

Review: At the Edge of Soviet State Control

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REVIEW ESSAY

AT THE EDGE OF SOVIET STATE CONTROL

by

Gennady Estraiikh

Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen. *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924–1941*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005. xvii, 366 pp.

Charles E. Hoffman. *Red Shtetl: The Survival of a Jewish Town Under Soviet Communism*. New York: American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 2002. xvii, 223 pp.

David Shneer. *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1930*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. ix, 300 pp.

In August 1956, Nikita Khrushchev took part in a meeting with a delegation of Canadian communists. Discussing the wave of repression against Jewish intellectuals during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Soviet leader mentioned that he had supported Stalin's decision not to give the Crimea to Jews because it would have created a springboard for attacks on the Soviet Union. Apart from being paranoid about the Soviet Jews' loyalty to the young state of Israel and its imperialist backers, Khrushchev had, as his remark revealed, another paranoia that was characteristic of the Kremlin decision-makers: distrust of the peripheries. Khrushchev and his advisors knew that their totalitarian regime was not such a monolith as it might appear in the eyes of foreign observers, especially because visitors were seldom allowed to travel to the outskirts of the Soviet empire and did not know that some areas had features of fiefdoms. The post-Soviet disintegration of the communist empire confirmed the Kremlin denizens' misgivings.

Center-periphery relations in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s are analyzed by Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, who uses the example of the Agro-Joint's activities in Jewish colonization projects. From 1924 to 1938, when the Agro-Joint operated in the Crimea and other areas of agricultural colonization in the European part of the Soviet Union, it enjoyed considerable autonomy in building and developing agricultural settlements. The Agro-Joint, or Joint Agricultural Cooperation, was formed in 1924 by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) as an offshoot of the American Relief Administration (ARA). Headed by future U.S. president Herbert Hoover, the ARA came to the rescue

of famine-stricken Russia. The nearly \$60 million raised for that operation included \$4 million contributed by the JDC.

Two Russian-born and American-educated representatives of the JDC participated in the mission: Dr. Boris D. Bogen, the former principal of the Baron Hirsch Agricultural School in Woodbine, New Jersey, and Dr. Joseph A. Rosen, a notable agriculturist whose “Rosen rye” is still cultivated by American farmers. Undoubtedly, both Jewish activists (Rosen was also a former Menshevik) saw a chance to realize their and numerous other Jewish intellectuals’ old dream of making the shtetl population “productive” by moving it to agricultural colonies. Significantly, the shtetl dwellers could no longer emigrate to the United States, whose gates were closed, with only a chink left open for a few lucky people. At the same time, the Palestinian project was widely shunned, particularly among the JDC leaders, as impractical. In September 1923, the New York Yiddish daily *Forward* wrote in its weekly English page that the Palestinian “Jewish population will never secure any liberty, but will remain colonial subjects on a par with the Hindus and Egyptians.”

It is hard to understand who owns the copyright on Soviet Jewish colonization. Functionaries of the Communist Party’s Jewish sections celebrated the tenth anniversary of the campaign in 1929, claiming that it had been their initiative in the first place. In fact, they more often threw a wrench into the colonization works, especially as many of them were Bundists-turned-communists who were zealous to ruin the whole matrix of Jewish life; therefore, they were very reluctant to establish new “Jewish reservations” in the form of agricultural colonies. To all appearances, the colonization initially was a combination of Zionist and grassroots initiatives during the early 1920s. The Hehalutz (Pioneer Zionist) movement, which remained legal in the Soviet Union until 1928, had established in the Crimea a few agricultural settlements as essentially temporary training camps for the Zionist youth, whose ultimate destination was Palestine. At the same time, in many areas of Belorussia and Ukraine, parcels of lands began to be cultivated by shtetl dwellers and in some cases even urbanites, whose short-term goal was bare subsistence in the chronically hungry country.

