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Localized Working-Class Political Violence in Russia's Pale of Settlement, 1906–1907

Abstract: This article addresses meanings of localized political violence among working-class youth in the Pale of Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland during the late period of the 1905 Revolution. The author claims, using contemporary debates and personal documents, that localized political violence became at that time an important expression of working-class militant identity, though its meanings varied with location and ethnicity. Localized violence became a statement of the militants' newly acquired dignity as revolutionaries within their local communities as well as a statement of their higher revolutionary commitment *vis-à-vis* the established revolutionary parties and the better-educated revolutionaries. While the article addresses violence of militants of all stripes, it particularly focuses on the meaning of localized violence among anarchists, since their uncompromising rejection of all social hierarchies combined with anti-intellectualism pushed them into perceiving violent confrontations with the authorities as the ultimate expression of their political and personal identities, more so than for other militants. The anarchists perceived themselves at war against the authorities and saw their war as an apocalyptic struggle of the good against the evil. The emphasis of the article is on working-class Jewish militants from the Pale of Settlement and from the Kingdom of Poland, who constituted a substantial minority within anarchist groups and who had to struggle against a combination of class and ethnicity-based discrimination which, as the author claims, affected their identity as militants and the meaning of localized violence for them.

Keywords: Revolution of 1905, political violence, mass violence, Pale of Settlement, working class.

Introduction

The present article delves into the significance of localized political violence for a major subculture of working-class youth during the latter stages of the 1905 Revolution. Drawing on letters, autobiographies, and memoirs, as well as the contemporaneous press, I have found that violence had a specific meaning in the context of the era's labor politics. More specifically, workers refused to accept a subordinate position within any social hierarchy, be it the revolutionary movement or beyond. On the premise that an individual's perception of violence is an outgrowth of his or her social status and location, Jewish proletarian militants tended to view force as a legitimate means for social mobility. This hypothesis is bolstered by the high percentage of young working-class Jews—a group that suffered from harsh ethnic discrimination—among the ranks of the anarchists, which was indeed a rather conspicuous movement in the Pale of Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland. In light of the above, we will focus on outlooks concerning localized violence among Jewish proletarian youth.

The paper begins with a discussion on early twentieth-century debates in the Russian Empire over the use of localized political violence, especially within the anarchist movement—the only ideological camp that supported such tactics in principle. Thereafter, I will analyze a number of personal documents by working-class Jews with the objective of discerning their attitude towards violence. An emphasis will be placed on militants that changed their political allegiance owing to their decision to employ such force as a primary mode of insurrection.

On this basis, I will take stock of what political violence meant to its young adherents from the Jewish working class. Between 1905 and 1907, localized violence became the political language of choice for these same activists. This decision epitomized their newly acquired stature as revolutionaries within the local community. What is more, these militants believed that their willingness to apply such force attested to the fact that they were more committed to the revolution than, say, the leaders of the established parties and the better-educated activists.

Methodology and Sources

Whether employed by individuals or groups, there are myriad forms of political violence. This paper surveys the emergence of Russian anarchist

and other insurgent groups that deemed political violence to be their *raison d'être* amid the 1905 Revolution. More specifically, I plumb the depths of what the Italian political scientist Donatella della Porta refers to as “clandestine political violence” by underground groups, which were expressly organized for the purpose of wielding such force. Directed at non-combatants, this patently communicative-cum-symbolic violence was designed to intimidate certain sectors and encourage others. Della Porta also underscores the fact that competition between and within social movements is a robust agitator of such violence.¹ Over the course of this paper, I will intermittently return to the notion of competitive escalation and reciprocal tension for the sake of illustrating why anarchist groups in the Pale of Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland increasingly saw violence as both an effective revolutionary tool and a defining element of their political identity.

In discussing political violence and the motivations thereof, I will also stress the importance of context. As the anthology *Dynamics of Political Violence* demonstrates, the resort to such means is always strategic. Both the form and magnitude of violence vary in relation to social changes. Put differently, instead of focusing exclusively on a movement’s ideological justifications for using violence, we will also explore the reasons for using a particular strain of force at a particular time.² An in-depth look at the circumstances of the Russian Empire’s young working-class Jews once it was evident that the 1905 Revolution had failed to remedy their grievances is crucial to understanding this group’s decision to make localized political violence the centerpiece of its strategy. To this end, we must also determine how emerging attitudes towards violence came to signify these activists’ self-perception as revolutionaries.

In undertaking this project, I availed myself of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), other relevant document collections, and the revolutionary press in the Russian language. Above all, I poured through a wide array of texts that were written by adherents and opponents of political violence, such as the following: programmatic statements that were run in the anarchist press; personal correspondence between militants; and autobiographies by various revolutionaries, foremost among

¹ Donatella della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (New York, 2015), 7–10.

² Lorenzo Bosi, Charles Demetriou, Stefan Malthaner (eds.), *Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on Radicalization and the Escalation of Political Conflict* (Farnham, 2014), 4.

them the memoir of Daniil Novomirskii—the well-known Russian-Jewish anarchist-syndicalist.³ By scrutinizing the references to violence in these texts and situating them in the broader socio-political context, this article will delineate a particular political culture of the early twentieth century.

Background

From 1905 to 1907, Russian workers, peasants, and members of the intelligentsia protested against the tsarist regime, with each group emphasizing its own agenda: improved labor legislation and the freedom to organize trade unions, land reform, and enhanced civil-cum-political rights, respectively. During the revolution, it was not uncommon for a group to resort to violence against its ostensible political adversaries. By the end of 1905, though, lower-class militants realized that despite some improvements to their rights, the insurrection had failed to address their specific grievances. In consequence, many left the revolutionary parties that shunned localized terrorism, such as the Bund and the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, and joined organizations that embraced violence. This often meant throwing in their lot with anarchist groups (another, less popular option was the breakaway Union of Socialists-Revolutionaries Maximalists). Some joined or stayed in other frameworks that officially repudiated localized violence, but whose local chapter was more amenable to such means.

Working-class Jews, in particular, were unsatisfied with the final outcome of the revolution. Whereas the government removed constraints on all other ethnic groups, its legal discrimination of Jews remained intact, as limitations on residence, employment, and educational opportunities remained the law of the land. Conversely, a large share of Jewish working-class militants felt that they had earned an important position

³ Anarcho-syndicalists raised the banner of unionization. Moreover, they endeavored to influence trade associations, on the premise that politicized unions are a key to igniting revolutionary change. Needless to say, anarcho-syndicalists engaged in terror against government officials and business owners that mistreated their employees. In principle, the movement's activities were financed by robbing large companies and the government. However, the actions of anarchist-syndicalist groups did not always match their rhetoric, as individuals and small businesses were also targeted. This strategy differed from that of anarcho-communists. In keeping with the radical Black Banner line, this particular camp endorsed random terrorist acts against the wealthy. Anarcho-communists believed that the persistent use of terror against the privileged constituted the only effective means to alter the *status quo*. In their estimation, trade unions, including illegal ones, served to perpetuate the *status quo* and were thus an impediment to their revolutionary aims.

in their community during the revolution, namely their ideas and deeds had garnered a modicum of attention and respect. It was only natural, then, that these activists had no intention of reverting to the humble status of manual laborers. As a result, quite a few joined multiethnic anarchist groups or local branches of other organizations that sanctioned localized clandestine violence. These militants directed their “wrath” at small business owners that abused their employees and local policemen that brutalized incarcerated revolutionaries. In addition, they targeted individuals that were considered to be wealthier than the average proletarian. Encouraging the poor to rebel and terrorizing alleged exploiters were the essential stated goals of this violence.

