

# THE ATTITUDE OF JEWISH LABOR TO WORLD WAR I, 1917-1918

by Morris U. Schappes

WHEN Congress declared war on April 6, 1917 (the vote was 82 to 6 in the Senate, 373 to 50 in the House), pledges of support were instantaneous in many Jewish circles. All the fraternal orders except the Workmen's Circle, all the rabbinical organizations and the Federation of American Zionists put themselves immediately on record. *Dos Yiddishe Folk*, Zionist organ, proclaimed on April 6: "We Jews of America stand by our land and our government, united and strong, and are happy in knowing that our victims shall serve the holy cause of justice all over the world." Rabbi Stephen S. Wise abandoned his pre-war active pacifism and literally draped his pulpit in the flag. On April 7, William Edlin, a socialist editing the *Tog*, a liberal daily, branded as a "traitor anyone who will try to avoid doing his duty because it is inconvenient or because of his previous sympathies."

On April 26 the Poale Zionists staged a rally of 3,000 at Cooper Union in New York, greeting the war as promoting "the principles of democracy and free nationality" and hoping these principles will be applied to Jewish claims to Palestine. On May 14, Seward Park on the East Side of New York was crowded with 20,000 at a rally organized by the League of Jewish Patriots to induce enlistments. Bedeviled by the fear of anti-Semitic misinterpretations of Jewish anti-war activities, pro-war Jewish circles exploited the threat of anti-Semitism to win loud support for the war from hesitant Jewish people. "Let us act as natives, not as foreigners," exhorted the pro-war Socialist, M. Baranov, in the *Forward* on June 12, and Louis E. Miller in his *Vochenshrift* echoed that view on June 22 when he argued that Jews and immigrants have "less right to engage" in anti-war activity "than the native-born."<sup>1</sup>

In response to such agitation and then through the operation of conscription, over 200,000 Jews served in the armed forces, 3,500 dying and 12,000 suffering wounds for ideals that Wilson later turned to dust and bitter ashes when he revealed it was a "commercial and industrial war" in which they had sacrificed life and limb for United States financial "leadership." There were more than 9,000 Jewish officers and 1,132 were awarded decora-

tions and citations, including three with the Congressional Medal of Honor and 147 with Distinguished Service Medals and Crosses. Anti-Semites jeered that Jews were mostly in the Quartermaster department, when as a matter of fact they were disproportionately crowded into the most dangerous service, the infantry and under-represented in the "safe" Quartermaster outfits. Jews indeed showed a higher percentage in the armed forces than the general population, primarily because as city residents working in light industries they had less claim to deferment than did farmers or those in essential industries.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there were those who did not have to wait for Wilson's belated confirmation to proclaim the nature of the war as reactionary. With superior wisdom and patriotism, the St. Louis convention of the Socialist Party, which opened the very day after the declaration of war, denounced it "as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world" and recorded "its unalterable opposition to the war just declared." There were only five pro-war delegates at that convention, with over 170 opposing the war. The membership referendum opposed the war by about 21,000 to 2,800 votes. From April to June 1917 the Socialist Party membership grew from 67,788 to 81,172 despite minor losses from pro-war elements.<sup>3</sup>

## *Jewish Labor Opposes the War*

For a time, the influence of this St. Louis anti-war resolution in Jewish labor organizations was extensive. The Workmen's Circle, the Jewish Socialist Federation, the Jewish unions and even large numbers of Labor Zionists supported this stand (most of the latter were finally won over to favoring the war by the Balfour Declaration while a minority ultimately split with the Zionists and became anti-war Socialists). The first convention to reflect this anti-war position was that of the Capmakers, May 1-10, 1917. On the opening day the Socialist lawyer, Jacob Panken, evoked enthusiasm with his eloquence: "Yes, the capitalist class has forced us into war with Germany,

<sup>1</sup> I. Joseph Rappaport, *Jewish Immigration and World War I, A Study of American Yiddish Press Reactions*, unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1951, p. 279, 281, 294, 289, 295.

