Jews, Expatriate Artists, and Political Radicalism in Interwar France

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Jews were new neither to Paris nor to the artistic avant-garde in the 1920s. What was new were both their numbers and visibility. One French study estimates that over five hundred Jewish artists were working in Paris in the interwar era; of these, 151 are discussed in that book. The international assortment of artists, many though not all Jews, who descended on jazz-age Paris in the 1920s, became known as the École de Paris. French-born artists who felt beleaguered by this foreign influx began to distinguish themselves as the École de France, and they tended to be more traditional stylistically than their foreign-born counterparts. Most of the Jewish artists were not politically radical, and, if they were, they probably refrained from advertising the fact, since they risked deportation if their political allegiance attracted the attention of the police. Nevertheless, their presence invited the interest of critics who bemoaned their undue cultural influence and who were likely to conflate foreignness, avant-gardism, and radical politics. This essay discusses the Jewish artists of Montparnasse and the reaction against them by right-wing critics. It then focuses on two Jewish modernists—one an Alsatian poet and writer, the other a Russian émigré painter—who were closely associated during this period.

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Yvan Goll and Marc Chagall in many ways typified the artistic trends of the interwar era.

Jewish would-be artists began arriving in Paris in the decade before the First World War—indeed, most of those who became well known in the interwar period were already there by the outbreak of the war. Before the war they remained struggling artists, and it seems they had not yet coalesced as a school of art. Many lived and worked in the odd-looking circular beehive building called La Ruche at the southern fringe of Montparnasse. La Ruche was created in 1902 by a French sculptor, who envisioned it as an ideal community based on the utopian socialist Charles Fourier’s *phalansteries*. Fernand Léger took up residence there, but soon found himself surrounded by many émigrés from Eastern Europe. The avant-garde poet Blaise Cendrars wrote a poem called "Atelier" (Studio) in October 1913 that described the warren of studios:

La Ruche  
Stairs, doors, stairs  
And his door opens like a newspaper  
Covered with visiting cards  
Then it closes.  
Disorder, wild disorder  
. . . Cossacks Christ a sun decomposing  
Roofs  
Sleepwalkers goats  
A werewolf  
Petrus Borel  
Madness winter  
A genie split open like a peach  
Lautréamont  
Chagall  
Poor kid beside my wife

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Cendrars, born like Chagall in 1887, repeats his friend Chagall's name twice more in the poem. That he associates Chagall with Lautréamont is striking, because he would become a key figure for the Surrealists of the 1920s. Cendrars seems to be assimilating Chagall's style to Surrealism avant la lettre. Later, André Breton would recognize in Chagall a precursor of Surrealist art; Cendrars, however, kept his distance from the Surrealists and all other art movements. In her book on La Ruche, Jeanine Warnod (daughter of André Warnod, a friend and defender of the artists of Montparnasse) describes the studio complex as comprised of "poverty, the ghetto, anarchy, individualism, the universe of Kafka." She also writes that "after the arrival of Léger, Chagall, Soutine, Archipenko, the spirit of La Ruche turned to anti-academicism and to anarchy."

Elsewhere she mentions the many exiled Russian revolutionaries, including Lenin and Trotsky, who might be seen in the cafes of Montparnasse, noting that many of the artists of La Ruche belonged to the Society of Russian artists and were used to police surveillance.

Marc Chagall, who had arrived in Paris in 1911, returned to Russia the summer of 1914 and soon married his fiancée Bella. Trapped by the war and then by the Russian Revolution, he would not return to France for nine years. After the Bolshevik seizure of power, he was named commissar for the arts in his native town of Vitebsk, and he threw himself into public art. He taught at the local art academy and later designed sets for the Yiddish theater in Moscow. He bitterly recounted to the Jewish art critic and anarchist Florent Fels in 1925 that when the art professors returned, innovators like himself were dismissed from their posts. In fact, it was Kasimir Malevich and the highly abstract Suprematists who replaced Chagall. In 1922, he, Bella, 

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6 Warnod, 158-59.
and their daughter Ida travelled to Berlin and made it to Paris the following year.

