

Ulrich Herbeck: Das Feindbild vom „jüdischen Bolschewiken“. Zur Geschichte des russischen Antisemitismus vor und während der Russischen Revolution [The „Jewish Bolshevik“ as an Enemy Stereotype. The History of Russian Antisemitism Before and During the Russian Revolution], Berlin, Metropol, 2009. 480 p. – ISBN 978-3-940938-49-7.

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In the spring of 1918 a new wave of pogroms hit the Jewish populations of the south and southwestern regions of the former tsarist empire. During the course of the Civil War pogromist violence reached hitherto unseen levels. The number of fatalities is unknown, but estimates range between 100.000 and 200.000. Jews in Russia had already experienced devastating pogroms in 1881-1884 and also around the 1905 revolution. The Civil War pogroms, however, were not only unique in their scale, they also came with the new and powerful antisemitic stereotype of the “Jewish Bolshevik”. This construction – which could also take the form of “Jewish Commissar”, “Jewish Communist” or “Judeo-Bolshevik world conspiracy” – did not only motivate counterrevolutionary violence against alleged betrayers of the Russian people, but also spread around the world, and propelled antisemitic and anti-socialist agitation all over Europe, including the German right wing of the Interwar period. Indeed the stereotype can also be found in a number of representatives in the British parliament as well as in the post-Holocaust pogroms in Poland.¹ The synonymization of revolution and Jews was welcomed for antisemites and anti-revolutionaries. Henry Ford epitomized this stereotype in his infamous “The International Jew”, in which he declared the odious Bolshevik revolution to be thoroughly Jewish. If Lenin was a Gentile, he pondered, then “why do his children speak Yiddish?”²

The stereotype also served as an example of the rapid acceleration of political discourse during the revolutionary period. In early 1917, “Bolshevik” was a word barely known even in Russia – yet by early 1918, pogroms raged against the “Jewish Bolsheviks” and the slogan spread over the world. Over the next few years the stereotype became one of the most powerful tenets of antisemitism in world politics. It therefore is surprising that despite the strong literature on antisemitism, the popularized and powerful antisemitic notion of the “Jewish Bolshevik” has not been contextualized and studied in the historiography of the Russian Civil War.³ Even Wolfgang Benz in his important work “*What is Antisemitism*” neglects the Russian origins of the “Jewish Bolshevik” construct, and instead focuses on German usages under the Nazis and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁴

¹ Gisela C. Lebzelter: Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939, London-Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1978, pp. 229-241; Sharman Kadish: Bolsheviks and British Jews. The Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution, London, Frank Cass, 1992, pp. 229-241; Daniel Blatman: Polish Antisemitism and “Judeo-Communism”. Historiography and Memory. In: *East European Jewish Affairs* 27 (1997), 1, pp. 23-43; Jan T. Gross: Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz. An Essay in Interpretation, New York, Random House, 2006, pp. 192-243.

² Henry Ford: The International Jew, Whitefish, Montana, Kessinger Publishing, 1981, pp. 214.

³ A few publications focus on later developments in the 1920s and under Stalinism, such as: Solomon M. Schwarz: The Jews in the Soviet Union, Syracuse, N.Y., Syracuse University Press, 1951; Matthias Vetter: Antisemiten und Bolschewiki, Berlin, Metropol, 1995. Another important exception is: Oleg V. Budnitskii: Rossiiskie evrei mezhdru krasnymi i belymi. 1917-1920, Moskva, ROSSPEN, 2006.

⁴ Wolfgang Benz: Was Ist Antisemitismus?, München, Beck, 2004, pp. 156-169.

However, in 2009 two books on this issue were published. The first, written by André Gerrits, received some scholarly attention.⁵ Although Gerrits analyzes “Jewish Communism” as a myth, he tries to situate this myth in the apparent Jewish presence in the revolutionary movement. In other words, he tries to find the “nucleus or core of reality” behind the stereotype.⁶ The second book, by Ulrich Herbeck and the one under review here, strongly opposes such an approach. Unfortunately it has barely been noticed, yet it deserves more critical attention.

