



Matthias Vetter

FROM ETHNOPHOBIA TO ANTI-SEMITISM

*Terror Against National Minorities
under Stalinist Rule*

With a foreword by Irina Sherbakova

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Note on Transliteration

Transliterations from Yiddish in this book are based on the YIVO Romanization table, without the use of special symbols. Transliterations from Russian and Ukrainian are based on the Library of Congress Romanization table, without diacritics. This results in several deviations from popular Anglophone usages, most notably in Russian words with initial "e," which has been rendered as "e" and not "ye." Thus, Ezhov (and not Yezhov), *evsektiia* and *evkom* (spellings recorded on YIVO's website, instead of *yevsektiya* and *yevkom*). We trust that this method of transliterations will ensure more accuracy and closeness to the original language of the source texts.

Foreword

The Long Shadow of Anti-Semitism

Irina Sherbakova

Matthias Vetter's seminal work, *From Ethnophobia to Anti-Semitism. Terror Against National Minorities under Stalinist Rule*, deserves special attention today. It is undoubtedly an important study for anyone seeking to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the history of anti-Semitism against the backdrop of the Soviet socio-political landscape.

Vetter analyzes a complex and contradictory phenomenon: anti-Semitism in the politics of the Soviet state over several decades, from Marxist-Leninist ideas and the repressions of the Stalin era to the anti-Semitic policies of the late Soviet Union. As he aptly puts it: "It was as if the violence directed against Jews acted like a magnet, attracting scattered or latent anti-Semitic elements and combining them into something new."

The question of the history of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union remains extremely sensitive to this day — not least because it is a sore spot in a country with deeply rooted anti-Semitic traditions. The reader is provided with a broad historical overview of this phenomenon—from the pogroms during the Civil War (1919–1921) through the shifting political currents of the Stalinist era to the end of the Soviet period. The book details how and why anti-Semitism took on different forms within the communist system, resulting in a highly complex and multifaceted picture.

After the revolution, there were formally no longer any restrictions on Jews. Many young and active people moved to the cities to take advantage of new educational and career opportunities. At the same time, profound upheavals occurred within the Jewish community: atheism spread, religious and national traditions were suppressed, names were Russified, and the younger generation increasingly distanced itself from the Jewish language and cultural heritage.

The Bolshevik leadership supported this development but, from its earliest years, it also fought against Zionist movements, persecuted their activists, and suppressed the Hebrew language in favor of Yiddish. In the early Soviet era, the class struggle was the primary focus—the fight against the "bourgeoisie" and the "capitalists" was not ethnically motivated. On the contrary: the Soviet regime actively combated forms of everyday anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, overpopulation, housing shortages, and difficult living conditions in the 1920s repeatedly led to outbreaks of anti-Semitism. Soviet propaganda characterized these as remnants of tsarism. At the same time, the leadership occasionally attempted to mobilize this "base" antisemitism for political struggle, for example, in the campaign against the Trotskyist opposition.

Vetter convincingly demonstrates how anti-Semitism in the 1930s was embedded in Stalinist policy with its general repression of national minorities. Anti-Semitic dimensions can also be identified during the Great Terror (1937–1938)—for example, in the context of the Moscow show trials, and later in the removal of Jewish cadres from key positions.

Particular attention should be paid to the thesis that the anti-Semitic policies of the late Stalin era were not a sudden reversal of the state machine but had already been prepared by prewar policies. The Holocaust, accompanied by anti-Semitic propaganda in German-occupied territories, also played an important role in this. The Soviet leadership's response consisted of decades of silence regarding the Holocaust, as well as the use of the evasive phrase "extermination of peaceful Soviet citizens." This was followed by anti-Semitic tendencies in party politics, which had already begun to emerge during the war. The book also sheds light on the tragic fate of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee—from its exploitation for anti-Hitler propaganda, particularly in the United States, to its dissolution and the murder of its members in 1948–1952.

Another focus of the book is Stalin's personal stance on the "Jewish question" against the backdrop of growing sympathy among Soviet Jews for the establishment of Israel. Vetter illustrates how the political shift after 1945 led to Great Russian nationalism

and, in the late 1940s, to state-sponsored anti-Semitism, for example, in the form of the campaign against "homeless cosmopolitans." But, even after Stalin's death, anti-Semitism did not disappear; rather, it transformed—from open campaigns such as the "Doctors' Plot" to anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist policies in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to military support for Arab states in their war against Israel. This is particularly significant, as the traces of this support are still evident today.

Particularly noteworthy is Vetter's precision in handling sources and facts. He challenges established notions and situates anti-Semitism within the broader context of Soviet nationality policy. Why is this topic relevant today? Although state-sponsored anti-Semitism largely disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union, new political developments in Russia reveal a dangerous trend toward the rehabilitation of Stalin and the instrumentalization of historical narratives. The internet plays a special role as a space for the dissemination of hate and conspiracy theories. Anti-Semitic sentiments can spread rapidly there and form international networks. Old clichés and myths—such as those regarding the role of Jews in the Russian Revolution—are experiencing a resurgence.

Anti-Semitic tendencies are also found in certain religious contexts within the Russian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the relativization of the Holocaust remains a prevalent phenomenon. Not least, the revival of a cult of Stalin contributes to the overall relativization of his policies—including the anti-Semitic campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Added to this is a problematic instrumentalization of terms such as "National Socialism" and "genocide"—for example, through laws on the "denial of the genocide of the Soviet people" (2026) or through the reinterpretation of historical institutions such as the Gulag Museum in Moscow into a "Museum of Remembrance of the Genocide of the Soviet Peoples by the Nazis," thereby once again suppressing the memory of the Holocaust against Soviet Jews.

At the same time, historical narratives are actively used to construct enemy stereotypes—for example, in the context of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in the aggressive war against Ukraine. Anti-Semitism must not be viewed in isolation from the broader political

developments, which are increasingly taking on authoritarian, nationalist, and anti-Western traits.

These developments go hand in hand with growing nationalism, isolation, and a systematic discrediting of liberal values. Economic stagnation and social insecurity further reinforce the willingness to blame "the other" for one's own problems. Warning signs are evident, among other things, in anti-Semitic statements by public figures, which contribute to the creeping normalization of such positions. The internet plays a significant role here as a space for the dissemination of hate and conspiracy theories. Old anti-Semitic sentiments are experiencing a resurgence and are being exploited for political ends.

Anti-Semitism must therefore not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon. It is linked to authoritarian trends, rising nationalism, and social insecurity. It is evident that Matthias Vetter's studies have not only historical value but also help us understand current developments: They reveal which patterns recur, which myths are being exploited, and how antisemitism adapts to new circumstances. They help reveal what lies behind the mask of the "struggle against Zionism," what parallels exist with today's anti-Semitism, which is spreading in Europe and beyond, and what narratives are employed by populist forces on both the right and the left.

