund. With the rise of Stalinism the USSR went to war against its Jews, destroying many brilliant Jewish intellectuals, artists, and activists. Lenin’s increasing fascism was opposed by Trotsky (a Jew named Lev Bronstein) and his followers, who were pushed out of government. Another joke plays off this bleak episode and the Jewish presence among the soviets....

But we’re getting ahead of our story. Back to the Bund:

The rise in popularity of Marxism and the strike wave in the Jewish trades in the early 1890s inspired radical intellectuals to attract Jewish workers to become agitators and leaders. The use of Yiddish helped to create a mass movement among the lower classes. The Bund advocated on behalf of women workers, demanding equality, and within the Bund, women were treated no differently from men. A significant number of women did join the Bund and many became prominent leaders. The doctrine of equality that arose naturally from the ideology of the Bund was applied also to notions of “the revolutionary family” which was feminist, egalitarian, and activist.

“In 1902,” writes Molly Crabapple, “the year one of its members shot and wounded the hated governor of Vilna, the Bund was Russia’s only Jewish revolutionary party. No other group could compete with its illegal printing presses, its smuggling networks across the Pale of Settlement, its pogrom-fighting militias funded by contributions from the diaspora. At that time, Bundists made up a third of the prisoners in the tsar’s camps in Siberia, and the organization grew as its members traversed the Russian Empire, on the routes of forced exile and escape.”

“They robbed a government alcohol monopoly in Izabelin. During strikes, they slashed phone lines, smashed up factories, beat scabs. They ambushed prison convoys, threw powdered tobacco (like improvised pepper spray) into the faces of the drivers and liberated their arrested comrades. They sawed through the cell bars of their friend Berl Dzhukin, and when the cops came looking for him at a comrade’s house he stole out, dressed as an old woman, into the open night. ”

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bund was the largest and best-organized Jewish party in Eastern Europe. “Archival photos bear testament to this world’s richness,” writes Crabapple. “Bella Shapiro, one of the Bund’s countless women leaders, addressing a May Day demonstration in Lublin in 1936; red flags fluttering with gold fringe and elegant Yiddish letters; unionized workers raising their fists; jaunty girl gymnasts in shorts, hearts pinned to their middy blouses; young men, boxing at the beach, grinning and tanned. These images of the bucolic wholesomeness are so poignant because we know how, for so many of them, the story ends.”

From 1905 until the early 1920s, the Bund engaged in self-defense as the need arose. Members would create ad hoc security forces for events and demonstrations or to ward off attacks. But as antisemitism and conflicts with Communists grew, the Bund's central committee decided to organize a permanent militia, naming Bernard Goldstein the leader. Goldstein would later head the Warsaw self-defense militia and author the memoirs *Five Years in the Warsaw Ghetto: The Stars Bear Witness* and *Twenty Years with the Jewish Labor Bund*. By 1939, as many as twenty thousand people attended Bund rallies with some two thousand Jewish militia members guarding them.

The Polish Bund

“ But the utopian bloom soon came off the revolutionary rose,” writes Crabapple, “as Russia descended into terror, repression, and civil war.”

‘The day is not far off when we will see revolutionary tribunals in which the more kosher Bolsheviks will execute the more suspect; the circle of ‘kosher’ or ‘authentic’ socialists grows narrower,’ Bundist leader Vladimir Medem wrote. In 1921, the Bolsheviks dissolved the Bund in Russia, along with all other political parties. Communist persecution of the Bund continued for years, and took the lives of two Bund leaders: Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter. Alter was executed, and Erlich driven to suicide by the Soviet authorities in 1943.

The Polish Bund continued on. “Goldstein and his comrades organized these rough proletarians into Bundist unions,” writes Crabapple, “which by 1939 represented nearly 100,000 Jews. Not content with economic justice alone, the Bund created a parallel culture of progressive newspapers, theaters, libraries, and secular Yiddish schools. A Bundist could send their child to SKIF, a socialist scout group, then to the Bundist youth league, Tsukunft. Athletic young people built their physiques at the Bundist sports club, Morgenstern, while less fortunate slum kids were treated for tuberculosis in the humanistic, rural beauty of the Medem Sanatorium.”