Bogen and Rosen were impressed with the first results of the spontaneous Zionist colonization. Following their fact-finding trip, they inspired both the Soviet officials and the JDC leaders to launch a large-scale resettlement campaign, which would transform déclassé shtetl inhabitants into productive people. The Soviet regime welcomed the resettlement project as a safety valve for easing the shtetl problem. In addition, it was seen as a way to “normalize” the Jews by creating among them a peasant class. The Jewish colonists also played a central role in communist propaganda against anti-Semitism, which took virulent forms in many urban centers, where Jewish apparatchiks and speculators were often blamed for virtually all shortcomings of the Soviet system. The Kremlin functionaries hoped that toil-hardened colonists would ruin the negative anti-Jewish stereotypes.

In the meantime, Bogen and Rosen’s missionary zeal proved to be infectious. Granted, it was not always hard to convince people because productivization of the shtetl had been part of virtually all Jewish socialist and liberal agendas. The JDC leaders embraced the plan partly because they were skeptical about the

Zionist doctrine and partly because Soviet Russia created better conditions for the experiment in social and national engineering: A new home in Palestine cost about \$5,000, whereas a similar home in the Crimean or Ukrainian steppes could be built with as little as \$200–\$1,000. Not only that, in Palestine, the JDC could not enjoy the state support that it found in the highest echelons of the Soviet regime.

Dekel-Chen's comprehensive study chronicles the development of the colonization project, which was previously treated as a footnote to another footnote—the Birobidzhan campaign; incidentally, the latter developed and failed without any support of the JDC. Exclusion or misrepresentation of this important episode in modern Jewish history was primarily a result of political biases, though Dekel-Chen emphasizes the inaccessibility of Soviet archives as an important factor. In reality, his research draws on mountains of relevant documents preserved in the JDC and YIVO archives outside the Soviet Union, whereas the Soviet and foreign Yiddish press could easily reveal the bulk of the “secrets” from the Soviet archives. It is enough to look into the Jewish press, published in the 1920s in the United States, to realize that various aspects of Soviet Jewish colonization were discussed day in, day out by journalists, writers, and ideologists. Even in the majority of non-Soviet periodicals, an average issue usually contained much more information on *di alte heyim* (old home) than concurrent events in Palestine.

The book convincingly demonstrates that the Crimean and south Ukrainian colonization was quite successful. Self-sufficient Jewish agricultural communities existed until the German invasion. In fact, the bulk of the colonists survived the Holocaust, either in evacuation or in the army, but only a few of them returned and continued to live in the colonies, which were deprived of their status as national territorial units after the war. The Kremlin was keen to use the results of the Holocaust to eventually “equalize” the Jews with other ethnic groups according to a Procrustean two-component pattern: (1) a metropolitan population with its national territory (Birobidzhan) and (2) diaspora.

Dekel-Chen deals predominantly with the Agro-Joint, which did not operate in the Soviet Union after 1938; therefore, the colonies' post-Holocaust afterlife is not discussed in his study. It is a different story that, it is hoped, will one day be written, and we will learn about the hundreds of Jewish villagers—chairmen of collective farms, agronomists, teachers, accountants, tractor drivers, and milkmaids—who never migrated to urban areas. During the early 1960s, when I spent a summer in my mother's home village of Novozlatopol (Nayzlatopol in Yiddish), the former center of one of the five Jewish national districts in prewar Crimea and Ukraine, the village still had a score of Jewish inhabitants.

Jewish life in post-Holocaust Soviet Union remains even less researched than earlier (Leninist and Stalinist) periods. Elie Wiesel's powerful if ambiguous image of “Jews of Silence” dominated the Western scholarly attitude until the end of the twentieth century. According to this approach, the constantly victimized Soviet Jewish community preserved some patchy national traits thanks to the heroic Zionist and religious underground. As for the Soviet brethren's Jewishness, it was usually measured by the yardstick of synagogue attendance and similar constituents of mainstream Jewish life in New York or Jerusalem. Hardly any attempts

were made to describe and analyze the hybrid (Soviet and Jewish) identity formed in the communist environment.

