

Hillel Solotaroff, Serious Questions¹

Hillel Solotaroff, *Geklibene Shriften: Driter Band* (New York: Dr. H. Solotaroff Publication Committee, 1924), 299–306. <https://archive.org/details/nybc207536/page/n302/mode/2up>

How dreadful are these pictures from the latest pogroms in Russia! What horrifying windows into the survivor's soul!

It seems this scene has risen from some ancient memory, a bloody and cruel nightmare of the crazed folks-mass with its hellish clamor and wild drunken din, a people driven mad by the shattering of windows and the crashing down of houses, lost in a devilish cry and infernal laughter, possessed by a tearing, bestial lust – the lust to humiliate and annihilate, to rape and murder, to hate and consume. In this tumult one can hear the quiet sob of the frightened, the strained groan of the wounded, the choked cry of raped women, and the wailing of weary children. This image of the fallen clouds our eyes even when shut, the image of the beaten and wounded, of the bandits and plunderers, of the desolation of poverty and suffering, of tormented and vulnerable people, an image of fear, of hunger and of need, an image of mourning and contempt! This image of misfortune and torment washes over our shuddering body, each limb becomes cold, it stains the heart with a blackness, becoming bit by bit darker and darker, as a storm of warm tears flows!

And willing or not the mind is confronted with tragic and serious questions.

Deep are the wounds and greater is the pain for the Jew – the idealist, the freethinking person, who has dedicated his life to a great belief in progress and light, to freedom and the love of humanity, and upheld his great beliefs with ideals of a joyful and happy future for future generations.

Deep are the wounds, I say, and greater is the pain, when he looks a little closer at the vast bloody history of Jewish persecution and pogroms, unlike the Jew-baiters and dishonorable anti-Semites who astoundingly increase more and more in the almost all of the civilized countries of the world. And even deeper will that wounded feeling be for him when he considers all the Jew-baiters and tormentors and all the inhumane and gruesome deaths and pogroms that have passed before the eyes of the civilized world, a world that boasts of its wonderful progress of knowledge and light, of humanitarian ideas and brotherhood, of internationalist sentiment and sparkling social ideals.

Now more than ever, I say, we are confronted with tragic and serious questions. Has the great and powerful dissemination of light and knowledge, the astounding program of ideas and concepts, the widespread desire for egalitarian economic and socialist conditions for all peoples, the propaganda of international socialist and anarchist ideals, has any of it, the entire progress of humanity in all civilized lands, lessened the enormous hatred from all peoples against the eternal persecuted Jewish folk by even a sliver? When one simply wants to know the truth, to not sooth the heart with a sweet hope for the future, we are answered with the inhuman state of Russia, the shameful anti-Semitism in Germany, the folk-cry of “a bas les juifs” in the streets of Paris, the torment in Russia, Galicia and Austria and even traces of the accursed symbols of Jew-hate in America. They all answer with a thousand tongues: No and No! The sinister religious hatred of the ignorant Christian masses alone is not enough. Look around, in every country there are distinct conditions that foment a nationalist hatred against the Jews even among the educated and enlightened.

¹ I would like to thank Tova Benjamin for her much-needed advice on this translation.

The civilized word can boast of its progress, as it does, science can spread its light to all corners of the world, the ideals of freedom and equality can uphold belief in an old-worldly brotherhood – but the history of the last fifty years is ample evidence that neither the progress of nations, nor the light of science, nor even the brotherly-ideals of the freedom-fighter nor of the bearer of social ideals has prevented the persecution nor alleviated the suffering of the Jewish people.

How sad is this bitter truth, and what serious results it has for the lives of the Jewish people! Results which we all – all who desire a humane society in the future – must come to. Despite that our life's work is the purification of the Jewish folk, no matter how much we hide it, choke it back, deny it a hundred thousand more times – we are Jews alone.² And when they beat, torment, torture, and murder the Jewish people as Jews, it calls up from deep in our soul such a strong, deep pain that we would, it seems, rather die as Jews, than buy our own lives with a false Jewishness. Yes, we must reckon with the results of the torment of the Jews, we must reckon with this phenomenon, which is life or death for the Jewish people.