Herbeck begins with the premise that the image of the “Jewish Bolshevik” cannot be contextualized inside the history of social movements or governmental institutions; but rather that it relates only to antisemitism itself, and thus requires a particular and specific analysis. For Herbeck, it is not only counterproductive to search for a “Jewish” basis to antisemitic prejudices, he also shows that such an approach is “highly questionable” since the already sparse primary sources are heavily biased and do not allow for a substantial quantitative or a qualitative examination of Jewish agency in the revolutions (16f., 58 FN 58, 108f.).⁷ Therefore asking for a Jewish presence behind the stereotype is the wrong question. Rather, what matters is the development and the function of the antisemitic stereotype in a rapidly changing world.

Consequently he examines the development of an “enemy stereotype”. He explores not only its function in revolutionary Russia, but also its roots in pre-revolutionary Orthodox philosophies of religion. This approach challenges the idea that, unlike religiously inspired prejudices like ritual murder and the “Jewish anti-Christ”, the various forms of the “Jewish Bolshevik” were exclusively grounded in a secular background. Russian antisemitism after 1917, he argues, was both modern and anti-modern at the same time (82). Whereas Klier and Aronson pointed to socio-historical factors in their groundbreaking revisionist works, Herbeck instead looks at the long-term effects of Pan-Slavism and Russian imperialism as the basis for an increasingly violent turn in antisemitism from the 1870s onwards.⁸ Herbeck essentially argues that these authors “underestimate the impact of social discourses.” (42) In the following chapter he examines the changes in tsarist Russia which altered the perception of Jews from “dangerous aliens” to the representatives of modernity. Herbeck draws a manifold picture of various forms and motivations of pre-revolutionary antisemitism, with a particular focus on Orthodox religious philosophy and constructions of a “Jewish anti-Christ” as a modern threat. However, it is a major flaw of the study that Herbeck, despite giving so much attention to the importance of “discourse”, nonetheless does not offer a definition of “discourse” itself. He neglects social theory and seems to imagine a more or less direct link

⁵ André Gerrits: *The Myth of Jewish Communism. A Historical Interpretation*, Bruxelles e.a., Peter Lang, 2009; it was preceded by: André Gerrits: *Antisemitism and Anti-Communism. The Myth of 'Judeo-Communism' in Eastern Europe*. In: *East European Jewish Affairs* 25 (1995), 1, pp. 49-72. The book was positively received by Mario Kessler (*International Review of Social History* 54 (2009), 3, pp. 521-524) and Elizier Ben-Rafael (*International Sociology* 26 (2011), 2, pp. 260-263). See a more critical review by Gleb J. Albert in *European History Quarterly* 42 (2012), 3, pp. 506-507.

⁶ Gerrits, *The Myth of Jewish Communism*, p. 26.

⁷ From a theoretical perspective this is laid out most clearly by Holz's sharp stand against theories of correspondence: Klaus Holz: *Nationaler Antisemitismus. Wissensoziologie einer Weltanschauung*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2010, pp. 62-77, esp. p. 72f.

⁸ See: Irwin Michael Aronson: *Troubled Waters. The Origins of the 1881 Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia*, Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990; Charters Wynn: *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms. The Donbass-Dnepr Bend in Late Imperial Russia*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1999; John Klier, Shlomo Lambroza (eds.): *Pogroms. Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992; John Klier: *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881-1882*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; for a contemporary survey, see: Iris Boysen: *Die revisionistische Historiographie zu den russischen Judenpogromen von 1881 bis 1906*. In: *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 8 (1999), pp. 13-42.

from philosophy and literature to violent practices. He fails to explain in how far the antisemitic scriptures of religious philosophers could incite people to participate in pogroms in Russia. What is more, he does not explain the transfer of these ideas across areas as diverse as Catholic Poland and the ethnically mixed Southern borderlands of the Jewish pale of settlement where pogroms also raged. In this part of the book he argues for causality but most likely only shows synchrony. Furthermore studies such as Judge's analysis of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom have long revealed the impact of heterogeneous factors, from social problems, the presence of agitators, to religious sentiment during Easter and anti-revolutionary movements.⁹

