Socialist Utopia and Realty in Israeli Communist May Day, 1919–1965

AMIR LOCKER-BILETZKI

Abstract

Since the 1920s the Jewish Communists developed a unique Israeli subculture. Both the Communist Party and its youth movement developed cultural practices made from Israeli Jewish and Soviet European elements. This article is examining May Day one of the most central of this cultural practices. The holiday is analyzed from its mythical, symbolic and ritualistic aspects out from a perspective that states that, while the Jewish communists never rooted themselves among the Israeli Jewish working class working class militancy had an important cultural significant in Communist subculture. This importance was expressed in May Day and mainly the main holiday' practice the march that was used to express a utopian vision of Israeli society. In addition the cultural emphasis on May Day was used to inculcate within the Jewish communists identification with workers, however a string of historical circumstances prevented the Jewish communists from creating an authentic working class identity.

Résumé

Depuis les années 1920, les communistes juifs ont développé une sous-culture juive tout à fait unique en son genre. En effet, le Parti communiste ainsi que son mouvement jeunesse ont développé des pratiques culturelles ayant pour origine à la fois des éléments juifs israéliens et d'autres provenant plutôt d'une

culture soviétique européenne. Cet article explore l'importance du « May Day » en tant que pièce centrale de ces pratiques culturelles. Cette journée est analysée d'un point de vue mythique, symbolique et rituel pour démontrer que, bien que les communistes juifs n'ont pu s'implanter dans les milieux ouvriers israéliens, la classe ouvrière militante a néanmoins eu un effet culturel majeur dans la sous-culture communiste. Cette importance s'est manifestée dans le « May Day » et particulièrement dans la marche qui y est associée afin d'exprimer la vision utopique de la société israélienne. De plus, l'accent mis sur le « May Day » a aussi été utilisé dans le but d'inculquer aux communistes juifs une notion d'appartenance avec la classe ouvrière malgré le fait qu'une série de circonstances historiques les aient empêché de créer une telle identité.

❦

Introduction

The Israeli Communist Party (MKI) was relegated to pariah status ever since its origins in 1919. For the first half of its existence, it was an underground movement hunted by both the British and the Zionists. After its legalization in 1941, the Communist Party of Palestine (PKP) and its successor organization after 1948, the Israeli Communist Party (MKI), were active at the margins of politics in Palestine and Israel. Though marginalized, the Jewish communists were nevertheless very much an integral part of their cultural political surroundings. In the course of the years 1919 to 1965, the Jewish communists in the MKI and its youth movement the Young Israeli Communist League (Banki) created their own subculture that welded together Soviet European and Israeli Jewish elements.

This article will examine the relation between the reality of communist presence among Jewish and Arab workers, and the cultural perception of the workers and their struggles by the communists. It focuses on the cultural practice of May Day, which will be examined from its mythical, symbolic and ritual aspects. The main argument of this article is that, in contrast to the marginal place that the Jewish communists occupied in reality

among workers, they ascribed an enormous cultural significance to the working class in their cultural practices. The importance that the Jewish communists attached to the ideal of working class militancy was most evident in their May Day march, which presented a marching Socialist utopian vision of Israeli society. The symbols, rituals and myths of the workers and May Day created and reflected identification with the workers; however, the Jewish communists never developed an authentic proletarian identity.

Workers and Israeli Communism

The Jewish communists never controlled the main Jewish union in Palestine, the *Histadrut*. In the early stages of the formation of communism in Palestine, the Hebrew Socialist Workers Party (MPSA) enjoyed a relative success in union and working class politics. The first groups of Jewish communists participated in the founding of the *Histadrut*. In the election to the founding conference, the Jewish communists won "303 votes out of 4,433 (about 6.8% of the electorate)."[1] Although it remained a small faction outside the mainstream of Zionist workers parties, the MPSA achieved influence in a few trade unions: "the base of activity was in the tailors union and the sand-workers union, which were funded by M.P.S. men."[2] The nascent Communist movement was also trying to penetrate the most advanced group of workers in Palestine, the railroad workers.[3] The Jewish communists presented radical demands, such as the inclusion of Arab workers in the union, and objected to forming connections with the World Zionist Movement that was controlled by the Jewish bourgeoisie.[4] The Zionist leadership of the *Histadrut* was

---

1. Yehuda Slozski, "M.P.S.A. in the founding convention of the Histadrut," *Asufot* 14 (1970): 149.

2. Shmuel Dothan, *Reds: The Communist Party in Palestine* (Kfar Sava, 1991), 58.

3. For the history of the Palestine railroad workers and communist activity among them, see: Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948*, (Berkeley, 1995).

4. For the growing connection between the *Histadrut* and Zionist-Socialism to the Zionist middle class and the preference of the nation over class in its thinking, see: Ze'ev Sternhell, *Nation-Building or New Society? The Zionist Labour Movement, 1904–1940 and the Origins of Israel*, (Tel-Aviv, 1995).

worried about the influence that the Jewish communists were gaining and broke it by force. The MPSA club in Haifa and its cultural circle in Tel-Aviv were attacked. By planting loyal workers in them, the *Histadrut* took over communist-controlled unions. By 1921, with the MPSA's hopes of waging a large-scale class struggle by means of the *Histadrut* dashed, they left it.

By the mid 1920s, as the Jewish communists became increasingly anti-Zionist, their influence within the Jewish working class diminished. Nevertheless, they continued to maintain their presence within the *Histadrut*. At the second *Histadrut* convention in 1923, the PKP nominated a non-Party list named the Workers Fraction. The Fraction was controlled by communists and was essentially a front of the PKP. It won 250 votes and sent three delegates to the conference.[5] This was a marked decline in voting for the Communists, who were divided amongst themselves and rejected by the Zionist workers. When the Fraction was expelled from the *Histadrut*, the Communists' pariah status among workers was sealed. The now anti-Zionist PKP turned to recruiting Arabs, making small inroads into the small Palestinian working class.[6]

The World War II years opened up new prospects for Communist union work among sections of the Jewish working class. The dislocation of the diamond-polishing industry from its traditional centres in Europe and local and British initiative led to the foundation of an extensive polishing industry.[7] In the hands of Jewish capitalists, the venture was staffed by Jewish workers. However, the Jewish character of the industry did not mean that the *Histadrut* penetrated it. The private owners shortened the internship period of the largely youthful workforce, thus limiting the influence of the *Histadrut*, which traditionally controlled the workforce and internship through its work

---

5. Dothan, 82.

6. Typical of the Arab recruits to the PKP at that time was Bulus Farah, a young print and railroad worker who was recruited to the Party in the late 1920 and early 1930s; see: Bulus Farah, *From the Ottoman Rule to the Hebrew State: The Life Story of a Communist and Palestinian Patriot, 1910–1991* (Haifa, 2009).