The vast majority of the groups that resorted to violence between 1906 and 1907 were anarchists. To understand the type of individuals that joined these groups, Vladimir D. Ermakov has studied 300 members of the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles who were affiliated with the anarchist movement from 1905 to 1907. His findings attest to the prominence of young working-class Jews in its ranks.

According to Ermakov, out of 300 ex-anarchists, 145 (ca. 48 percent) were Jews, 86 (29 percent) were ethnic Russians, 42 (14 percent) were Ukrainians, and 10 (3 percent) were Latvians. The remaining 17 (6 percent) belonged to a *mélange* of other ethnicities. Nearly all of the members were under thirty-years old upon joining the movement. More specifically, 14 percent were between the ages of 13 and 15; 44 percent between 16 and 18; 31 percent between 19 and 23; 8 percent between 24 and 30; and a mere 2 percent were over 30. At the time of their actual involvement in anarchist actions, 5 percent were from 13 to 14 years old; 42 percent were from 16 to 18 years old; 41 percent were between 19 and 23 years old; 10 percent were between 24 and 30 years old; and 2 percent were over 30.

With respect to social background, the majority came from poor families or those of modest means. As for their social status at the time of their militant activities, about 3 percent belonged to the intelligentsia; 11 percent were clerks; 17 percent were students; and 63 percent were laborers, of which only 13 percent held jobs at large factories. The social status of the remaining 16 anarchists (less than 6 percent) is unknown.

The next category is schooling. It was found that 44 percent of these revolutionaries had some formal elementary education; 36 percent were home schooled; 7 percent received some secondary education; 4 percent had finished the equivalent of high school; and 6 percent had attended

a university, one of whom earned a degree. The educational background of the remaining 8 individuals (ca. 3 percent) is unknown. At any rate, all of the subjects claimed to be literate.

Of the 300 individuals, 16 percent were women. Most of the militants (64 percent) had belonged to other political parties before joining anarchist groups or left the latter to join another revolutionary organization. This suggests that there was ample inter-party mobility.⁴

Ermakov's research points to an undersized yet significant number of militants who opted for anarchist groups that espoused clandestine violence. Most of the activists were rather young, working-class men. Though all the anarchist groups were multiethnic, Jews filled a substantial portion of their ranks. The movement's use of force ensured public visibility.⁵ As discussed below, the anarchists embraced violence to the point where it became the focus of their political activism and identity as revolutionaries.

Arguments against Localized Violence

All of the major revolutionary parties—the Social Democrats, the Socialist-Revolutionaries, and the Polish Socialist Party—as well as various regional affiliates and ethnic parties rejected localized violence. Even those who supported terrorism in principle believed that such violence harmed the revolutionary cause by drawing attention away from the struggle against the regime and towards minor local issues. Within the anarchist movement, clandestine violence sparked controversy and debate. Anarchists widely supported the use of force against, say, the police and business owners. However, some forms of violence caused the general public to confuse anarchists with regular criminals. A case in point was robbery and extortion for the purpose of financing a group's activities⁶ and indiscriminate violence against bourgeoisie targets, such as the bombings of the Libman Café and the Bomze drapery store in Odessa or the Bristol

⁴ Vladimir Dmitrievich Ermakov, "Portret rossiiskogo anarkhista nachala veka" [paper], <http://rospil.ru/pdf2/009.ermakov.pdf> [retrieved: 17 Sept. 2017].

⁵ *Ibid.* One of Ermakov's subjects offered insight on the Białystok anarchists. Although the Białystok chapter had only 60 members in May 1905, the member claimed that its meetings occasionally drew between 3,000 and 5,000 people.

⁶ These sort of heists were inevitable, for anarchists were ideologically opposed to all other means of financing. They refused to solicit the wealthy, whom they considered enemies. On the other hand, anarchists eschewed charging the rank and file membership dues, for the latter were struggling to make ends meet.

restaurant in Warsaw. A handful of anarchist groups indeed refused to condemn even these harrowing attacks.⁷

Some revolutionary parties unmistakably distanced themselves from the anarchists. In general, the parties were concerned that any association with groups resorting to heavy-handed tactics would damage their own reputations.⁸ On 15 October, the Socialist-Revolutionary newspaper *Zemlia i volia* proscribed the funding of revolutionary activities through expropriation:

Lately all over Russia, there are numerous robberies of private individuals which are now called private expropriations. The hooligans responsible for these robberies often hide behind the name of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. They come armed to some small store or wait for somebody in a deserted location and then say, "Hands up! Give money for the party!" Moreover, they often send threatening letters demanding funds, allegedly for the party. As a result, a view has emerged among those who do not know much about our party that it commits robberies and extorts money. In truth, our party has nothing to do with any of this. Our conferences and councils have always unilaterally denounced private expropriations. Our local organizations have repeatedly published declarations stating that it has nothing to do with such robberies and extortion. These sort of declarations were recently published in Tambov, Kozlov, Vologda, Sevastopol, Elizavetgrad, Berdiansk, Kiev, Kharkiv, and many other places. Here, for example, is one such declaration that was published by the Atkarsk branch of the SR party:

"Due to the view in our society that the SR party engages in all kinds of expropriations, the Atkarsk branch of the Socialist-Revolutionaries considers it our duty to inform society that the party has nothing to do with expropriations in the Atkarsk region and in the city of Atkarsk."

Comrades should well remember and always state that our party only sanctions large-scale expropriations of government money and weapons, and this only with the approval of the Central Committee.⁹

Although this open letter does not explicitly refer to anarchists, it is obvious from the context that the Socialist-Revolutionaries wished to distance themselves from such elements. In the writer's estimation,

⁷ Viktor Savchenko, *Anarkhisty–terroristy v Odesse, 1903–1913* (Odessa, 2006), 70; Boris I. Gorev, *Anarkhisty, maksimalisty i makhaevtsy, anarkhicheskie techeniia v pervoi russkoi revoliutsii* (Petrograd, 1918), 10–13.

⁸ Though all revolutionary parties accepted money that was expropriated by their members, this issue was a source of tension between the central leadership and grassroots activists; Mikhail I. Leonov, *Partiia sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov v 1905–1907 gg.* (Moscow, 1997), 255–256.

⁹ GANO [State Archive of Novgorod Region], f. 916, op. 3, d. 115, quoted in Grigorii V. Nabatov (ed.), *Obshchestvenno-politicheskie protsessy: Partii i dvizheniia v Nizhegorodskoi gubernii v kontse XIX–nachale XX vekov* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2001), 1: 173–174.

anarchist heists were so paltry that they were of no political value whatsoever. Furthermore, he noted that common criminals often disguised their transgressions under the guise of political enterprise. In short, *Zemlia i volia* challenged the revolutionary *bona fides* of such militants.