The Bund also played a central role in the development of Jewish newspapers in Russia and Poland. Before 1917, most of its Russian and Yiddish publications were illegal, though after World War I in newly independent Poland the Bund sponsoring a rich variety of publications on the national and local levels. The reading matter included articles about politics, culture, and sports; other journals were aimed at a young readership. The main newspaper was the *Folks-tsaytung*, which appeared in various forms and titles from 1920 to the outbreak of World War II; beginning in the 1930s it occasionally published special sections for female workers. This rich culture of newspapers and new literature was also brought to the New World, inspiring papers like the *Forverts* (Forward).

By the mid-1930s, the Bund had become the dominant Jewish organization in Poland, where Jews constituted 9.5 percent of the population. In 1940 the Nazis confined 400,000 Polish Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto (about 1.3 square miles large). The Bund established an underground network that offered both educational and political activities to teenagers and youth in the ghetto, and maintained constant contact with the Polish underground, with political leaders in the West, and with the Polish government-in-exile.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

The Bund's long relationship with Polish socialists allowed them to breach the ghetto walls, sneak in Polish resistance soldiers, and provide the world with some of the first accounts of the Nazi genocide, through the testimonies of Zalman Freidrych and Jan Karski. Through these networks, news filtered out, and weapons flowed in. In April 1943, three months after the first brief battle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, one final arms shipment smuggled by Bundists got through the Ghetto walls.

It took the most feared military force in Europe three weeks to subdue 750 starving, inadequately-armed Jewish captives. Even then, the ghetto fell not to direct fighting, but to fires, set by German flamethrowers and incendiary bombs. Some 13,000 Jews died in the rebellion. In London, Artur Ziegelboim, the Bund's representative in the Polish parliament in exile, took

poison in a futile attempt to rouse the world from its indifference. The words of his suicide note read: “I love you all. Long live the Bund.”

On May 10, with the Ghetto reduced to a smoldering ash-heap, a band of fighters led by Edelman, the Bundist Abrasha Blum, and the ZOB’s only female leader, the labor Zionist Zivia Lubetkin, escaped through the sewers. On the Aryan side of the wall, Goldstein wrote, “a large crowd watched incredulously as human skeletons with submachine guns strapped around their necks crawled out one by one... The look in their leaden eyes assured the crowd that they would not hesitate to fire.”

Shortly after his escape, the Gestapo killed Blum. Edelman fought as a partisan until Poland’s liberation. As an old man, he took part in the Solidarity movement that led in 1989 to the peaceful end of Poland’s communist dictatorship. When he died, in 2009, mourners sang the Bundist anthem over his coffin. The old leftist anti-Zionist received no honors from the Israeli state despite his role in fighting the Nazis, due to his opposition to Zionism.

In the early 40s the center of the Bund’s activities shifted decisively to New York, though they would have widespread influence throughout North America in the form of summer camps, folk festivals, day schools, and the preservation of Yiddish culture. From the 70s onward, however, as the North American Jewish community became increasingly middle class, Zionist, and disinterested in Yiddish culture and radical politics, the once mighty Bund would fade to a vague memory for most Jews.

Before we leave behind Eastern European Jewish radicals, we need to pause to talk about

Emma Goldman.

The higher the mental development of a woman, the less possible it is for her to meet a congenial male who will see in her, not only sex, but also the human being, the friend, the comrade and strong individuality, who cannot and ought not lose a single trait of her character.

A party in New York, just before the turn of the century. A young Jewish woman from Russian Lithuania is there, a remarkable person who ran away from home at the age of 16 to escape a

forced marriage and made her way to the US. There are many other young radicals and intellectuals present, including others who are, like her, anarchists. She is bespectacled and bohemian looking, with a strong yet somewhat pixie-ish face and long curly hair held up in a bun. One might say she looked somewhat like a pirate. As the band kicks up a joyous dance number she joins with abandon. Her happy dancing attracts the attention of a taciturn radical who tells her with a frown “that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway.”

Goldman responded furiously: “If I can’t dance, then I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”

Well, or at least she said something like that. Later in her 1931 autobiography *Living My Life* she said, “I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown in my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand denial of life and joy...I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things.” This telling of the episode was later paraphrased by others in the pithy quote above.

Emma Goldman was born in 1869 in Kovno, Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire., Goldman, into a religious family. She ran away when her father tried to force her into a marriage she didn’t want. She would literally never stop running from the chains people wanted to catch her in, though along the way she would dedicate her life principally not to her own freedom, but the freedom of others. By the age of 21 she was a dedicated anarchist and a fiery speaker on a lecture tour, using powers of rhetoric which are still admired a century later.

