

BUND. Der Algemeiner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland (The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia), known simply as the Bund, was founded in Vilna in October 1897 by a small group of Jews who were profoundly influenced by Marxism. Led by Aleksandr (Arkadii) Kremer (1865–1935), their goal was to attract East European Jews to the emergent Russian revolutionary movement.



Bund election poster, Kiev, Ukraine, ca. 1918. The slogan reads: "The place where we live—there is our homeland." (YIVO Archives)

By the end of the nineteenth century, a new social class was growing within the Jewish population, made up of working-class Jews whose socioeconomic characteristics differentiated them from Russian, Lithuanian, or Polish workers. Jewish workers faced higher levels of discrimination than any other national group. Effectively barred from the more advanced and developed industries, they featured prominently in sweatshops and workshops that demanded intensive manual labor while offering poor working conditions and low wages. The worst situations existed in Lithuania and Belorussia, where the Jewish workers' movements were founded; there, employees endured greater than 12-hour workdays in crowded shops with

inadequate ventilation. Hunger, widespread disease, and the absence of medical insurance placed Jewish manual laborers on the lowest rungs of the Jewish communities' economic and social ladders. It was this group who affiliated with the first work organizations for Jews in the Pale of Settlement in the last decades of the century.

The establishment of the Bund was the outcome of an encounter between the new Jewish working class and a group of young Jewish intelligentsia who were attracted to various forms of Marxism and socialism. This latter group included men such as Kremer, Iulii Martov (1873–1923), Vladimir Kossowsky (1867–1941), Avrom Mutnik (1868–1930), Isai Aizenshtat (1867–1937), and John (Yosef) Mill (1870–1952). Coming from middle-class families, most had received a modern education and were entrenched in Russian or Polish culture. They had also been exposed to the revolutionary ferment that was brewing in Russia.

This revolutionary Jewish intelligentsia organized discussion groups, or "circles," in cities and towns such as Minsk and Vilna. Their primary aim, before the Bund was founded, was to increase the activist consciousness amongst Jewish youth and to integrate them into the general revolutionary movements. After forming study groups or circles, the revolutionary intelligentsia in the 1890s sought to attract cadres of Jewish workers to

become agitators and leaders among their associates. The practical expression of this activity was a movement of strikes. Jews laboring in workshops were organized to seek higher wages and better working conditions. Jewish-oriented goals were far from their minds. Instead, they believed that the encounter between intellectuals and workers was essential for shaping the main characteristics of the new movement. While both the leaders and the workers agreed on the need to change the economic and social circumstances of East European Jewish society, the founding of the Bund also reflected the gradual decline of the centuries-old institutional frameworks that had separated Jews from the larger society, a separation that had put a brake on the possibility of mutual association between Jew and non-Jew.

During its initial years, the relationship between the Bund and the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP) was complex and beset with tension. The Bund's founders did not view their organization as a specifically Jewish movement, and their ultimate aim was to integrate the Jewish worker into the general Russian proletariat. Lenin, though, saw the Bund as a national Jewish party, and he claimed that the Bund was developing independent political tendencies that were uniquely Jewish in character. Attacks on the Bund led some of its leaders, notably Vladimir Kossowsky, to take the position that the Bund was not created to supply reserves of workers for the General Russian Movement, but rather to further the rights and status of the Jewish proletariat. The final outcome of this bitter dispute was the removal, in 1903, of the Bund from the Russian Socialist Democratic Party coalition. This dismissal occurred at the dramatic Second Congress of the RSDWP, held in Brussels, and was primarily the result of pressure from Lenin's faction of the party. By 1906, however, the Bund had once again become a partner within the socialist movement.