Early in 1925, Chagall's work was reviewed in the communist-affiliated intellectual journal *Clarté*. The reviewer discussed Chagall's ideological trajectory at some length, and he came up with a very different interpretation of the artist's time in the Soviet Union than Chagall himself suggested. Describing him as belonging to the class of "petit-bourgeois in decomposition," the reviewer said that he had returned to Russia to be crowned a revolutionary artist and had rallied to the revolution and made some concessions to realism, because the Bolsheviks demanded that he be a realist, materialist, and naturalist. Then the reviewer commented acidly:

He, who had led so hard a combat for Abstraction, for Anarchy, for his Self and his navel, would be a realist? . . . He thought to seize the truth by means of anarchist reality, individualist and egoist . . . But the revolution demanded just the opposite: not an individualist ideology, but the just comprehension of the collective world problem of the organized proletariat. Thus the petit-bourgeois believed himself naturally to be in hell and found no place among the Bolsheviks, despite his ultra-revolutionary words and acts. And he went away, far, very far, with one sole hope: to succeed in Paris. The exhibition of Chagall in Paris shows in a complete fashion the different stages he has followed: 1910–17, impressionism, petit-bourgeois individualism, cubo-futurism and expressionism; 1917–18, return to petit-bourgeois naturalism—which is none other than the incomprehension of realist aspirations of the proletarian Russian Revolution. Objectively that signifies a step backward toward anarchism, and not a step forward toward proletarian realism, toward the organization of reality.⁸

Chagall was condemned for having left the land of revolution behind, presumably to make his fortune in the capitalist art market, but even more for his anti-realist style. The reviewer brandished the epithet "anarchist" as a synonym for

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modernism. This was well before the official doctrine of socialist realism had been established, but the communist fellow-travelers at *Clarté* had already decided that Chagall was both temperamentally and stylistically ill-suited to toe the party line. Ironically, later that same year, André Breton and several of the young Surrealists would announce their new allegiance to communism in *Clarté*, beginning a decade of their own fellow traveling that ended in Breton's being drummed out of the movement at the international writers' conference of 1935. Surrealism was probably too new for the communist reviewer to use as another epithet to hurl at Chagall, and, in any case, the artist kept his distance from the Surrealists. Of course, calling Chagall an anarchist did not make him one, and it appears clear that Chagall's sympathies were with the non-Marxist left.

The animus of the *Clarté* reviewer was motivated by communism, not anti-Semitism. Yet it was just as easy for reviewers motivated by hostility to the incursion of Jewish artists to associate Jews, modern art, and anarchist politics. Camille Mauclair was a critic who reviewed art for the conservative paper *Le Figaro*. In response to support for the École de Paris expressed in the art journal *L'Art Vivant*, Mauclair collected his newspaper columns into two books, published in 1928 and 1930, both titled *La farce de l'art vivant*, with the second bearing the subtitle, "Les métèques contre l'art français" (aliens against French art), in case anyone should mistake his purpose. The third chapter of the first volume was titled "Toujours plus à la gauche" (always further to the left); in it Mauclair called the current crop of avant-garde artists a pictorial Third International after the association of world communist parties who took their orders from Moscow (popularly called the Comintern). Whereas the impressionists were French (ignoring such foreigners as Mary Cassatt), now the avant-garde salons were filled with foreigners who hoped to impose "pictorial communism: [the] real danger is that conception which separates art from nature and the artist from his race, cutting the roots . . . where our taste, our sensibility, our terroir (native soil) no longer count. That conception is encouraged by all the adherents of political
extremism."³⁹ Since the École de Paris was international, it must by definition be opposed to French nationalism; since it was avant-garde, it must also be leftist. Mauclair was not about to admit that his hostility to the new artists derived from anti-Semitism. Because he was Catholic, he argued, he was not anti-Semitic—indeed, he had many Jewish friends:

One must admit that if Jews have produced marvelous poets, they have never excelled in plastic arts. How then explain that the current art market is in the hands of Jewish merchants and critics, and that they therefore push Jewish painters to the forefront of "living art," all agreeing to attack the Latin tradition and to obey the spirit of negating criticism, of dissociation, of overturning of values, which is the old Bolshevik base of their race.¹⁰

Whether he intended it or not, Mauclair sounded much like the National Socialists in accusing modern art of being internationalist and Bolshevik, but also capitalist, with the art market manipulated by dealers whom Mauclair repeatedly satirized as "Lévy-Tripp, Gluant, Bouc and Rosenschwein."¹¹ His first volume concluded that modern art was a conspiracy to pass off bad art on the unsuspecting French and meanwhile take over the mantle of modernism.