Irina Sherbakova is co-founder and board member of the Russian human rights organization "Memorial" which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

1 Class Struggle and Ethnic Hatred – Related Enemies

It is widely known that ethnically defined groups were oppressed and persecuted in the Soviet Union. The deportations of the Volga Germans and other peoples accused of collaboration with the Nazi occupiers, as well as the anti-Jewish campaigns in the postwar years, have been etched into historical memory. However, there is little consensus on what actually happened. It is less well known that, even during the "Great Terror" of the 1930s, nationality could be a significant reason for extermination (in other words, repressions against ethnic groups were not always limited to deportation, but could also involve executions). And there is still widespread uncertainty about the "anti-Semitic turn" of the late Stalin years. Was it a shift at all? What were the dictator's intentions and motives in the mysterious "doctors' plot," and what threats loomed in the months before his death? Was he inspired by Hitler and planning a second Holocaust? Were "ethnic" repressions more important to the character of the dictatorship than acts of "class struggle," or were they at least of equal weight? How much anti-Semitism is there in Soviet (and other left-wing) anti-Zionism?

If we summarize frequently heard positions on these issues, the following scenario emerges: Jews were the most prominent victims of postwar terror, reminiscent of the great purges of the 1930s, even if in the prewar period repression was directed primarily against the elites and not against minorities, and was still free of anti-Semitic undertones. The nationalist turn, as is sometimes claimed, only occurred during or after the war. At that time, anti-Semitism was no longer officially combated but became an integral part of the state's politics and ideology. However, in order to conceal this, Jews were always attacked as "cosmopolitans" (or as "Zionists," which meant the same thing). The peak of the persecution, it is repeatedly claimed, was a show trial against Jewish "doctor-murderers." They and other Soviet Jews were particularly accused

of sympathizing with the newly founded state of Israel. The implementation of a pre-planned mass deportation to the Far East was only prevented by Stalin's death. It is often argued that his personal anti-Semitism, which he had suppressed in previous years, was a major driving force behind the persecution which amounted to a Soviet-style "final solution." However, it is generally acknowledged that this terror was free of racist elements.

I consider all of these statements and interpretations, which are admittedly exaggerated for polemical purposes here, to be incorrect. However, it is understandable that they have become widely accepted in this or a similar form. They are not entirely unfounded and are by no means the result of malicious historical legends. Nevertheless, I am convinced that many widespread statements about anti-Semitism or ethnic oppression under Stalin and his successors are misleading or at least miss the point. Contrary to common interpretations—or supplementing them with further aspects—this work aims to interpret the communist persecution of Jews in the context of a broader policy of repression against national minorities. I would like to show that it began long before 1939 and was resumed under changed conditions at the beginning of the Cold War. I will trace the events of the postwar period in particular and the motives of those involved in detail, partly to avoid the danger of attributing specific endpoints to intentional planning or strategic preparation, where it may have been a matter of a functional mechanism of coincidental constellations, chaotic interventions, or unpredictable intrigues.

In my analysis, I draw on everything that has been published since the opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s, until (at least in Russia) access to further archival materials became impossible again. Particularly in the 2000s, carefully edited, dependable, and unabridged publications of sources to the issues relevant here appeared. They provide previously impossible insights into the innermost mechanism of the dictatorship. Published research and archival documents from the states of the former Soviet sphere of influence (where there are hardly any renewed archive restrictions,

but where extensive source publications are available, as well) are also evaluated as comprehensively as possible.¹

Since a different approach is to be taken here than is often done in common interpretations, it is not assumed prior to the analysis that Stalin's persecution of Jews was anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitism is understood here to mean a fundamentally negative assessment of people designated as "Jews" who are assumed to act in a virtual collective in a manner that is harmful to others. Anti-Semitism involves extending this assessment to explain general social problems and leading to the demand for, and implementation of, countermeasures. However, not every action that harms Jews must be motivated by anti-Semitism; if the victim's Jewishness is not at issue, one must look closely. Anyone who wishes to see an attempt at trivialization in my hesitating to diagnose anti-Semitism in late Stalinism without further examination, is asked to read to the end. Things are not always as they seem at first glance. Sometimes, even a second look is deceptive.

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Capitalism

This study focuses on a prime example of "right-wing" politics pursued by the "left." But how does a self-declared left-wing dictatorship come to use "right-wing" violent measures? What is meant here by "right" and "left"? To put it very simply: all radical left-wing movements contain at their core a declaration of enmity that is directed against behaviors, social roles, and relationships of ownership and power. The ruling elites, regardless of national or ethnic affiliation, are to be disempowered and, if necessary, "liquidated as a class." A utopian order with equality for all, regardless of ethnic

1 I have presented this interpretation in a more concise form: Matthias Vetter, "Die letzte 'fünfte Kolonne.' Antisemitismus und stalinistische Minderheitenpolitik," *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 19 (2010): 234–268. Its basic thesis is similar to that of Jeffrey Veidlinger, "Soviet Jewry as a Diaspora Nationality. The 'Black Years' Reconsidered," *East European Jewish Affairs* 33 (2003): 4–29; the difference lies in my emphasis on the American connection. For an overview of research approaches, see Antonella Salomoni, "State-Sponsored Anti-Semitism in Postwar USSR. Studies and Research Perspectives," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 1 (April 2010).

origin, is the goal for the future. Right-wing movements, on the other hand, oppose egalitarians and subversives who seek to overturn a hierarchy in society that is interpreted as "natural" or "God-given."

However, the radical right does not only fight against left-wing rebels, but almost always also against enemy groups that are assumed to have an innate common character. These are "birth communities" of lesser value or with unjustified claims to power, against which a people must protect itself. It is precisely in the name of the *people* that right-wing movements act just as much as left-wing ones, but only the right invokes a great past to be restored by defending the people against the "corrosive" influences of modernity, through a purification of "foreign" elements, the reprimanding of the weak, and the establishment of a "healthy" order with a national community within the main ethnic group and with hierarchies of differently valued ethnic groups, insofar as such groups are tolerated at all. We should not downplay this difference from the left-wing postulate of equality.

You don't have to be a supporter or defender of the left to recognize that there is a serious difference between the fight against persecution, and destruction of "classes," on the one hand, and "peoples," on the other: it is difficult to leave a "people" or even a "race," but it is easy to leave a "class." Of course, this does not apply without restriction. These attributions are never objective, natural facts, but inventions of the human mind, or, at worst, of a malevolent spirit. Ideas of "innate" class affiliation and changing "racial" ethnic affiliation are certainly not uncommon. Soviet history in particular offers sufficient illustrative material for this. Resentment against minority nations because of their special economic roles has occurred and continues to occur in many regions of the world. Nevertheless, the threat against ethnically defined communities is more aimed at total oppression and even extermination – an innate deficiency cannot be overcome by re-education, as is still an option for "class enemies" in left-wing despotism, at least in theory.

It is necessary to explain repression against the Jewish minority in the context of a regime's general treatment of ethnically defined groups also because the Soviet dictatorship classified Jews as

a nationality. However, this minority can never be viewed as just one of many other small national groups in a multi-ethnic empire. In an environment shaped by Christian traditions, Jews are burdened in the eyes of others as God's murderers, rejecters of the true faith, and thus as the embodiment of the Other in itself. These accusations are deeply inscribed in the cultural heritage, whether they are consciously shared or only resonate unconsciously. They are not replaced by "modern" forms of anti-Semitism, but rather overlaid, sometimes repressed to the point of oblivion, yet remaining effective. In addition, in this cultural sphere, Jews are associated with trade, money, and economic power like hardly any other group (after the deeper, religiously based rejection had forced them into precisely these roles).