7. An interview with David De Vries titled, "Why did the Diamond Workers Strike so Often during War World II," in *Arise, ye Workers from your Slumber: Life and Collected Works of Eliyahu (Alyosha) Gozansky, 1914–1948*, ed. Tamar Gozansky (Haifa, 2009), 35.

bureaus. That meant that in the diamond-polishing industry all the different political unions, from the Revisionist right to the Orthodox, organized the workers. It also meant that workers from marginalized groups who had trouble finding work through the *Histadrut* work bureaus could find work there.[8] As a result, a relatively large number of right-wingers and Communists were employed in the diamond-polishing industry. Divided into different unions and paid by the piecework method, with a restless and unusually young work force, the diamond workers were more predisposed to strike than other workers in Palestine.

One of those Communist activists was Eliyahu (Alyosha) Gozansky, probably the most capable workers' organizer the Party had ever had among Jewish workers. A diamond worker himself, he led the workers in the industry in their struggles in 1942–1946. Gozansky stressed in his union work the "high priority of Communist Party members to integrate in activity. . . in the unions and *Histadrut* institutions."[9] In 1944 the Jewish communists, for the first time since their expulsion from the *Histadrut*, were allowed to work openly as one of the union's parties. Their re-admittance to the *Histadrut* began a flurry of activity among Jewish workers by the communists,[10] culminating in the report made by Gozansky in the name of the Central Committee to the PKP conference in September 1945. The report is imbued with Marxist ideology and Gozansky's practical union experience. It represents the most methodical effort by any Jewish communist to understand Palestine's working class and its economic surroundings. The report is an analysis based on statistical data charts, tracking the industrialization of the country during the war and the policies and behaviour of private capital and the British colonial government. It also describes the conditions of life and work of Jewish and Arab workers. The report concluded that "the foreign monopolies, in partnership with the local and big bourgeoisie helped by the colonial

---

8. Ibid., 38.

9. Ibid., 20.

10. Idem. In a *Haganah* secret-agent report on a conference of committees of the PKP in June 1945, Alyosha is quoted as saying that "when the Party wished to participate in the election to the *Histadrut* convention (1944) it was able to collect, in two days, 300 required signatures of *Histadrut* members."

government,"[11] were lowering workers' living standards and hurting Palestinian industry's ability to compete in both the local and foreign markets.

The upsurge in the union work of the Jewish communists was short-lived. Born of the unique economic circumstances of wartime Palestine, it did not help the communists take root among the workers. As the conflict between Arabs and Jews deteriorated into open warfare, it diverted the attention of the Jewish communists. When Gozansky died at the end of 1948 in a plane crash, the Jewish communists lost their most gifted workers' leader. The Arab Communists fared no better. The war ruined their unions and their party, the National Liberation League (NLL). The Arab working class that had developed during World War II was expelled outside the borders of the new Jewish State.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Jewish communists retained their representation in the *Histadrut* and became a permanent opposition to the long-time hegemony of the Eretz-Israel Workers Party (MAPAI). The only purely class struggle the MKI became involved in was the merchant fleet sailors' struggle in 1950. Some of the strikers who were ex-members of the *Palmach* found their way to the MKI. Apart from the sailors' strike, the MKI developed activity among the new immigrants that were pouring into the country. Yet neither its gains among the new immigrants nor its participation in the sailors' struggle were of long duration. The sailors' strike never materialized into a full-scale revolt against the hegemony of the *Histadrut*. As for the new immigrants, every "step up the economic ladder, leaving the overcrowded immigrants' towns, getting out of the swarming slums,"[12] meant leaving the Communist Party. The MKI's agenda was aimed more at "the Soviet Union, the Arab population, and only after them – the class struggle."[13] But in contrast to that reality, workers held an important place in MKI and Banki subculture. And that identification with the workers was reflected in the holiday connected with workers' militancy, May Day.

---

11. Gozansky, ed., 165.
12. Nessia Shafran, *Farewell Communism* (Tel-Aviv, 1983), 25.
13. Ibid., 63.

May Day: From Counter Ritual to Socialist Marching Utopia

The main ritual connected with workers was the May Day march held by the MKI and Banki as part of the *Histadrut* central demonstration. The march was steeped in symbolic and mythological motifs taken from Soviet traditions and local Israeli influences. May Day was celebrated in Palestine for the first time in 1906 by members of the *Po'alei-Zion* party. Alongside the symbols of International Socialism, mainly the Red Flag, the workers' march and the singing of the *Internationale*, the Zionist Socialists tried to integrate into May Day Zionist symbols such as the White and Blue national flag and the national and the Labor Movement anthems.[14] The holiday was institutionalized during the 1920s by the *Histadrut*, which turned it into a display of its power.

The Jewish communists had participated in the May Day march since the early 1920s. As they nevertheless operated at the margins of workers' politics, it was for them a day of protest, an incursion into a hostile public sphere. On that day, like the revolutionary movement in Tsarist Russia, the Jewish communists burst out into the open,[15] violently encountering their political rivals and the forces of the British colonial state. In 1921 the MPS parade was embroiled in a skirmish with the participants of the *Ahdut HaAvoda* march. By a dismal coincidence, the brawl in Tel Aviv took place just as Jaffa Arabs began rioting and attacking Jews in what became known as the 1921 Riots. The communists were wrongly accused of provoking the riots, giving the Mandate police justification to persecute them.[16]

The testimony with respect to later May Day demonstrations during the 1920s stresses their underground nature. The PKP activist Nachman List described the May Day PKP demonstration in Tel Aviv as an exercise that involved sending a group of members to lure the police away from the chosen site. The decoy was so successful that when the main communist

---

14. Rachel Shrabi, "May Day Rituals in the First Decade of Israel: From a Sectoral Holiday to a State Holiday," *Megamot Behavioral Science Journal* (2005): 108.

15. Richard Stites, "The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style: Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution," in *Symbols of power: the Esthetics of Political Liegitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. Claes Arvidsson and Lars Erik Blomqvist (Stockholm, 1987), 24.

16. Dothan, 67–70.

demonstration started only one policeman, the one responsible for fighting communism, rode after the demonstrators on his bicycle, whistling and shouting "Disperse." The rituals accompanying these raids into the public sphere were simple: the demonstrators waved "the Red Flag and marched singing the *Internationale*,"[17] and the singing was accompanied by a speech. The demonstration ended with arrests by the police.

A less humorous tone is to be found in Bulus Farah's recollection of the same May Day in Haifa in 1925. The communist-led parade clashed with the police as the "security men that were trying to disperse the demonstration tried to grab the Red Flag from a young man who was carrying it at the head of the marchers."[18] When the flag-bearer punched the officer in charge it only provoked the police into violently attacking the marchers. We see here the same elements as in the Tel Aviv May Day: the Red Flag as the main symbol, and the inevitable clash with the forces of the state.