After several years of sometimes bitter internal debate intensified by criticism and attacks by representatives of the RSDWP, the Bund added national-cultural autonomy to its ideological rallying call, in addition to its earlier principles advocating socialist revolution and complete civic equality. Enshrined in the 1905 party platform, national-cultural autonomy was justified by the claim that in the future the central state authorities would transfer jurisdiction over culture, national education, and domestic law to institutions that were democratically elected by the various national minorities. Such autonomy, by its very nature, was to be sustained by a national language, and in the Bund's view the national language of Jews was Yiddish.

The Bund was molded by its illegal activities and by the self-sacrifice of its members, who did not, however, endorse assassination and terrorism. The positive response of tens of thousands of Jewish workers and students to the Bund's call to join mass demonstrations during the revolutionary year of 1905 in the Pale of Settlement and of Congress Poland, reinforced confidence

in the future of the party among its members. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bund claimed 34,000 members in 274 branches. It was at that time the largest and best-organized Jewish party in Eastern Europe.

The February Revolution of 1917 heralded a new era for the Russian branch of the Bund. Bund activists Moyshe Rafeš and Henryk Erlich played key roles in articulating the aims of the revolution. The Bund helped to forge links between the liberal parties and the Marxist movement; some of the Bund's leaders were also particularly prominent among the Mensheviks. During the summer and autumn of 1917 (shortly before the October events), the Bund faced a future with confidence. However, within a few years the Russian Bund faced total collapse and liquidation in the Soviet Union.

At the end of 1917, some of the party's branches began to lean in the direction of Bolshevism. Torn between the wish to remain within the Social Democratic camp on the one hand, and to be part of the soon-to-be-established Soviet government on the other, the Bund began gradually to crack under the strain, eventually leading to a total split along ideological lines. Among the most prominent of the Russian Bund leaders who joined the Bolsheviks in 1921 was Ester (Esther; pseudonym of Malke Frumkin, 1880–1943), who played a prominent role in the *Evsekstia* (the Jewish section of the Communist Party) that year, and was appointed vice rector of the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West. Until about 1926, she maintained her conviction that a unique Jewish culture could be preserved in the midst of revolutionary changes. Thereafter, she abandoned this path. In early 1938, after being dismissed from her position as head of the Foreign Languages Institute in Moscow, she was arrested and sentenced to eight years imprisonment at a camp in Karaganda. Other former Bundists who did not join the regime left for Poland or the United States. The remainder, like Frumkin, was purged in the waves of Stalinist terror during the 1930s.

The establishment of an independent Polish Bund was the result of a breakdown in communication between the Russian party and Bundists in areas of Poland that had fallen into German hands during World War I. At a congress of activists held in Warsaw in November 1914, some veteran members (including Yekutiel [Noyakh] Portnoi, Wiktor Szulman, Lazar Epstein, Khayim Meyer Wassar, and Emanuel Nowogrodzki) sensed that the war would bring about Poland's independence from the Russian Empire, and that the party would cease to be able to operate as a united organization. Soon after, Vladimir Medem (1879–1923) joined the group, becoming the party's theoretician and political leader in a period of relative political freedom during the German occupation. Poland was then the party's main center of activity; in December 1917 the inaugural congress of the Polish Bund convened in Lublin.

As a legal party in the independent Polish state, the Bund sharpened its ideological positions. While the party had always been opposed to Zionism

(considering it to represent only the interests of bourgeois Jewry), the movement responded to the increased appeal of Zionism after the Balfour Declaration of 1917. At this point Vladimir Medem added a new and central component to the ideology of the Bund by expanding the definition of *doikayt* (hereness) and making this concept the trademark of the movement during the interwar period. Supporters of *doikayt* insisted that the future of the Jewish people would best unfold in the same places in which it had experienced its past, and where it had developed and created its cultural resources. The party began to portray itself as the guardian of secular Yiddish Jewish culture, fighting against what it perceived to be an irresponsible illusion that would concentrate all Jews into a national homeland in Palestine, and vigorously warding off attempts to cultivate Hebrew culture in Poland at the expense of the original Yiddish culture.