Charles Hoffman, who passed away in 2000, spent nine years in post-Soviet Ukraine and Russia, working as a representative of the JDC. His experience showed him that the stereotypical heroes-cum-victims model of Soviet Jewry was fundamentally wrong, particularly in such backwoods areas as the Ukrainian town of Shargorod. Hoffman writes,

To understand Shargorod we must toss aside many of our conventional notions and cherished images and myths about Soviet Jews. We cannot portray this as a story of heroism, even though the Jews of Shargorod have striven quietly against great odds and emerged with their heads held high. We cannot see them as victims, even though they have experienced their share of the suffering inflicted on east European Jews in this [i.e. twentieth] century. Nor should we romanticize them by imagining that they have just stepped out of a performance of *Fiddler on the Roof*. There is no ready-made pigeonhole to put them in, and they cannot be readily understood by comparing them to any of our familiar icons of Russian Jews, from Tevye to Trotsky to Sharansky. (22)

After the Holocaust, the shtetl was pronounced dead, though in some places, especially in the areas occupied by the Romanian army, some Jewish population survived. Moreover, in a few places, including Shargorod, the vast majority of the local Jewish inhabitants lived to see their liberation. Of course, the story of their survival was an open secret: Paul Novick, editor of the New York communist Yiddish daily *Morgn-Frayhayt* wrote about it during the late 1940s. The Moscow Yiddish journal *Sovetish Heymland* published numerous materials devoted to the surviving shtetl. However, these and similar publications did not attract scholars' attention. In fact, Hoffman did not know any Yiddish, which created a linguistic problem during his field trips to Shargorod. The Hebrew and English spoken by the author were not part of the Shargoroders' daily usage, whereas even the non-Jewish mayor could understand some Yiddish.

The "unashamed" Jewishness of Hoffman's respondents ruined the stereotype of the "Jews of Silence." Their lives had nothing to do with any endeavor to hide their ethnic and religious origin. In fact, it would have been an irrational occupation for people whose identification clearly evidenced it and whose neighbors remembered their parents and grandparents. Hoffman was surprised that even a committed communist saw nothing wrong with having a mezuzah in his house. According to Hoffman, "the Jews of Shargorod felt at ease with themselves and their traditions, and with their non-Jewish neighbors, in ways that were difficult to understand, let alone replicate, in the more oppressive atmosphere prevalent in the large towns and cities." In addition, "the survival of Jewish life in Shargorod on a communal plane—as opposed to the atomized Jewish existence in the cities—can be explained mainly by the survival of the town of Shargorod as a shtetl. This means that even after the war, Shargorod remained a very small town where Jews

made up a significant portion of the population, lived together in a compact residential area, and played a key role in its economic life.”

Undoubtedly, in places such as Shargorod (the book somewhat overplays Shargorod’s uniqueness), where Jews had been living for centuries and continued to play a (even *the*) central role in the local administration, industry, and culture, Jewishness meant (at least, in the Jews’ terms) belonging to the cream of society. They had nothing to be ashamed of. They could not be accused of not supporting the Soviet regime. In the 1920s, they participated in the colonization drive; Dekel-Chen’s list of “Places of Origin for Members of Selected Colonies in Southern Ukraine” includes the settlement of Petrovskii, whose population came from Shargorod. Scores of Shargoroders migrated to such cities as Moscow and Kiev and made impressive professional careers. (I know this firsthand because my mother-in-law was born in Shargorod.) Jewish names dominate the local memorial to the Red Army soldiers killed in action during World War II. Of course, the situation became tenser after 1967, when the Soviet Union sided with the Arabs and the majority of Soviet Jews openly or secretly expressed their solidarity with Israel. Nonetheless, their belonging to the Jewish nation gave them a chance to leave their God-forsaken town and settle in the West while the few remaining Shargorod Jews were generously catered to by the JDC.