Now, after this dire news, do we return again to the old basis of natural science, that the strongest motive of each living creature and of most people is to hold on to their own life by tooth and nail? It seems not. These days few are convinced. But it is exactly this feeling that exists in each individual social group's life. Ordinarily, the peaceful existence of a social group reduces its particular social attitude, as it is nourished, made productive, and developed bit by bit by new social relationships. But should an enemy attack the social group, they will instantly strengthen their internal ties, the inner union of one being to another, and this strengthened spirit of unity will create a single, powerful striving – an indomitable force that will destroy his enemy's ability to bring shame on the group. This is a natural law, which man has emblazoned in the slogan "unity is strength." Perhaps you have maybe seen this wonderful strength in the work of a great artist, who has painted a flock of sheep in an open field during a fierce gale? The sky is shrouded with heavy, black clouds hanging over him, a tremendous wind blows and howls and pulls at the earth beneath it. It takes every ounce of strength to paint with precision such total chaos. The sheep, who no one can protect, feel the enormous might of this great destruction, life is shrunken from pain and fear, and they all hunker down and squeeze together, closer and closer, one by one forming together into a great mass of bodies and little heads. Even in their little brains are capable of the concept, that unity is strength! Have you not seen this wonderful image?

Consider the history of the Jewish folk for the last thirty years.

I remember, in the early 80s' the great storms of the first Russian pogroms began, when the Russian-Jewish youth had spread out over all the schools to absorb the light and wisdom from the well of knowledge – when they became separated from the Jewish folk. Though wisdom and light they gained humanitarian ideals, liberatory ideals, and international aspirations. They upheld the great hope of assimilation, casting aside all that is Jewish ("ales yidishes"). I remember also how soon after the pogroms the very same Jewish youth threw themselves back into the great huddled mass of the Jewish people and already then, in my time, they demonstrated a great striving for unity with the folk. The youth fought and died hand-in-hand to save them from such a horrible terror, with the very same hands that they had once reached out for assimilation. It was at that time, almost 25 years ago, that the tormenters of the Jews, the inciters of anti-Semitism and the inhuman horrors they wrought became a chronic phenomenon

² By "purification" ("reyen"), Soloratoff means the tendency among both Jewish socialists and the upholders of enlightenment principles (here melded) to combine progress with assimilation. Indeed, many Jewish anarchists and socialists at the time saw the coming social revolution as wiping away all ethnic distinction, including that which made them Jews.

in almost the entire civilized world. And bit by bit that enormous storm of persecution will push together more and more all the Jewish folk into one great national mass, where it will find its only strength in its national unity.

One would have to be blind to not see this. Blind not to see that the might stormy of nationalism, not of religious nationalism, but of cultural-political nationalism (“kulture-politishen natsionalizm”), will spread to all countries. Even here in America it will erupt – like the last inhuman pogrom in Russia – the twenty-year work of international socialism and anarchism.

But the circumstances which bring out such a national feeling in every Jew are too powerful [we are told]. Though this is the natural consequence of the desire for self-preservation for any social group, including the Jewish people in its time of unending persecution, we hope they will not be tempted by it, that it will not affect even for a moment our daily lives. Yet now more than ever we are confronted with a serious and great problem, because now we must answer what our relationship is to the developing spirit of the [Jewish] folk, to the development of our nationalism!

Nationalism! A mighty striving of the people toward nationalism in the twentieth century, after a hundred years of progress of the global ideal for solidarity among all people (“al-menshlakher eynikayt”) – truly a sorrowful occurrence.

But what can one do, as these are the facts of our existence; is this not the ambition of our folk, the outcome of our bloody history?