When the first city council elections were held in Poland in 1919, some voices in the Bund called for the organization not to participate. Those urging a boycott maintained that a revolutionary movement should not play a political game in which terms were dictated by reactionary bourgeois and national elements that dominated the political life of the young Polish state. Most branches of the Bund, however, decided to field candidates; indeed, 160 Bund representatives were chosen for various municipal councils. In Warsaw and Łódź, the Bund attracted more than 20 percent of Jewish voters, a noteworthy achievement for the newly organized party. In the national elections of 1922, by contrast, while Bund candidates received a total of 87,000 votes, these were scattered in a variety of districts. Consequently, not a single Bundist was elected to the Polish Sejm (parliament). Some candidates had not run as Bundists but had joined the list of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS).

Over the years, the Bund enlarged its sphere of activities and campaigned to make itself attractive to a wide variety of Jewish groups. From the mid-1920s it intensified its participation through the election of its members to executive bodies of the Jewish communities, to city councils, and to the Sejm. It felt, however, that its reliance upon its senior partner, the Polish Socialist Party, was stifling its progress, and thus the leadership decided that in future elections it would present itself as an independent Jewish socialist party. The Bund's greatest breakthrough was achieved in 1936, in the Łódź city elections, after which it completely overhauled its political strategy. From a party that on a national-political level was almost a subsidiary of the Polish Socialists, the Bund came to be considered by the Jewish street as a political ally of the PPS. In the municipal elections of 1938, the Bund made impressive gains, winning 17 of the 20 city council seats taken by members of Jewish parties in Warsaw. Electoral success continued into 1939, when further municipal elections were contested in Poland. Nonetheless, the Bund failed to elect even one representative to the Polish parliament. The main reasons for this lack of success were the party's utter

refusal to enter into agreements on joint lists of candidates with other Jewish parties, and its snubbing of the other Polish ethnic minority parties that had traditionally entered into alliances with Jewish parties.

The issue of elections to the Jewish community councils was not a simple matter for the Bund. The community council was conceived by the party's highest echelon as an anachronistic institution, whose purpose was to provide religious services, burials, and traditional Jewish education, and to prevent the Jews from integrating into the general population. Yet the party leaders were confounded by local activists, especially those from outlying areas who attached importance to active involvement in the leadership of the community, which they saw as an essential structure for encouraging Jewish activism.

At the end of the 1920s, the Bund was at a crossroads, not knowing where it stood in relation to the general European socialist camp. Once it decided not to join the Comintern, a fierce internal battle erupted over whether to instead join the Labor and Socialist International (LSI). Some argued that the International operated within a reformist nonrevolutionary framework; those who took this position added that a broad-based coalition of parties, whose members varied from the British Labour Party to the German Social Democratic Party, would be ineffective in curbing European fascism. Two Bund leaders, Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter, argued by contrast that the Bund would be unable to survive for very long if it remained unaffiliated with this broad international political framework. The party finally decided, at its Łódź conference in June 1930, to join the LSI. In July 1931, the Bund sent its first delegation to the LSI Congress in Vienna, where it was granted the status of official representative of Polish Jewish workers.

The Bund played a central role in organizing Jewish trade unions, addressing both the professional needs of workers and campaigning for their civic needs as members of a national group. Rather than focusing exclusively on work-related matters, the unions also concentrated on education, cultural activities, and social support. Jewish trade unions were forced to confront issues such as the declining economic status of the Jewish middle class, the predicament of university-qualified graduates who were unable to find employment and were forced into low-paying labor jobs, the unique problems of female breadwinners, and the relations between workers and employers in industries owned by Jews.

