



## **Social Justice and Freud's 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego': A Freudian/Frommian Perspective**

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In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud puts forward in the same paragraph two apparently contradictory accounts of the crowd and its behaviour. On the one hand he says: “when people are put together in a mass all individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal, destructive instincts that lie dormant in the individual as a leftover from primitive times are roused to free drive-satisfaction” [Freud, 1921/2004, p. 26]. But in the very next sentence, Freud says: “However, masses are also capable, under the influence of suggestion, of great feats of renunciation, disinterestedness, and devotion to an ideal.” [Freud, p.26]. I want to apply Freud’s two-sided analysis of the mass/crowd (depending on whether one is using the Standard or the Penguin edition) to the issue of antisemitism and the Russian Revolution, and to suggest that Fromm’s social character analysis is useful here.

During the latter part of the 19th century and first years of the 20th, the European country which witnessed the most severe antisemitism was not Germany but the Russian Empire. The Tsarist state police would regularly organise pogroms during which drunken Black Hundreds or Cossacks would attack Jewish villages, murdering inhabitants and destroying their property. When Peter the Great, who ruled Russia from 1682 till 1725, was asked about admitting Jews into the empire, he replied, “I prefer to see in our midst nations professing Mohammedanism and paganism rather than Jews. They are rogues and cheats” (Levitat, pp. 20–21).

During the reign of Catherine II from 1762 until 1796 Jewish habitation was restricted to the Pale of Settlement. The Pale took away many of the rights that the Jews of late 17th century Russia had enjoyed. From then on they were restricted to a small area of what is currently Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. More active discriminatory policies began with the partition of Poland in the late 18th century. For the first time in its history Russia acquired land with a large Jewish population. And in 1772, Catherine the Great required the Jews of the Pale to stay in their *shtetls* (villages), forbidding them to return to the towns where they had lived before the partition.

Whereas Jews in Western Europe, following the French Revolution, were experiencing greater freedom, in the Russian Empire the laws governing Jewish life were becoming more restrictive. In contrast to the gradual expansion of legal and social rights for Jews in Western Europe, liberal and democratic tendencies in Russia were weak. Various writers have noted that the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment bypassed Russia. Trotsky attributed this largely to the failure of a strong bourgeois class and a capitalist society to develop in Russia.

The reign of Alexander II (1855–81) was marked by significant reforms, the most important of which was the 1861 emancipation of the peasants from their servitude to the landowners. Towards the Jews, Alexander II adopted a milder policy with the objective (as was that of his predecessor) of achieving their assimilation into Russian society. He granted various rights — in the first place the right of residence throughout Russia — to selected groups of “useful” Jews, including wealthy merchants (1859), university graduates (1861), certified craftsmen (1865), as well as medical staff of every category. The Jewish communities outside the Pale of Settlement rapidly expanded, especially those of St Petersburg and Moscow, so that their influence on the way of life of Russian Jewry became important. Jews began to take part in the intellectual and cultural life of Russia in journalism, literature, law, the theatre, and the arts generally. The number of professionals was very small in Russia, and Jews soon became prominent among their ranks.

This increasing importance of Jews in economic, political and cultural life aroused a sharp reaction in Russian society. The main opponents of the Jews included several of the country’s most distinguished intellectuals, such as the authors Ivan Aksakov and **Dostoevsky**. The Jews were accused of maintaining ‘a state within a state’ and of ‘exploiting’ the Russian masses. Even the blood libel was renewed by agitators — as in the Kutaisi trial in 1878, when Jews were accused of murdering a Christian girl in order to use her blood in their baking.

The main argument of the hatemongers was that the Jews were an alien element invading the various areas of Russian life, gaining control of economic and cultural positions, overall a most destructive influence. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II by the Narodniks (anarchists) in 1881 marked a turning point. It was blamed on the Jews and provoked widespread pogroms lasting three years. State policy under his successor Alexander III hardened, resulting in the laws of 1882 which severely curbed the civil rights of Jews within the Russian Empire. The pogroms and the repressive legislation resulted in the mass emigration of Jews to Western Europe and America. Between 1881 and 1920, an estimated 2.5 million Jews left Russia — one of the largest group migrations in recorded history. The Kishinev pogroms, organised by the police, were the state’s response to the mass strikes of 1902–3, the initial stirrings of the working class leading up to the 1905 Revolution.

**The year 1903** also witnessed the publication of the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a faked document which claimed to be minutes of a late 19th-century meeting of Jewish leaders discussing their goal of global Jewish hegemony achieved through subverting the morals of Gentiles and controlling the press and the world’s economies. It was circulated in the Russian Empire during the 1903–6 period as a tool for scapegoating Jews, whom the monarchists blamed for their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and the Revolution of 1905.

However, a remarkable change developed with the seizure of state power by the Russian working class led by the Bolsheviks in the October 1917 revolution. To begin with, the Bolshevik government abolished all 650 legal restrictions on Jews, establishing a regime of formal equality. By mid-1917 the soviets had become the main instruments of opposition to anti-Semitism, with a campaign aimed at factory workers and even some activists within the broad revolutionary movement.