The demand for equal rights in every vocation of life is just and fair; but, after all, the most vital right is the right to love and be loved.

Jailed many times, in 1893 she served a year for incitement to riot; she was jailed again in the aftermath of President McKinley’s assassination by an anarchist, imprisoned again for disseminating "obscene" birth control literature in 1916, then again in 1917 for organising against forced military conscription.

Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth; an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.

For Goldman anarchism was a protest against unjust hierarchy, oppression, state violence, prejudice, and irrational convention. Her commitment to a human dignity that pre-existed any state or any state-given rights could sometimes lead her into controversial statements, as in her famous quip, “Ask for work. If they don't give you work, ask for bread. If they do not give you work or bread, then take bread.”

In 1919 Goldman was deported back to Russia, where she quickly spotted the totalitarian tendencies of the Bolsheviks and became an early critic. In the afterword to *My Disillusionment in Russia*, she wrote: "There is no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another....”

Goldman was an early, and fierce, feminist. In 1897, she wrote:

"I demand the independence of woman, her right to support herself; to live for herself; to love whomever she pleases, or as many as she pleases. I demand freedom for both sexes, freedom of action, freedom in love and freedom in motherhood."

Goldman was also an outspoken critic of discrimination and hatred against homosexuals. Her belief that social and legal liberation should include gay men and lesbians was virtually unheard of at the time, even among anarchists. As German-Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who is often viewed as the father of LGBTQ rights, wrote, "she was the first and only woman, indeed the first and only American, to take up the defense of homosexual love before the general public."

In numerous speeches and letters, she defended the rights of gay men and lesbians. "It is a tragedy, I feel, that people of a different sexual type are caught in a world which shows so little understanding for homosexuals and is so crassly indifferent to the various gradations and variations of gender and their great significance in life," she wrote.

In 1936, after living in Germany, England, France and Canada Goldman went to Spain to enlist with the Loyalists against the Fascists. When Franco's Fascists won, Goldman returned to Canada, from where she raised money for the victims of the war. She died in Toronto, Canada, on May 14, 1940.

I'd rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck.

Part 2: Mitteleuropa

Elective Affinities In The German Sphere

Prior to the 1930s urban Germany offered an unparalleled freedom to Jews. Scholar Michael Lowy has pointed out that many German Jews, even secularized ones, were attracted to pursuits with clear affinities to the traditional Jewish preoccupations which they or their families had left behind. Overwhelmingly they were attracted to revolutionary (messianic), philosophical (ethical), political-legal (halakhic) and scientific (theological) innovations. Lowy, borrowing a term from Goethe, calls this a case of "elective affinities", a kind of mysterious structural or spiritual resonance between what was "in their bones" so to speak, and currents in the world around them. The leading Jewish intellectuals of the German sphere would have a powerful effect on global culture in the 20th century.

Karl Marx

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”

In 1818 young Karl was born to a German-Jewish family, the Marxes. He would grow up to be a journalist, philosopher, sociologist and political theorist who would be called “one of the most influential people in human history.” Marx argued that history unfolded in an orderly way as higher stages of social organization developed out of lower ones. He argued that the then-new capitalist stage would evolve into a higher socialist stage, and also that religion, whose purpose was to comfort those suffering from oppression, injustice, and suffering, would vanish in proportion to the extent life was made better for everyone in *this* world.

Marx started out as a journalist but ran into trouble for defending the rights of the poor and criticizing the capitalist and political class for their unjust exploitation of workers and peasants. He was forced to relocate several times, finally finding refuge in Britain. Marx’s most famous written works were 1848’s *Communist Manifesto*, written with Friedrich Engels, his long time collaborator, and *Das Kapital* his brilliant socio-economic masterpiece, published posthumously by Engels. Marx had a very close and loving relationship with his wife, Jenny Marx, and was succeeded by his daughter Eleanor, who herself became an important activist and revolutionary organizer. At his funeral his friend Engels said, “On the 14th of March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think.”