The Social Democrats concurred with this assessment. The Menshevik leader, Julius Martov, wrote in a letter to his colleague Pavel Axelrod that he was disturbed by a wave of terror and robberies during the first weeks of 1906: “As you see from the newspapers, this kind of terror is rapidly expanding; in my opinion, it threatens to absolutely bewilder and demoralize the proletariat.”¹⁰ Put differently, localized violence undermined the revolution.

Anarchists were the only revolutionaries to publicly back private expropriations, but the support was far from unanimous within the movement’s ranks. For instance, Peter Kropotkin, a leading anarcho-communist thinker, strongly objected to such tactics. He regularly spoke out against the machinations of semi-political, semi-criminal groups, not least expropriations carried out by *Chernyi Voron* (Black Crow) and *Yastreb* (Hawk) in Odessa. Kropotkin felt that these incidents ruined the anarchists’ reputation and poisoned the atmosphere within the movement.¹¹

At the Anarchist Conference that was held in London between 17 and 18 September 1906, Kropotkin’s disciples vigorously condemned private expropriations.¹² They pointed out that such acts are liable to attract common criminals to the movement, whose primary interest is lining their own pockets. They also worried that the lure of personal gain from these expropriations would corrupt upstanding members of the group, thereby depoliticizing some of the local chapters. By dint of such conduct, they added, the public was liable to view the anarchists as bandits rather than revolutionaries. The conference ultimately adopted a resolution that set guidelines for appropriate and inappropriate seizure:

Expropriation is a removal of resources by force by a society as a whole in the interests of a society as a whole and not an act of an individual or group appropriating resources—even for revolutionary goals. The resolution notes the danger of revolutionaries indiscriminately taking resources . . . [:] people that are only interested in personal gain will rear up among them. The goal of the revolution is

¹⁰ Stanislav V. Tiutiukin, *Men’shevism: Stranitsy istorii* (Moscow, 2002), 157.

¹¹ Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, 1967), 59.

¹² Vladimir Sapon, *Filosofiia probudivshegosia cheloveka: Libertarizm v rossiiskoi levoradikal’noi ideologii (1840–1917 gg.)* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2005), 243.

a transfer of resources from individuals to society, rather than . . . from one individual to the other.¹³

At the International Anarchist Congress of August 1907, Kropotkin continued to advocate this policy. “Money coming from expropriations,” he averred, “should be completely excluded from prospective income for the movement.”¹⁴

Daniil Novomirskii (given name Yakov Kirillovskii, 1882–1936 or thereabout), the well-known Russian-Jewish anarcho-syndicalist writer and activist, expressed a similar viewpoint. Upon reaching Odessa in the autumn of 1905,¹⁵ he immediately contacted the city’s small anarcho-communist group.¹⁶ Novomirskii was shocked by a number of the branch’s political views, above all the dominant role it assigned to violence. Although he believed that force can be used to advance political goals and had indeed taken part in violent actions himself, the intellectual considered it a means to an end and nothing more. In his estimation, the local anarcho-communist group had crossed a line, turning violence into its *modus vivendi*. Novomirskii feared that this approach would discredit the movement in the eyes of the local populace, including the proletariat whose interests the anarchists claimed to represent.

In his memoirs, Novomirskii bolstered these arguments by recalling a talk on anarchism at Odessa University:

When I outlined our views on capitalism, on the state, and on the means of [our] struggle against the existing regime, some people from the audience vociferously approved. One young student asked me, “The anarchists, do they really have a worldview? I thought they were simply another kind of pogromist.” Many workers joined the student in asking this naïve question. There were calls from the crowd: “If this is anarchism, I want to be an anarchist.” I engaged the audience in a lively conversation, [over the course of which] people asked for reading recommendations [and] swamped me with questions.¹⁷

¹³ Igor Trubichev, “Anarkhistskie ekspropriatsii: Revoliutsionnaya bor’ba ili ugolovshchina (na primere Pervoi russkoi revoliutsii),” *Nauchnyi al’manakh ‘Varianty’* (26 Feb. 2010).

¹⁴ Savchenko, *Anarkhisty–Terroristy*, 148–150.

¹⁵ Novomirskii came to Odessa in the immediate aftermath of several momentous events: a general strike, which forced the tsar to issue the October Manifesto; and the antisemitic pogroms that were perpetrated by the extreme right in response to the subversive demands allegedly put forth by “the Jews.”

¹⁶ Savchenko, *Anarkhisty–Terroristy*, 55, 73. According to Savchenko, this particular group had but eighteen members. All told, there were roughly 200 militant anarchists in Odessa during this time.

¹⁷ Daniil I. Novomirskii, “Anarkhicheskoe dvizhenie v Odesse,” in Aleksei A. Borovoi (ed.), *Mikhailu Bakuninu, 1876–1926: Ocherki istorii anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Rossii* (Moscow, 1926), 255.

Whereas the attendees were seemingly impressed by Novomirskii's survey of the movement's theoretical underpinnings and goals, the same could not be said for the event's organizers, who proceeded to kick him off the stage and replace him with Lazar Gershkovich—a prominent local Jewish anarchist who worked as a mechanic. Novomirskii depicted him as a raging fanatic:

Lazar Gershkovich immediately started crying hysterically: "Comrades, Novomirskii merely expressed his own views. He has no right to represent the group. The anarchists-communists sharply disagree with him. We tell the workers: 'Cut, rob, beat.'" He then kept repeating [these words] hysterically with some kind of perverse pleasure: "Rob, cut, beat." The audience laughed. People laughed at him.¹⁸

In recapping this evening, Novomirskii created a narrative of confrontation. He argued that there is a vast chasm separating the wishes of the people and those of the local anarchists, who were over-obsessed with violence. This discursive framework enabled him to summarily dismiss the group's views. To this same end, Novomirskii described what he regarded as the senseless bombing of the aforementioned Libman Café by anarcho-communist militants:

On 17 December, a group of Chernoe Znamia [Black Banner] supporters, mainly newcomers from Białystok, organized a terrorist act, which for a long time after destroyed any influence anarchists-communists could have in Odessa. This was the famous attack on the Libman Café . . . —a second-rate restaurant whose clients were not wealthy, but . . . from various classes, up to minor clerks and poor members of the intelligentsia . . . No one believed that revolutionaries did this. I was in the crowd that gathered after the explosion and heard what the workers said, "Do the revolutionaries really have nothing better to do now other than throw bombs into restaurants? Is the Tsar's government finished? Is the rule of the bourgeoisie destroyed? The Black Hundreds probably threw the bomb to discredit the revolutionaries."¹⁹

In Novomirskii's estimation, the workers' response to the bombing testified that such indiscriminate violence as well as politically-motivated robberies and extortion tarnished the anarchists' reputation, leaving them open to the accusation that they were no better than criminals. Moreover, he warned that this sort of conduct was liable to distance the revolutionaries

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

from the population at large.²⁰ This outlook was indeed shared by many of the revolutionary leaders and activists in this period.