The party also devoted efforts to cultivating frameworks for younger members; along these lines, it established the Socialister Kinder Farband (SKIF; Union of Socialist Children) and Tsukunft (the Future). In 1939, membership in Bund youth organizations had reached 12,000, who were associated with 200 branches across Poland. By blending scout activities, sports events, and politics, Tsukunft provided its members with tools for self-expression and prepared young Jews for positions of responsibility and leadership. Above all, it left them with a feeling of belonging at a time when

traditional supports were crumbling and when day-to-day living was becoming hard to bear because of economic depression and growing antisemitism. A proletarian sports organization, Morgnshtern, was set up in 1926 to assist the party in promoting its educational and political agendas; it held soccer, boxing, and track and field events. Set up by a joint conference of sports organizations affiliated with a number of socialist parties across Europe, it was not a competitive association but was devoted to integrating the culture of physical activity into educational programs for teenagers and young activists. [See Tsukunft; Morgnshtern.]

The Bund was the largest political party supporting the Tsentrale Yidishe Shul Organizatsye (TSYSHO or CYSHO, Central Yiddish School Organization) school network, which had facilities in more than 100 communities and was supported by the Left Po'ale Tsiyon party. Instruction was in Yiddish, with secular and socialist orientation guiding the values taught to the students. By the early 1920s, TSYSHO included at least 69 schools and 30 kindergartens. In 1928–1929, the system embraced 46 kindergartens, 114 elementary schools, 52 evening schools, 3 secondary schools, and a seminary for training teachers. More than 24,000 students attended TSYSHO institutions. [See TSYSHO.] In 1926, the Bund also built the Vladimir Medem Sanatorium, a residential facility for children with tuberculosis; the children were organized into a collective that provided them with independence as they governed their own social and cultural activities. During the summer months the numbers reached about 350. [See Medem Sanatorium.]

The Bund also played a central role in the development of Jewish newspapers in Russia and Poland. Before 1917, its Russian and Yiddish publications were illegal, though as early as 1896 Vladimir Kossowsky had begun to edit *Der Yidisher arbeyter* in Vilna. After World War I a turning point was reached in newly independent Poland, with the Bund sponsoring a rich variety of publications on the national and local levels. The reading matter included articles about politics, culture, and sports; other journals were aimed at a young readership. The main newspaper was the *Folks-tsaytung*, which appeared in various forms and titles from 1920 to the outbreak of World War II; beginning in the 1930s it occasionally published special sections for female workers [see *Folks-tsaytung*]. A parallel Polish-language newspaper, *Glos Bundu*, was also published during the same period.

A growing number of Jewish female workers entered the labor market as early as the 1870s and 1880s, a consequence of the increasingly grim economic situation. Very early in its history, the Bund advocated on behalf of women workers, demanding equality, and within the Bund, women were treated no differently from men. A significant number of women did join the Bund and many became prominent leaders, a phenomenon that paralleled developments within the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party as a

whole. The doctrine of equality that arose naturally from the ideology of the Bund was applied also to notions of the revolutionary family developed by Bundist theoreticians.

In independent Poland, however, the role of women in the Bund took a different direction, reflecting the peculiarities of Polish Jewish society in general and workers' families in particular. The Yidishe Arbeter-froy Organizatsye (YAF; Organization of Female Jewish Workers), founded under the auspices of the Bund in the early 1920s, devoted attention to issues important to female workers, including childrearing, domestic relations, household budgets, and family planning. In the early 1930s, YAF created a network of daycare centers for the children of working women, with facilities for 450 children. The egalitarian participation in revolutionary activity that had been stressed at the turn of the century was supplanted among activists like Sarah Shvaber and Dina Blond by organizational and propaganda work aimed specifically at women. Other women who were prominent in the Bund, including Bela Shapiro and Sonya Novgorodski, concentrated on developing educational and cultural activities for young women.

