

**A Future without Hate or Need:
The Promise of the Jewish Left in Canada**

Ester Reiter

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016

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Over the past five years, a number of authors have critically examined the complexity of the historical Jewish-Left alliance. They include, most notably, Jack Jacobs (*Jews and Leftist Politics* [Cambridge University Press, 2017]); Matthew Hoffman and Henry Srebnik (*A Vanished Ideology* [State University of New York Press, 2016]); Alain Brossat and Sylvie Klingberg (*Revolutionary Yiddishland* [Verso, 2016]); Colin Shindler (*Israel and the European Left* [Continuum, 2012]); and Philip Mendes (*Jews and the Left* [Palgrave, 2014]).

As a collective, these texts interrogate the key factors that attracted Jews to the political Left, the extent to which they identified as Jews per se, the reasons why the Jewish-Left alliance declined, and whether there is likely to be a revival of the Jewish-Left connection in the future. Although they vary from sole authored texts to edited contributions, their locational focus tends to be at least regional if not global with an emphasis on the commonality of Jewish Left experiences across borders.

In contrast, Ester Reiter limits her study to Canada and specifically to the pro-Soviet subsection of the Jewish Left in that country, as personified by the activities of the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO) and its predecessor groups from approximately the 1920s to the 1950s. Her narrative is based primarily on oral history sources and also on primary and secondary movement documents. This discrete focus enables a particularly rich analysis of the UJPO subculture, including exploration of their secular after-school programs or shuls, summer camps, theatre groups, women's groups, choirs, newspapers, social service benefits, and other educational and social activities based on Yiddish language and culture. Reiter rightly praises the movement for its unusually strong opposition in the 1930s to antiblack racism and offers a vivid description of the movement's connection with the famous American black singer and Communist Paul Robeson. But at times the book would arguably have benefited from a less parochial and broader global orientation to the key issues and events that impacted the study subgroup.

Reiter is herself a member of the still existing UJPO, and a major aim of her book is to reiterate the continuing relevance of their social justice and human rights ideals for progressive Jews today. She emphasizes that while the UJPO was "communist-led" (4), its participants were not all members of the Communist Party or even self-identified communists. However, their faith in the Soviet Union and an accompanying doctrinaire approach segregated them from the much larger number of left-wing Jews active in the Bund, Labour Zionist, and other socialist and anarchist groups. She describes them as Jewish internationalists who actively integrated their Left and Jewish identities, albeit within a class-based tradition that rejected the notion of a unified Jewish collective. She insists that they were not assimilated or "self-hating Jews" (9) who rejected or denied their Jewish origins. Rather, they constructed their political activities as promoting both working-class and Jewish concerns.

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Reiter attributes the large Jewish participation in the Canadian Left to the same dual forms of class and ethnic oppression that drove Jewish leftism globally. Most activists arrived in the early twentieth century from Eastern Europe where they had experienced violent anti-Semitism and poverty, and these harsh conditions were repeated in Canada. The large numbers of Jews who settled in cities such as Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg experienced low wages and terrible working conditions, poor housing, ill health, and general disadvantage. They also confronted serious manifestations of popular and official racism.

The pro-Soviet Jews maintained a powerful if naive belief that the existence and actions of the Soviet Union were good for the Jews. Reiter is not uncritical of their reluctance to acknowledge the brutal anti-Semitism of Stalin's regime. But her analysis is limited at times by her binary ideological approach. To be sure, she laments the secret trial and execution of leading Soviet Jewish intellectuals in July 1952 and Stalin's murder in 1948 of the famous Jewish theatre director Shloime Mikhoels. But, oddly, she makes no reference to two seminal events that shaped global opinion: the infamous Czech show trial of Rudolf Slansky and thirteen other, mostly Jewish, Communists in November 1952; and Stalin's persecution of a group of predominantly Jewish physicians in the campaign known as the Doctors' Plot in January 1953. In trying to explain why many pro-Soviet Jews chose at the time to deny Stalin's anti-Semitism, she ignores more complex explanations and instead suggests simplistically that there was "no middle ground" between defending the Soviet Union and joining the "ranks of redbaiters" (261).

Reiter also obscures the real reasons behind the expulsion from Jewish establishment bodies of the UJPO and similar pro-Soviet groups in Australia and elsewhere. The major problem for the Jewish mainstream was not, as suggested by Reiter, that the UJPO was pro-peace and opposed to the Cold War or even that they were critical of Zionism given that all Jewish Communists had strongly supported the creation of Israel in 1948. Rather, their concern was that when Jewish and Communist interests clashed, the principal loyalty of the UJPO lay not with their fellow Jews but with Communism, and this was symbolized by their denial of Soviet anti-Semitism, which was an issue of central significance to most Jews.

Reiter is on firmer ground when she discusses the major Jewish involvement in the famous Canadian Royal Commission of inquiry into Communist espionage in 1946 known as the Gouzenko Affair. She also poignantly documents the UJPO's active involvement in the worldwide attempts to stop the execution of the Jewish Communist couple Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 for allegedly selling atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union. But this section would definitely have benefited from some broader contextualization of why so many Jews were involved in Soviet spy activities in Canada, the United States, and Britain and of the political implications of this association. Harvey Klehr's chapter ("Jews and American Communism," 169–79) in the Jack Jacobs collection cited above is particularly illuminating in this regard.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, this book presents a valuable insight into the unique social, economic, and cultural factors that framed the lives of those Canadian Jews who built a community around the universalistic values of the political Left.

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