Reiterating these concerns, Novomirskii described a confrontation between supporters of localized clandestine violence and the public. In both the above-cited passages, the public was identified as revolutionary. Therefore, it was entitled to judge the revolutionary credentials of all the insurgents and indeed cast doubt on the *bona fides* of those using excessive force. Novomirskii implicitly labeled his opponents as ineffective revolutionaries, for they were unable to garner the support of the *hoi polloi*. He structured his argument to convince readers that fervor for violence is not a major revolutionary criterion.

Like Novomirskii, many other revolutionary leaders described localized violence as an emotional manifestation of rebelliousness. Put differently, it was neither a conscious revolutionary measure nor a calculated political act. In their estimation, revolutionary politics should be predicated on rational analysis, pertinent theory, and mass organization. Consequently, the leadership was inclined to view political acts of working-class individuals that were unschooled in revolutionary theory as illogical and disconcerting.²¹ For this reason, as Charters Wynn astutely notes, the revolutionary elite were concerned that proletarian violence would not only be directed against recognized oppressors, but other elements that the *hoi polloi* resented, including members of other ethnic groups and even revolutionary activists.²²

²⁰ Such feelings were prevalent even among anarchist intellectuals. See Severianin, "Ob ekspropriatsiakh," *Burevestnik* 1 (20 July 1906), 9–10; "Zakliucheniia s'ezda: O grabezhe i ekspropriatsii" and "Zakliucheniia s'ezda: Ob aktakh lichnogo i kollektivnogo protesta," *Listki "Khleb i Volia"* 1–2 (30 Oct. 1906), 6–7, 7–8; "Programma iuzhno-russkoi gruppy anarkhistov-sindikalistov," *Listki "Khleb i Volia"* 5 (28 Dec. 1906), 8; "O chastichnykh ekspropriatsiakh," *Buntar'* 1–2 (1 Dec. 1906), 24–25; "K voprosu ob ekspropriatsii," *Anarkhist* 1 (10 Oct. 1907), 16.

²¹ Taking this idea to the extreme, some modern historians have claimed that such violence was completely irrational. See Vladimir Buldakov, *Krasnaia smuta: Priroda i posledstviia revoliutsionnogo nasiliia* (Moscow, 1997); Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, 1995).

²² Charters Wynn, *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms: The Donbass-Dnepr Bend in Late Imperial Russia, 1870–1905* (Princeton, 1992).

Raising the Banner of Violence

Supporters of localized clandestine violence argued that it was a compulsory act of self-defense on the part of the lower classes against the state and the well-to-do. In a leaflet justifying an attack on a workshop owner for organizing a lockdown, Białystok anarchists explained that the violence of capital had to be forcefully countered by the oppressed. The employer, the circular reads, had ignored the poverty and hunger of his workers. Insofar as the anarchists were concerned, his apathy constituted a hostile act. The only way to even the playing field was through violence.²³

In the *Buntar'* [Rebel] newspaper, a writer assuming the pen name S-sky—in all likelihood, one of the editors and the Jewish anarchist and publicist German Sandomirskii (1882–ca. 1938)—also championed such force. He discursively constructed the relationship between the rich and poor as a full-fledged war. Since capital already resorted to violence against the lower classes, a response in kind was a mandatory act of self-defense. In fact, no revolutionary could abstain from such reprisals in good faith:

When people are passive, in a frozen state of general resignation, violence hides under the label of “objective developments.” It goes on and on, and people never doubt its objective necessity. Exploiters torture their victims and justify it as the “natural and irrevocable order of things.” The confidence in their right to do so makes them appear morally justified and free of all blame.

But the masses have rebelled; active fighters have emerged. Moreover, they have started to perceive what was heretofore considered natural and unavoidable, to be a gross injustice. They are not facing some natural force, but real, human enemies; hence, the violence from elites should be met with violence by the downtrodden. Violence cuts the chain of “natural” and “immutable” rules. In the resultant clash, the violence of both sides becomes obvious. Exploiters, who considered themselves innocent of all fault, begin to consider themselves criminals, enemies of the masses. They consciously exploit violence to make the masses submit. The masses see them as they truly are and rebel.

In this respect, terror clarifies things; it reveals to the masses who their enemies are and how their enemies keep them subjugated by dint of coercion. It exposes society's faults. Instead of “natural developments,” oppression and economic exploitation are exposed as a ramification of the will of specific persons. Hence, terror prepares the masses for rebellion.²⁴

²³ *Al'manakh. Sbornik po istorii anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Rossii* (Paris, 1909), 179–181.

²⁴ *Buntar'* 4 (Jan. 1909), 5.

From the essayist's standpoint, society is already at war, namely the exploited masses are perpetually threatened with force. This state of affairs is so entrenched that the *hoi polloi* widely perceive it as the "natural . . . order of things." The purpose of terror from below is to unmask this abuse for what it is. Once this goal is fulfilled, the masses will understand that it is incumbent upon them to answer violence with violence.

Discursively speaking, this editorial revolves around the notion that the activists are major combatants in a revolution. Although this point is not spelled out, withdrawing from the battle is akin to betrayal. Lastly, revolutionaries that invariably object to clandestine violence against the rich are traitors. Needless to say, this outlook was, by and large, shared by militants that aggressively expropriated funds from the powers that be.

A case in point is six Riga anarchists who were sentenced to death on 23 October 1906 for armed expropriation. Before their execution, a rabbi entreated the three Jews among them to repent for their sins. *Al'manakh*, a collection of articles on the history of the anarchist movement, provides the responses of the condemned. Let us begin with the following account of the first, anonymous revolutionary:

A robbery, in my view, means stealing for your own benefit. I am 18 years old; I always worked and was paid very little for my labor. I saw how those who do not toil live a pleasant life at the expense of the workers; I was convinced that there are workers who get nothing for their labor and there are people who do not do anything, but are paid a great deal . . . Pointing this out to my brothers, explaining the huge injustice to all proletarians, explaining to all workers that they are children of eternal slaves who always create things and are always robbed—was my goal. I can't see in this [i.e., the expropriation] anything criminal or anything for which I should ask forgiveness. I did not take a penny from the money we took; all of it was used for our holy goal.²⁵

Like S-sky, the condemned militant viewed himself as a soldier in a war against the rich. His seizure was not fueled by personal gain. Instead, it was part of a broader campaign aimed at, among other things, drawing attention to the lowly status of workers. He wanted his "brothers" to realize that capital was robbing them without pause. The witness' revolutionary identity centered around this struggle and the adoption of violence as a justified means with which to advance the cause. From the activist's perspective, it was imperative to convince the public that his motives were altruistic and that he was a combatant in a just war.

²⁵ *Al'manakh*, 181–182.

To this end, the militant turned to religious language. More specifically, he depicted himself as a fighter in a holy struggle against evil. The objective of this campaign, he declared, is to bring about the salvation of the workers and construct a new and just world. In prosecuting this war against capital, any and all means, like robbing the well-to-do, are legitimate.