By the mid-1930s, the Bund had become the dominant Jewish organization in the country. In March 1936 it stood at the forefront of the struggle against antisemitism by announcing a general strike in response to the pogrom in Przytyk as well as in response to the wave of antisemitism that had engulfed Poland. The broad response to the Bund's call to engage in protest activity included support from a variety of Jewish political circles, many of which differed with the Bund over ideological questions about Zionism and religion. This support, along with considerable backing from Polish trade unions, turned the Bund into the leading representative of Jews in Poland. As the Bund involved itself more deeply in Jewish affairs, it distanced itself increasingly from the internationalist and universalist ideology of its formative years. Displaying flexibility and pragmatism, the Bund's Jewish-nationalist agenda became prominent, if not central, during the interwar years in Poland. Substantial attention was devoted to Jewish education, workers' organizations, Jewish culture, and the battle against antisemitism.

While Poland was the locus of the Bund's activities, the party was active elsewhere as well, particularly in Romania and in Latvia. Jewish socialist activity began in Romania in the 1890s. Its first organization, Lumina, was founded in 1893 and was devoted to the organization of Yiddish-speaking workers. In 1922, Jewish socialist organizations in Romania became united under the banner of the Bund, and its main strength lay in Bukovina and Bessarabia, where Yiddish-speaking Jewish workers were most numerous. In independent Latvia, the Bund's activities began with a congress of members of Unzer Tsayt, its Latvian division, in Riga in December 1918. The disputes and splits that prevented the emergence of a single, united Jewish socialist movement in Poland were unknown in Latvia,

as were the problematic relations with the broader socialist movement. Unlike their Polish comrades, Latvian Bundists succeeded in electing two of their representatives to the country's parliament as early as 1918. Elections to the Riga municipal council in 1919 succeeded with the Social Democratic bloc gaining 36 of the 96 seats. Six of those elected were Jews, four of them Bundists. In 1934, there were 500 active members of the Bund in Latvia.

Immediately following Germany's occupation of Poland at the end of 1939, the Bund initiated a wide range of activities. The party's veteran leadership left Warsaw, along with the great wave of emigration of political activists, and was replaced by young men who were members of the Tsukunft youth movement. The leading personality in this group, who more than anyone else left his mark on the history of the Holocaust-era Polish Bund was Avraham (Abrasha) Blum (1905–1943), who had come to Warsaw from Vilna in 1929. This group succeeded in preventing the complete disintegration of the party.

The Bund established an underground network that offered both educational and political activities to teenagers and youth in the Warsaw ghetto. The Bund maintained constant contact with the Polish Underground, with political leaders in the West, and with the Polish government-in-exile. The importance of the Bund's underground network was realized at the beginning of 1942, when activists in the ghetto received mounting information of the genocide in Poland and Lithuania. A detailed report by Leon Feiner, the Bund's principal liaison with the Polish underground, was, with the latter's assistance, dispatched to London in May 1942. This report, the first of an incoming stream of information, was transmitted to the Polish government-in-exile and to others in Britain and in the United States.

In 1941, when most of the Central Committee members who left Poland arrived in the United States, the Bund's mission in New York City became the main center for the organization's political activity. It established contact with Jewish workers' organizations and collected money to assist members who were trapped in Poland and the Soviet Union. In 1942, Shmuel (Artur) Zygielbojm was sent from New York to London to act as the Bund's representative on the National Council of the Polish government-in-exile. After Zygielbojm committed suicide in 1943 to protest the lack of any general action taken by the Allied forces or by the Polish government-in-exile in response to the Nazi genocide, he was replaced by Emanuel Szerer. Another painful episode in the history of the Holocaust-era Bund involved the deaths in a Soviet prison of two of Poland's interwar leaders, Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter; Erlich took his own life and Alter was executed.

Until 1949, the Bund continued to carry out activities under its own auspices, but the organization was eventually wiped out after a very tough Stalinist line was adopted in Poland. After 50 years of activity in Eastern Europe, the Bund disappeared from the Jewish horizon. Together with it, the

culture and public lifestyle that had developed among the Jewish proletariat in Vilna, Minsk, Białystok, Warsaw, and Łódź was lost forever.

[See also Parties and Ideologies; and the biographies of the principal figures mentioned herein.]

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