Marx’s Thought

Marx thought that human history was the history of “class struggle”, i.e. the struggle of a small group of people to seize more power and wealth than everyone else, and the rest of humanity fighting back. He felt that in his time period the upper classes controlled society by owning property, resources and equipment (“the means of production”) and structuring things so that other people would need to sell their labour to them in order to survive (“wage slavery”). Those who run the world are the capitalists, the ones who control the money. He argued that capitalism was an unstable system with inherent contradictions (like the need for constant growth, the creation of metabolic rift, and other factors). It would inevitably break down through periodic

crisis and the eventual rebellion of the working class (“the proletariat”). Marx argued that the proletariat would, and should, seize power from the capitalist class and create a classless, egalitarian and democratic society where the workers owned the means of production in common and where all citizens had equal rights, equal resources, and equal voting power. In the Marxist society everyone would have their basic needs met, the need to work would be reduced for all, and everyone would have the leisure to develop their full humanity in learning, creative pursuits, and play.

Marx argued that it was likely needed for a “revolutionary vanguard” to seize power and manage the transition to a fully communist society, an argument rejected by his Anarchist debate partners (like Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon and Goldman). He also thought that religion would fade away, something he put forward in his typically eloquent and vivid way: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.”

As well as mobilizing revolutions throughout the next century and more (and often perverted by tyrannical applications which Marx would have abhorred), Marx also inspired the gentler but also influential movements of Democratic Socialism and Cultural Marxism, the latter a movement in which Jews played a heavy role as we shall see. Cultural Marxists generally believed that the conditions for a successful violent revolution were not present and instead spent their energies in analyzing how aspects of society- psychological neurosis, sexual mores, religion, and aspects of “the culture industry” -like film, music and advertising- served the interests of capitalist or fascist social control. We’ll return to the most influential group of cultural Marxists, the mostly Jewish Frankfurt School- below.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Freud, born to an assimilated Jewish family, was born in a Moravian town in the Austrian Empire and lived most of his life in Vienna. Summarizing Freud's thought and contributions would take us far afield here, but we should note that his massive influence comes down to three factors: 1) his promotion of psychodynamic theory, or the idea that the workings of the mind could and should be mapped out as a basis for healing in the context of talk therapy; 2) his major theories, such as those of the oedipal complex, the life and death drives, the ego/id/super-ego structure, the meaning of dreams, jokes and slips of the tongue, and the dynamics of psychological repression. These had a massive influence not just in the field of psychotherapy but also in popular culture and its critics (critical theorists); and 3) from his many students. These included Erik Erikson, Karen Horney, Carl Jung and many others. The list of philosophers and psychodynamic theorists who were influenced by his thought would be too long to produce here, but it should be noted that it includes all of the great psychoanalytic theorists of the 20th century as well as many political and social theorists, including those of the Frankfurt School, who fused psychodynamic and Marxist theory to try to explain why socialist revolutions had failed and either fascism or capitalism had won.

Messianic Revolutionaries

Marx, Freud and Husserl all moved, for the most part, outside Judaism. Other Jewish intellectuals, however, wedded Jewish thought to the rise of romantic and revolutionary thinking in early 20th century Germany, finding an "elective affinity" between Jewish messianism and radical politics.

Gustav Landauer (1870-1919)

Gustav Landauer was born on 7 April 1870 into an assimilated bourgeois Jewish family in south-west Germany. A writer, philosopher, literary critic, friend of Buber and Kropotkin, and

editor of the libertarian journal *Der Sozialist* from 1909 to 1915, Landauer was a politically active anarchist. What caused Landauer to turn towards Judaism in his mature thought was his discovery through the writings of Martin Buber (in particular his book *The Legend of the Baal-Schem*) of a new conception of Jewish spirituality, a romantic and communitarian Jewish religiosity.

“One characteristic example of Landauer’s revolutionary traditionalism,” says Lowy, “was the way in which he interpreted Moses’ institution of the Year of Jubilee, which re-established social equality every fifty years through the redistribution of land and goods. In *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* (A Call To Socialism, 1911), he wrote: “The uprising as a Constitution, transformation and upheaval as a rule expected to last forever ... were the grandiosity and sacredness of the Mosaic social order. We need that once again: new regulations and a spiritual upheaval which will not make things and commandments permanently rigid, but which will proclaim its own permanence. The revolution must become an element of our social order, it must become the basic rule of our Constitution.”

