

Canadian antiSemites, antiReds and the Internment of Trotsky

By Richard Sanders

In *Strangers Within our Gates* (1909), J.S. Woodsworth revealed his contempt for east Europeans, Aborigines, Asians and Blacks. However, he had a slightly higher regard for Jewish immigrants, in large part because he saw a better chance of assimilating them.

Labelling all “Hebrews” as “[n]aturally religious,...industrious and ambitious,” Woodsworth concluded “the Jew is bound to succeed.” Then, saying “they may be miserly along some lines,” he branded all Jewish people as having “keen business instincts,” from the “pedlars or sweat-shop tailors to the money-barons who control the world’s finances.”¹

After explaining that young Jewish newcomers to Canada were “drifting away from the Synagogues,” Woodsworth sadly noted the disturbing fact that “they are not becoming Christians, but atheists or secularists.” He then concluded his section on “Hebrews” by saying that the “most serious danger” faced by “our immigrants,” is “the loss of old faith in the new land.”²

Woodsworth made no secret of his view that this vulnerability among Jewish immigrants was an opportunity that Christians should exploit. In his chapter, “A Challenge to the Church,” he used anecdotes about Hebrew children straying from Judaism, “to plead the cause of Jewish missions.” Stating that the “old faith is lost,” he asked: “Have we a better to offer? Then, can we refuse to make the Jews sharers of our Gospel liberty?”³ His answer lies in stories promoting church efforts to convert Jews who had wandered from their faith.

Woodsworth gave praise to the “London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews” for its missionary work in Montreal and Ottawa. He also blessed Presbyterian and Anglican Churches’ efforts to convert Jews in Toronto and Winnipeg. In advertising the Methodist Mission in Winnipeg, of which he was then Superintendent, Woodsworth rejoiced that “Russian-Jewish children are taking an active interest in the Sunday School.”⁴

English professor Terrence Craig compared “racial attitudes” in Woodsworth’s “pseudosociological” work with those in Rev. Charles Gordon’s novel, *The Foreigner*. Calling the latter “a fictionalised version of *Strangers Within our Gates*,” he noted that while Woodsworth “deplored...Jewish middlemen acting dishonestly as interpreters and business

agents for less educated immigrants, the villain in *The Foreigner* is such a character. Rosenblatt, a greedy, conniving, and immoral Jew, is the antithesis of the Christian missionaries. He exploits the simple Galician [Ukrainian] community in Winnipeg both financially and immorally.”⁵

Craig also explained that: “For Gordon and Woodsworth..., the idea of Jews being God’s chosen people contradicted their own claim for predestined Anglo-Saxon superiority in Canada.... Theirs was a narrow national ...and unhistorical view, so ethnically egotistic that racism was its inevitable result.... [I]t was popularly believed that Jewish immigrants would ...compete in business with the WASP entrepreneurial superstructure.”⁶

Canada’s rabid anti-Semitism and the widespread prejudice against east Europeans went hand in political hand. Jews and Slavs were often tarred as seditious, leftwing radicals. Woodsworth not only linked east Europeans with Judaism, but with an atheist brand of socialism that went far beyond the accepted, religious pale:

“Many of our immigrants from Russia and Roumania are Socialists, some of them of the most *extreme type*. This seems rather strange, as *naturally* the Jew is individualistic.... *Socialism has come as a gospel, and they have welcomed it with almost religious devotion. Some of them have preached anarchy.*”⁷ (Emphasis added.)

Woodsworth was suggesting that “extreme” Socialism, which *replaced* “religious devotion” with a political “gospel,” threatened the Canadian establishment. He devoted his life to crafting Social Gospel politics as an acceptable alternative. Christian social democrats were tolerable to the establishment because they rejected the atheist, anticapitalist Socialism attributed to radicalised Jews and east Europeans. Compared to these “extremists,” Woodsworth’s middle-of-the-road socialism was tame, loyal, compliant and easily co-opted.

Blaming “*extreme*” socialism on “despair” caused by “intolerable conditions” abroad, Woodsworth believed that better conditions in Canada meant that “extremists cannot secure a large following.”⁸ His narrative did not mention the Czar’s use of *extreme* violence, including mass murder, to crush general strikes and mass protests for democracy. Nor did Woodsworth note that the Czar had forced hundreds of thousands into internment. (See “The Russian Revolution...,” pp.38-39.) Instead, Woodsworth’s worries dovetailed

nicely with the paranoid antiRed delusions of the Canadian elite. They shared an intense phobia that godless, east European socialist fanatics were threatening the established social, religious and political order of our so-called Peaceable Kingdom.