Mauclair blazed no new ground in the second volume of The Farce of Living Art, but he took umbrage at the cries of anti-Semitism directed his way. Again he referred to his dear Jewish friends, but became increasingly shrill about the danger of the "homdegoche" (man of the left), who believed that art makes progress, traveling like a railroad in a straight line from station to station. "And the avant-gardist does not follow a straight line," Mauclair further objected, "he always leans toward the left."¹²

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¹⁰ Mauclair, La farce, 1:199.
¹¹ Mauclair, La farce, 1: 199. Among the many Jewish art dealers operating in interwar Paris were Uhde, Kahnweiler, Zborowski, and Rosenberg.
Mauclair's animus reached its peak when he described the art scene centered on Montparnasse. The internationalist spirit lurking there was favorable to bolshevism, while the foreigners indulged themselves in all forms of decadence: "The Monparnasse crowd united in the cult of alcohol, cocaine, and the living art of Germans, Pollocks, Little Russians, Yankees, Japanese; there were even some Negros and redskins, and all that made up the 'School of Paris.' Among the whites, the proportion of Semites is around 80 percent, and that of failures (ratés) is nearly equivalent."\(^\text{13}\)

Mauclair contrasted this alarming collection of revolutionaries and addicts with the flourishing of French art that took place between 1860 and 1900. The irony of this attack is that as a young man in the 1890s, Mauclair himself had been one of the many littérateurs inspired by the deeds of the anarchists. He had written a novel toward the end of the fin de siècle anarchist vogue, Le soleil des morts (The sun of the dead), in which he imagined a popular insurrection leading to a harmonious society.\(^\text{14}\) As with the Clarté critic, so Mauclair's diatribe has more to say about his own fears than about the École de Paris, and it anticipates the growing spirit of nationalism and anti-Semitism of the coming decade. Yet if most artists of Montparnasse were neither morphinomanes nor anarchists, it is telling that they were perceived as such; perhaps the legend of such famous decadents as Amedeo Modigliani, of Sephardic Jewish extraction and whose brother was a leading socialist back in Italy, stimulated Mauclair's fevered imagination.

The other Jewish artist on whom this article focuses was also only marginally French, but less removed from French origins than the émigrés from Eastern Europe. Yvan Goll was born Isaac Lang, but he used some variant of Yvan Goll throughout his career (his pseudonyms included Iwan Goll, Ivan Goll, and even

\(^{13}\) Mauclair, La farce, 2:41.

\(^{14}\) For Mauclair's early anarchist fellow-traveling, see Richard Sonn, Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 229-34.
Gollivan). He was born to Abraham Lang and Rebecca Lazard in 1891 in St. Dié in the Vosges. His father was Alsatian; his mother came from Metz in Lorraine, and she raised him there after his father died in 1897. That ancestry made him a German citizen, twenty-three years of age when war broke out in 1914. To escape military service, Goll fled to Switzerland, where he joined the literary pacifists who included Romain Rolland, Stefan Zweig, and James Joyce. Joyce and Goll remained friends until Joyce's death in 1941. In Switzerland, Goll wrote a collection of poems called Élegies internationaux, as well as a "Requiem pour les morts de l'Europe, 1916–1917." In a 1917 poem called "Noémi," Goll acknowledged his Jewish heritage, writing "Hear O Israel, Adonai was your God, Adonai was the only one (l'Unique)." Noémi, described as a daughter of the ghetto, is destined to "give to the ancient faith the name of knowledge (Connaissance)". This poetic activity attracted the attention of a young woman who soon became Claire Goll. I emphasize the Jewish themes of Goll's writing because as with most secularized, leftist Jews, Goll rarely refers to his Jewishness. At the end of his life, Goll did emphasize his internationalism, writing that "I leave with a French heart, German spirit, Jewish blood, and an American passport."