<sup>2</sup> I. George Fredman and Louis A. Falk, *Jews in American Wars*, New York, 4th rev. ed., 1943, p. 76.  
<sup>3</sup> Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928*, New York, 1928, p. 313, 310; Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932*, New York, 1935, p. 422.

expecting that the workers will make peace with them during the war. But this day, the 1st of May, 1917 . . . I cry to you, comrades, 'No peace with capitalism.'" When the applause stopped, he went on to expose the huge profits made from the war by Standard Oil and other corporations. He closed on this note: "On with the fight against war; on with the fight for peace; on with the fight against an expeditionary force to Europe; on with the fight against conscription; on with the fight for liberty, for solidarity, for humanity." The record reads: "Long Applause."<sup>4</sup>

Both the I.L.G.W.U. and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers refused to follow the A. F. of L.'s example of pledging not to strike. In fact, the clothing workers in all crafts piled up one of the largest strike records in their militant history. In May 1917, the Workmen's Circle convention endorsed the St. Louis resolution with only four dissenting votes and William Edlin was shouted down as a "murder-patriot" when he tried to make a pro-war speech. In June 1917, preparing for a convention, the organ of the International Fur Workers' Union concluded its outline of the tasks facing the workers by emphasizing that all previous gains are endangered by the war, that courage is needed to speak up now in face of threats of imprisonment and that the delegates have a duty to protest and inspire other branches of labor to protest. "Now," it pointed out, "is the time to demonstrate that we are not only heroes at passing resolutions supporting industrial democracy in peaceful times . . . but that you have courage enough in a time of oppression and reaction to speak out against militarism, against the domination of those who would conquer the world, and to take a stand for full democracy in political and industrial life."<sup>5</sup>

Government repression—censorship, mass arrests and imprisonments—sought to stamp out the peace movement. Under the Espionage Act of June 15, 1917, second-class mailing privileges were denied several socialist periodicals, including the New York *Call* and the *Forward*. Cahan began to vacillate. When the Trading with the Enemy Act of October 1917 required foreign language newspapers to file translations of all material dealing with the war or foreign affairs, Cahan gave this as an excuse for abandoning the St. Louis resolution as a guiding line and began to agitate for a convention to revise that resolution. Out in Chicago, however, Kalman Marmor, editor of the Yiddish *Daily World*, resourcefully found ways of getting his point across to his alert readership. Thus on October 15, 1917, he took advantage of the fact that the *Chicago Tribune*, to whom German anti-war socialists were praiseworthy, had lauded Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin for their "bold struggle against their government." Reprinting the *Tribune's* anti-imperialist excerpts from these leaders, Marmor editorially commented: "But the trouble with the *Tribune* and its like is that they always have two kinds of standards and two ways of evaluating truth and falsehood, patriotism and treason." Lamenting that

they regard socialists here who say the same thing about our government in an entirely different light, Marmor concluded that this "proves that the socialists are on the right track when they follow the path of the Liebknechts and unmask the capitalists of their own country."<sup>6</sup>

## Electoral Victories

The peace temper of the Jewish masses in New York can best be gauged from the results of the November 1917 elections. Heading the socialist ticket as candidate for mayor was Morris Hillquit, who was associated in the public mind with the St. Louis resolution. He was backed by the United Hebrew Trades, the Amalgamated and the I.L.G.W.U., the Workmen's Circle, the Poale Zion and the Jewish National Workers' Alliance, the Progressive Irish League and the Negro Independent Political Council of Harlem. His campaign was dynamic and was geared to local issues as well as to the overriding issue of the war. Frightened by the spreading idea that a vote for Hillquit was a vote for peace, the Jewish plutocracy and its supporters counter-attacked with the threat that a large Jewish vote for the socialists would provoke anti-Semitism. Jacob H. Schiff, Louis Marshall, Oscar S. Straus, Adolph Lewisoohn, Daniel Guggenheim and Henry Morgenthau were among those who signed paid advertisements in the Yiddish press warning the Jewish voter against Hillquit.