The other two Jews expressed similar thoughts. Here is an excerpt from the response of Osip Levin, a 16-year-old militant:

Out of all the money that we took from capitalists for our sacred Anarchy [*sic!*], I did not even permit myself to get a pair of pants—I am going to be killed in old pants that my student brother shared with me because mine were too tattered . . . I treated that money as sacred and I only used it for holy goals. In my view, I die not as a sinner but as a fighter for all of humanity, for all those oppressed by the current regime.²⁶

The third Jewish anarchist, a 16-year-old identified as Petrov, also turned to religious terminology:

I am an orphan; I grew up without parents. My face and my body are proof of the conditions under which I grew up; I was always starving and had no permanent place to live. Nobody would even let me stay in their place. And I became convinced that besides for not having a father and mother, who died when I was little, even the ground on which I grew up was stolen from me, so my head had no right to a place to rest and my feet had no right to tread the ground . . . All my life I fought for freedom on Earth for all its inhabitants. I am not a sinner; I performed my duty.²⁷

All three anarchists presented expropriation as a major facet of their holy struggle against inequality. They framed their heists, which under other circumstances could be viewed as immoral, as no less than religious acts. In other words, they adamantly refused to view themselves as sinners, much less repent. In fact, they considered themselves revolutionaries precisely because they were willing to employ such means in order to win this just war against the forces of evil.

While the arguments for rejecting localized clandestine violence merited center stage, the pros raised by the very working-class adherents of such force are practically unknown.²⁸ The reason for this stark contrast is that the objections were put forth by leading revolutionary intellectuals within

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pavel I. Talerov, *Anarchism pro et contra* (St. Petersburg, 2015), 489.

the context of their writings and so-called “rational” or “scientific” political debates. In parallel, these thinkers designated the proponents of violence as “illogical” and thus non-political. Hence, their opinions were largely excluded from the public discourse, even though their arguments were not without merit. The proletarian activists challenged the validity of the intellectuals’ discourse, rejecting theory as the main criterion for gauging revolutionary dedication. Moreover, like some the groups della Porta researched, they used religious terms to defend their willingness to employ clandestine violence.²⁹ Rather than engaging in ideological debates, these revolutionaries marshalled a sense of identity and an emotive language for the sake of casting doubt on the commitment of other revolutionaries to the cause.³⁰ To grasp the challenge mounted before the intelligentsia, let us explore the personal documents (letters and autobiographies) of these same working-class Jewish anarchists.

The Meaning of Violence for Working-Class Jewish Youth

What did the use of localized violence mean to these young working-class Jews? Why did they opt for this route even when their political leaders—save for anarchists—ruled out expropriations in no uncertain terms?

In their autobiographies, young Jewish workers repeatedly expressed their displeasure with an alienation from the mainstream parties’ senior ranks, which afforded them few options for activism within their organizations. Consequently, these militants believed that the leadership failed to take advantage of their revolutionary potential. Aron Ruzhanskii, an illiterate Warsaw native, talked about his negative experiences with the Bund intelligentsia as a young man:

I was a member of the Bund for just five-six months. After that, I, together with the most active comrades, understood that the Bund’s methods of struggle against

²⁹ Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, 7–10.

³⁰ Several historians have discussed the working class’ opposition to compromise during the revolutionary period. In his essay on the labor movement on the heels of the Lena Massacre, Haimson argues that this vehemence was an outgrowth of the workers’ deep-seated insecurity over their place in society – see Leopold H. Haimson, “The Workers’ Movement after Lena: The Dynamics of Labor Unrest in the Wake of the Lena Goldfields Massacre (April 1912 – July 1914),” in id., *Russia’s Revolutionary Experience, 1905–1907* (New York, 2005), 109–230. While this anxiety certainly existed, I postulate that violence, among other forms of activism, constituted working-class outlets for self-assertion. See Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, 1993).

despotism would achieve nothing. And after I was criticized for my terrorist ideas, I joined the more revolutionary party, PPS-Lewica [PPS-Left, PPS-L], with other comrades.³¹ I want to point out that, being uneducated, I had to carry out some [dangerous] missions both in the Bund and in the PPS-L; for example, during strikes I often had to wield weapons to enter the employers' apartments by force and make them, by way of death threats, promise in writing to accept their workers' demands.³²

Due to what for him was the Bund's insufficiently revolutionary approach, Ruzhanskii moved from a Jewish political party to a multi-ethnic one, along with several comrades. While the activist might have believed that a multiethnic revolutionary party was more effective than the homogeneous Bund, he downplayed the issue of ethnicity and accentuated his role as a worker. Regardless of whether his closest friends in the PPS-L were Jewish, he built his inner circle—a group of people that more or less shared the same emotional language³³—strictly on the basis of worker solidarity and violence.

On the one hand, Ruzhanskii resented the fact that he was the one that “had to” apply force on behalf of the revolutionary groups to which he belonged. On the other hand, he proclaimed that his departure from the Bund was motivated by the PPS-L's greater willingness to condone violence. In the final equation, he evidently had few qualms about resorting to duress. Therefore, it seems as though Ruzhanskii begrudged the fact that other forms of activism were closed off to him on account of his illiteracy. In excluding him from other roles, he felt the party had committed a moral injustice and, all the more so, discriminated against him as

³¹ The PPS (Polish Socialist Party [Polska Partia Socjalistyczna]) was established in 1892. Among the top items on the party's agenda were Polish independence and the building of a socialist state. PPS-Lewica started out as the party's leftwing. Taking issue with the leadership's emphasis on national independence, this faction splintered from the party in 1906. For more on this schism, see Robert E. Blobaum, *Rewolucja: Russian Poland, 1904–1907* (Ithaca, 1995), 37–39, 199–208. While the PPS focused, as above mentioned, on demands for independent Poland, the PPS-L raised the banner of socialism and internationalism. In consequence, the breakaway party attracted more Jews than its parent.

³² GARF [State Archive of the Russian Federation], f. 533, op. 2, d. 1726. This folder contains the files of applicants that were offered membership in the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles. This organization was established in the early 1920s with the objective of helping these elements re-acclimate themselves into Russian society. It also sought to involve them in Soviet propaganda. The documents are organized by date. I did not list the page numbers, for the documents were filed multiple times in accordance with different numbering systems. The alternative frameworks are liable to confuse readers.

³³ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2006).

a worker. This perception elicited a sense of solidarity among a particular group of activists that shared the same age bracket, class, and educational background. These revolutionaries all served as muscle and espoused “terrorist ideas.” While Ruzhanskii did not initially choose this route, violence became the ascendant political tool within his circle of activists.

These sort of undereducated activists left the Bund on the grounds that the party’s efforts to secure their upmost needs were inadequate. At the very least, the party did not sufficiently back the use of methods and political language that these workers deemed to be most effective. In consequence, they migrated to organizations that, to the best of their knowledge, were amenable to localized violence, and thus more revolutionary. In changing allegiance, Ruzhanskii felt that he was displaying greater loyalty to the cause than other militants. As far as can be seen, the party intelligentsia and working-class diverged over political goals as well. Workers frequently complained that the leadership was buckling under the pressure that the government and employers exerted on revolutionary organizations and their proletarian supporters. For instance, they felt that the parties did not do enough to help striking workers. They also complained about the leadership’s excessive sway over ideological matters within the party’s ranks. In parallel, working-class revolutionaries accentuated their superior militancy *vis-à-vis* the top brass. More specifically, they claimed that their actions contributed more to the party’s triumphs and to the protection of workers. Lastly, these militants were convinced that their willingness to apply force attested to the fact that they far surpassed the intelligentsia in all that concerned self-sacrifice.