The Golls arrived in Paris in November 1919, but even before they arrived Goll had contributed a translation of fourteen poems by German anti-war poets to Maurice Wullens' anarchist journal Les Humbles. Wullens titled this collection "Le coeur de l'ennemi" (heart of the enemy). Goll became a frequent contributor to Florent Fels' literary anarchist journal Action beginning in 1920, publishing his own poems (including one called "Les juifs mendiants" [the beggar Jews]) as well as articles on German expressionism, on the sculptor Archipenko, etc. Fels was a French Jewish critic who was one of the prime

targets of Camille Maucclair's wrath, since he promoted many of the Jewish émigré artists in the 1920s and was a major force behind *L'Art Vivant*, the journal Maucclair satirized so savagely.

Equally fluent in French and German, Yvan Goll functioned as an intermediary between the two cultures, and in 1922 he translated and edited a collection of poems from around the world called *Cinq continents* (Five Continents). However, Goll also contributed to Henri Barbusse's leftist journal *Clarté*, which started out as an independent leftist and anti-war publication, but by 1922 was turning into the intellectual organ of the French Communist Party. Since both *Les Humbles* and *Action* were as strongly pacifist as they were anarchist, it is possible that Goll's connection with them signified his internationalism rather than an explicitly anarchist orientation. None of his biographers identify him as an anarchist writer, though one characterizes his twin ideals as individualism and humanism, the former suggesting liberation and the latter his social mission, which is more congruent with anarchism than socialism. Another calls him a "romantic nihilist," a sufficiently vague term that also puts him closer to anarchism than communism. None of his critics, however, discuss his most avowedly anarchist book. To understand its significance, we need to take a glance at 1920s anarchism.

In 1923, a twenty-year-old anarchist woman named Germaine Berton killed Marius Plateau, a leading member of the right-wing Action Française, walking into his office and firing five shots at him before turning the gun on herself. She only wounded herself in the shoulder and was tried for the assassination in December of that year. Berton claimed at her trial that she had killed Plateau to avenge the murder of the socialist orator Jean Jaurès in 1914 on the eve of World War I. The Action Française had called for someone to silence the great

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pacifist leader. Though the only remorse she expressed was that she had failed to kill the real target of her wrath, the deputy and *Action Française* newspaper editor Léon Daudet, Berton was acquitted in the week-long trial by a jury that deliberated all of thirty-five minutes before refusing to convict a young woman for a crime that had sent many male anarchists to the guillotine or at least to jail. Female anarchist assassins were rare in France and in Western Europe in general, and Germaine Berton received considerable attention and admiration from the avant-garde left. Most famously, an unflattering police photograph of her was featured in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, surrounded by pictures of the young Surrealists and a few other figures whom the Surrealists admired, including Sigmund Freud and Pablo Picasso.\(^19\)

In a police report on Russian anarchists who circulated around Montparnasse, dated 5 June 1924, the police singled out two female Jewish Russian émigrés. One was named Olga Gorney, a painter's model. Her redheaded friend Marie Laska sold drawings on the street, and both frequented the popular cafes on the boulevard du Montparnasse. The report described both women as fervent followers of Germaine Berton. The police noted that Olga Gorney's sister Anna had a lover, a Jewish chauffeur, who had been expelled from France for radical activities.\(^20\) Two months later, another police report noted that Olga Gorney and Marie Laska, were two of many foreigners frequenting the cafes du Dome and de la Rotonde, but they were not able to establish whether political conversations were being carried out there. Gorney was noted as having been born in 1893 in Nijni-Novgorod and as being the mistress of a taxi driver named Chaim Gopp. Laska was born in Poland in 1894 and was married to an artist named Joseph Klein, born in Budapest in


\(^{20}\) Archives of the Prefecture of Police of the Department of the Seine, Paris [hereafter PPo], BA 1709, 5 June 1924, marked "From a Correspondent."
1902. Klein was an artist; it was his drawings and paintings that Marie sold in the streets. Marie had been a student before the war, then returned to Paris in 1918, living on subsidies sent by her parents, who owned textile factories in Tourcoing, France, and Lodz, Poland. The police reported that they had stopped sending her money for the last two years. While this constitutes scant evidence of radical ferment in Jewish circles in Montparnasse, it does demonstrate police concern about such ferment. It was not only Camille Mauclair who found this foreign community suspicious.