Yet even by a Tammany count Hillquit got 145,332 votes, almost nosing out John Purroy Mitchell (155,497) for second place, and carried 12 assembly districts with heavy Jewish populations (Tammany later reorganized these districts so as to avoid such popular disasters in the future). More important, ten socialists were elected to the State Assembly and seven to the New York City Board of Alderman. The then fiery anti-war orator, Jacob Panken, was elected a municipal judge. Incidentally, in Rochester, N. Y., three Jewish socialists were elected to office: an alderman, a supervisor, and a constable. And while Hillquit polled 22 per cent of the total vote in New York, in Chicago the Socialists attained one-third of the total vote. Considering the jingoistic flag-waving, the war hysteria and the repression, such voting is an index to the desire for the peace among the masses, especially among the Jewish workers.<sup>7</sup>

One form of expression of this desire for immediate peace was through the People's Council for Democracy and Terms of Peace, formed at the end of May 1917 by an organizing committee that included Benjamin Schlesinger, president of the I.L.G.W.U., Joseph Schlossberg, secretary of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, P. Geliebter of the Workman's Circle, Max Pine, secretary-treasurer of the United Hebrew Trades of New York, Rose Schneiderman, I.L.G.W.U. organizer, Jacob Panken, Morris Hill-

<sup>4</sup> From Scrapbook in Marmor Collection.

<sup>5</sup> Rappaport, work cited, p. 318-321; Fine, work cited, p. 323; Stuart E. Rosenberg, *The Jewish Community in Rochester 1843-1925*, New York, 1954, p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> *The Headgear Worker*, May-June 1917, p. 4-6, English section.  
<sup>7</sup> *Der For-Arbeiter*, June 1, 1917, p. 2-3; Rappaport, work cited, p. 286, 288.

quit, Alexander Trachtenberg and Rabbi Judah L. Magnes, chairman of the Jewish Kehillah of New York (which promptly removed him from office lest the Jews be tainted). Similar councils sprang up in Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston. The New York Council, headed by Panken, had 284 affiliates, including 93 unions. At a national convention in September more than 40 of 350 delegates represented Jewish organizations. "Peace now, and peace without victory" summed up its general program, although much emphasis was also placed on protecting the rights of labor against war-time repression.

To combat this broad peace movement, which was actively supported by the anti-war Socialists, the pro-war Socialists in August 1917 formed the Jewish Socialist League of America, affiliated with the Social Democratic League of pro-war elements who had walked out of the St. Louis Convention. Poale Zionists were conspicuously active in this new Jewish league although a speech by Dr. N. Syrkin denouncing Jewish opposition to the war as the work of German agents was condemned by the Executive Committee of the Poale Zion, from which Syrkin speedily withdrew.<sup>8</sup>

### **Reactions to Bolshevik Revolution**

The pressure of the government and of reactionary forces to stifle all opposition to the war from Americans intensified when the Bolshevik Revolution began on November 7, 1917. The universal acclaim that had greeted the March revolution was gone. It was one thing for the tsar to be overthrown; it was quite another thing to have the economic and political rule of landlords and capitalists replaced by the economic and political rule of the workers and peasants. The social instinct of American reaction led it to an immediate wholesale propaganda attack on the new Soviet government, with misinformation and misrepresentation as the main weapons of this propaganda.

How thorough this misinformation was, became a matter of public and scandalous record when Walter Lippmann, now the famous columnist, and Charles Merz, now editor of the *New York Times*, made a study of the way the *New York Times* had reported the news about the Bolshevik government in the first 1,000 days after November 7, 1917. Published as a special supplement to the *New Republic* on August 4, 1920, "A Test of the News" concluded that those Americans who relied upon the *Times* as their source of information had been totally misinformed about the facts of Soviet life for these crucial 1,000 days, when basic attitudes and opinions were being shaped. Innumerable falsehoods, big and little, had been put over on the American people by its most creditable source of news!