In the Comintern English-language publication *Inprecorr*, meant for Communists outside the Soviet Union (USSR), one Abu Siam from Jerusalem described the May Day of 1926. Struggling against mounting police repression and the threats of "reformist trade union bureaucrats," the Party organized a demonstration "by great masses of workers."[19] The Communist marchers "marched under the Red Flags with Communist slogans." The march ended in "fierce skirmishes with the police who had to be reinforced by the Irish-English officers division."[20] Leaving aside the exaggeration of the small number of participants, the communist May Day of 1926 featured the same elements as its predecessors. The communists emerged into the street to encounter their political rivals and the forces of the state. In a counter ritual symbolically clustered around the Red Flag, they voiced their rage and indignation against the backdrop of inhospitable and hostile surroundings.

In the streets the activists of the PKP clashed with Zionist-Socialists and the forces of order. The handbills clandestinely distributed by the Party

---

17. Nachman List, "The Comintern was Right," *Kesht* (1963): 147.
18. Farah, 22.
19. The First May Day in Palestine, *Inprcorr*, 27 May 1926.
20. Ibid.

were imbued with the same militant spirit. From the start, the Jewish communists defined May Day in universalistic terms. Psychologically compensating for their weakness and small numbers, they used May Day to demonstrate their belonging to the "world proletariat,"[21] headed by the "magnificent building of the Soviet Socialist Federation."[22] In a 1921 pamphlet the Jewish communists called upon the Hebrew workers to celebrate "your combat holiday May Day in the 'hard time' of the birth of the working class government around the world."[23] The manifesto accused the Zionist-Socialist parties of betraying the Jewish workers of Palestine by collaborating with the Jewish bourgeoisie and the British. The Jewish Communists, still nominally Zionist-Socialist, accused their political rivals of betraying the "worker Zionist Communist ideal."[24] The pamphlet also called for joint action with Arab workers. The class struggle, the text asserts, will help create, in a Borochovist manner, "a territorial work center" for the Hebrew worker. A handwritten 1926 handbill addressed to working youths described May Day as "not just a demonstration. . . it is part of a struggle starting now on a global front."[25] The pamphlet cited struggles ranging from "the countries of the East – gigantic China, great India, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon" to "countries with a large working class" like England and France. [26]

The same militant internationalist language continued in use into the 1930s. The 1930 May Day pamphlet issued in the wake of the Arabization of the Party called for "uniting the front of the Arab peasant, the Jewish, Arab and Armenian workers in one immense revolutionary camp."[27] The pamphlet suggested in no uncertain terms "that the most radical and active means

---

21. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, For May Day.

22. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, The Central Committee of the Communist Party in Eretz-Israel, Berlin April 1923.

23. May Day Manifesto of MPSA Distributed in Jaffa 1921, in Suliman Baashear, "The Arab East in the Communist Theory and Political Practice, 1918–1928," (PhD diss., Birkbeck College, University of London, 1976), 393.

24. Ibid., 393.

25. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, Oppressed Workers from all Lands Unite.

26. Ibid.

27. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, For the International, Revolutionary and Proletarian Day for May Day!

against national hatred is the revolutionary internationalism of the proletariat."[28] It proudly announced "that the Soviet Proletariat builds in a fast-paced Socialism"[29] which was progressively resolving national and colonial questions. The 1935 May Day pamphlet reflected the concerns over the rise of Fascism, noting that "Italian Imperialism is plunging its claws into the quivering body of Abyssinia; Japan is ripping away parts of China wallowing in its own blood."[30] The new imperialist wave was posing the threat of "intervention against the workers' homeland – Soviet Russia – serving as a shining beacon to millions of oppressed starving workers – that successfully built Socialism – a society with no exploitation, hunger or war."[31]

May Day was imbued at this early stage with the symbols of International Socialism, mainly the Red Flag and other symbols of the Soviet state that became the universal symbols of all communists. One early example of the internalization of the Soviet symbolic system into the landscape of the Jewish communists is a handbill from the 1920s. Unsophisticatedly handwritten, it features two of the basic Soviet symbols, the Red Star and the Hammer and Sickle with a PKP logo and above it the slogan "Long Live May Day!"[32]

In the formative stage of communism in Palestine, three distinct elements of a communist May Day emerged. The first was its nature as a counter ritual where the Communists erupted into the public sphere and violently clashed with their political rivals and the forces of the British colonial state. The second was the framing of the holiday as the day of international working class militancy. The workers of Palestine were called upon to join a global class struggle in which Palestine was merely one small front. The third element was the pride of place held by the USSR in the Jewish Communists'

---

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, Comrades Youths!
31. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, Comrades Youths!
32. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, Long Live May Day!

awareness.[33] In the context of May Day, the Soviet Union was uncritically perceived as a workers' paradise, a place where the workers held political power and solved national and economic problems.

These elements reflected the incorporation of working class and Soviet symbolism into the Jewish Communist mind. The emphasis on the international working class and the USSR was undoubtedly a form of compensation for the realities of Palestine. In reality, the PKP was a small and oppressed minority, which had made few inroads into the only substantial Jewish working class in the country. The reality of the USSR, where mass death by starvation and state repression ruled, was sugarcoated into a Socialist-Realist utopia and workers' paradise.

As the 1930s wore on, the Jewish communists remained in the margins of workers' culture and politics in Palestine. The outbreak of World War II saw no change in the elements of the May Day celebration dating from the 1920s. A 1940 May Day pamphlet retained the international fervour of earlier years, defining May Day as the "international day of solidarity of the proletariat."[34] An underground issue of *Kol Hanoar*, Banki's official organ, for May Day 1940, which was dedicated mostly to attacking the war effort, called May Day "an international holiday and sabbatical of the worker, the day of international unity and solidarity in the fight for his liberation."[35] It celebrated the Soviet Union as "the fortress of peace and the defender of small peoples,"[36] glossing over its short-lived cooperation with Nazi Germany in robbing "small peoples" like the Poles and the Baltic nations of their sovereignty.

The turning point in the form and content of May Day came after the legalization of the PKP on 22 June, 1941. For the first time the Jewish Communists' counter ritual was allowed into the public sphere. The visual evidence remaining from the 1944 May Day parade reveals that the Jewish

---

33. For the relations between the communists in Palestine and the USSR from a Soviet point of view, see L. Zahavi, *Apart or Together: Jews and Arabs in Palestine according to the Documents of the Comintern (1919–1943)* (Jerusalem : Keter Books, 2005).

34. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-2, Long Live May Day!

35. Yad Tabenkin, file 1, May Day and the Youth.

36. Yad Tabenkin, file 1, The Peace Manifest of the Communist youth in Palestine.

communists had turned their counter ritual into an orderly, military-style parade. Emulating Soviet parade practices, which since the early 1930s had frozen into rigid military parades,[37] the Jewish communists in late 1940s Palestine marched in orderly military fashion. One photograph[38] shows three columns of Communist marchers headed by a flag-bearer, dressed in Banki uniform. The marchers are carrying the Red Flag. A second picture[39] shows the same demonstration as the march was passing along Tel Aviv's seashore promenade. As in the earlier photo, the marchers are in three rows, headed by Party leaders Alyosha Gozansky and Uzi Borshtain and the Red Flag. The Banki members are dressed in their white shirts and red ties, and the older Party members in civilian clothing.