Jewish Socialists in Revolt

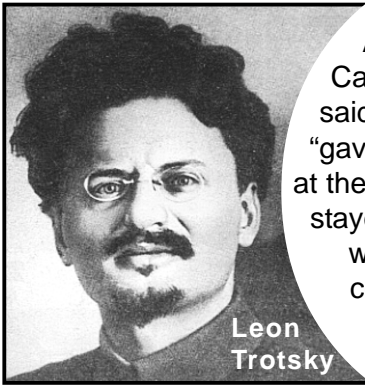
In the 20th century’s first decade, the imperial Christian rulers of Britain, Russia, Germany and Austria—besides being an intermarried racist elite—all faced a common threat from popular socialist uprisings. Jewish socialists were active in all of these multiethnic movements. The Bund for example, which began in 1897, was a militant Jewish trade union and political party in Russia. Between 1903 and 1905, Bundists organised “a succession of strikes in factories, in railways, in sweatshops and textile mills” and in one summer alone, 4,500 of them were arrested.⁹

Russia’s reactionary backlash included state repression of the Left and deadly antiSemitic rampages. Between 1903 and 1906, 2,500 Jews were killed in Odessa Ukraine alone. In the worst Ukrainian pogrom of 1905, 400 to 800 were killed when blamed for a general strike.¹⁰ After the Czar crushed the Bund and other socialist groups, “many Jewish radicals fled to North America...[and] both secularists and radicals became a driving force in the life of North American Jewry.”¹¹

In 1906, while radicals—Jewish and otherwise—were being killed, exiled or interned by Czarist forces, a Conservative MP presented Canada’s Parliament with a resolution denouncing Russia’s “reign of terror.” It stated that “large numbers of helpless men, women and children of the Hebrew race were massacred in a most brutal and inhuman manner.” While saying the murder of 100,000 Hebrews was “a disgrace to...civilization,”¹² the resolution did not mention the mass killing and internment of those who were not Jewish. It also failed to mention the huge strikes and protests that were then threatening to topple the Czar’s brutal regime.

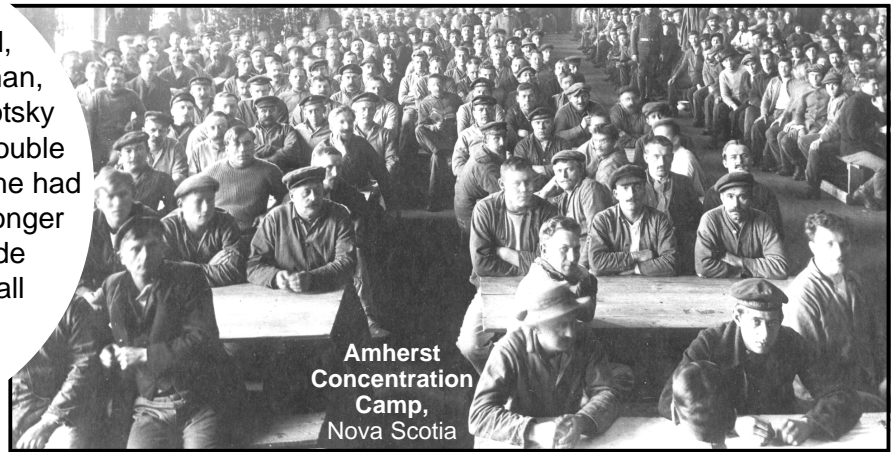
After uttering a few niceties, Liberal Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier spoke out against the idea of even debating the motion. Conservative Sir Robert Borden agreed, as did Liberal Quebec nationalist, Henri Bourassa, who argued:

“[S]o far as Russian Jews are concerned, perhaps we might be a little careful about our expressions of sympathy, in view of the well established



Leon Trotsky

Amherst guard, Capt. F.C. Wightman, said that Leon Trotsky “gave us a lot of trouble at the camp, and if he had stayed there any longer would have made communists of all the German prisoners.”



Amherst Concentration Camp, Nova Scotia

fact...that the Jews have been at the bottom of most of the social troubles that have risen in Russia—that a great deal of the money that has been raised...on behalf of the Russian Jews has been used...in purchasing firearms and supplies for the revolutionists.”

Bourassa added that it would be “embarrassing for the British government...if we...express[ed] sympathy for people who, having taken a large share in the revolution in Russia, are now...sufferers from that revolution.”¹³

Official Canadian criticism of the Czar’s mass murder of Jews would have been especially “embarrassing for the British government” because Czar Nicholas II was the first cousin of King George V. And, Canada’s then-Governor General, Prince Arthur, who passed laws by decree with Borden’s Cabinet, was a son of Queen Victoria. Also, both Czar Nicholas II and Queen Victoria were both descended from Britain’s King George II, a German.

