



A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York

By Tony Michels

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In a compelling history of the Jewish community in New York during four decades of mass immigration, Tony Michels examines the defining role of the Yiddish socialist movement in the American Jewish experience.

The movement, founded in the 1880s, was dominated by Russian-speaking intellectuals, including Abraham Cahan, Mikhail Zametkin, and Chaim Zhitlovsky. Socialist leaders quickly found Yiddish essential to convey their message to the Jewish immigrant community, and they developed a remarkable public culture through lectures and social events, workers' education societies, Yiddish schools, and a press that found its strongest voice in the mass-circulation newspaper *Forverts*.

Arguing against the view that socialism and Yiddish culture arrived as Old World holdovers, Michels demonstrates that they arose in New York in response to local conditions and thrived not despite Americanization, but because of it. And the influence of the movement swirled far beyond the Lower East Side, to a transnational culture in which individuals, ideas, and institutions crossed the Atlantic. New York Jews, in the beginning, exported Yiddish socialism to Russia, not the other way around.

The Yiddish socialist movement shaped Jewish communities across the United States well into the twentieth century and left an important political legacy that extends to the rise of neoconservatism. A story of hopeful successes and bitter disappointments, *A Fire in Their Hearts* brings to vivid life this formative period for American Jews and the American left.

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A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York By Tony Michels Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1194824 in eBooks
- Published on: 2009-04-15
- Released on: 2009-03-02
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Socialism among Jewish immigrants to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is usually seen as a passing phase of acculturation into American life. But this illuminating study puts socialism back on the map as a core aspect of the Jewish immigrant experience. As Michels shows, hundreds of thousands of immigrants didn't bring socialism to New York; rather, their experiences trying to adjust to life there, along with their contact with Socialist German immigrants in the Lower East Side, led them to socialism. At the same time, Russian-speaking Jewish intellectuals in the community saw the importance of Yiddish as a tool in creating a flourishing world of leftist politics and a secular Yiddish culture. Michels, a professor of American Jewish history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, vividly depicts the lectures, unions and educational groups that taught Marxist and anarchist politics to the masses. He cites the numerous socialist politicians, both local and national, who were boosted by these immigrant votes. He also shows that many of these intellectuals then traveled back to Russia to spread socialism there. But Michels shows that, after 1920, in-fighting, along with rising economic fortunes, deradicalized Jewish immigrants.(Nov.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

In November, 1917, New York's Jewish working class elected a slew of Socialist Party officials, including seven aldermen, ten state assemblymen, and a municipal judge. Huge crowds gathered around "Trotsky Square" (the corner of 110th Street and Fifth Avenue) to celebrate. This informative, though at times dry, account traces the Jewish Socialist movement from its beginning, after the Russian pogroms of the eighteen-eighties, through its height, when revolutionaries like the German anarchist Johann Most made speeches on Lower East Side street corners, to its decline, a result of immigration quotas, the popularity of F.D.R., and the anti-Semitism accompanying the Red Scare. Michels points out that many of New York's atypical socially democratic features, like the cooperative-housing movement, were initiated by these practical revolutionaries, who were always ready to forsake orthodoxy for measurable gains in the working-class standard of living.

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Review

Tony Michels's elegantly written account of Jewish socialism at the turn of the century is groundbreaking. His deep knowledge of Jewish history and ease with Yiddish language sources shine through in this penetrating and innovative book. It will certainly become a standard in American Jewish history, but will also make a great impact in American political history, particularly on the history of the Left. (Beth S. Wenger, University of Pennsylvania)

Socialism as a force in the immigrant community has never gone beyond a kind of lip-service romanticism. Tony Michels has given this topic its rightful due. This superb book finally provides a way to understand socialism in the Jewish immigrant world in America. It will occupy an extremely important place in American Jewish history, labor history, and American radicalism. (Hasia R. Diner, author of *Hungering for America*)

Nothing is harder to envision today than the burning passion for knowledge, self-improvement, and social justice that once united working-class immigrants and fiery intellectuals under the banner of socialism. *A Fire in Their Hearts* is an illuminating and exceptionally well-researched account of the early decades of the

Jewish left, the immigrant cauldron in New York, and secular Yiddish culture in America. Michels's book has much to tell us about this still fascinating era. (Morris Dickstein, author of *Leopards in the Temple*)

This illuminating study puts socialism back on the map as a core aspect of the Jewish immigrant experience. As Michels shows, hundreds of thousands of immigrants didn't bring socialism to New York; rather, their experiences trying to adjust to life there, along with their contact with Socialist German immigrants in the Lower East Side, led them to socialism. (*Publishers Weekly* 2005-09-26)

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[Michels] portrays socialism as a transforming experience for many Jewish immigrants, something that shaped their thinking and touched their souls...[He] throughout offers a compelling story and a fresh, stimulating approach to understanding the Jewish experience in America. (Judith Maas *Boston Globe* 2005-12-29)

A beautifully written and crisply narrated history. (Eric Rauchway *Altercation*)

More than 170,000 Germans settled in New York's lower East Side, carriers of the same tradition that had turned the German Social Democratic Party in the late nineteenth century into the strongest socialist party in the world. Their language, as Michels incisively points out, was the cradle of modern Yiddish in the United States. (Abraham Brumberg *Times Literary Supplement* 2006-07-21)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Cornell Smith:

Precisely why? Because this A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap that but latter it will jolt you with the secret it inside.

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