

When Bundism Expanded to the Americas: The Story of the Transnationalisation of Jewish Socialism

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Abstract:

Frank Wolff's book tells a fascinating history of Bund, putting it in the context of migration and transnational exchanges. Basing his research on biographies of Bundist activist and numerous archival sources, the author underscores very personal aspects of modern political movements and shows how the Bundists truly dreamt about a better tomorrow that was supposed to happen "here and now". For Wolff, the half-century long history of Bund serves as a departure point for examining how the movement evolved, transcended the geographical borders, and changed as its activists turned into migrants.

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Wolff, Frank: *Neue Welten in der Neuen Welt. Die transnationale Geschichte des Allgemeinen Jüdischen Arbeiterbundes 1897-1947*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2014. 558 S., hardcover, 69,90 Euro. ISBN: 978-3-412-22211-6

Neue Welten in der Neuen Welt. Die transnationale Geschichte des Allgemeinen Jüdischen Arbeiterbundes 1897-1947, is a new take on writing history of political movements. Rather than examining changing policies and internal conflicts, Frank Wolff decided to focus on the activists and their stories. Looking on the biographies of the dispersed Bundists in the United States and Argentina, the author examines how Bundist history was remembered and caused to evolve in the New World.

Wolff's book fits well into the growing trend of writing transnational histories. Whereas at the beginning of the development of diaspora studies in the 1990s transnationalism was seen as a contemporary phenomenon, in recent years scholars have begun applying this perspective to past conditions and processes. The Wolff's study overlaps additionally with the field of memory and remembrance studies. Thus, his book is located on a very fruitful and exciting intersection of transnational history and memory politics, and is strengthened by an honest use of classic historical tools.

Bund, the main actor of Wolff's book, was a left-wing Jewish political movement that originated among Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe. The peak of its development was in interwar Poland, when the movement administered their own schools, daily newspapers, a publishing house, a sanatorium and its members served as councillors in many municipalities throughout Poland. The Bund was based on a secular vision of Jewishness that was understood as a Jewish diaspora national project that had Yiddish as a national language and focused on improving the conditions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, "here and now". Yet, some of its activist emigrated to the Americas and spread Bundist ideas among working-class Jewish masses from New York to Buenos Aires.

The Frank Wolff's book is composed of three parts. The first examines the development of Bundist activism in Eastern Europe, the second looks into the processes of remembering and biographies of Bundists, whereas the last one considers the transnationalisation of bundism through the migration. Three sections together form a well-informed, detailed, and innovative study.

Exceptionally interesting are the subchapters devoted to Bundist schooling and fundraising. Analysing the expansion of the TSYSHO (Central Jewish School Organization) schooling model, Wolff shows how Bundism combined Jewishness with socialist ethics. Examining cases from the United States and Argentina, the author presents Bundist schooling as both an origin and an outcome of its transnationalisation. Relying not only on the institutional archives, but also on testimonies of teachers and students, Wolff draws a picture of innovative, secular schooling that shaped the new generation of “nationally aware” Jewish children.

In the next section, the author examines transnational campaigns organized by the Bund. As the economic situation in interwar Poland was far from rosy, the Bundist institutions struggled to make ends meet. The schools could not count on the state or municipal support. Proletarian parents could barely support the education of their children. The Bund solved this by organizing regular fundraising campaigns in the countries where emigrants from Poland were concentrated. Polish Jews in the USA and Argentina felt responsible for the well-being of the “Bundist jewels”, how the schools were often labelled, and gladly offered their financial support. The campaigns usually included a Polish-Jewish emissary who travelled through the Americas collecting the money and giving talks for the immigrant Jewish public that shared Bundist ideals. Such was the case of Borys Tabaczyński, who visited Argentina in 1931, or Baruch Schefner, who came to South America in 1936. As Wolff argues, these visits linked the Bundist ideals of *doyakyt* (“hereness”) and transnational lives of Eastern European Jews. The meetings, apart from their financial goal, served as a way of forming a transnational community of Bundist activists and supporters who struggled for a better Jewish future despite geographical divisions.

What requires special attention is the linguistic and geographical diversity of sources used by the author. Frank Wolff gathered an impressive selection of archival materials in Yiddish, Spanish, English, and German that also shows how Bund transnationalised from Eastern Europe to the United States, Argentina, and Canada.

Wolff’s book, based on his doctoral dissertation, is an exceptional and innovative approach to the history of Bund. The book could be recommended for everyone that is interested not only in Eastern European Jewish studies, but for everyone that works on diaspora and transnational studies. Thanks to Frank Wolff we see the Bund in a broader, multidimensional perspective. Wolff has made the Bund history fuller, more personal, and has accessed its new transnational readings.