

## Revolutionary Jews from Marx to Trotsky Robert Wistrich

Portraits of ten personalities that changed history. Emphasis on their Jewish nature more than their historical deeds

This is a book of 10 short biographies from the periods in which Jews first began taking an extremely active role in the societies where they lived. The issues that concern them, the dogmas that attracted them, changed from decade to decade. It is meaningful to note not only who the personalities were, but when and where they came from. The subjects of the book are:

Primarily German:

Karl Marx, 1818, Trier, Germany  
Ferdinand LaSalle, 1825, Breslow (modern Wrocaw), Germany/Poland  
Edward Bernstein, 1850, Berlin and Danzig/Gdansk  
Rosa Luxembourg, 1871, Zamosc Poland/Russia

Austria – Hungary:

Victor Adler, 1852, Prague  
Otto Bauer, 1881, Vienna

France

Bernard Lazere, 1865, Nimes  
Leon Blum, 1872, Paris

Julius Martov, 1873, Constantinople/Russia  
Leon Trotsky, 1879, southern Ukraine/Russia

These Revolutionary Jews were active in promoting socialism, in the labor movement, in anarchism and Bolshevism. As is well described in other books, Solzhenitsyn's [[ASIN:5969707023 Two Hundred Years Together]] and Slezkine's [[ASIN:B005646E32 The Jewish Century]], Jewish society, and the relationship of Jews to the host cultures among them they lived, changed extremely radically during this period.

For several centuries Jews had been quite separate, excluded from the mainstream societies on the one hand, and rejecting them on the other. They lived in their own ghettos and shtetls, speaking Yiddish in preference to the local tongues. They dressed differently and observed different religious customs, among which was the endless discussion of the Torah and the Talmud. They had different professions. They did not farm, nor did they want to. They were tavern keepers, distillers, and overseers for remote landlords.

In the early 19th century, the time of the Enlightenment, the Romance in literary history, the Industrial Revolution, they started to become better integrated into the host societies. They were admitted into schools, the universities, the Army and the civil service. They learned the host society languages. They became involved in civil affairs and politics.

Along the way, in generation after generation, they rejected their parents' wisdom and their parents' religion, attracted to new ideologies. More than merely attracted, they were the authors of new ideologies such as Marxism. As Wistrich quite clearly writes, they tended to be swept away with the dogmas of each new age. The rhetorical skills their ancestors had honed in Talmudic arguments were turned to secular affairs.

Jewish intelligence, which seems to have been an underused resource in their prior self-segregated life, became a formidable asset when competing with their European host societies in schools, universities, and civic affairs. These newly enfranchised Jews soon came to dominate most of the movements in which they became involved.

They realized different objectives in the different societies in which they found themselves. In Western Europe the labor movement and socialist politics were most attractive to the populations. Therefore, the French, German and Austrian figures addressed in this book tended to be labor leaders and the leaders of leftist political parties. Russia was a different question. It was backwards, agrarian and religious in a fairly primitive way. The sophisticated reasoning that was useful in Western Europe was wasted. It took brute force and strong action.

Trotsky, the last of the characters described in the book, became a military leader in the days of the Bolsheviks and the early Soviet Union. Military command was an altogether odd role for a Jew to assume, but he did it very effectively. And, per a leitmotif running throughout the book, his idealism found itself at odds with the idealism (or cynicism, or paranoia perhaps) of his fellow Bolsheviks, and he died in his Mexican exile of an icepick to the brain.

The biographies are well drawn. They do a better job of describing the personal journeys of each person within their Jewish persona, not so good of a job of describing what they accomplished on the world stage. Leon Blum was the leader of France's socialists. We learn about him, but not so much about the political issues that occupied him. The focus is on his Judaism, not his contributions to France. So it must be in dealing with so much material in a single book.

Overall a worthwhile read.