A deep-rooted characteristic of Christian heritage is the rejection of, and hatred toward, wealth and Judaism, both separately and in mixed forms. This makes it possible for socially backward or strongly conservative movements to rally against the "financial power" of the Jews and to ignore the rebellious attitude inherent in anti-Semitism. Communism/socialism and anti-Semitism share a revolutionary indignation against a clearly defined power group: communists against the capitalist class; anti-Semites against an ethnic-religious community, which they imagine, in a distorted copy of the socialist-communist declaration of enmity, to be an overpowering minority that unjustly appropriates the wealth that belongs to the people. It is, first and foremost, a restrictedly negative view of capitalist modernity.

Again, to put it bluntly, there are "genetic" similarities between anti-Semitism and socialism. Both are children of the French Revolution, which attempted to heal society by eliminating the ruling aristocracy (equally a community of property and descent). Anti-Semites and socialists use this legacy to shape their narratives – explanations of the evils of the capitalist modern world and promises of a way out. For socialists, this lies in overcoming and

eliminating the "bourgeoisie," while for anti-Semites, with their mimetic anti-capitalism, it lies in overthrowing the "kings of the epoch" — the Jews.²

And so it is not simply the diametrically opposed position that makes socialists and communists bitter opponents of the anti-Semites.³ The rejection of socialist ideas by anti-Semites is rather reserved; hardly any of them are openly pro-capitalist;⁴ what bothers them most about socialism is Jewish involvement and, often associated with this, internationalist sentiment. Nevertheless, it is precisely this structural and thematic proximity that forces socialists to draw a sharp distinction, but at the same time always creates the possibility of "confusion," mixing, and merging of enemy images.⁵ This applies to the production of ideology as well as to the perception and, not least, the later interpretation of these discourses. The confusing kinship of these hostile siblings and the "left-wing DNA" contained in anti-Semitism do not mean that anti-Semites are fundamentally "left-wing" (even if they surprisingly often classify themselves as revolutionaries) or that left-wingers tend to be anti-Semitic (the right-wingers are not consistently so either). But anti-Semitism on the left is possible — it is not simply paradoxical or inexplicably fallen from the sky. However, things are complicated, right from the start.

As early as Karl Marx's 1844 essay, there is mention of the "secular cult of the Jew," that is, "haggling" (*Schacher*) and his "secular god," that is, money. The reduction of Judaism to commerce and

2 On Alphonse Toussenel's 1845 *Juifs, rois de l'époque*, which coined the phrase, see Michel Dreyfus, *L'antisémitisme à gauche. Histoire d'un paradoxe, de 1830 à nos jours* (Paris, 2009), 25ff.

3 Mario Keßler, *Sozialisten gegen Antisemitismus. Zur Judenfeindschaft und ihrer Bekämpfung (1844 – 1939)* (Hamburg, 2022).

4 There are always exceptions. One example is Henry Ford, who, surprisingly, enjoyed a good reputation in the USSR, even though he was a capitalist and anti-Semite.

5 For a detailed history of left-wing anti-Semitism (without consideration of Eastern Europe), see William I. Brustein and Louisa Roberts, *The Socialism of Fools? Leftist Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (Cambridge, 2015). In addition to the above-mentioned work by Michel Dreyfus, see Michele Battini, *Socialism of Fools. Capitalism and Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York, 2016), which examines the intertwining of anti-capitalism and anti-Semitism not only on the left.

self-interest (which was not empirically substantiated by Marx) used in this polemic was and is part of the rhetoric of anti-Semitism, as long as it is considered anti-Semitic to describe greedy or business-minded behavior as typically Jewish. For Marx, the most despicable feature of bourgeois society in the 1840s was its "Jewish" monetary system. However, he did not consider the "practical Jewish spirit" of egoism to be the originator of this system, but rather its expression. While an ideological anti-Semite excludes Jews from society, Marx did not do so in his complete equation of the "Jewish" and "bourgeois" money-minded types. But anti-Semites, even if they consider society to be "Judaized," still see Jews as fundamentally different from the majority.⁶ In Marx's view, on the other hand, all members of the bourgeois society become "Jews." He did not advocate discrimination or special treatment of the Jewish minority as an anti-Semite would do, but rather—without demanding assimilation or renunciation of religion as a prerequisite—the civic emancipation of the Jews. He wanted to achieve the abolition of Judaism (in reality, as a religious community, and metaphorically, as a ruling mentality) not through an isolated attack on that group, but exclusively in the course of overcoming bourgeois society as a whole—which he called, in a peculiarly ambivalent formula, the "emancipation of society from Judaism."⁷

In Stalinist policy against Jews—let us say this up front—there is no reference to Marx's rejection of the alleged Jewish fixation on money, nor to his deeply anti-Semitic rhetoric and equation of "bourgeois" with "Jewish." The text did not go unnoticed. Stalin referred to it casually in 1913 (see below, chapter 10), but it was largely ignored in the USSR for a long time; and even in Germany,

6 See Thomas Haury, *Antisemitismus von links. Kommunistische Ideologie, Nationalismus und Antizionismus in der frühen DDR* (Hamburg, 2002), 160–182; Enzo Traverso, *Les Marxistes et la question juive. Histoire d'un débat (1843–1943)* (Montreuil, 1990), 37ff.; Robert S. Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal. The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (Lincoln, NE, 2012), 73ff., 183ff.

7 Karl Marx, "Zur Judenfrage," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die Heilige Familie und andere philosophische Frühschriften* (Berlin, 1953), 28–66; quotations from 59, 62, 66; the translation here is taken from Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994), 52ff., 56.

its use by the KPD remained sporadic.⁸ It was only the Soviet "anti-Zionists" of the 1960s who saw it as confirmation of their resentments. But even without reference to Marx, early Bolshevik anti-anti-Semitism always had a loophole in anti-capitalism: what did it mean that Jews were excessively associated with capitalism? In fact, before the revolution, Lenin had attested to the anti-Semitic, anti-capitalist right-wing extremists: "There is in our Black-Hundred movement one exceedingly original and exceedingly important feature that has not been the subject of sufficient attention. That feature is ignorant peasant democracy, democracy of the crudest type but also extremely deep-seated."⁹

Lenin did not share anti-Semitism in the slightest, but in "peasant democracy" with its rejection of "usury" and the like, he too could recognize an anti-capitalism that had not yet taken the final step. The anti-Semitic and communist enemy stereotypes undeniably show similarities and points of connection. A drastic example of this is the infamous appearance of KPD spokeswoman Ruth Fischer, who is said to have called on nationalist students in Berlin in 1923: "You cry out against Jewish capital (*Judenkapital*), gentlemen? Whoever condemns Jewish capital, gentlemen, is already engaged in the class struggle, even though he doesn't realize it. You are against Jewish capital and want to eliminate the stock manipulators. Rightly so. Trample the Jewish capitalists underfoot, hang

8 *Rote Fahne* published excerpts in 1923; cf. Olaf Kistenmacher, *Arbeit und "jüdisches Kapital."* *Antisemitische Aussagen in der KPD-Tageszeitung Die Rote Fahne während der Weimarer Republik* (Bremen, 2016), 68.