Legalization also broadened the scope of communist May Day rituals, adding public rallies to the day's events. The main rally for May Day 1944 took place at the Allenby cinema on the eve of 28 April and was accompanied by smaller rallies in various towns.[40] The main event in Tel Aviv boasted a thousand participants and was decorated with pictures of Lenin and Stalin and "slogans calling for the international unity of the working class and Jewish-Arab workers' unity."[41] The event featured three speeches, and it began and ended with the singing of the *Internationale*. The main issue stressed in the speeches was the war. Nonetheless, an internationalist flavour remained, although tempered by a more conciliatory tone towards the *Yishuv* and the Western allies. The struggle of the working class, for instance, "is the war of all progressive, freedom-loving humanity."[42] The speeches also stressed the unity of Arab and Jewish workers against the Zionist plans for establishing a Jewish state in Palestine after the war. The 1945 rallies saw the first artistic performances. Artistic performances characterized the May Day rallies of the

---

37. Rosalinde Sartori, "Stalinism and Carnival: Organization and Aesthetics of Political Holydays," in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, ed. Hans Günther, (New York, 1990), 54.

38. Photograph courtesy of Yoram Gozansky.

39. Gozansky, ed., 142.

40. See: Kol Haam, 4.27.44, May Day 1944 and 5.11.44, From the Party's Rallies in May Day.

41. Kol Haam, 5.11.44, From the Party's Rallies in May Day.

42. Ibid.

Histadrut and mostly included recitations and choral singing.[43] The communists followed suit, and in 1945 "comrade Etta recited" in Jerusalem and then gave an encore in Haifa, accompanied by "comrade Rachel who sang the partisan song"[44] and a choir.

This new and orderly form that the Communist May Day had taken, from the early to mid-1940s, did not mean that the holiday did not retain some of its counter ritual character. While Communists did not directly encounter the forces of the state, they still came into conflict with their political rivals. May Day was a contentious issue among both left-wing and right-wing Zionists as "those sectors disregarded the sabbatical enacted by the Labor movement on May Day: their schools were open and their newspapers appeared on that day."[45] For the Revisionists especially the holiday was an abomination and, as early as 1928, they skirmished with Communist May Day marchers.[46] The street skirmishes with the Right are the background to the enduring counter ritual nature of May Day after the Party's legalization. In an article commemorating Eliyahu (Alyosha) Gozansky, the fallen Party leader, the writer describes how the PKP activists in Tel Aviv were ordered on May Day 1943 to "hang large cloth placards in central spots in the city."[47] One such site was a school located in the old heart of the city near Allenby Street. The task fell to a band of young communists who hoisted a red banner carrying the portraits of Lenin and Stalin and the Hammer and Sickle, igniting a protracted street battle between members of *Beytar* and the communists. This incident on May Day 1943 bears all the hallmarks of the communist counter ritual of the 1920s. The communist youths and older Party members burst into the public sphere brandishing the symbols of the Soviet Union painted in the red of the working class. Their incursion led to a clash with their political rivals, and the forces of order, the police, tore down the placards that caused the ruckus.

---

43. Shrabi, 123.
44. Kol Haam, 5.2.45, The Party Activates for the First of May 1945.
45. Shrabi, 108.
46. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-445-208, To the Working Youths of Palestine! May Day 1929!
47. A. Myling, "So was Alyosha," in *Arise, ye Workers from your Slumber*, 401.

The most important development in the evolution of the communist
May Day in the era after legalization was the inclusion of the Party in the
Histadrut procession. As early as 1944, the *Histadrut* lifted the ban on accepting
communist members to its ranks, in fact recognizing the PKP as one of the
union's parties. In late March 1946 the Party sent to the *Histadrut* executive a
telegram demanding "the participation of our representatives in the
performances and rallies of the *Histadrut*"[48] on May Day. The demand was
granted, but not fully. In Tel Aviv the main procession went smoothly, but in
Haifa *Kol Haam* (*The People's Voice*, the Party's Hebrew organ) reports that the
members of the communist youth were not permitted to march with the rest
of the union. The main parade in Tel Aviv, where both the Party and its youth
movement marched, exhibited the elements that had begun to characterize the
Jewish Communists' May Day since legalization. The PKP and the communist
youth marched in separate blocs. The march was headed by a truck
"decorated with red flags and a big star made from vegetation and flowers."[49]
The first bloc consisted of the youth members "dressed in white shirts and red
ties marching in unified lines."[50] The second bloc consisted of the Party's
Central Committee and veteran members, headed by the flag of the Tel Aviv
PKP branch. The rest of the marchers were war veterans and the veterans of
the International Brigades. The two blocs marched separately, the Party's
procession with the rest of the *Histadrut*, and the youth movement with the
other Zionist-Socialist youth movements.

The two blocs differed markedly in character, as the visual evidence
of the 1946 march attests. The young communists marched in three straight
lines carrying flags and a placard.[51] By contrast, the Party's bloc is an
unorganized mass carrying placards in no apparent order.[52] One element that
was carried over from the 1920s was the continued use of working class and

---

48. Kol Haam, 4.10.46, For Participation in May Day Holiday.
49. Kol Haam, 5.16.46, The Communist Party March in Tel Aviv in Honor of May
Day.
50. Ibid.
51. Kol Haam, 5.8.46, The Communist Party Demonstration in May Day – the Youth
Block.
52. Ibid. At the same issue The Communist Party May Day March in Tel Aviv.

Soviet symbolism, the Red Flag and the Red Star, in this case made of vegetation, echoing the spring motif of the holiday and the first parades of the Russian Revolution where flora was used to decorate the horses of the Red Army. Another Soviet element borrowed straight from the Stalinist vocabulary was the carrying of "portraits of the great leaders Lenin and Stalin."[53] As opposed to the Stalinist symbolism and rigidity of the youth march, there was a carnival element to the bloc of soldiers and veterans carrying caricatures mocking the state of the veterans, more akin to the first revolutionary festivals in Russia and the USSR of the 1920s.[54]

The content of the holiday remained internationalist, working-class militant, and pro-Soviet, as in the 1920s. A look at the Party's slogans for the holiday reveals, side by side, such slogans as "Long live the Soviet Union!" and "Long live the freedom and independence struggle of the peoples of Indonesia and India and all colonial peoples!" Another slogan called for "progressive work and social laws."[55]

After 1948, May Day was characterized by an increased effort by MAPAI which dominated the *Histadrut* to "direct its ceremonies from above and to shape the holiday patterns so they will contribute to the advancement of its values and the strengthening of its position."[56] This meant the regimentation of the preparations for and execution of the holiday. At the same time, MAPAI tried to nationalize the holiday and create a symbolic identification between it and the state. Those tendencies were partly absorbed by the Jewish communists. Although the communist holiday was already self-regimented ideologically and organizationally, they refused to bow down to MAPAI's demands. In that sense, May Day retained some of its counter ritual spirit as the communists clashed with political rivals inside and outside the *Histadrut*.