Perhaps more significant than some idle café talk about the young female terrorist, in 1925 Yvan Goll published the only book ever written on the trial of Germaine Berton. Germaine Berton, Die Rote Jungfrau was published in Berlin as part of a series of books with a leftist orientation. While it is possible that Goll wrote the book more as a money-making venture than as a piece of anarchist propaganda, in the book he vilified Léon Daudet and idealized Berton, describing her at one point as having "a soul of burning iron." At the very least he wanted to inform the German public about French anarchism, and specifically about the anarchists' attempts to rebuff the far right. It is worth noting that Berton's attentat took place in January 1923 during the French invasion of the Ruhr, which was loudly championed by the Action Française and decried by anarchists like Berton, who viewed the French invasion as war-mongering.

Two decades later in exile in the United States, Goll wrote to his fellow writer-in-exile André Breton in terms that affiliated him in a non-sectarian way with the revolutionary left:

I arrived from Switzerland animated by a revolutionary spirit and trying to inflame your young hearts; at that time, motivated solely by aesthetic goals, you had only mistrust for "action" and for the spirit of revolt. . . . Five years later, it was you who became more revolutionary than the others, in complete contradiction to your principles formulated in Littérature. At that time, having already

21 PPo, BA 1709, 13 August 1924.
noted the bankruptcy of European regeneration, of the surrender of the German revolutions, I returned to my ivory tower.\footnote{Albert Ronsin, "Yvan Goll et André Breton: Des relations difficiles," in Grunewald and Valentin, \textit{Yvan Goll: Situations de l'écrivain}, 66.}

Goll perceived Breton and the Surrealists as having been apolitical until their adherence to communism in 1925, while he had been full of the spirit of revolt. When they entered politics, he retreated to literature, reinforcing the overall pattern that anarchist enthusiasm dropped off after 1925. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that though Goll and Chagall maintained their distance from Breton and the Surrealists, both shared a great deal stylistically with Surrealism. Goll even had the nerve to title a journal he edited \textit{Surréalisme}, which appeared for one issue just before \textit{La Révolution Surréaliste} entered the scene. Though he was a man with strong pacifist and leftist sympathies, Goll also read the Kabbala.\footnote{For evidence of Goll’s interest in Kabbala and Jewish mysticism, see \textit{Fruit from Saturn} (Brooklyn: Hemispheres, 1946). This late book of poetry was written in English, attesting to Goll’s linguistic skills. For a study of the mystical influences on his work, see Vivien Perkins, \textit{Yvan Goll: An Iconographical Study of His Poetry} (Bonn: H. Bouvier, 1970).} Goll and Chagall were attracted enough to mysticism and the irrational to automatically distance themselves from the communist left.

In 1936, Yvan Goll published an epic poem called "La chanson de Jean Sans Terre" (the song of homeless John), which reprised the theme of the wandering Jew at a time when the rise of Nazism had created many Jewish refugees. "Jean Sans Terre" was perhaps a play on the name given the medieval Burgundian noble Jean Sans Peur or on John Lackland, that is, Bad King John, who lacked an inheritance because he was the youngest son of Henry II of England. Jean Sans Terre was not explicitly Jewish, but rather identified the plight of the Jews as central to the era.\footnote{Yvan Goll, \textit{Jean Sans Terre} (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1958); see "Jean Sans Terre Meets Ahasuerus," Babette Deutsch translator, including the concluding stanza, "Thus John Landless meeting/Ahasuerus the Jew/Recognized perhaps his brother/But flesh of his flesh he knew."} The wandering Jew was the principal victim of the age...
of extreme nationalism. At a time when ethnicity reinforced the
power of the state, the Jew was in danger of becoming stateless.
More victim than revolutionary, the Jew, like the anarchist, had
been marginalized in the bellicose atmosphere of the late 1930s.
This poetic cycle captures Goll's own sense of homelessness as
he wandered first around Europe and then arrived in America as
a wartime exile. After singing an ode to France in May 1940,
Jean Sans Terre strolls down Broadway, buys Manhattan ("I buy
Manhattan for a single smile/I sell it back for immortality"), and
salutes the Harlem River. Landless John/Yvan traversed the
world and the chaotic half-century of war, revolution, and mass
atrocities.