What can we do, as this is the nature of that inner spirit that seeks to preserve the life of its own persona and that of its entire group with its inner, spiritual connections and its particular way of life? What can we do given that that this is the mighty spirit of life, which one cannot pull back in a moment, just as now one cannot pull back the great hands of the watch of time now pointed to a deep, dark night over the entire world! And not only is this unconscious spirit of the masses there to preserve its unique life, but it is also the unconscious echo in our own soul of that distant scream of the Jewish martyr, that enflames us like a wildfire in our soul, instilling a burning desire to do something about our people, to save them from the hand of their torturer, from the barbarian that bathes in his [the Jew’s] warm blood and offers up his small children on the altar of a wild, drunken rage and rapes his daughter and young wife with a tyrannical and unlimited lust. Yes, we can be whoever we want to be if we are true only to ourselves. If we do not remain beholden to those timed angels with the stench of scientific-philosophy who are satisfied with the little change that they make in the blessed land of America, nor to those warm and enthusiastic souls who for the world’s ills one cure – the future – and for all of humanity one messiah – the future society.³ Rather, I say, we are, willing or not, nationalists.

Thus every serious free-thinking person is confronted with the unavoidable question: how can we square our great liberationist ideals for a joyous communal life,⁴ in which we believe with all the strength of our soul, with this deep inner feeling that demands we throw ourselves into the stream of our folk-spirit and with it strive for national wholeness, which alone can save the masses of some ten million people from total annihilation?

Let us not be fools! As much as we may believe in our ideals, as inevitable their accomplishments may be for mankind one day, we must admit that now, in the current moment, they are simply powerless to

³ Here Solotaroff criticizes the more classically Marxist-minded among socialists who rely on a strict developmental view of society which saw socialism as an inevitable future due to changing social conditions.

⁴ Meaning socialism.

prevent either the overflowing striving of our masses, or the inner striving of our soul. Indeed, what good is such toying around? They beat us, they murder us, they set us on fire and cook us alive, they want to kill us all! We look instinctively for every method to resist the force that wants to consume us, that drives us into a mighty union of all the beaten, burned, and bloodied – and find the most powerful, the nationalization of our folk.

But must we therefore cast aside our ideals? Or reconsider what social conditions will make a future free and communal life inevitable?

I don't know! Our ideals remain always and forever the true ideals, to which the development of our humanity marches on. Besides, even they have not lost their international character, which make them ideals for all mankind, simply because they are driven by international social conditions. But even after deep and serious contemplation, one cannot find either in the ideals of total freedom or of communal solidarity a single attribute that would contradict our very real experience of life, of existence.

The powerful force that is Jewish nationalism is the expression of that genuine experience of our existence.

Who knows better than we do of the fantastical beliefs and dark superstitions, of the deep rifts between human and human, of the degrading enslavement and terrible oppression (from god, from rulers, from tyrants) that nationalism has already driven nations to in the history of the world! Who knows better than we do of the dreadful social conditions, of the rivers of human blood and seas of human tears, of the hate and contempt, murder and revenge driven on by nationalism day after day. Who knows better than we do, as Jews and free-thinking people?!

Here lies our greatest and strongest human rights.

We are with the spirit of our people because we suffer and feel with our people in their infinite martyrdom, because we seek to protect ourselves and our people from our external enemies and torturers who want to destroy us. We are with the spirit of our people and suffer and feel with it in its unending martyrdom, *because* we seek to protect the folk and ourselves from our inner enemy and torturer who want us enslaved and dominated.⁵ We lock ourselves up in the miserable purification of our people, imploring them to resist their attackers and savagers, to respond to them with the light of knowledge and freedom and teach them not to lose themselves to bitterness and the slavery of their inner temptations and instincts. Rather, I speak “to it”, to the Jewish folk, “in its own spirit.” While that great international spirit of human brotherhood would advise that we should be happy and teach the peoples of the world who beat and hate us, who torment us and murder us, who bathe in our blood every day. To preach the internationalist spirit to the Jewish folk is to preach its own destruction.

Our relationship to this immense stream of nationalism is therefore clear; we must not only help to save the Jewish people from the extraordinary forces of torment and destruction, but also seek to help group the [Jewish] masses together. National unity should hind the inner destruction of our people. We must be the avant-garde of freedom and light and help the development of a culture, which should lead to a free and better social life for our folk.

⁵ Emphasis mine.