---

53. Kol Haam, 5.16.46, The Communist Party March in Tel Aviv in Honour of May Day.

54. Stites, "The Origins of Soviet Ritual Style: Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution."

55. Kol Haam, 4.26.46, The Slogans of the Palestinian Communist Party for May Day.

56. Shrabi, 115.

During the 1950s, the elements of communist May Day which had first appeared in the 1920s and after the Party's legalization became entrenched, with the addition of some local Israeli elements. The holiday march displayed a mix of Soviet elements and patterns of local Israeli origin. The communists took part in well-structured rites; the eve of May Day was marked by rallies consisting of short speeches and artistic performances. The Party rallies in the days before the May Day holiday in 1950 included a choir performance in one locality. The main rally in Tel Aviv in 1951 featured a speech by the MKI General Secretary and the Ron Party choir. The schedule of rallies in the same year shows that almost every one of them included a speaker and an artistic performance, ranging from a Soviet play or movie to a humble sing-along accompanied by accordion.[57]

The main event of May Day without a doubt was the mass march and the assembly. Like other holiday events, they too were tightly organized by the *Histadrut*.[58] The communists participated in the march in two blocs, the one reserved for the workers' parties and the closing bloc of the parade, made up of the youth movements. The main demonstrations were held in "Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Nazareth and Haifa."[59] While the MKI members marched in relatively loose formation,[60] Banki's march was different. All through the 1950s until the mid-1960s, the Banki marchers became the centerpiece of the Communists' May Day, the showcase of the whole movement whose "fighting character and fair form. . . are respected by the crowds."[61] Increasingly, from the 1950s, the organized element was more and more evident. In contrast to the orderly appearance of the parade, a grassroots mobilization of Banki members was required to create the spectacle.

---

57. Kol Haam, 4.25.51, Celebrations in Honor of May Day for Unity in the Fight for Peace.

58. Shrabi, 121.

59. Yad Tabenkin, File 1, May Day- The International Workers Day!

60. In photographs of the May Day demonstrations in 1959 and 1961 in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the older Party members are seen marching holding banners in their hands in a loosely coordinated column or in groups. See: In the Campaigns of Struggle Between the two Conferences 1957–1961, in the author's possession.

61. Yad Tabenkin, File 1, May Day - The International Workers Day!

In many ways the marked change in the appearance of the May Day march was the result of the collective work of Banki members, mainly Yoska Valershtiean. Valershtiean, a survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, was sent to Palestine as part of a unit recruited by the Czechs and the MKI to aid Israel in the 1948 War.[62] A devout communist and a graphic artist, he used his talents in the service of the communist movement. During May Day he was responsible for the design of the slogans and displays that were carried by the marchers. Those included placards that showed an atom bomb exploding, peace doves spreading their wings, and a globe four metres in diameter highlighting the Eastern Block and the USSR.[63] Valershtiean's ideas were put into effect by members of the Tel Aviv branch of Banki, who turned the movement's club into a workshop to make the displays for the march and even provided training to the drummers and trumpeters.[64] This resembled the grassroots efforts which accompanied the revolutionary marches in NEP-era Russia.

But though the mobilization of Banki members echoed early Soviet models, the marches themselves came straight from the visual world of Stalinism and the post-Stalinist USSR. The visual similarity between the Soviet Union and the more modest Banki did not escape its members. Yoska Valershtiean admitted it, saying that "I put all my experience from the Czech Republic and my impressions from the May Day demonstrations in the Socialist countries and the U.S.S.R."[65] into the design of the marches in Tel Aviv. Another ex-member made the connection even clearer: "Look at the marches in the U.S.S.R. of 7 November or May Day. Clearly it is not to the same extent, and without the arms it is only a small fraction of that."[66]

Marching publicly in the streets, the communists met a certain level of resistance and violence. Jacob Markovizky asserts that most communist May

---

62. For Yoska Valershtiean's personal histories, see: Kol Haam 2.9.61, I Accuse Adolf Eichmann, and an Interview with Yoska Valershtiean, 11.14.05.

63. Interview with Yoska Valershtiean, 11.14.05.

64. Interview with Daliya Vintrob and Manheam Vintrob, 5.29.05.

65. Interview with Yoska Valershtiean, 11.14.05.

66. Interview with Daliya Vintrob and Manheam Vintrob, 5.29.05.

Day demonstrations "ended with no bloodshed and violent confrontations,"[67] but a closer look reveals a more complex reality. First to erect barriers to the conduct of the marches was the *Histadrut*. Anxious to imbue May Day with Zionist content, the MAPAI-dominated union tried to disqualify the slogans proposed by the MKI.[68] On one glaring occasion in 1960, the *Histadrut*'s nationalization of May Day came into direct confrontation with the MKI's socialist principles. Claiming that the holiday overlapped with Remembrance Day, *Histadrut* secretary-general Pinhas Lavon passed a resolution in the *Histadrut* institutions annulling it. For the MKI this was sacrilege. In an angry open letter, the MKI faction in the *Histadrut* accused Lavon and the union leaders of a "far-reaching plan to deny from it [May Day] its character as the holiday of struggle against the capitalists and the danger of war."[69]

Other harassments were of a more violent nature. The main focal point of hostility towards the communist marchers was in Haifa. Ruled by MAPAI boss Abba Hushi, Red Haifa welcomed the communist marchers with physical and verbal abuse. Bottles were thrown at the marchers, and Hushi's and the *Histadrut*'s *Plogot Hapoel* attacked them.[70] In Tel Aviv the Banki demonstrators clashed with *Beytar* members when the procession of the former passed one of the strongholds of the latter near where the Banki club was located.[71] Clashes with political rivals were frequent in the formative stage of communist May Day in the 1920s and continued after legalization. This aspect of the holiday seems to have persisted, at least to the 1950s.

The visual evidence remaining of the Banki processions also points to the Soviet influence on May Day. The photographs of successive events reveal elaborate visual effects that the displays were planned to create. The parade included everything from abstract displays to graphically sophisticated

---

67. Ya'akov Markovizky, *A White Shirt and a Red Tie: Banki Youth Movement (1948–1965)* (s.l., 2003), 145.

68. Interview with Yair Tzaban, 2.19.09.

69. Lavon Institute for Labour Research, File IV-425-44, The Working Class will Celebrate the 70th Anniversary of May Day!

70. See: Interview with Zafrera Kalorman, 11.6.05 and Markovizky, 145.

71. See an interview with Tamar Gozansky, 2.21.09 and an interview with Yoram Gozansky, 2.22.09.

placards, illustrating such themes as nuclear war, workers' solidarity, the Eastern Bloc, and Arab-Jewish fraternity. Other important elements are the written slogans, marching bands, and the extensive use of national flags side-by-side with the Red Flag. Vehicles carrying displays also participated in the marches.