Anarchists specialized in using clandestine violence against employers during strikes. Prevailing in such confrontations was vital to working-class activists, for it endowed them with a new communal role. By improving the lot of their fellow proletarians, they elevated their own standing. As the activist, Moisei Vilenchik, recalled, “Until 1905 I was a simple worker, but from 1905 I joined the Bund and was a loyal member until 1908.”³⁴ By joining the party, Vilenchik believed that he had become a different person. In other words, he was no longer a universally despised plebeian worker. As a member of a revolutionary party, Vilenchik was active on two fronts: he was jostling with the owners for better working conditions; and fighting the state and the pogromists to advance the rights and safety of

³⁴ GARF, f. 533, op. 3 (files of applicants refused membership), d. 479a.

the entire Jewish community. Vilenchik, who remained a Bund member, was comfortable emphasizing that he was struggling not only on behalf of labor, but for his entire ethnic group. This revolutionary drew no distinction between his battles against capital, the state, and the pogromists, as each of these foes oppressed Jews.

Some Jewish working-class militants deemed clandestine violence against ownership during strikes to be their main revolutionary function. For instance, Zelik Magidin affirmed that:

continuous want and hunger made me hostile towards the social regime; therefore, I immediately became an anarchist and from 1905 to 1906 was active in the revolutionary movement in the West, which meant taking part in strikes and putting pressure on stubborn employers. I also took part in expropriations, etc.³⁵

As opposed to Vilenchik, Magidin did not even broach the topic of ethnicity. Zalman Apfelbaum, a Bundist from Łódź, was part of a fighting detachment charged with facilitating strikes, protecting demonstrations, and assassinating enemies, foremost among them troublesome policemen.³⁶ Both Magidin and Apfelbaum resented their humble socio-economic status. While downplaying their Jewishness, the two activists could not have been pleased with the ethnic discrimination that they faced. In this respect, joining an anarchist group or a fighting detachment was, *inter alia*, a bold display of self-assertion. Since working-class militants relied on localized violence, their new identities and prestige within the community were inextricably linked to force. Therefore, violence was of greater significance to these sort of revolutionaries than particular group affiliation.

Apfelbaum recounted a PPS rally against the Bloody Sunday massacre. When the rival party's demonstrators came under heavy attack from the police, he and other working-class Bundists rushed to their defense:

At this time, a small revolutionary demonstration of the PPS materialized nearby. Not knowing what to do next, I decided to join this PPS demonstration with my workers and go all together as a mass [i.e., *en masse*] . . . [so as] to immediately express our opposition to those horrible massacres of the regime. In spite of the fact that the demonstration took place under the PPS's banner . . . —as a Bund representative, I was not supposed to unite my collective with this group—still I did just that because it was better to go as a united mass, even under the banner of the PPS revolutionary party, than to perish here, standing helplessly [on the

³⁵ Ibid., op. 2, d. 1182.

³⁶ Ibid., op. 1, d. 199.

side]. I decided that we can go and express our opposition together with that party, which was anyhow revolutionary and strived, like us, to end the autocracy.

Apfelbaum's participation in the rally of the "competitors" led to his expulsion from the local Bund chapter, but he had no regrets: "I was sure that it was the right thing to do—if the mass was shot at, and we could not reply and join some Bundist demonstration—then, of course, what I did, in my opinion, was right . . . even if it was under the banner of the PPS."³⁷ From Apfelbaum's standpoint, he was closer to the rival organization's working-class members than the top ranks of his own party. The activist's self-identity was based on the class and the use of clandestine violence, not party affiliation or ethnicity.

The resort to force also implied an assertive stand that underpinned the militants' self-perception as indefatigable and altruistic people, namely genuine revolutionaries. Iakov Feigelman, another Jewish activist, "was a self-defense member" during the revolution and beyond. He said:

When the [government's] reaction [against the insurgency] started, I was disappointed with the outcome of the revolution. I felt that the [SD] party, which was not revolutionary enough, was to blame. I had way too much revolutionary energy and I was looking for ways to use it.³⁸

To Feigelman, clandestine political violence was a more important part of his identity than self-defense activities. In other words, his role as a combatant in a broad insurrection towered above his efforts to safeguard the Jewish community.

Kelman Feigelman was also disappointed by his party: "With the quelling of the revolution I gradually started to distance myself from the Social Democratic party, for I considered it indecisive and its peaceful tactics to be harmful to the tasks facing the workers."³⁹

Both of these Jewish workers assessed their parties' performance during the revolution. In their estimation, the Bund and the SD Party lacked the mettle to advance issues that were close to labor's heart. To make matters worse, they felt, a couple of these same issues did not even warrant the attention of the party intelligentsia. For individuals with pent up revolutionary energy, the parties were too hesitant. These activists' self-identification as militants, rather than "simple workers," or the

³⁷ Ibid., op. 1, d. 199.

³⁸ Ibid., op. 2, d. 2099.

³⁹ Ibid., d. 2095.

implied “simple Jewish workers,” was ill-suited to the character of the Bund and SD Party.

There were also practical matters to consider, namely the local relationships between workers and their employers. It appears as though the party intelligentsia did not place much weight on the stature of the working-class militants. However, the latter realized that their newfound communal standing mainly stemmed from the defense they provided for striking workers. This was especially true for Jewish proletarians, whose livelihood was rather precarious due to their employment at struggling, undersized workshops. As per his testimony, Isaac Shipkevich, a Jewish proletarian and Bund member, threw a bomb at wealthy local residents that had informed on revolutionaries. Even though he knew that the Bund would disapprove,⁴⁰ Shipkevich took this measure for the sake of advancing the new revolutionary ideas that had opened up doors to him and considerably improved his status and rights within the Jewish community. For example, the insurrection had provided this activist with camaraderie and emotional support. Nevertheless, he ultimately switched over to the anarchists for the following reason: “What I, as a young revolutionary, liked here was not just the action, but also the personal autonomy.”⁴¹ Furthermore, the anarchist movement enabled him to sidestep the authority of the intelligentsia, who controlled the more established parties. By joining the anarchists’ ranks, Shipkevich was now in an organization that shared his desire to back principles with force. As a result, he no longer felt like a lonely rebellious misfit.