9 "The Black Hundreds" (September 26, 1913), in Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 19 (Moscow, 1979), 390ff.; accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/sep/26.htm>. The "Black Hundreds" were a pre-revolutionary Russian group, largely identical to the "Union of the Russian People," cf. in brief: Matthias Vetter, "Sojus Russkogo Naroda (Russland)," in *Handbuch des Antisemitismus*, vol. 5: *Organisationen, Institutionen, Bewegungen*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Berlin, 2012), 571–573; Jörg Baberowski, *Der sterbliche Gott. Macht und Herrschaft im Zarenreich* (Munich, 2024), 939ff.

them from the street-lamps, stamp them out."¹⁰ This escalation can be found in many KPD appeals. But it does not mean that the KPD was fundamentally anti-Semitic. It was an ingratiating rhetoric intended to undermine the arguments of the right – but it may have actually played into their hands. It should be noted here that such "arguments" were not used by the Bolsheviks either during the Civil War or after they consolidated their power. This had less to do with greater reservations than with the fact that there was no electoral competition with right-wing radicals as in Weimar Germany.

Russian revolutionaries, whether Bolsheviks or Mensheviks, refused to align themselves with the anti-Semitic right, not least because it would have been a flagrant contradiction of their tradition as defenders of minorities against tsarism. In the name of equality, they had always opposed the "tsarist prison of nations." Left-wing movements always derive their goal of disempowering the ruling class from a moral claim, and not just as a superficial justification. Indignation against the injustices of the world is part of the core capital of the left. In 1901, Josef Stalin, then a little-known agitator from the Caucasian periphery, listed (in Georgian) the "oppressed nations and religious communities in Russia": the Poles and Finns, Georgians and Armenians, and the "the eternally persecuted and humiliated Jews who lack even the miserably few rights enjoyed by other Russian subjects."¹¹ And so, entirely in line with his party's

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- 10 Kistenmacher, *Arbeit und "jüdisches Kapital,"* 39; Haury, *Antisemitismus von links,* 283ff. Quote translation is from David Hirsch, "From 'Jewish Capital' to the 'Jewish-Fascist Legion in Jerusalem': The Development of Antizionism in the German Communist Party (KPD) in the Weimar Republic, 1925-1933," *Engage* 3 (2006), accessed June 12, 2026, <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2015/11/04/from-jewish-capital-to-the-jewish-fascist-legion-in-jerusalem-the-development-of-antizionism-in-the-german-communist-party-kpd-in-the-weimar-republic-1925-1933/>. When forced out of KPD leadership in 1926, Fischer attributed this to resentment against Jewish intellectuals; cf. Karin Wieland, "'Totalitarismus' als Rache. Ruth Fischer und ihr Buch 'Stalin und German Communism,'" in *Totalitarismus. Eine Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Alfons Söllner, Ralf Walkenhaus, and Karin Wieland (Berlin, 1997), 117-138.
- 11 Joseph Stalin, "The Russian Social-Democratic Party and its Immediate Tasks" (November/December 1901), in idem, *Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1954), accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1901/11/x01.htm>.

thinking, he declared after the revolution, now as People's Commissar for Nationalities: "The policy of tsarism was to obliterate these minorities by every possible means, even by pogroms (the anti-Jewish pogroms)."¹² The Bolshevik dictatorship, on the other hand, promised, in a word from the Christian tradition, that it would recognize no differences of origin, "no Hellenes and no Judeans." This is how Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin expressed himself to a gathering of Jewish communists in June 1919. He went on to explain that, if the counterrevolution were to prevail, there would be piles of corpses of Jews, not only of communists, but even of the Jewish bourgeoisie.¹³ The latter was a rarely used argument (which some radicals already considered too "Jewish-nationalist"); and it was clearly different from the KPD's rhetoric against "Jewish capitalists."

Red and White Terror

In view of the anti-Jewish and anti-Bolshevik agitation everywhere, the Bolsheviks had good reason to see anti-Semitism as the ideology of their enemies – in part they interpreted it as their real conviction, but mainly simply as a tool to incite the people against a substitute enemy. Stalin's statements quoted above about the persecution of minorities by the tsars are an example of this assessment. In Lenin's verdict, the condemnation of anti-Semitism was even harsher: Tsarism relied on people "who seize hold of Jewish children by their legs and smash their heads against stones," and so "in a country like Russia we should have to chop off the heads of at least a hundred Romanovs in order to wean their successors from the habit of organising Black-Hundred murders and anti-Jewish

12 J. V. Stalin, "The Immediate task of the Party in the National Question" (Theses for the Tenth Congress of the R.C.P.[B.], *Pravda*, February 10, 1921, in idem, *Works*, vol. 5 (Moscow, 1954), accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1921/02/10.htm>.

13 Mikhail Kalinin, "O evreiakh," speech on June 11, 1919, in Vitebsk, in idem, *Evreiskii vopros* (Kharkiv, 1927), 5ff. Reference to "neither Jew nor Gentile" is from Galatians 3:26–29.

pogroms."¹⁴ On the one hand, this seemed like justified indignation (even though the tsars had by no means ordered the pogroms, but feared them as a form of unrest),¹⁵ but, on the other hand, it was also a call for blanket violent countermeasures against "culprits" who could be automatically identified on the basis of their social role.



Image 1 – The Voice of Lenin, 1919

- 14 Vladimir Lenin, "The Slogans and Organisation of Social-Democratic Work Inside and Outside the Duma" (December 8, 1911), in idem, *Collected Works*, vol. 17 (Moscow, 1974), 331–341, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/dec/08.htm>.
- 15 Baberowski, *Der sterbliche Gott*, 513ff., 533ff., 959ff., 1009, 1077.

The vehemence of this position is reflected in a 1919 recording of a speech by Lenin.¹⁶ Such an appeal seemed necessary because not only the reactionary White Guards and the tsarist Black Hundreds, from whom the Bolsheviks had expected this anyway, but also units of the Reds had participated in anti-Jewish violence during the Civil War, albeit to a far lesser extent than the Whites. The small town of Hlukhiv (Russian: Glukhov) in northern Ukraine gained sad notoriety when the Reds killed about one hundred Jews there in April 1918; shouts against *zhidy* (an insult for Jews) and *burzhui* (the bourgeois) could be heard. Individual warlords on the Ukrainian battlefield, such as the notorious Cossack leader Nikifor Grigor'ev, stood between the fronts, sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other. Before he had over six hundred Jews slaughtered in Cherkasy in May 1919, he had fought in alliance with the Bolsheviks; and that is just one example of similar cases.¹⁷

Lenin did not address his recorded speech to opponents, but to potential supporters. They should understand anti-Semitism as a legacy of the tsarist era and reject it as a means of redirecting the hatred of the exploited class. Hostility toward Jews could only be maintained as long as workers and peasants were kept in ignorance, said Lenin. For it was not the Jews who were the enemies of the working people, but the capitalists of all countries. "Among the

16 Vladimir Lenin, "Anti-Jewish Pogroms" (end of March 1919), in idem, *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow, 1972), 252ff., accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/mar/x10.htm>. Russian original: Vladimir Lenin, *O evreiskom voprose v Rossii* (Moscow, 1924), 57. The recording can be listened to at Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lenin_-_Anti-Jewish_Pogroms.ogg.