What was the purpose of the Jewish Communists' elaborate display? Clifford Geertz maintains that ritualistic processions are displays of symbols of power emanating from symbolic centers of power.[72] In that sense, the use of Soviet symbols and practices is understandable. The military-style uniformed procession, the profiles of Lenin and Stalin, the Hammer and Sickle and the oversized displays all derived from the Soviet Union; they were the trappings of power that the Jewish communists wished to present. The Jewish communists also resorted to the symbolic system of the international working class, mainly the Red Flag. Hoisted at communist May Day demonstrations since the 1920s, it can be considered a dominant symbol,[73] connecting the Jewish communists with another symbolic centre of power, the international and local working class. These symbols of power were clearly in contrast to the reality of the Jewish communists as a small minority with little representation in the mainly Jewish working class. They were meant to alleviate this contradiction by identifying them with a worldwide class and a superpower, respectively.[74]

---

72. Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York, 1983).

73. "Dominant symbol" was defined by Victor Turner as one "presiding over the whole procedure, sometimes over particular phases. Their meaning is highly constant and consistent throughout the symbolic system." See: Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture, Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1978), 245.

74. This feeling of empowerment is abundantly apparent in Banki's pamphlets for May Day. One pamphlet proudly declared that since 1889 organized work had risen "from tens of thousand. . . to 33 million communists organized in Communist Parties and 160 million workers unionized." See: Long Live May Day – The Holiday of Youth and workers Unity, Yad Tabenkin, File Unknown. Another handbill proclaims that "the Socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union is marching from one victory to another." It asserts that the Soviet youth already works six hours a day; see: Yad Tabenkin, File Unknown, Long Live May Day - International Solidarity Day of the Workers and the Youth.

At the same time, the Banki parades also had a local symbolic aspect. Two local symbols were used foremost, the Israeli flag and the Arab-Jewish duo. There is no evidence as to when the Jewish communists started to use the national flag, with its obvious Zionist context, in their May Day procession. The scant visual evidence from the mid- to late 1940s gives no indication that the Blue and White was used before 1948, but since it does appear from the 1950s,[75] it may be assumed that it was in use at least since 1948. In carrying the two flags together, the Jewish communists were following the practice of the other Zionist workers' parties that "waved the Red Flag with the state flag."[76] The existence of this practice manifestly shows the growing affinity between Zionist-Socialist culture and the Jewish communist subculture subsequent to legalization.

The other symbol used by Banki members, the Jewish-Arab duo, was borrowed directly from the symbolic vocabulary of Israeli Communism. Widely used to symbolize Arab-Jewish fraternity, one of the MKI and Banki's core identity values, it played an important role in May Day. The communist May Day demonstrations manifestly stressed their Arab-Jewish identity. The Arab members of Banki dressed in the traditional *keffiyeh* and marched side-by-side with their Jewish comrades.[77] Yoska Valershtiean recalled that Banki members insisted that the Arab members wear the *keffiyeh*, thus deliberately identifying them as Arabs and stressing the Arab-Jewish character of the march.[78] It is in this context that the Arab-Jewish duo emerges in the May Day Banki procession. In a photograph from the 1957 May Day march, we see a vehicle mounted with a display of two youths, one Arab, the other Jewish. Both figures are in red Banki ties and one of them is clad in a *keffiyeh*. Beneath them a caption reads "Long live Jewish-Arab fraternity!" flanked by the Banki

---

75. See for example May Day 1958, where two distinct rows of Red Flags and national flags can be seen; photograph courtesy of Yoram Gozansky.

76. Shrabi, 120.

77. For example, a photo of Banki members wearing the *keffiyeh* and holding the symbol of the movement alongside Jewish members of mixed gender in the Israeli Communist Party. See: In the Campaigns of Struggle Between the two Conferences 1957–1961, in the author's possession.

78. Interview with Yoska Valershtiean, 11.14.05.

logo, which incorporated the national flag with the Red Star, the Hammer and Sickle, and a sheaf of wheat. At either side of the display, the Red Flag and the Blue and White flag are waving. The entire display, bedecked with the Jewish Communists' symbolic plethora, points to the set of cultural traits that Banki wished to convey to the spectators and other marchers.

Geertz asserts that royal processions and political rituals were codified with cultural signifiers that portrayed an idealized view of the universe, the nature of the ruler's charisma, or the expectations of the ruled from the ruler. The symbolic language used by Banki members was codified in symbols of Soviet Communism, working class militancy, Arab-Jewish fraternity, international peace and liberation struggles.[79] It depicts a Socialist utopia, one where Israel would be "independent, democratic, and peace-seeking,"[80] a land that gave "happiness to its builders-workers, Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazi and Sephardic. . . living together in equality and fraternity with no military government and no discrimination."[81] In fact, the young Banki members' march became a marching utopia.[82]

Since the early 1920s, the communist May Day had been phrased in internationalist working-class militant terms. This language is clearly evident in Banki's instructors' brochures dedicated to May Day. Like much of Banki's instructional material, they were constructed as a *Masechet*, a collage of songs and literary segments with educational parts as well as stories. One text from the late 1950s is made up of articles on the origins of May Day, plays and poems. A central theme in the brochures is the history of May Day. The

---

79 May Day was used to outwardly show the Communists' support for liberation movements, anti-Imperialism and pacifism. One sign from the 1957 march exulted: "The Peoples of Africa Throwing off the Yoke of Foreigners." Another graphic sign showed an atomic mushroom cloud rising above a burning city. Yad Tabenkin, File 17-2.

80 Yad Tabenkin, File Unknown, Long Live May Day - International Solidarity Day of the Workers and the Youth.

81 Yad Tabenkin, File 2, Youths! Yong Men Yong Women!

82 Utopia was nothing new to revolutionary movements. Mona Ozouf describes the self-image of the French Revolution as aiming "to be the daughter of utopia." Utopia would wipe out the distinctions among men and perform rites with the simplicity of the ancients. See: Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, (London, 1988), 1–12. The Russian Revolution also had a strong utopian undercurrent; see: Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams, Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989).

young communists were taught that its origins lay in the Haymarket Massacre and the Second International resolution of 1889. The historical sections of the instructors' brochures contained a detailed history of the holiday. The historical narrative was meant to instill in the young communists a militant identification with the international working class: "For 70 years May Day has been calling the workers of the world to its banners. It cannot be liquidated or stolen."[83] The identification with the workingmen was, from the 1920s, couched in an internationalist language. Quoting Lenin, Banki members proclaimed that "Jew and Christian, Armenian and Tatar, Pole and Russian, Fins and Swedish, Latvian and German, all march together under the joint banner of Socialism."[84] The internationalist language was also inculcated in the younger age group of *Bney Amal*. In one recommended activity, the instructor is told to "ask the children about social and national struggles being fought at this time," and to summarize the talk with the "struggle and achievements of the Cuban people, the great achievement in the fight for independence of the Algerian people, the growing power of the revolutionary workers movement in countries like Italy and France. . . the struggle for national liberation of Africa and Asia."[85]