A Jewish dressmaker, Vera Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya, became an anarchist after a legally-sanctioned trade union bungled a labor dispute. At the time, these sort of associations were a relatively new phenomenon, and Social Democrats were hoping to increase the unions’ rolls. In consequence, labor representatives often accepted legal restrictions that compromised their ability to help its members in return for government permission to run unions.⁴² Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya worked at a small workshop

⁴⁰ Ibid., d. 2307.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Heather Hogan documents similar cases in which disgruntled workers turned to the Bolsheviks – see Heather Hogan, *Forging Revolution: Metalworkers, Managers, and the State in St. Petersburg, 1890–1914* (Bloomington, 1993), 217–220. Almost every other scholar of early twentieth-century Russian labor (e.g., Victoria Bonnell, Gerald Surh, and Mark Steinberg) refers to the weakness of the sanctioned unions. Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya’s disappointment was thus par for the course. As Surh indeed demonstrates, small workshop employees were particularly vulnerable to the whims of their bosses. The only way lawful

that was owned by Temkin—a harsh taskmaster. With the assistance of the above-noted union, she organized a strike, which initially garnered the support of her co-workers. However, Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya soon discovered that the union had no means to exert pressure on management:

We started demanding that the union take more radical measures, but the secretary smugly answered that the union cannot take any measures, for the governor will just close it down. The words of the comrade secretary shocked us; highly offended, we answered that we would find a better way and comrades that could help us. The secretary tried to dissuade us from joining the anarchists-communists. I do not remember what I said to him, but he called me a typical rebel and tried to get comrade Elia to his side, but again without success.⁴³

In this passage, Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya juxtaposed the true revolutionaries—Elia and herself—with the presumably less committed and better-educated trade union official, who refused to put up a fight. Upon returning to their shared room, the two dressmakers met an anarcho-communist neighbor who immediately offered the support of his organization. The two eagerly accepted; as from their standpoint, this collaboration was the only way to preserve their dignity. Unlike the trade union, the anarcho-communists took immediate action. They obtained money to buoy the strikers and dispatched activists to threaten the employer. Fearing for his life, Temkin accepted all their conditions.

This work stoppage riveted the attention of other local tailors, who adopted aggressive strategies against their own employers. Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya had found the trade association useless. Loath to accept her subordinate status, she threw in her lot with the anarchists. The dressmaker wanted to be treated as a human being, in accordance with her own definition thereof. However, Temkin was unreceptive to this demand, for it entailed surrendering the leverage he had over his employees. Such power was of utmost importance to the Jewish owner of a struggling workshop that employed Jewish women, for his status was not much higher than that of his lowly workers.

Owing to their resolve to apply force, Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya and her cohorts became rebels in the eyes of the trade union secretary. Interestingly enough, though, both labor and capital were more responsive

trade associations could defend their rights was by organizing the entire profession, which was indeed a colossal undertaking. See Gerald D. Surh, *1905 in St Petersburg: Labor, Society, and Revolution* (Stanford, 1989), 395–396.

⁴³ GARF, f. 533, op. 2, d. 796.

to the language of violence than the union's alternative of comprehensive negotiations. As we have seen, both Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya and Temkin were averse to compromising what they saw as their inalienable rights. Hence, the only common language available to them was duress. Both sides—the strapped owner and the Jewish woman, whose employment options were basically limited to such ragged outfits—were treading on thin ice. For the Jewish working class, the option of violence was but a recent development. As far as the owners were concerned, a trade union that eschewed violence was irrelevant to their Darwinian relationship with labor.

Whereas the heads of the revolutionary parties also viewed the class struggle in terms of war, they never had the same sense of urgency as the *hoi polloi* to instantly respond to any perceived abuse with force. Put differently, violence was not a prerequisite for militant status. Their revolutionary criteria had more to do with political views, affiliations, and perceived utility in advancing the cause. For practitioners of clandestine force, a militant was somebody that already abided by principles of equality. In answering any violation of this creed with a show of force, these activists hoped to convince the destitute masses that it is indeed possible to question and alter the *status quo*.

Revolutionary Parties and Their Working-Class Supporters

The gap between the revolutionary parties' outlook and that of their working-class members steadily widened. For young militants that entered the political arena for the sake of carving out a dignified role for themselves in the community, there was nothing more important than self-respect. As a result, they could not fathom the leadership's seemingly anti-revolutionary call for restraint.⁴⁴ To activist workers like Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya, violence was not an irrational step. Especially during the tsar's reaction to the events of 1905, force was probably the only means for commanding respect within Jewish society. The workers cultivated an identity that was informed by a proactive, can-do approach towards changing the *status quo*. Moreover, they often downplayed their Jewishness on the grounds that it was irrelevant to the class struggle in which they were embroiled.

⁴⁴ For this same reason, as Hogan demonstrates, St. Petersburg metalworkers were more attracted to Bolsheviks than less radical parties.

In consequence, the revolutionaries perceived themselves as champions of all the downtrodden, irregardless of race or creed. As such, Jewish self-defense against pogroms, attacks against oppressive employers or police, and extorting the wealthy to finance revolutionary activities were all part of the same militant campaign in pursuit of human dignity.

Responding to this disparity between the working-class members and party elite, the local organizers, who were generally more familiar than senior officials with grassroots activists, toiled to minimize the disputes within the revolutionary camp. In many instances, though, these disagreements metastasized into open feuds, as workers left the party to become anarchists. Many of the departees were indeed militants involved in expropriation. The word “anarchist” came to symbolize a labor activist that was willing to physically lash out at both people and property in the name of defending the worker’s self-respect (and ensuring that the organizations continued to operate). That said, many acts of violence were committed with little regard for their utility.

Naum Nemzer was a Bundist from Vilna that, according to his autobiography, initiated several expropriations. The local party committee, he wrote, overlooked this sort of activity until it became too embarrassing for the organization:

The truth is that I quietly took part in some “exes [expropriations],” but at the time the discipline in the Bund was not like our discipline in the Communist Party. In addition, when we brought the Bund committee money, as though it was gathered for the party’s needs [using standard fundraising techniques] (in fact, we expropriated it), it [i.e., the money] was taken [by the leadership]. This two-faced work was done not only by myself, but by many comrades. And it went on until one of them happened to be arrested for an ex and the “good” Bund members began to open their mouths [clamoring for the party to eliminate such tactics].⁴⁵

Nemzer clearly differentiated between his fellow working-class militants and members of the semi-intelligentsia, who he sarcastically referred to as the “good” Bundists. For this militant, participating in an “ex” was a selfless attempt to help the cash-starved party. As per Nemzer’s autobiography, he was pushed to anarchism by hatred of the regime as well as his disappointment with the party top brass and other educated members that had left politics. His revolutionary fervor, he claimed, became less relevant to the Bund. In Nemzer’s estimation, the party did not recognize

⁴⁵ GARF, f. 533, op. 2, d. 1379.

militants like him as its representatives. He railed at the Bund leadership for repeatedly lambasting expropriators while hypocritically accepting their money. Nemzer also distinguished between the working-class youth and other Bundists. The former put their lives on the line in their efforts to promote the revolution's goals through violence. Conversely, the rest of the party condemned the expropriators, but offered no solutions for the organization's financial woes. In light of the above, Nemzer felt that the Bund was treating him like a second-rate member. Therefore, he looked elsewhere for the sense of cohesion and respect for "good militants" that he expected to find in revolutionary circles. This outlook underpins Nemzer's account of a robbery that he carried out in order to save a Bundist newspaper that was on the verge of bankruptcy due to police pressure:

I personally had to hide for quite some time from the Bund members after robbing a Jew (a wood merchant [named] Shliarevich) because the party committee, knowing what we planned to do ahead of time, made it clear that they would deal with us firmly for setting a bad example for the youth. However, when we came to them sometime later with our regrets and with the money (about 8,000 rubles), we were "forgiven" because it was obvious that we had taken part in the ex not for personal gain, but with the best intentions. . . . The older comrades, Liber and Medem,⁴⁶ protested and said this is a non-Marxist approach to the issue, but we kept saying what we thought and were certain that if we would come up with the money, nobody would criticize us . . . In the end, we committed the robbery [and] brought the money, but were expelled from the organization. Of course, we were later forgiven, but by this point we did not exactly feel like Bund members.⁴⁷

Nemzer and his fellow militants were working-class youth, while the party leaders, who he accused of alienating such members, were apparently from the intelligentsia or semi-intelligentsia. To the activist, shoring up the newspaper was of utmost importance. Letting the periodical close due to budget problems was far more reprehensible than saving it by means of expropriation, for its termination would sully Nemzer and his collaborators' newfound dignity. In contrast, the Bund leadership feared that this sort of violence might tarnish the party's relations with the community at large. More specifically, the average Jew was liable to view the Bund as a criminal gang instead of a respectable organization. Nemzer and his ilk were scoffed upon, for they were neither educated nor wealthy. From

⁴⁶ Mark Liber (1880–1937) and Vladimir Medem (1879–1923) were among the more prominent Bundists.