17 Matthias Vetter, *Antisemiten und Bolschewiki. Zum Verhältnis von Sowjetsystem und Judenfeindschaft 1917–1939* (Berlin, 1995), 37ff.; Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917–1920* (Philadelphia, 2012), 91ff.; Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe. The 1919–1921 Pogroms in Ukraine and the Onset of the Holocaust* (New York, 2021), 67ff., 176ff., 190ff.; Brendan McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, 2019), 38ff., 183ff.; Vladimir Buldakov, "Freedom, Shortages, Violence: The Origins of the 'Revolutionary Anti-Jewish Pogrom' in Russia, 1917–1918," in *Anti-Jewish Violence. Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, ed. Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen (Bloomington, IN, 2011), 74–91, esp. 84; Sergei Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Bagrovaia kniga. Pogromy 1919–20 gg. na Ukraine* (Harbin, 1922), 8ff. (Grigor'ev), 73ff. (violence by the "Reds").

Jews there are kulaks, exploiters and capitalists, just as there are among the Russians, and among people of all nations. The capitalists strive to sow and foment hatred between workers of different faiths, different nations and different races." An early decree from 1918 sounds no less clear. Lenin himself is said to have added a handwritten note to the draft already stating that "the antisemitic movement and anti-Jewish pogroms are fatal to the case of the workers' and peasants' revolution," and that steps have to be taken to "effectively destroy the antisemitic movement at its roots." Lenin extended this: "It is herewith ordered that pogromists and persons inciting to pogroms be outlawed." But the same document already contains the intertwined enemy images: "The Jewish bourgeois is our enemy, not as he is a Jew but as he is a bourgeois."¹⁸

The reverse conclusion could have also been drawn, but, as Jews, the Jewish bourgeoisie did not deserve (except in rare historical examples) to be protected from persecution by the socialists or communists. And in Bolshevik anti-anti-Semitism, as serious as it was, it was soon proclaimed – unlike in Kalinin's early statement quoted above – that the "Jewish bourgeoisie" always supported the enemies of the Jews because of their common opposition to socialism. One of the most frequently cited Soviet books on this subject from the 1920s claimed that the pogroms of the Civil War had only affected poor Jews: among the more than 200,000 murdered, there were no rich people; Jewish bankers or factory directors had been under the protection of the White Guards.¹⁹ This was a distorted interpretation of the fact that there were indeed "bourgeois" Jews among the Whites (especially in the liberal Cadet Party). But they had nothing to do with the pogroms, which of course also claimed the lives of the wealthier Jews in the Ukrainian shtetls, as they were the targets of robbery and looting.

18 "From the Council of People's Commissars," *Izvestiia*, July 27, 1918. The task of drafting the text was given to Semen Dimanshtein, who passed it on to Lev Trotskii; this is reported by Hersz Smolar, *Fun ineveynik. Zikhroynes vegn der "Yevsektseye"* (Tel Aviv, 1978), 322. Cf. Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites*, 96; Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse, 1951), 274ff., English translation from there.

19 Iurii Larin, *Evrei i antisemitizm v SSSR* (Moscow, 1929), 43. The number of victims there is at the upper end of various estimates, which start at around 50,000.

In fact, the pogroms combined "revenge for Bolshevism" with brutal requisitioning of supplies and social unrest against "merchants" and other supposedly better-off people. One of the ideologues of the White movement, Vasilii Shul'gin, admitted in retrospect that, in addition to political anti-Bolshevik White anti-Semitism, there had also been "dirty" hatred of Jews during the Civil War, which had served as a pretext for criminal elements to loot. The Whites were to blame for not preventing the pogroms.²⁰ This was hypocritical, because in reality Shul'gin was involved in stirring up pogrom sentiment through a press campaign, had agitated against Ukrainian separatists and "Jewish terror," and proclaimed that Jews were right to fear pogroms as long as they did not repent their involvement in Bolshevism.²¹ In retrospect, this still seemed legitimate to him, because the White movement had begun as the embodiment of good and had never dreamed of exterminating entire classes like the "Red executioners." But, with the pogroms, it had lost its honor and morality and had become like the Reds: "We behave toward the *zhidy* as they behave toward the *burzhui*. They shout, 'Death to the *burzhui*,' and we respond, 'Kill the *zhidy*.'" ²²

For a representative of the Whites, this is a surprising equation of Red and White terror. However, a pattern of justification also becomes apparent, which can be summarized as follows. First came the Red terror, with a high proportion of Jews as perpetrators. Then, as a reaction to this allegedly primary outbreak of violence, came the idea that Jews were to be fought as punishment or prevention. This can be found in the writing of the White ideologist quoted above (with regret), in the ideology of the German occupiers after 1941 (without regret)—and even in the arguments of German historian Ernst Nolte, who attempted to interpret the Holocaust as a

20 Vasilii Shul'gin, *Chto nam v nikh ne npravitsia* (Paris, 1929), 81ff.

21 Vetter, *Antisemiten und Bolschewiki*, 46ff.; Ulrich Herbeck, *Das Feindbild vom "jüdischen Bolschewiken."* *Zur Geschichte des russischen Antisemitismus vor und während der Russischen Revolution* (Berlin, 2009), 255; Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Bagrovnaia kniga*, 247.

22 Vasilii Shul'gin, *1920 god. Ocherki* (Sofia, 1921, reprinted Moscow, 1922, and Leningrad, 1927); reprinted in idem, *Dni. 1920. Zapiski* (Moscow, 1989), 283–530, quotation from 298.

reprehensible but understandable reaction to the "prius" of Bolshevik class murder, thereby earning fierce criticism in the historians' dispute of the 1980s.²³ This figure of thought (in Nolte's case, it is an attempt at an apologetic re-evaluation of German history rather than an openly anti-Semitic resentment) is misguided—and not only because of its relativizing and tendentiously justifying components. The White terror against Jews was not merely a response to Jewish involvement in Bolshevism, for many ideologues of the Whites had already decided before 1917 that the Jews were the enemies of Russia. Shul'gin, who is quoted above, admitted to having been a staunch opponent of Jewish aspirations and pretensions since 1905.²⁴

It was not only die-hard anti-Semites who believed they perceived "Jewish" rule in the Soviet Union; this sentiment was directed against the leading revolutionaries from many quarters.²⁵ Even among emigrated Jews, a kind of remorse spread for the "overzealous participation of Jewish Bolsheviks in the oppression and destruction of Russia."²⁶ But, most often, talk of "Jewish Bolshevism" was at its core a rebellion against the Jews as the supposed new rulers—under different circumstances than in the previous, strongly anti-capitalist anti-Semitism that had also been prevalent in Russia.²⁷ Even in its counterrevolutionary turn, anti-Semitism remained true to its revolutionary heritage.

In contrast, it seemed unthinkable for the Bolsheviks to make sweeping accusations against peoples or ethnic groups. A little-noticed example of this: the two most prominent anti-Bolshevik assassins after the revolution were left-wing radicals of Jewish origin. On

23 "Historikerstreit". *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich, 1987), 45; Ernst Nolte, *Der Europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Frankfurt, 1987), 502, 511, 529, 544.

24 Shul'gin, *Chto nam v nikh ne npravitsia*, 52ff.

25 Paul A. Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe. The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, 2018), 11–45; on dissemination within Russia see Herbeck, *Das Feindbild vom "jüdischen Bolschewiken"*, 182ff., 283ff.