Many older “Red Shtetl” inhabitants were educated in Yiddish. Until 1937, Jewish children could (often, they were forced to) go to state Yiddish schools that opened all over Ukraine and Belorussia and in some places in Russia. Apart from secondary education, Yiddish was used in vocational and higher education; central, republican, and local periodicals were published in Yiddish; Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, and Minsk were main centers of Yiddish book publishing, party, and trade union activities, scholarship, and theater. In the national Jewish districts and many other places, local authorities worked in Yiddish (in the Belorussian republic, it was recognized as one of the four official languages), court proceedings were conducted in Yiddish, and the militia (police) used this language in their local operations. Shneer’s well-researched monograph analyzes the cadre, institutions, and ideology of Soviet Yiddish culture.

*Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* represents a pioneering study of Yiddish publishing in the Soviet Union. Although the whole of Soviet publishing, including its Yiddish variety, represented an important constituent of the communist agitprop, readers could also find generally informative and educational publications. Newspapers and journals chronicled Jewish life; therefore, any historian of that period cannot avoid the tiring process of reading microfilms or disintegrating copies of such newspapers as *Der Emes (Truth, Moscow)*, *Der Shtern (Star, Kharkov)*, and *Oktyabr (October, Minsk)*.

Shneer’s analysis of primary materials shows that during the 1920s, Soviet Yiddish publishing houses and other institutions enjoyed a measure of autonomy. However, after 1929, when Stalin’s totalitarianism replaced the authoritarian rule of party oligarchs, “the intelligentsia no longer had control over the creation of Soviet Yiddish culture.” It was hard to be an editor and journalist in the Soviet Union. On the surface, the Soviet Yiddish press and publishing industry had a cushioned existence because they were sponsored by the state. In reality, the

periodicals and publishing houses struggled for survival, and Shneer follows their travails. Many locally circulating newspapers were closed down between 1921 and 1922, when the post-1917 military communism was replaced by the New Economic Policy (NEP). The remaining outfits had to balance their budgets. During the NEP period, the Soviet press published commercial advertisements. Even in the special ten-page edition of *Der Emes* commemorating the October Revolution, three pages were devoted to commercial advertising.

Still, the newspapers lacked the main ingredient needed for their survival—readers. It was a vicious circle: To attract readers, the editors had to publish popular material written in an understandable language. However, in the eyes of Soviet cultural watchdogs, most notably the editor of *Der Emes*, Moshe Litvakov, it was anathema even to think about any concession to ease of understanding. Entertaining literature was regarded as a trademark of the “yellow” press in capitalist countries. Communist writers and journalists continued the pre-1917 Yiddish intellectuals’ endeavors to seek and educate the awakened, sophisticated Yiddish reader, not least the so-called *bavustzinike arbeter* (conscientious workers). Shneer analyzes the literary groups and their publications in pre-World War II Soviet Union. In fact, he does not limit his study to the period stated in the title, 1918–30.

Although Jewish activities in Ukraine were compartmentalized in domains such as the national districts, the Jewish sections of the party, and various Yiddish-speaking institutions, in Belorussia, they became part of mainstream Soviet network. The early Soviet Belorussian nation was seen as a four-headed (Belorussian, Russian, Jewish, and Polish) body. Shneer dedicates a separate chapter to the poet Izi Kharik (1899–1937), who was “the highest-ranking Yiddish cultural figure in Soviet Belorussia by the mid-1930s.... For a short time, Kharik became one of the most powerful Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union.” He was “the paragon of the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia—a modernist poet deeply invested in the Jewish future and simultaneously committed to building socialism in the Soviet Union.” Shneer even translates a few of Kharik’s most significant poems, which reflect the poet’s antagonistic feelings toward the traditional Jewry:

Pass on, pass on, you sad grandfathers  
With terrified beards all run through with snow!

and to the traditional environment

O, woe to your whole shtetl  
Trampled in pain and hunger...

The grandfathers and the traditional shtetl did pass on. Many of the Jewish activists, including Kharik, perished in Soviet prisons and labor camps. Meanwhile, new forms of Jewish life developed in Soviet villages, towns, and cities. These three new books help us to understand how it happened.

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