“In other religions,” Landauer wrote, “the gods help the nation and protect its heroes, while in Judaism, ‘God is eternally opposed to servility; he is, therefore, the insurrectionary (*Aufrührer*), the arouser (*Aufrüttler*), the admonisher (*Mahner*)’. The Jewish religion is evidence of the ‘people’s holy dissatisfaction with itself’.” Jews held a special place in Landauer’s messianic conception of history: their mission (*Amt*), vocation (*Beruf*) or task (*Dienst*) was to help transform society and create a new humanity. “The Jewish mission of redemption in modern times has taken the secular form of socialism,” he wrote. Landauer regarded the present condition of Jews as the objective foundation for their international socialist role. Writing before the success of Zionism, Landauer wrote that unlike other nations, Jews had the uniqueness of being a people, a community, but not a state, which gave them the historical chance to escape “the statist delirium.”

Martin Buber (1878-1965)

Martin Buber was probably the most important representative of religious socialism within German-Jewish culture. His discovery of the Hasidic legends (1906–8) also brought about a profound renewal of modern Jewish spirituality which shaped a generation. “His political and religious ideas left their mark on an entire generation of Jewish intellectuals, from Prague to Vienna and from Budapest to Berlin” (Lowy). The success of Buber’s books on Hasidism was due to the fact that they expressed the subterranean current of religious rebirth flowing within the Jewish intelligentsia, who romanticized and longed to return to their traditional origins (but not literally). Buber’s image of Judaism was as different from assimilationist liberalism (and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, or scientific study of Judaism) as it was from rabbinical orthodoxy: his was a romantic and mystical religiosity, permeated with social critique and a longing for community.

“It was from a romantic/messianic vision of history that Buber... questioned the concept of evolution, progress or improvement (Verbesserung): ‘For by “renewal”, I do not in any way mean something gradual, a sum total of minor changes. I mean something sudden and immense (Ungeheures) by no means a continuation or an improvement, but a return and transformation.’” writes Lowy. “Rather than hope for ordinary progress (Fortschritt), one should ‘desire the impossible’ (das Unmögliche). Buber found the paradigm for this complete renewal in the Jewish messianic tradition: ‘The last part of Isaiah has God say: “I create new heavens and a new earth.” (Isaiah 65:17)...

Buber placed the active participation of humans in redemption – as God’s partners – at the heart of his idea of messianism: ‘The central Jewish *Theologumenon*, which remains unformulated and undogmatic, but which forms the background and cohesion of all doctrine and prophecy, is the belief that human action will actively participate in the task of world redemption.’” God does not will redemption without the participation of humankind. Generations have been granted a ‘collaborative force’ (mitwirkende Kraft), an active messianic force (messianische Kraft).”

“According to my belief,” Buber wrote, “the Messiah did not come at a determinate point in history: his arrival can only be the end of history. According to my belief, world redemption did not take place nineteen centuries ago; we are living in an unsaved (unerlösten) world, and we are

waiting for redemption, in which we have been called upon to participate in a most unfathomable way. Israel is the human community that bears this purely messianic expectation ... this belief in the still-to-be-accomplished and must-be-accomplished Being of world redemption.”

Buber insisted on the necessity for Jews to contribute to the revolution of humankind – that is, to the rebirth of society through a spirit of community. “So long as the Kingdom of God has not come, Judaism will not recognize any man as the true Messiah, yet it will never cease to expect redemption to come from man, for it is man’s task to lay the foundation for (begründen) God’s power on earth.” He voiced his solidarity with the revolutionary tide that was rising in Central Europe: ‘Situated in its camp ... not as profiteers but as comrades in the struggle, we salute the revolution.’”

Although a religious Jew, Buber was radically opposed to the orthodox rabbinical establishment and invoked Jesus or Spinoza as much as he did Jeremiah. His source of inspiration was what he called subterranean Judaism (to set it apart from official Judaism): the “prophetic, the Essenic-early Christian, and the cabbalist-Hasidic.” As a Zionist, Buber was from the beginning critical of the politics of the movement’s leadership, and after his arrival in Palestine in 1938 he became one of the main organizers of Ihud (Union), a Jewish-Arab movement which advocated the establishment of a bi-national state in Palestine.

As a cultural nationalist, Buber always maintained a humanistic-universal utopian goal. In an (unpublished) lecture from April 1925, he said of the messianic prophecy of the Old Testament: ‘Its aim is not emancipation of a people, but the redemption of the world; the emancipation of a people is but a sign and a pathway to the emancipation of the world.’”