26 *Die Russische Revolution und das Schicksal der russischen Juden. Eine Debatte in Berlin 1922/23*, ed. Karl Schlögel and Karl-Konrad Tschäpe (Berlin, 2014), 106.

27 Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, *The Tsars and the Jews. Reform, Reaction and Anti-Semitism in Imperial Russia; 1772–1917* (Chur, 1993), 107ff.

the one hand, this did little to dissuade anti-Semites from equating Jewishness with Bolshevism. On the other hand, however, the Bolsheviks did not even remotely consider that the ethnic collective to which the perpetrators belonged should be held responsible for the shootings of Lenin and secret service chief Moisei Uritskii.²⁸ Instead, the terror was directed as a "response" against socially defined enemy groups that were completely uninvolved in the acts: the "bourgeoisie," embodied by wealthy farmers, nuns, prostitutes, priests, former police members or officers, but also by Mensheviks or Social Revolutionaries.²⁹

Just as the White or Ukrainian perpetrators of the pogroms in the Civil War murdered Jews as representatives of the Bolsheviks, the Bolsheviks now pursued the extermination of socially undesirable people as placeholders for the bourgeoisie. These individuals were considered guilty from the outset, without any evidence of wrongdoing, just as the anti-Semites considered the Jews guilty. This practice of holding certain groups responsible in the place of enemies beyond reach also became a hallmark of later Stalinist minority policy.

But what was a social community, and what was an ethnic community? Looking more closely, we can see that the Bolsheviks' definition of the enemy included other features besides the supposedly universal "class approach." In January 1919, the organizational bureau of the party's Central Committee called to "exterminate one and all" of the Don Cossack elite and to "conduct merciless mass

28 O. Mozokhin, *Pravo na repressii. Vnesudebnye polnomochiia organov gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (1918–1953)* (Moscow, 2006), 23ff. The Jewish assassins were Fanni Kaplan (whose perpetration of the attack on Lenin is not certain) and Leonid Kannegiser, who shot Uritskii in September 1918.

29 James Ryan, *Lenin's Terror. The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence* (London, 2012), 106ff. (terror orders after revolts by peasants and Czechoslovak troops), 111 (after assassinations). Only Social Revolutionaries had any connection to the acts, without their Central Committee openly approving them. See Fabian Thunemann, *Verschwörungsdenken und Machtkalkül. Herrschaft in Russland, 1866–1953* (Munich, 2019), 111ff. (assassinations), 120ff. (reactions, especially against the Social Revolutionaries); also on the sources of Stalin's fear of conspiracy.

terror" against all those Cossacks who had acted directly or indirectly against Soviet power.³⁰ Anyone who had held public office, but also "every single rich" Cossack, was to be executed. The orders went as far as "exterminating a certain percentage of the entire male population." One witness describes the procedure: "Executions were carried out during the daytime in plain view of the whole village. Groups of 30 to 40 people were led – with shouts, jeers, and insults – to the place of execution. At the place of execution, the convicted were stripped naked – and all this in plain sight of the villagers. When the women attempted to cover their nakedness, they were mocked and forbidden to do so. All the executed were buried in shallow graves by the mill, not far from the village."³¹

Although the Cossacks were not clearly considered an ethnic group, they were attacked as such, as a community whose members belonged to it by birth – with the terror always being justified on "social" grounds, as the Cossacks were generally considered "rich."³² The decisions were implemented with thousands of executions. But they also led to internal party discussions about a false "zoological" (meaning biological-racist) approach and then to corrections in the policy against the Cossacks. The view prevailed that there were class differences among the Cossacks that the Bolsheviks should exploit in order to divide the enemy camp. Thus, in 1920, in the case of the Terek Cossacks, "only" deportations were decided upon, and 35,000 people were forcibly resettled.³³

30 Peter Holquist, "'Conduct Merciless Mass Terror.' Dekossackization on the Don 1919," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 38 (1997): 127–162; Vladimir Genis, "Raskazachivanie v Sovetskoi Rossii," *Voprosy istorii* 1 (1994): 42–55 (with the verdict "genocide").

31 Quoted from Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government. A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 163. Russian version in Gesin, "Raskazachivanie v Sovetskoi Rossii", 46. Cf. Ryan, *Lenin's Terror*, 127ff.

32 A. Kozlov, "Raskazachivanie: Don, 1919 god," in *Sud'by rossiiskogo krest'ianstva* (Moscow, 1996), 162–191, here 169.

33 "'Obshchaia pros'ba – obezoruzhit' ves' Kavkaz.' Iz istorii pervogo sovetskogo 'pereselenija narodov,'" ed. Tat'iana Simonova, *Istochnik* 6 (2001): 42–67. See *Stalinskie deportatsii, 1928 – 1953*, comp. N. Pabol' and P. Polian (Moscow, 2005), 789. According to tsarist nomenclature, Cossacks were considered an "estate" (*soslovie*) at that time; since 2002, they have been officially recognized as an ethnic group in Russia (*ibid.*, 13).

The early attack on the Cossacks resembled in many ways the pogroms against Jews during the Civil War: they were by no means mere spontaneous acts of group violence, but a large part of them was planned and organized in advance. A drastic example of this kind of organized violence against Jews are the events of February 1919 in Proskurov (today Khmel'nyts'kyi) in Ukraine. There, the Jewish population was blamed for a Bolshevik uprising. The Cossack leader Ivan Semesenko declared that the Jews were enemies of the Ukrainian people and must be slaughtered and exterminated to the last. His men had to swear to kill the Jews but not to rob them, which was not entirely observed. An example of the perpetrators' actions: "Some went into the apartment; some remained on the street. Those who entered grabbed old Krochak [proper name] by the beard, dragged him to the kitchen window, and threw him out to those standing on the street, where they beat him to death. Then they killed the elderly mother and the two daughters, and a young woman who was visiting them, dragging her by her braids into another room... Then they threw her into the street, where she was brutally murdered."³⁴ The three-and-a-half-hour massacre claimed 1,500 to 2,000 lives before it was stopped by a telegram from the Petliura government.³⁵

As in the attack on the Don Cossacks, representatives of a group that was not entirely, but still defined in ethnic terms, were held politically responsible and deliberately murdered. However, there was one significant difference: even though not all Cossacks were opposed to the Bolsheviks or always acted as perpetrators of pogroms, there were nevertheless Cossack communities that were politically organized and shared at least a rudimentary collective anti-Bolshevik and often anti-Semitic attitude – unlike the comple-

34 Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Bagrovaia kniga*, 46. The author of this pogrom indictment (published only in abridged form in the USSR) was a White émigré, the son of a Cossack.

35 Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government. Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917 – 1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 136ff.; Veidlinger, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe*, 134ff.

tely imaginary "Jewish" pro-Bolshevik collective. There were Jewish self-defense groups, but these arose in response to the attacks;³⁶ and traditional Jewish groups such as the Bund or the Zionists were not Bolsheviks.