The poems, plays and allegorical stories abounding in the brochures were used to get the young communists to internalize the day's values. The literary segments included antiwar sections, stories about the sufferings of Israeli workers, anti-capitalist allegories, and poems by communist Israeli poets such as Ḥaya Kadmon and Alexander Penn, the Turkish communist poet Nâzım Hikmet, as well as other communist poets. The literary pieces, together with the historical parts, instilled in Banki members the identification with workers and their plight and with national and class liberation struggles. The Soviet Union, ever present in the minds of Jewish communists, was not denied a place either. One booklet stressed the fact "that since October 1917… the workers of Russia started celebrating in their own state."[86] An

---

83. Yad Tabenkin, File 2, Youths! Yong Men Yong Women!
84. Yad Tabenkin, File 4, May Day Material for Parties and Group Evenings.
85. Yad Tabenkin, File 25, *Bney Amal* brochure, May Day 1962.
86. Yad Tabenkin, File 4, May Day Material for Parties and Group Evenings.

internal memorandum of Banki's Education and Culture Department, in the wake of the 20th Congress, asserts the "achievements of the Soviet Union and all the Socialist camp"[87] in the face of all criticism. The memorandum resurfaces the image of the USSR, held by the Jewish communists since the 1920s, of a fulfilled utopia. By 1960, the text boasts, the USSR will have moved to a six-hour working day for young workers and free education.[88]

The 1962 *Bney Amal* booklet claims that the "Red Flag will celebrate its victory worldwide."[89] The Red Flag, part and parcel of communist subculture since the 1920s, is emphasized in the instructors' booklets of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the 1962 *Bney Amal* booklet, in a section named "suggestions for diversifying activity," the Red Flag takes a central role and is connected to workers' militancy. The instructor is advised to connect the talk with the young communists to stories about the Red Flag, to collect newspaper clippings on the background of the Red Flag, a map of the Socialist countries marked with Red Flags, and "essays and songs on the subject – *what does the Red Flag tell me?*"[90] Furthermore, the Red Flag was also internalized by means of poems and allegorical stories. One booklet featured a song named "Red Flag," while another contained songs that were well known among the Zionist-Socialist youth movements such as "On Barricades," "Onward Flame" and "Forward, Forward." The stress on the Red Flag represented both influences of European origin and local influence. On May Day Zionist-Socialists "made a special place in the *Masechet* for the Red Flag."[91] It was supposed to generate identification with the union and the workers. The communists allocated no place in the booklets to Zionist national elements beside the Red Flag, emphasizing even more the identification with international and local working-class struggles.

---

87. Yad Tabenkin, File 4, The Department of Education and Culture Martial for May Day Parties.

88. Yad Tabenkin, File 4, The Department of Education and Culture Martial for May Day Parties.

89. Yad Tabenkin, File 25, *Bney Amal* brochure May Day 1962.

90. Yad Tabenkin, File 25, *Bney Amal* brochure May Day 1962. Emphasis in original.

91. Shrabi, 120.

The communist May Day posed a sharp contrast to reality. MKI and Banki members had almost no influence on the masses of Jewish workers. The Arab workers who flocked to the MKI in the 1950s were driven more by nationalist than class motivations. The young Jewish Banki members were encouraged by their parents to become intellectuals rather than workers. Their few attempts to make contact with Israel's underclass failed dismally.[92] Nonetheless, despite the flaws in the Jewish communists' day-to-day contact with workers, their May Day represented the possibility of a different Israeli society, one that respects its workingmen, where Arabs and Jews could live and work free of nationalism and exploitation. It was a direction that Israeli society never took.

May Day and Jewish Communist Identity

Working class militancy, symbolized through Soviet and local motifs, ritualized in what was undoubtedly the main rite of the MKI and Banki, had a profound effect on young communists. Marching through the main streets of the cities left diverse and conflicting impressions on the participating youngsters. As in other public appearances of the communists, mainly in the 1950s, the reaction to them was abusive and sometimes violent. Some, like Banki ex-member Carmit Gai, recall the exposure to the hostility of the crowd as a negative experience:

> May Day marches, in white shirts with blue and red ties, are engraved in my memory as a terrible nightmare. Marching in step left-right, the national or the class flag in hand, or some slogan in favour of fraternity, freedom and peace, shouting slogans in unified, confident chorus in the city street, to the sound of shouts of scorn and the cursing of passers-by, added to the activity a dimension of exposure that I could not bear.[93]

---

92. Shafran, 55–68.
93. Carmit Gai, *Back to Yad-Hannah* (Tel Aviv, 1992), 219.

In a gentler tone, Nessia Shafran recalls, in contrast to her friends, that "May Day demonstrations were for them a great release, a sort of yearly catharsis," and that she felt "held back in such collective shouting."[94] At the same time, Shafran admits to being excited, as a child, as she watched her father marching in the main street of her hometown. Nissim Calderrun fondly remembers the youthful enthusiasm that accompanied the preparations for the march. Yoram Gozansky also recalls the hard work and the pride that the young Banki members felt when the other Zionist-Socialist youth movements passed by.[95]

Whatever the young communists' feelings and doubts about May Day, the MKI and Banki used the holiday to further the movement's indoctrination and instill in them a sense of identification with the workers' struggle: "All the songs that I heard in the movement, all the books that I read in those years, everything I heard from my father and the instructors in the movement were supposedly enough to develop in me a deep sympathy toward the working class."[96] The stress on the symbols and myths of working-class struggle was intended precisely, despite the personal ambivalence some communists may have felt, to develop that sympathy toward workingmen.

Sympathy did not translate, however, into a sense of belonging. The Jewish communists never managed to recruit a large enough number of workers to develop a proletarian identity in their movement. Their contacts with the underclass of Israel in the 1950s, made up mainly of non-European Jews streaming into the country after 1948, were limited and short lived. The "attempts to work among the youths in Kfar Yona Bet did not go well," recalls Carmit Gai. The young Banki members from Yad-Hanna approached the unemployed youngsters of the slum with real enthusiasm, intent on introducing them "to the principles of Socialism, peace and international solidarity." Nonetheless, when those youngsters hinted at a romantic interest

---

94. Shafran, 114.

95. See: Interview with Nissim Calderrun, 3.3.09 and an interview with Yoram Gozansky, 2.22.09.

96. Shafran, 57.

in the girls, "we were startled and clammed up like a hedgehog."[97] Nessia Shafran describes her group's attempts to connect to the local juvenile garage workers as driven by good but impractical intentions. She claims that "we felt sympathy for the garage boys in Bar-Kokhba Street, but we came from above, not from among them."[98] The lack of a proletarian identity was reflected in the MKI as well as in Banki. The history of the Party shows a tendency to deal more with the national question and relations with the Soviet Union than with the class struggle. A glaring example of that is the fact that Yair Tzaban was reprimanded by the Party for allocating too much space in an article in *Kol Hanoar* to the exploitation of young boys picking cotton, and for not allocating more space in the issue to the October Revolution.[99]

Why did the Jewish communists lack a proletarian identity? Above all, there were objective reasons. Since the 1920s the Communist Party had been forcibly marginalized within the Jewish working class. The PKP's inability to propagate its views openly certainly contributed to its inability to recruit workers in such numbers as to give it a proletarian character and identity. By the time the Party was allowed to operate openly among the Jewish working class, the Zionist *Histadrut* was already entrenched, giving the Jewish working class a Zionist-Socialist identity. Thus, the PKP and later the MKI were unable to emplace an alternative working-class identity.