By the late summer the soviets had launched a wide-ranging campaign against antisemitism. For example, throughout August and September, the Moscow Soviet organised meetings and lectures in factories on antisemitism. In the former Pale of Settlement local soviets acted to prevent the perpetration of pogroms. Moreover, as the political crisis intensified, and the Bolsheviks deepened their support in the working class, scores of provincial soviets launched their own campaigns against antisemitism. Many party members helped to develop the cross-party response to antisemitism at factory and soviet levels. In the days following the Bolshevik-led insurrection, there were no pogroms in Russia.

However, as Trotsky stressed: “The October Revolution abolished the outlawed status against the Jews. That, however, does not at all mean that with one blow it swept out antisemitism... Legislation alone does not change people.” [Trotsky, 1937, in Howe, 1963, p. 207]. As Brendan McGeever has pointed out in his article *The Bolsheviks and Antisemitism* in Jacobin magazine, in the course of the revolutionary year 1917 there were some 235 attacks on Jews — a mere 4.4 percent of the population but victims of roughly one third of violent assaults against minorities during that year. During the Civil War years (1918-1921) there was a devastating wave of violence against Jews, most of which was perpetrated by the counter-revolutionary White Army.

Nevertheless, McGeever also claims that in the spring of 1918 “in towns and cities of northeast Ukraine such as Glukhov, Bolshevik power was consolidated through anti-Jewish violence on the part of the local cadres of the party and Red Guards”. [McGeever, 2017, p.6]. However, in a witness statement by a Jewish woman, a child at the time, Harriet (Hasia) Segal seems clear that the pogrom was perpetrated by anti-Bolshevik Cossacks [see YouTube, “Remembering the Glukhov Pogrom”]. A concerted and remarkable effort was made by the leaders of the revolution and by thousands of revolutionaries across the former empire, to stamp out **antisemitism**. And to some degree, at least, it worked. The central committee of the Bolshevik Party that won a majority in the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in October 1917 contained six Jews out of 21 members. This would have been unthinkable in the dark days of Tsarist oppression. Something fundamental had happened to the workers and peasants who had carried out the revolution.

Certainly the most class-conscious workers, many of whom would have harboured anti-Semitic feelings and attitudes prior to the revolution, carried out a far-reaching change, not only externally. Through their revolutionary actions, they had

transformed themselves, their emotional attitudes and intellectual outlook. The confidence they had instilled in themselves through their own political actions against the real enemy — the Tsarist ruling class — meant that antisemitic attitudes withered away to some extent.

Professor Steve Smith has described how workers in Petrograd who had taken over the factories in 1917 experienced hardship as a result of unemployment. High hopes were raised by the October insurrection which lasted until early 2018. Then the working class began to be disillusioned with the regime, not so much because of its political policies but rather because of the economic chaos. Rocketing unemployment and chronic food shortages gave rise to open resentment in certain areas. Hostility was expressed in conflicts between unemployed and employed workers. “The unemployed began to organise but in a manner which socialists could not condone.” A meeting of the unemployed in three Petrograd districts declared: “The people have come to understand the dirty deeds of the Yids. Jews have settled on all the committees. We suggest that they leave Petrograd within the next three days.” However, Steve Smith continues: “Such ugly moods, however, were characteristic of only a minority.” [Smith, 1983/2017, p. 246]. In other words, under the enormous pressure of economic chaos, hunger, the threat of western imperialist intervention, a majority of workers did *not* develop antisemitic attitudes.

This illustrates Freud’s analysis of the dual character of the mass or crowd: their ‘brutal, destructive instincts’ but also their ‘great feats of renunciation’. Fromm is relevant here too. The crowd or mass display both a ‘destructive-authoritarian’ and a ‘productive’ social character. Fromm illustrates the destructive character by reference to the Roman emperor Caligula whose madness “is one solution to the problem of human existence, because it serves the illusion of omnipotence, of transcending the frontiers of human existence.” [Fromm,1974, p. 289]. And in Fromm’s and Maccoby’s study of a Mexican village, he found that among the children “authoritarian attitudes are combined with extreme hostility and malignant destructiveness ... At the same time, the children expressed acute fears of starvation and abandonment, combined with a regressive fixation to the mother...” [Fromm,1970, p.194]. Again, Fromm agrees with Freud who agreed with Nietzsche. “Freud...convincingly demonstrated the correctness of Nietzsche’s thesis that the blockage of freedom turns man’s instincts ‘backwards against man himself...’” [Fromm, 1949, p. 151]. This ‘blockage of freedom’ is an accurate description of the Russian working class and peasantry before the revolution. The blockage of their freedom induced in them a destructive-authoritarian social character expressed in antisemitism. However, Freud and Fromm have illuminated the great potential for human liberation that Marx perceived in working class self-activity.

## References

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