The heavy weight of this reactionary propaganda on the Jewish population was even greater than upon the American people as a whole because there was the ever-present fear of anti-Semitism acting as an additional spur

to conformity to reaction. Thus the orthodox *Morgen Journal* had no difficulty making up its mind about the new government. Two days after the Revolution began this newspaper declared authoritatively that the Bolsheviks "have brought Russia closer to slavery and barbarism than at any time since the Romanov dynasty was destroyed." It is no surprise therefore that as early as June 29, 1918, the liberal Yiddish daily, the *Tog*, was insisting that "once and for all an end must be made of the Bolsheviks." These were primarily echoes in Yiddish of the wild and fearful cries of the general reactionary and in some instances liberal press.

The American workers, and particularly the Jewish workers, were of a different mind about this great new development in Russia. It is true that there was much confusion as to just what was happening there and some misinformation stuck to even the most cautious reader of the "news." His close study of the Yiddish press, however, leads Joseph Rappaport to the conclusion that "the Leninists of Russia came to be looked upon in 1918 as the hope of the world for Socialism. . . . Sympathy for the Bolsheviks mounted in the succeeding months as Leninist efforts to stabilize conditions appeared to be the only alternative to chaos and a Rightist reaction. The Bolshevik reform program was attractive and their slogans and manifestoes carried great ideological appeal."<sup>9</sup>

The organ of the Capmakers' union, *The Headgear Worker*, carried an editorial by its editor, J. M. Budish, calling for aid to the Bolshevik government early in 1918, beset as it was by Germany from without and capitalist enemies within. "The real traitors of Russia," he wrote, "who for a pot of porridge sold their souls to the Kaiser, proved to be . . . not the villified Bolsheviks but those 'loyal' Russian elements whom the entire capitalist press never ceased to eulogize and on whom they put their hopes of getting Russia into line. . . . While the Red Guard are fighting the enemies without, the rich bourgeoisie is joining hands with German imperialism to stamp out democracy and enforce slavery. This is what the patriotism of the Russian capitalists proved to be. They do not give a rap for the country."<sup>10</sup>

At its convention in May 1918, the I.L.G.W.U. General Executive Board declared that the membership "will follow the struggles of their brothers in Russia with intense interest and sympathy, not only because many are linked to them by ties of kinship and sentiment, but also because the fate of the first great working class republic in the world cannot be but a matter of prime concern to the organized and progressive workers of all countries." Amid all the confusion about tactics the organ of the Jewish Socialist Federation, *Neie Velt*, wrote on August 23, 1918: "The Bolsheviks are perhaps the only Socialists who have undertaken to live up to the letter of every word in the phrases we all have been preaching for many years. . . . If the dictatorship of the proletariat is the goal, why then not

<sup>9</sup> Rappaport, work cited, p. 354, 355.

<sup>10</sup> *The Headgear Worker*, January-February, 1918, p. 3-6, English section.

<sup>8</sup> Rappaport, work cited, p. 299-302, 310, 314-315.

approach that goal while the path is clear? . . . The Bolsheviks have acted logically, and there is no room for criticism except if we wish to criticize all the methods of our propaganda up to now." In socialist and labor circles the only anti-Bolshevik periodical was the *Neie Post*, organ of the New York Cloakmakers' union.

American reaction of course was worried by these and other signs among the American workers as a whole of curiosity and sympathy with the new Russian government. In addition to stepping up the propaganda campaign, it decided to take part in Allied military intervention against the Soviet government. When Wilson announced American military intervention on August 3, 1918, he was applauded as a "liberator" in the *Morgen Journal*, the *Tog*, the *Varheit*, the *Yiddishes Tageblatt* and in Anglo-Jewish periodicals like the *American Hebrew*. The press incitement against American opponents of this military adventure led to hoodlum attacks. In October 1918 the *Bulletin* of the New York Young Men's Hebrew Association called upon its young readers to "break up that street meeting where Bolshevik doctrine is preached. Squelch that misguided would-be martyr who weaves theories in idleness while the world burns."<sup>11</sup>