The fact that Jews were not involved in the violence of the Civil War as a collective perpetrator group represents an important difference from other pogroms and mass murders of those years. When the Armenians and the Azeris in the Caucasus burned down villages belonging to the other ethnic group, murdering or expelling tens of thousands of people, the perpetrators were members of the Armenian Dashnak or Azerbaijani Musavitist troops, or mobs made up of members of the ethnic groups involved. Unlike the Jews, both sides were involved here as victims and perpetrators, consciously fighting for the cause of their ethnic group.³⁷ Those who denounced Bolshevism as a decidedly Jewish enterprise ignored this difference. The Jews, who had not pursued any particular collective interest in the revolution, were burdened with overall responsibility for what had happened. The resulting threat of violence against them persisted even after the Civil War—especially from beyond the country's borders. Violent and violence-demanding anti-Semitism was part of the ideological arsenal of many Whites in exile (even if a blanket equation of the White movement with anti-Semitism does not do justice to the facts).³⁸

"Ethnophilia" and Jewish Success Story

The Soviet dictatorship's commitment to ending all national and ethnic oppression was not just propaganda designed to win over dissatisfied minorities. The 1920s were marked by the promotion of ethnic groups, which historian Terry Martin has characterized as *affirmative action*. In doing so, he introduced into the discussion of

36 Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government*, 83ff.

37 Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall. Stalinismus im Kaukasus* (Munich, 2003), 139ff., 147ff., 167ff.

38 Matthias Vetter, "Die russische Emigration und ihre 'Judenfrage,'" in *Russische Emigration in Deutschland 1918 bis 1941. Leben im europäischen Bürgerkrieg*, ed. Karl Schlögel (Berlin, 1995), 109–124.

Stalinism a term that had been used since the 1960s to describe support for previously discriminated minorities in the United States (and which is only partially applicable to the policies of the USSR).³⁹ This policy created an education system for people who had not previously been reached by similar measures. This led to the introduction of writing systems—initially based on the Latin alphabet in the spirit of internationalism—and, on this basis, to the creation of literature and journalism. This included Romani, the language used by two-thirds of Soviet Roma, in which over 260 books were printed between 1927 and 1938 using an alphabet (Cyrillic) introduced for the first time.⁴⁰ But established writing systems such as Yiddish (the language of 97% of the Jews according to the last tsarist census), printed in Hebrew letters, were also respected; in the peak years from 1925 to 1932, 2,800 titles were published in this language.⁴¹

The promotion of ethnic groups was not an end in itself but was intended to serve the expansion of power and the "rooting" of the system. This could mean that ethnographic attributions were more important than the self-assessment of those affected. Formerly oppressed nations were considered progressive; they had virtually replaced "classes." But, even then, there were signs that small nations or ethnic groups—such as the Cossacks—could at

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- 39 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939* (Ithaka, NY, 2001). The corresponding contemporary term was *pokrovitel'skaia politika* ("patronage policy"). A related trend was the "rooting" of the dictatorship in the national environment: *korenizatsiia*.
- 40 Viktor Shapoval, "USSR," in *Roma Writings. Romani Literature and Press in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II*, ed. Raluca Bianca Roman, Sofiya Zahova, and Aleksandar G. Marinov (Paderborn, 2021), 159–195, here 164. On the alphabet, see "Resolution of May 10, 1927," in *Roma Voices in History. A Sourcebook*, ed. Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov (Paderborn, 2021), 710ff.; cf. Brigid O'Keeffe, *New Soviet Gypsies. Nationality, Performance, and Selfhood in the Early Soviet Union* (Toronto, 2013), 75, on the spread of the language.
- 41 Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union. The History of a National Minority* (New York, 1988), 36, 114. Hebrew was not banned. Lenin is said to have spoken out against the idea of a "counterrevolutionary language," but its representatives (such as the *Habimah* Theater) were driven out of the country; cf. Yehoshua A. Gilboa, *A Language Silenced. The Suppression of Hebrew Literature and Culture in the Soviet Union* (Rutherford, 1982), 77 (Lenin), 146 (*Habimah* not returning from US tour in 1926).

some point be considered "reactionary" as a whole, and that the energy of "class struggle" would turn against them. Initially, however, the main reservations were directed against the largest ethnic group, the leading people of the empire. As historian Yuri Slezkine has noted, it was advantageous for a Russian to be a proletarian; for members of other ethnic groups, it was already an advantage not to be Russian.⁴² Polemically, one could say that it was even a special advantage to be of Jewish origin. Lenin in particular had a decidedly positive prejudice. Before 1917, he praised the "civilised world" where the Jews do not live as a segregated caste, and where "the great world-progressive features of Jewish culture stand clearly revealed: its internationalism, its identification with the advanced movements of the epoch (the percentage of Jews in the democratic and proletarian movements is everywhere higher than the percentage of Jews among the population)." But this high regard did not apply to those Jews who insisted on independence, because only the "Jewish Marxists" (meaning Lenin's Social Democrats) upheld, "despite the separatism of the Bund, [...] the best traditions of Jewry."⁴³ In a sharp turn against the "separatists," Lenin declared as early as 1903 that "the idea of a Jewish 'nationality' is definitely reactionary not only when expounded by its consistent advocates (the Zionists), but likewise on the lips of those who try to combine it with the ideas of Social-Democracy (the Bundists)."⁴⁴

But Lenin was also opposed to refraining from publicly "praising" Jewish participation after the revolution. Some had called for

42 Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53 (1994): 414–452. Francine Hirsch emphasizes that, alongside or in opposition to "ethnophilia" (Slezkine), there was an effort to form nations at the expense of ethnic particularities, "Toward an Empire of Nations. Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities," *Russian Review* 59 (2000): 201–226.

43 Vladimir Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question" (1913), in idem, *Collected Works*, vol. 20 (Moscow, 1972), 17–51; accessed May 15, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq>. Praise for assimilated Jews was already omitted from the Soviet collection of texts in 1924: Vladimir Lenin, *O evreiskom voprose v Rossii*, 61.

44 Vladimir Lenin, "The Position of the Bund in the Party," originally published in *Iskra*, October 22, 1903, repr. in idem, *Collected Works*, vol. 7 (Moscow, 1964) accessed May 15, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1903/oct/22a.htm>.

this restraint in order not to stir up anti-Semitic agitation. Instead, Lenin praised the Latvian and Jewish workers (without mentioning whether the "reactionary" Bundists were among them) who had been brought to the Russian hinterland by the evacuation measures of the First World War and had helped the revolution at a difficult moment through sabotage activities.⁴⁵ Viacheslav Molotov claimed to have learned from Stalin that Lenin once reproached the latter with regard to the composition of an investigative commission: "Not a single Jew (*evreichik*)? No, nothing will come of it!" Molotov commented on this by stating that Lenin generally considered Russians to be lazy.⁴⁶

This peculiar philosemitism, which was accompanied by a certain contempt for the "backward" majority, was further intensified by the people's commissar for education, Anatolii Lunacharskii. At the end of the 1920s, he declared that Jews were more mentally agile than the provincial Russians, because the Jews lacked the Russian "heaviness of thought." He advocated not only for Jewish assimilation, but also for a movement in the opposite direction, indeed, for a mixing of ethnicities, because "our whole biological tempo is a little too rural. On the other hand, the blood of our Jewish comrades flows swiftly. For that reason, let us mix our blood and in this fruitful mixture find the human type that carries within the blood of Jewish people like a precious, thousand-year-old wine." Adaptation to the Russians was also supposed to improve the Jews, whose "urban culture had produced a speculative, commercial, refined-philosophical, and dialectical mind, a penchant for the artistic and for art," leading to "exaggeration and hysteria."⁴⁷ This should not be taken as the essence of Bolshevik "Jewish policy"; it was an outsider position – but it was possible in the early years of the regime.