However, Herbeck's depiction of religiously motivated, modern antisemitism is of greatest importance for the following decade, and especially the Civil War. For religious philosophers like Sergei Bulgakov and Vladimir Solov'ev or authorities like patriarch Tikhon, the outbreak of the revolution represented the advent of the anti-Christ. They combined this interpretation with traditional perception of Jews as the collectively embodiment of the anti-Christ which had already been played up before the revolution (214-220). Herbeck shows how these arguments were articulated in various anti-revolutionary situations, movements and army corps. They merged with the flexible scapegoat function which the Jews fulfilled in the antisemitic mindset, and so Jews were held responsible for almost every single aspect of Russian life which, in the eyes of the antisemites, had gone wrong. Thus, in two long and detailed chapters Herbeck demonstrates that the enemy stereotype of the "Jewish Bolshevik" in right-wing and White perceptions had a number of specific functions in counterrevolutionary and also in national movements. The argument here is that these ideas did not develop independently from traditional antisemitism.

In the particularly strong third chapter, Herbeck goes beyond the examination of a stereotype and analyses the organization of the White counterrevolutionaries in order to demonstrate the integral function that antisemitism had in this movement. Yet, he is far from drawing a black and white picture. He reveals that leaders of the Whites were not necessarily antisemites, and that only a smaller number of them actually encouraged pogroms as a means to fight against the revolution or for an independent Ukraine. On the other hand he shows that many military leaders did indeed turn a blind eye to the pogroms. Thus they used pogroms instrumentally as a tactic to strengthen their authority within their troops. Denikin, for instance, only condemned the pogroms in 1920, by which time they had become politically inexpedient to him (299). Also, Herbeck correctly views the Whites, the Ukrainian nationalists and peasant armies as heterogeneous movements, and not as single military units. Whereas authorities like Nestor Makhno in Ukraine and anti-Bolshevik actors in exile like Vladimir Burtsev opposed antisemitism (283, 360), military leaders like Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak in the East or the troops under Ataman Struk in Ukraine (which first joined and then deserted the Bolsheviks in 1919) engaged in increasingly deadly pogromist agitation (311, 353, 359f.).

However, as Herbeck repeatedly demonstrates, there were differences in the scapegoat function of the Jews. For instance: whereas Kolchak's troops fought revolution in general and spread agitation for the Russian people to "hunt down the scoundrel Jew that is ruining Russia" and to resist orders of "persons like Bronshtein, Nakhamkes, etc." [i.e. Trotsky and Iurii Steklov], others called to rise against Jews for their alleged sabotage against the revolution. For instance, deserted former Red troops such as those under Struk in Ukraine in 1919 called to "beat the Yids, save Soviet power without the commune" (359). In this case

⁹ Edward H. Judge: *Easter in Kishinev. Anatomy of a Pogrom*, New York, New York University Press, 1992.

“Jewish Bolshevism” was transformed into the idea that Soviet power itself was not the problem, but rather its Jewish “infection.”

In the final and compelling chapter, Herbeck develops the argument further. Having mapped out the function of the “Jewish Bolshevik” stereotype, he moves on to explore the complexity of antisemitism in the Red territories, including the Bolshevik agitation against pogroms. Herbeck demonstrates that for a long time Bolshevik officials did not take the pogroms seriously (400) and that when they did, they did not interpret them as acts of antisemitism. Responsibility for pogroms was externalized to tsarist and bourgeois “provocateurs” and pogroms were not understood as specifically anti-Jewish but as general anti-revolutionary violence against Soviet power. Propaganda against pogroms therefore necessarily missed the point. In their own territory the Bolsheviks largely failed to mount the serious offensive against pogromist violence which Bundist and Poalei Tsionist representatives demanded. Rather, the Bolsheviks were somewhat blinded by a naïve belief in their own propaganda. Furthermore it was feared that anti-antisemitic agitation within the Red Army would undermine military authority and lead to mutiny (424). Actions undertaken by the Commissariat for Jewish National Affairs (Evkom) and later the Jewish Section of the Communist party (Evseksiia) apparently had only marginal influence, and they often simply adopted the standard reading of pogroms as not specifically anti-Jewish, but as counterrevolutionary. As the Civil War progressed, pogroms were increasingly played down, and by 1922 their existence sometimes was even denied by the regime (373-376). In Russia after Red October, Herbeck conclusively argues, “Jewish Bolshevism” was “*the* central topic of Russian antisemitism” (438). Yet at the same time there was no singular understanding of “Jewish Bolshevism”, and the stereotype could unfold and develop because it was combined with other contradictory antisemitic stereotypes.