Bourassa supported the Christian killing of Jews by saying “the Jews had prepared a conspiracy to slaughter the Christians.” No MPs countered his narrative to excuse the mass murder of Russian Jews. Neither did MPs criticise the Czar’s regime for quelling protests and strikes by killing thousands and interning hundreds of thousands more. Russian “Reds,” like the “Reds” in Canada or anywhere else, were the diabolical enemies of empire. Canadian Liberals and Conservatives, would not deign to embarrass British authorities by issuing resolutions denouncing the slaughter and imprisonment of anti-imperialist “Reds,” especially Jewish ones.

The Canadian elite’s burgeoning opposition to radicals found loyal support in the Social Gospel. By 1909, when Canada faced the nascent stirrings of its first Red Scare, right-wing bigotry was at home in the pages of reformist Christian literature, from Rev. Woodsworth’s missionary diatribes to Rev. Gordon’s populist novels. The Canadian public’s growing distrust of east Europeans and Jews—spurred on by Social Gospeller’s fearmon-

gering rants about the horrors of “extreme” socialism—put these aliens into the cross hairs of a fierce Anglo-Protestant hatred.

Trotsky Fever Hits Largest Prison Camp in Canada

Leon Trotsky, the infamous Soviet revolutionary of Jewish Ukrainian origins, was the best known prisoner ever held in a Canadian concentration camp. His account of the physical, social and psychological conditions inside Canada’s largest internment facility provides insights into the potential for radicalisation among internees.

Trotsky, who later became the first leader of the Red Army and a member of the Soviet Politburo (1919-1926), was born Lev Davidovich Bronstein in the Ukraine. By the age of 21, in 1900, he was a devout Marxist and had helped form a major union, spent two years in prison and had been sentenced to four years in Siberia. Later, after his arrest for taking a leading role in Russia’s failed 1905-1907 revolution, Trotsky was again forced into exile. Besides his radical politics, Trotsky did not endear himself to imperial elites with his outspoken self-identification as an “irreconcilable atheist.”¹⁴

By 1917, Trotsky was rabble-rousing in New York City. When the February Revolution ousted the Czar, he and his family boarded a steamer to return home to Russia. His narrative states that: “At Halifax British naval authorities inspected the steamer, and police officers made a perfunctory examination of the papers of the American, Norwegian and Dutch passengers. They subjected the Russians, however, to a downright cross examination, asking us about our convictions, [and] our political plans....”¹⁵

After removing Trotsky, his wife and two children, and others from the ship, he was separated from his family and taken to the prison camp in Amherst, Nova Scotia. Once there, he endured “an examination the like of which I had

never before experienced, even in the Peter and Paul fortress. For in the Czar’s fortress the police stripped me and searched me in privacy, whereas here our democratic allies subjected us to this shameful humiliation before a dozen men.”¹⁶

Trotsky said Camp Commander Col. Arthur Morris “made his career in the British colonies and in the Boer war.” Morris had led imperial forces in Egypt, India, Burma, Ireland and the Gold Coast.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the two men did not exactly get along. “I did not show proper respect when I spoke to him,” said Trotsky, “which made him growl behind my back.”¹⁸

Trotsky described the “Amherst concentration camp” as “an old...very dilapidated iron-foundry...confiscated from its German owner.” Its prisoners, he said, were segregated into two distinct classes:

- (1) 100 “officers and civilian prisoners of the bourgeois class,” and
- (2) 500 “sailors from German boats sunk by the British” and 200 “workers caught by the war in Canada.”¹⁹

Trotsky’s relations with his fellow inmates depended on their view of “revolutionary socialists.” While “officers and petty officers, whose quarters were behind a wooden partition, immediately set us down as enemies,” Trotsky said, the “rank-and-file...surrounded us with an ever increasing friendliness.”²⁰

To Trotsky, it was a chance to proselytise. “The whole month...was like one continuous mass-meeting,” he said. “I told the prisoners about the Russian revolution, about Liebknecht [a German socialist], about Lenin,...and the intervention of the US in the [Russian civil] war.” With “constant group discussions...[o]ur friendship grew warmer every day.”²¹

When German officers complained about his sermonising, Camp Commander Morris “locked Trotsky in the foundry’s old blast furnace as a form of solitary confinement.”²² Trotsky’s narrative states that