Abstract

The Jewish Labor Bund of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia was a significant player in both the Russian revolutionary movement and Jewish political thought in the early 20th century. In regards to the Russian Revolution, it is often recognized for its conflict with Vladimir Lenin and the subsequent dramatic split from the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDWP) in 1903. As the understanding of the conflict has become more developed as the Bund has become more recognized, this split has proven to illuminate the latent authoritarian tendencies of Lenin and his cohorts. This paper seeks to show that the fundamental structure, origin, and culture of the Jewish Labor Bund sowed the seeds of conflict with the larger, Russian-speaking movement. Specifically, the mass quality and specific Jewish identity of the organization made it unique in the field of Russian social democratic parties. Because the Bund had an exclusively Jewish membership, they propagandized and agitated using Yiddish as their main language. Because they used a separate language from the rest of the Empire, there was room for more nationalistic positions. Furthermore, the Jewish population in the Pale constituted a middleman class, which exposed the Jewish worker to market forces earlier than his serf counterpart. This created a higher level of class consciousness, which manifested itself in the Bund’s organization. Since it was more populous in nature than its Russian-speaking counterparts, it was the major opposition to Lenin’s efforts for a strict, centralized social democratic party. This confrontation and resulting political split has its roots in the origin of the Bund. The Bund is important to study because of its interconnections with and relationship to Lenin and Russian Marxism.

Bibliographical Note

This essay focuses on the origin of the Jewish Labor Bund, and the timeline of its departure from the Russian Social Democrat Workers’ Party. The primary sources used are articles and pamphlets by Bundist leaders Vladimir Medem and Arkady Kremer that help explain the basis and significance of their ideology. For secondary sources, I used articles from Henry Tobias and Koppel Pinson along with others. Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir’s work on split labor markets in the Pale was used to understand the economic conditions of the Jewish proletariat at the time.