The structure of the *Histadrut* itself prevented the Jewish communists from attaining a meaningful place within the ranks of Jewish workers. The *Histadrut* wielded a combination of economic and ideological powers that were vital to the Zionist project as "The organizational tools created in the *Histadrut* alongside the trade union – the workers' society and the economic enterprises, the collective settlements, workers' education, the pioneering youth movements, the welfare institutions, all those… were tools in the national struggle."[100] The potent combination of Zionist nationalism with a Socialist ideology that was meant to serve it made the *Histadrut* a powerful body. It

---

97. Gai, 219.

98. Shafran, 64.

99. Interview with Yair Tzaban, 2.19.09.

100. Yosef Gorny, Avi Bareli and Yitzhak Greenberg, eds., *The Histadrut: From a Workers' Society to Trade Union: Selected Essays on the Histadrut*, (Beer-Sheva, 2000), 2.

organized the workers to such a degree "that there was no space that would enable the Communist Party to penetrate industry and develop in it diverse trade union activity."[101] This factor clearly prevented the development of a true Jewish communist workers' identity. The lack of a communist union organization during the formative stage of the Jewish working class in the 1920s and the communists' subsequent inability to penetrate the highly organized Zionist union contrasts sharply with the efforts of the Arab communists. The NLL, exploiting the absence of a modern polity, used the emergence of a working class from the peasantry to mass-mobilize workers. The Arab communists managed to do exactly what their Jewish comrades were unable to. In the absence of a powerful anti-Communist union, they developed union activity. The question as to what working class identity, if any, the Arab communists developed awaits research.

A last factor that prevented the Jewish communists from forming a proletarian identity was the nature of political culture and conflict in Israel. Palestine's political culture evolved around the conflict between the Zionist immigrants' society and the emerging Palestinian nation.[102] The Jewish communists were more preoccupied with the fight against Zionism and dealing with the sway that nationalism had over them, than with diverting their energies to class warfare. Thus another barrier was erected to the creation of a proletarian identity among Jewish Communists.

The lack of a working-class identity does not detract from the cultural importance of the Jewish communists' identity structure. The Jewish communists identified with the plight of working people. The mythical, symbolic and ritualistic dimensions of that identification played an important role in shaping Jewish communist subculture. The Jewish Communists' presence within the Jewish working class may have been small, but it was there. The struggles of people like Alyosha Gozansky and countless unknown

---

101. Shafran, 63.

102. B. Kimmerling, *Immigrants, Settlers, Natives: the Israeli State and Society between Cultural Pluralism and Cultural Wars* (Tel Aviv, 2004), 90. "Since the Jewish community was an immigrant society, the conflict between it and the local Arab community was built into the situation."

others wrote an unknown page in the history of the Israeli working class. Theirs certainly was not the hegemonic Zionist narrative.

Conclusions

From 1919 until the split of the MKI in 1965, the Jewish communists created a unique May Day practice of their own. Within the confines of their subculture, influenced by Soviet, left-wing European and Zionist-Socialist elements, the Jewish communists produced a myth, symbol and rite of working-class militancy. Those cultural practices both reflected and fostered an identification of MKI and Banki members with workers; however, the Jewish communists never developed an authentic proletarian identity. The root cause of their inability to do so was the reality of the relations between workers and the Jewish communists. Unable to effectively penetrate the *Histadrut*-organized workers or change their Zionist-Socialist character, the PKP and later the MKI were doomed to work at the margins of labour politics in Palestine and Israel. Another inhibiting factor was the *Yishuv's* and Israeli political culture's overt focus on the escalating conflict with the Palestinians rather than questions of redistribution of wealth. Nonetheless, in contrast to this reality, the Jewish Israeli communist subculture celebrated May Day and the preeminence of the working class as one of its central practices.

The May Day celebration was couched in internationalist language, as the Jewish communists used the day to identify with workers and liberation struggles worldwide. At the same time, it was presented in pro-Soviet terms, the USSR being depicted as the workers' paradise. Symbolically, the holiday was centred on the dominant symbol of the Red Flag, as well as the symbols of Soviet power, the Red Star and the Hammer and Sickle. Increasingly after 1948, national and local communist symbols were integrated into the holiday, expressing the growing influence of Zionist-Socialist culture on the Jewish communists. Thus, the communists hoisted the national flag beside the Red Flag and held aloft depictions of the Arab-Jewish duo, symbolizing Arab-Jewish fraternity.

The ritual at the heart of the Jewish Communist May Day was the march. From the 1920s to the early 1940s, the Jewish communists celebrated May Day as a counter ritual in which they burst out into the public sphere from their underground existence to violently clash with the forces of order and their political rivals. After the legalization of the PKP, the May Day rite became a quasi-Stalinist, military-style parade that later developed, in the 1950s, into an elaborate display of Party politics and ideology. Even more than that, however, the May Day demonstration turned into a cultural practice where the Banki marchers displayed a vision of an economically egalitarian Israeli society free of ethnic tensions. It was a Socialist utopia of Israel.

In 1965, with the political split of the MKI and Banki, the Jewish communist subculture as it had developed since the 1920s came to an end. As the Jewish faction of the Party, still carrying the name of MKI, disintegrated into the Zionist left, those Jews still espousing communism remained active in RAKAH (New Communist List). What elements of the Jewish communist subculture, particularly regarding May Day, were still practiced by them is a question that awaits further research.

Amir Locker-Biletzki is a PhD candidate at the University of Guelph in the final stages of his program. He is a cultural historian whose interests include the history of Communism in Palestine/Israel, critic and history of Zionism and the State of Israel, and Middle East history, Soviet and Communist history and imagery.

Amir Locker-Biletzki est un candidat au doctorat en est à la phase finale de son programme à l'Université de Guelph. Son champ d'intérêt se situe en histoire culturelle et, plus particulièrement, l'histoire du communisme en Palestine/Israël, la critique et l'histoire du sionisme et l'État d'Israël, l'histoire du Moyen Orient, du communisme, de l'histoire soviétique ainsi que de l'imagerie.