Four years after the Golls arrived in Paris, the painter Marc
Chagall returned to France after an absence of nine years,
accompanied now by his wife Bella. As early as 1925, Chagall
began illustrating Goll's books of poems. After collaborating on
the Poèmes d'amours (1925), Chagall contributed illustrations to
Goll's volume La chanson de Jean sans Terre (1936). After the
war and Goll's death, he illustrated Goll's collected works. Judging
from a photograph taken in 1924, which shows the Golls
and Chagalls together in a rural setting, the two families were on
friendly terms. The next year Chagall sketched the poet and his
wife. Marc Chagall is probably more identified with the theme
of the wandering Jew than any other modern artist. He painted
"The Wandering Jew" immediately on returning to Paris,
including a bearded figure with a walking stick and a satchel
thrown over his shoulder in many canvases, as in the 1937
painting "The Revolution." Chagall identified with the image of
the wandering Jew, both in terms of his personal travails from
1914 to 1923, and more generally as an artist who served as a
witness to history.\textsuperscript{28} The earlier painting foregrounds the wandering Jew with only a hint of a Russian village in the background. The striking canvas portraying the Russian Revolution features an image of Lenin balancing himself on one hand, while seated at the same table supporting Lenin is a rabbi holding the tablets of the law. The wandering Jew passes before them, looking up in their direction, while red flags wave and a crowd of Russian peasants surges forward. Yet Chagall does not portray the wandering Jew as a revolutionary, but rather as a spectator. Chagall himself had been actively involved as a revolutionary artist, yet left Soviet Russia discouraged in 1922. Chagall was too identified with Jewish themes to have appealed to the deeply antireligious anarchists, but it seems likely that both he and Goll were libertarian socialists if not outright anarchists.

Yvan and Claire Goll and Marc and Bella Chagall all managed to escape from Europe to the United States, in Chagall's case on the same boat as André Breton. Goll, for his part, mended fences with André Breton, and he returned to Europe after the war, already stricken with leukemia. He died in Paris in 1950 and was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery. His tombstone was inscribed with the most poetic of epitaphs. A melancholy phrase underscored the ephemeral quality of life as of the homelessness of his people: "I lasted no longer than the froth on the lips of the waves on the sand. Born under no star on a moonless night, my name was only a perishable sob [sanglot]."\textsuperscript{29}

Chagall returned to France as well, though without Bella, who had died during the war. In March 1952, a confidential dispatch from the American Embassy in Paris to the State Department identified Marc Chagall as the honorary president, since 1949, of a communist front organization called MRAP, the


\textsuperscript{29} Quoted by Jean Bertho, \textit{Surréalisme I}, 55.
Movement against Racism, Anti-Semitism, and for Peace, a predominantly Jewish organization. The Chargé d'Affaires called him a "painter and political crackpot," and said he was only a figurehead, so Chagall was not taken very seriously as a threat. Later that year, after the Soviets executed several Yiddish writers in Moscow, Chagall left the organization. Stalinist anti-Semitism severed the ideal portrayed by Chagall in 1937 of the rabbi and the hand- standing Lenin. Chagall lived on for another generation, making it nearly to one hundred, and became the beloved artist of the Jewish bourgeoisie. He is best remembered for his evocation of Russian village life before the revolution and for his whimsical, quasi-Surrealist style; both style and content qualified him as "petit bourgeois" in communist eyes. The same mixture of pre-modern nostalgia and modernist anti-realism made of Chagall a good candidate for anarchism, if not in the era of the Cold War, at least during the years of his rebound from communism in the 1920s.

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