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

Arendt was born in Hanover, Germany. She studied under Martin Heidegger (with whom she had a love affair, then a lifelong friendship). When WW2 broke out she fled through Europe, managing to escape death though she was captured once by the Gestapo and once by the Vichy government. From Portugal she fled to the US, where she settled in New York for the rest of her

life. An early Zionist, she later joined Ihud (the coalition for Jewish-Arab Unity). She was a rarity in objecting to the 1947 UN partition plan on the same grounds Gandhi rejected the India-Pakistan partition- that the groups should build a shared country together.

In NY she became a writer and editor, becoming an American citizen in 1950. In 1948 she wrote a letter to the NY Times together with Albert Einstein and other Jewish intellectuals protesting a visit by Menachem Begin to the US, saying that his party was “a terrorist, right-wing, chauvinist organization.” With the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, her reputation as a thinker and writer was established and a series of seminal works followed. These included *The Human Condition* in 1958, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *On Revolution* in 1963. She taught at many American universities. She died suddenly of a heart attack in 1975, at the age of 69, leaving a lasting imprint on political philosophy and the science of resistance to fascism.

The Frankfurt School

Not long before he died in 1969, Theodor Adorno told an interviewer: ‘I established a theoretical model of thought. How could I have suspected that people would want to implement it with Molotov cocktails?’ Adorno (1903-1969) was a leading thinker of the Frankfurt School, a mostly Jewish group of sociological/political thinkers established in Germany in 1923. The Frankfurt School generally thought that the time was no longer ripe for revolution after witnessing the failure of the German revolution in the 1920s, the rise of totalitarian communism and of fascism in Germany and Italy. Instead they believed the role of the intellectual was to understand and diagnose what was happening, and to open up pockets of intellectual, cultural and artistic resistance. As Stuart Jeffries wrote in *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of The Frankfurt School*, they “were virtuosic at critiquing the viciousness of fascism and capitalism’s socially eviscerating, spiritually crushing impact on western societies.” Their thought was fundamentally based in Freudian and Marxist thought and had a huge impact on the counter-culture in North America and Europe to this day.

Members of the Frankfurt School were at first involved in analyzing why a socialist revolution had not occurred in Germany, and then why Fascism was on the rise instead. They put forth both Marxist and psychological theories- for instance some theorized there were elements of sadomasochistic wish fulfillment in supporters of Fascism. In the 30s and 40s the main figures all managed to escape the Nazis and relocate to America. In the US, famously, they did not embrace their new found capitalist freedoms but began asserting that capitalism was every bit as murderous as Fascism, just in different ways.

Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) theorized something they called “the culture industry”, which included pop culture. They saw it as fundamentally ideological, aiming to justify or make acceptable capitalist inequalities. Adorno excoriated “feel good” art, arguing that the true artist must produce material which unsettles and confronts people, making them unhappy with their vapid, consumeristic lives. Erich Fromm (1900-1980), another Jewish member of the Frankfurt School, wrote influential critiques of fascism, social conformity, and the culture of “having” over “being” and the degeneration of committed love. Herbert Marcuse (1878-1979) wrote “The One-Dimensional Man”, a critique of flattened consumerist culture which made him, for a time, into a rock star among young people in the 1960s. Although Marcuse embraced 60s activism, Adorno was critical of it, seeing it as harboring irrational, totalitarian tendencies. One of Adorno’s students, Angela Davis, would go on to be one of the most influential African-American freedom fighters of the late 20th century, going from imprisoned black panther to international speaker, writer and activist.

In 2005 Yuri Slezkine wrote a book called “the Jewish Century” which argued that Western Culture, in the 20th century, was overwhelmingly shaped by Jews, the ethnic group who had best adapted to, and helped create, the modern western world despite their great traumas. While that is to my mind likely an exaggeration, the Jews who translated the ancient Torah values of social and economic justice, egalitarianism, the value of the individual, love of neighbor and stranger, and the refusal to worship human power into political radicalism had a massive influence on radical and progressive politics in the 20th century, one we only scratched the surface of here.

Suggested Reading

Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought In Central Europe Michael Lowy

Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of The Frankfurt School Stuart Jeffries

A World To Win: The Life of Karl Marx: Sven-Eric Liedman

I and Thou: Martin Buber

Encounter On The Narrow Bridge: A Life of Martin Buber Maurice Friedman

Tales of The Hasidim: Martin Buber