45 Lenin, *O evreiskom voprose v Rossii*, 16–17 (introduction by S. Dimanshtein). One of those who spoke out against the claim of Jewish "talent" was Lev Trotskii, cf. Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites*, 102.

46 Feliks Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym. Iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow, 1991), 273 (recorded in 1980). The translation follows: *Molotov Remembers. Inside Kremlin Politics. Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago, 1993), 192.

47 Anatolii Lunacharskii, *Ob antisemitizme* (Moscow, 1929), 29ff., 36, 45ff. Further quotations from this work can be found in Götz Aly, *Europe against the Jews. 1880–1945* (New York, 2020), 167ff.

It was virtually inevitable that representatives of minority groups would enjoy particularly successful careers in the Soviet system. This had nothing to do with any special affinity for Bolshevism on the part of members of these ethnic groups, nor with any "philosemitism" on the part of its leaders; it can be conclusively explained by sociological factors. The urban, educated, and formerly oppressed Poles, Balts, and Jews were the ideal human resources for the new rulers. They were hardly represented among the "backward" and rebellious peasants; especially the Jews, who, with only 8% of peasants among them, differed very significantly from the majority population. And there was a need for personnel in the cities: police workers, officers, and security personnel of Russian origin had to be replaced because they had been the pillars of the old regime and were now under blanket suspicion. The minorities, with their high degree of political awareness, seemed much more reliable, not necessarily as Bolsheviks, but often as members of leftist organizations. This was especially true of the Jews, many of whom had belonged to the Bund or various left-wing Zionist groups. Almost all of these parties were dissolved after the revolution, but many of their members were accepted by the Bolsheviks without further problems and often formed the cadres for the Jewish party sections (*evseksyii*, singular: *evseksziia*) of the Communist Party (initially in Russia, although such sections were also active in Ukraine and Belarus) that were newly founded at the end of 1918.

It was not until 1922, when the sections were subordinated to the All-Soviet Communist Party, that attempts were made to increasingly push out the "petty-bourgeois" ex-Bundists.⁴⁸ Similar party sections also existed for other minorities; in the case of the Jews, this was in stark contrast to the statements made by Lenin and

48 Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics. The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930* (Princeton, NJ, 1972); see also Gennadii Estraikh, "Evreiskie sekszii kompartii. Po materialam byvshego partiinogo Tsentral'nogo partarkhiva," *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve* 2 (1994): 35-45; Victor Dönningshaus, *Minderheiten in Bedrängnis. Sowjetische Politik gegenüber Deutschen, Polen und anderen Diaspora-Nationalitäten 1917-1938* (Munich, 2009), 281ff., 289ff., 307ff.

Stalin before the revolution that Jews were not a nation or nationality.⁴⁹ Practice made theory obsolete here. "Nation" or not – after the October Revolution, the Jews, like other minorities (beginning with the Poles in 1917), were given a commissariat in order to "split the Jewish working masses from the Bund and other nationalist parties," as was admitted.⁵⁰ In 1920, the nationalities commissariats were placed under the People's Commissariat for Nationalities, led by Stalin, as departments. The Jews were given equal status with the Germans and the Ukrainians, with their own department.⁵¹ Although the Evkom (plural: *evkomy*, for local branches) was an organ of the Russian Soviet Federative Social Republic, it extended its activities to Ukraine and Belarus.

By granting a certain degree of Jewish cultural autonomy without territory, the Soviet state was in fact pursuing a "bundist" policy; from 1928 onwards, it even followed a "Zionist" policy when the government decided to develop a Jewish settlement area in the Far East. Thus, what the Jewish parties, fiercely opposed by the Bolsheviks before 1917, had demanded was now being implemented under Stalin. Ironically, he was the first minister in Russian or Soviet history to have responsibility for Jewish affairs, apart from the fact that in independent Ukraine in 1918–1920 there were ministries (or "secretariats") for the Jewish minority. Unlike the Soviet institutions, which primarily served to enforce the dictatorship in the Jewish milieu, in Ukraine under Petliura there was a genuine representation of Jewish interests – which, however, was unable to prevent

49 Boris Zinger and Lilia Belenkaia, "Stages in the Formation of Policy on the Jewish Question in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1917–28," *Shvut* 3 (1995): 112–146.

50 S. Dimanshtein, introduction to Lenin, *O evreiskom voprose v Rossii*, 14. The commissariat and its sub-organizations were called *Evreiskii Komissariat*, hence the abbreviated name *Evkom* (plural: *evkomy*).

51 Stephen Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice. Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, 1917–1924* (Westport, CT, 1994), 18ff.; V. Chebotareva, *Narkomnats RSFSR. Svet i teni natsional'noi politiki 1917–1924 gg.* (Moscow, 2003), 53, 382ff.; Dönninghaus, *Minderheiten in Bedrängnis*, 74ff.

the pogroms in the name of the Ukrainian People's Republic.⁵² In comparison, the Bolsheviks' one-party state offered much better protection against open anti-Jewish violence, even if it failed to adequately meet its claims of promoting minorities. Even a representative of the *evseksiia* acknowledged fundamental shortcomings in early 1925, after the dissolution of the *evkomy*: During Petliura's times, there had still been three Yiddish newspapers in Ukraine, but now there were none; in the neighboring bourgeois countries, there were Jewish factions in the parliaments, as the Ukrainian Jews had to acknowledge; and in the organs of power of Soviet Ukraine, they were virtually unrepresented. All this created a feeling of "helplessness, defenselessness, and lawlessness" among the "Jewish people."⁵³

Although the vast majority of Soviet Jews (especially in Ukraine) spoke Yiddish, which facilitated their pragmatic recognition as a nationality, they also knew Russian or Ukrainian. This became the basis for the careers of countless people who left their shtetl homes for the big cities in a migration movement that was similar to the earlier migration to the United States or later to Palestine.⁵⁴ Jews were not only one of the most mobile groups in the Soviet Union, but also the most literate ethnic group, with 71% of the total population compared to 47% of Russians. It did not matter that a small proportion (less than 10%) of literate Jews could only read and write in Yiddish and, in some cases, Hebrew. Their educational advantage, combined with the fact that they were not compromised by services under tsarism, paved the way for them to enter the Soviet authorities and administrations. As a result, by the mid-1920s,

52 Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government*, 58ff., 67ff., 142ff.; Guiseppe Motta, "Anti-Jewish Violence and Ukrainian Nation-Building. The Jewish Communities in 1918–1920 in the Documents of the Joint Distribution Committee," *Nordost-Archiv* 31 (2022): 83–100.

53 See the complaints of *Evseksiia* Secretary A. Chemerisskii, in January 1925, Chebotareva, *Narkomnats RSFSR*, 478ff.

54 Gabriele Freitag, *Nächstes Jahr in Moskau! Die Zuwanderung von Juden in die sowjetische Metropole 1917–1932* (Göttingen, 2004); comparison with other migrations: Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ, 2019), 212ff.