### **Capitulation to Pro-War Pressure**

In the ranks of Jewish labor, capitulation to reactionary pro-war pressure also took the form of an ever more rapid drifting of a majority of the Socialist leadership into the pro-war camp. Although they had voted for the St. Louis anti-war resolution, they soon began to abandon it, while Eugene V. Debs and Charles E. Ruthenberg and other Socialist leaders conducted active anti-war campaigns. For this work they were persecuted by the government, indicted and imprisoned and opportunist elements in the leadership caved in under the ideological and even more tangible blows. Signs of this trend to clamber onto the pro-war bandwagon became pronounced around the issue of the Third Liberty Loan drive of April 1918. The seven Socialist Aldermen in New York, elected less than a half year before because the voters thought they stood for peace, suddenly announced their support of this Loan. Despite immediate condemnation of this unauthorized reversal of socialist policy by the local leaders of the Bronx and Brooklyn Socialist parties, Congressman Meyer London published his endorsement of the Loan on April 11, and on April 19, the executive committee of the Jewish Socialist Federation appealed to the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party to reverse the St. Louis resolution, an appeal which was promptly rejected.

Seeking to justify his position, London in a speech in Congress on May 1, 1918 not only affirmed his support of the war, but rationalized his position by asserting that Wilson "has not only adopted the substance of the international Socialist program, but even the very formula of the

international Socialist movement for his expression of the aims and objects of the United States in this war." So dazzled were the Londons by the glitter of Wilson's Fourteen Points of January 8, 1918 that they forgot the basic point that even Wilson was to admit in September 1919, that this was "a commercial and industrial war."

On May 10 to 12, 1918 the Jewish Socialist Federation had a national conference at which the majority, led by **Louis B. Boudin, B. Charney Vladeck and J. B. Salutsky** (now known as J. B. S. Hardman), repudiated the St. Louis resolution and took a pro-war stand by a vote of 25 to 19. This position was soon endorsed by the leadership of the Workmen's Circle, the United Hebrew Trades, the I.L.G.W.U., the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and other organizations. These unions bought Liberty Bonds with **union funds. Together with the United Hebrew Trades** and the Furriers' union these unions also conducted a popular Bond drive on the East Side that resulted in the sale of \$12,000,000 worth of bonds, in contrast to the \$200,000 in bonds bought in that area in the Second Liberty Loan. Elements in the membership and parts of the leadership fought against this and similar pro-war actions. The rift between the opportunist leadership and the still militant forces among the Jewish workers was widening.<sup>12</sup>

This division between right and left wing socialism was to become a major factor in the Jewish labor movement after the war. It is of prime importance to note that the central issue on which the cleavage was based had to do with what position workers in our own country were to take on the foreign policy of our own government, on the repression imposed by our government on all opponents of the war and on the need of the workers to fight back to prevent the rampant employers from using the war fervor for the purpose of reducing the living conditions and standards of the workers. Who were the patriots: those who beat the drums and gulped insatiate doses of noble words about making the world safe for democracy, or those who, seeing dimly or clearly that this was in fact "a commercial and industrial war . . . not a political war," refused to give their voluntary support to it?

Reaction, grown bloated with triumph and superprofits during the war, let loose a post-war wave of terror that, as we shall see, was to have profound effects upon the Jewish masses in our country.

### **Arab Communists Urge: Recognize Israel**

**T**HE Communist Parties of Syria and Lebanon have come out with a call for recognition of the State of Israel by the Arab states, an Associated Press dispatch from Damascus reported on February 9. The news was based on a story in the Syrian journal *Al Nas*, which reported that this call resulted from a decision made at a joint session of the central committees of the two Communist Parties held in Lebanon in April 1954.

<sup>11</sup> Rappaport, work cited p. 355-356, 363.

<sup>12</sup> Rappaport, work cited, p. 348-351; *The Fur Worker*, Sept. 1918, p. 5.