Overall, this is a compelling book which presents many new sources and perspectives on the “Jewish Bolshevik.” Unfortunately it is anything but an easy read, it jumps back and forth and is generally underedited. Nevertheless, despite the lack of methodological clarity and theoretical ambition, it has a number of fundamental strengths. The focus on “discourse” promises to be not only a viable approach to the stereotype of the “Jewish Bolshevik”, it also allows for the contextualization of sources which other researchers might uncritically use as data. The downside is that the relationship between word and practice remains vague. For example, even in the last chapter on the anti-antisemitic propaganda of the Bolsheviks, society (which had to echo antisemitism as well as anti-antisemitism) remains outside the analysis.

Despite this critique the book still makes a very important step towards a deeper understanding of antisemitism's significance in the Russian Revolution, its traditional heritage and contemporary meaning. For historians of antisemitism, the second and third chapters are of a groundbreaking quality, especially because of the close observation of the function and development of antisemitic heritage in the Russian Revolution. The last chapter on the Bolsheviks and the stereotype of “Jewish Bolshevism” goes even further and ambitiously combines the history of antisemitism with Jewish history. It does so not by searching for Jewish agency behind antisemitic stereotypes, but rather by indicating how Jewish actors in Soviet Russia opposed or failed to oppose antisemitism. This strong chapter also leaves open a number of questions for further research, like for instance the issue of contextualizing the Evkom and Evseksiia as actors in the field of the Jewish (and Yiddish) politics.¹⁰

¹⁰ See: Jonathan Frankel: Jewish Politics and the Russian Revolution of 1905. In: Crisis, Revolution, and Russian Jews, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 57-71; Jonathan Frankel: Crisis as a Factor in Modern

Furthermore it calls for a closer observation of the dynamics of contradiction and subordination in the nascent Soviet regime, for a more detailed view on the individual biographies of the historical actors involved and – most importantly – for the social implications of these “discourses.” For historians of Communism and the Russian Revolution, this book convincingly demonstrates that antisemitism must be considered an integral factor of the revolutionary period and that the Bolsheviks had anything but a clear standpoint against it.

The arguments presented in the book go well beyond the field of Russian history. In his classic work on the development of antisemitism in Germany and Austria, Peter G. J. Pulzer states that “the main difference between the political anti-Semitism of the post- and the pre-war period lies not in its content, but in its success.”¹¹ Herbeck’s book allows the assumption that Pulzer may well be wrong: the German right was not only antisemitic. In the Weimar period, it also was explicitly anti-Bolshevik. The introduction of the “Jewish Bolshevik” stereotype drastically altered the content of antisemitism, and this was crucial to its subsequent success. One can only hope that Herbeck’s book will receive more attention as time proceeds and that it inspires future researchers to bridge the gap between word and deed on a more profound basis. For the time being, this book stands up as the best attempt yet to develop a closer understanding of the enemy stereotype of the “Jewish Bolshevik” as a fundamental factor of modern antisemitism.

Jewish Politics, 1840 and 1881-1882. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 15-31; Kenneth B. Moss: *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 2009.

¹¹ Peter G. J. Pulzer: *The Rise of Political Anti-semitism in Germany and Austria* [Orig.: 1964], New York, Wiley, 1988, p. 292; the statement is repeated in the latest edition: Peter G. J. Pulzer: *Die Entstehung des politischen Antisemitismus in Deutschland und Österreich*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004, p. 305; also Shulamit Volkov, in her classical piece on the tradition of German antisemitism, neglects the “Jewish Bolshevik” as a new factor: Shulamit Volkov: *Kontinuität und Diskontinuität im deutschen Antisemitismus 1878-1945*. In: *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 33 (1985), 2, pp. 221-243.