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 533, op. 2, d. 1379.

the militants' perspective, the only dignified social status within their reach was attainable via revolutionary enterprise. It also bears noting that middle-class respectability meant little to both these activists and, in all likelihood, the authority figures they dealt with on a regular basis, such as business owners and local government authorities. This sense of frustration with the mainstream parties was captured by Moisei Neiman, a Bundist who crossed over to the anarchists in 1906. He said:

Trials started, the authorities shot and hung hundreds of people; for some minor offences, people were sent to Siberia. I felt that I can no longer stay with the passive "Bund members" when revolutionary deeds against the bloody reaction were needed. At this point, I went to work for the organization of the Anarchists-Communists.⁴⁸

Insofar as Neiman was concerned, the Bund was much too apathetic on the matter of revolutionary labor solidarity. Therefore, he moved to an organization that appeared to be more dynamic. Upon joining the anarchists, Neiman resumed his involvement in expropriations. Though corruptive, these heists provided crucial funding during a period in which revolutionary parties were hard-pressed for cash. Against this backdrop, the question of whether to condemn the perpetrators of these operations was never clear-cut among the revolutionary organizations, much less their working-class adherents. For these young militants, who hitherto had no choice but to humbly submit to the prerogatives of their employers and older, higher-ranking work colleagues, these acts of violence also served an outlet for self-assertion. While undoubtedly significant, money was not their only motive. A case in point is the story of Usher—a Jewish anarchist who had also been active in a mainstream party. In a letter to a friend in Kiev, he carelessly described a botched robbery in Kamenetz-Podolsk (Polish: Kamieniec Podolski) that he undertook for the SR party. The local party officials, according to Usher, excoriated the militants that carried out this heist. This response pushed Usher and his comrades into the arms of the anarcho-communists:

You know that red-headed gymnasium student—he's an SR [activist]. So he somehow found out that it was us and said that . . . some SR from the Central Committee will come out and try us for this. We already left the group, [but] did not take any money. . . . Yesterday, December the 3th, Mazur and I met your comrade. . . . He asked us what happened, who led us, etc. He said that he did not want to believe

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, d. 1374.

that an SR would do that. Of course, we told him that we are no longer SRs but ACs [anarchists-communists]. . . . The SR group in Kamenetz is dead, for it rested almost entirely on us.⁴⁹

The expropriation in question went awry. However, Usher was proud of the operation, for it scared the local bourgeoisie and the local police never managed to find the cell. What is more, it confounded the local SR officials, all in the name of anarchism. The expropriation had no obvious revolutionary utility, but it did mount a challenge to practically all the authorities in the militant's life. On the other hand, the impact was relatively limited, for it was an intra-community affair: like Usher, the target was clearly Jewish. The ethnic dimension, though, was downplayed. Anarchism was the label that the expropriators assumed in order to give their violence a semblance of political and noble enterprise, instead of merely an expression of rebelliousness.

In the eyes of the party leaders and many of their contemporaries, working-class militants lacked sophisticated political views. Though responding emotionally to a difficult situation, these sort of activists were distracting the proletariat's attention away from the primary goal. As observed in an anonymous letter from Łódź in 1906: "There are always strikes, starting from the most mundane reasons, and the parties are unhappy with this, for it is absolutely unnecessary, both economically and politically, but is distracting from the main organizational task."⁵⁰ Party officials could neither comprehend nor accept the fact that revolutionary identity had different meanings for working-class supporters than it did for themselves. It was in this very environment that the figure of the anarchist emerged. In the process, anarchism offered these leaders a palatable explanation for why they were at loggerheads with certain elements of the proletariat: a different political allegiance with its own "brand name." Correspondingly, anarchism gave political cachet to the revolutionary ideas of the working-class activists who otherwise would have been ignored as "preposterous rebels." To trade union representatives, Kazimirovskaya-Kanevskaya and her ilk were just rebels; and the turn of these workers to the anarchist groups for help only underscored their political *naïveté*. Be that as it may, the fact that militant political actions could be linked to a specific ideology and political organization

⁴⁹ GARF, f. 102, op. 265, d. 133.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, d. 88.

allowed the differences between the two sides to be conceived of in terms of inter-party rivalry. For the higher echelons of the mainstream parties, this narrative was much more convenient than having to grapple with the fact that the trade unions' inaction put vulnerable workers between a rock and a hard place. As revolutionaries, the leaders claimed, these militants were supposed to protect the dignity of the worker; as "responsible" trade union members, they were expected to bear the union's limitations as a political necessity and eschew violence. However, given the impotence of the Russian unions in the early 1900s, the threat of force was the only recourse left to these workers against ownership. Insofar as working-class activists were concerned, by very definition, revolutionaries must preserve the dignity of the masses. By failing to honor this commitment, the union had lost its revolutionary credentials. In turn, the embrace of anarchism transformed the initiates, as they were now classified as working-class militants with opinions grounded on revolutionary theory and practice.⁵¹

Conclusion

From the standpoint of young Jewish working-class militants, localized clandestine political violence was a legitimate weapon in the struggle for dignity and labor solidarity. These same revolutionaries perceived themselves as combatants on the front line of a holy war against the government and capital. In consequence, they brooked no criticism of their actions.

The present article has taken stock of both the ideological and emotional motivations behind these activists' embracement of localized clandestine violence as their preferred *modus operandi*. Following in della Porta's footsteps, radical politics can be viewed as a platform on which Jewish working-class militants asserted themselves against the tsarist regime, the local community elite, and better-educated revolutionaries. Violence helped these activists underscore what they considered to

⁵¹ Owing to structural constraints, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward argue that violence is often the sole means for ensuring that a social group's positions are taken seriously – see Frances Fox Piven, Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, 1978). By dint of the emotional, ideological, and social engrossment of executors of clandestine political violence within their own group, they often perceive themselves as a heroic vanguard in a struggle to the end versus pure evil; see della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*, 233. This was eventually the fate of the anarchist groups under review. Immersed in the movement, these activists gradually lost touch with the community at large and were decimated by the police.

be their moral superiority as militants who were more willing than others to sacrifice themselves for the cause. In challenging the *status quo* amid the Revolution of 1905, they also let it be known that they would refuse to take a backseat to the government, the well-to-do, or the intelligentsia.

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