



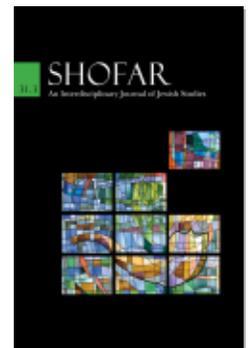
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*Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the
Holocaust* by David Shneer (review)

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of careful and detailed engagement with a wide range of scholarship and creative and careful attention to both familiar and little-discussed sources. As such, it will be a valuable resource for scholars in many fields, and it helps to further the study of early modern Jewish history, early modern science, and the culture of the early modern world.

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THROUGH SOVIET JEWISH EYES: PHOTOGRAPHY, WAR, AND THE HOLOCAUST
David Shneer. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 283 pp., illustrations.

The Nazis' murder of over 1.5 million Jews in the former Soviet Union prior to Auschwitz, in 1941–42, is a dimension of the Holocaust that historians and others have only recently begun to understand and consider in the length, breadth, and depth appropriate to this pivotal stage of the catastrophe. Alongside emergence of the facts about the Holocaust in the Soviet Union has come a growing appreciation of how the Soviet media, for all its numerous faults, began to show and tell their public about the Holocaust before anyone else. The chief merit of *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* lies in its contribution to this two-fold picture.

However, while images of the war are the subject of the greater part of the book, David Shneer starts his narrative with the prerevolutionary roots of Soviet Jewish photography. The relatively large number of Jews involved in the new medium is asserted and attributed to photography's "low status and lack of officialdom," meaning an absence of state-imposed antisemitic barriers such as quotas or academies (15). Shneer likewise argues that Jews had more to gain than others from photography, as families spread across states and continents welcomed a means to transmit shared memory over long distances: "If Jews had been the 'people of the book,' perhaps they were becoming the 'people of the media'" (20).

The revolutionary Soviet regime embraced photography from the outset, just as it did cinema, and those behind the cameras were often Jews, as with Moisei Nappelbaum's 1918 photograph of Lenin. Shneer succeeds admirably in using disparate materials to provide a brief biographical background for each of the photographers discussed. In charting the 1920s development of photojournalism in popular magazine *Ogonek* this section also excels. However, at times here problems are evident. One is the dividing line

between the popular press and the avant-garde, which is far more porous than the author suggests. Erecting a clear distinction enables the author more effectively to dismiss the famous *Lef* debates around photography, including the writings of Osip Brik, himself Jewish, who although widely known and anthologized in the English language, receives only a single brief mention here. The central contentious dimension in the book, however, is whether or not there are not just Jewish subjects of photographs but also a “Jewish gaze.” This Shneer aspires to prove, and despite coming close on occasion never entirely succeeds in persuading at least this reader. Possibly this is a matter of presentation: had the book compared the images it discusses taken by Jewish cameramen and those taken, for example by the best known photographer of the time, Alexander Rodchenko, we might have seen more concretely how the Jewish gaze differed from the broader Soviet way of looking.

The unconvincingly demonstrated notion of a Jewish gaze likewise informs in the central section, “Soviet Jewish Photographers Confront World War II and the Holocaust.” Here, all too often there is a suggestion that only Soviet Jewish photographers recorded Nazi atrocities against Jews, beginning with the opening of mass graves in 1942 and ending with Auschwitz, when they were not alone in doing so. Despite this problem, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* opens up for the English-language reader some of the vast array of these Soviet images of the war, especially of the early stages of the Holocaust, which have been very largely ignored. Concentrating on the biographies of those behind the camera enables the author to make sense of the photographs and to explain the complex and contradictory way in which the Soviet media recorded and represented Nazi atrocities. A further, often more effective, means by which Shneer explains the tension between the broader Soviet media’s representation of Nazi atrocities, which was widespread during the war, and the articulation of the more specific narrative of the Holocaust, is through reference not to who is taking the images, but who is looking at them. Thus, the book examines the contrast between the Russian-language and the Yiddish-language press. In the former, images of the mass murder of Jews appeared, but they were infrequently identified as showing Jewish victims. As Shneer puts it, whereas “the Jewish narrative lurked in the shadows of the national story” (9), this narrative of the Holocaust was more widely and explicitly treated in the Yiddish-language newspapers, such as *Eynikayt*, so that Yiddish formed “a narrative boundary around a collective Soviet Jewish story” (203). Yet, while clearly the Jewish narrative about Nazi atrocities was prominent in the Yiddish-language

press, it was not entirely absent in the wider Soviet press. Once again the boundaries between Shneer's hard and fast categories turn out to be less helpfully distinct than he strives to present them.

These criticisms, however, do not detract substantially from a book that helps tell the least well-remembered story of the Holocaust, the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, and its representation in the Soviet media. Shneer's book is strongest of all when articulating how the individual biographical fate of a photographer like Evgenii Khaldei, riven by the competing commitments of his Soviet and Jewish identities, shifted during the war, making him more sensitive to the fate of his Jewish kin under the Nazis and dramatically coloring the kinds of photographs he took. This account of Khaldei and others places them alongside other Soviet cultural figures who documented the Holocaust as knowledge of it first emerged: artist Zinovii Tolkachev, writer and journalist Vasilii Grossman, cinematographers Roman Karmen and Mark Donskoi, although making the links is not really within the scope of Shneer's study. Ongoing scholarship is, however, uncovering more figures of this kind and the cultural artifacts they produced. This enhances our understanding of the Holocaust, but we must be wary of assuming Soviet Jews alone produced such responses for fear of simplifying or distorting this picture.

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THE TALMUD IN ITS IRANIAN CONTEXT

Edited by Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. 270 pp.

Ten essays originally presented at a 2007 UCLA conference on the Iranian foundations of the Talmudic tradition show how a wholly new approach to the context of the Bavli has taken shape in the current generation of the academic study of late antique Judaism. To one scholar goes all the credit for introducing into Talmudic studies a systematic reading of Pahlavi religion, law, history and literature, and that is Yeshiva University's Talmud superstar, Yaakov Elman, who has brought Iranian Zoroastrian studies into the world of the Talmud. Indeed Elman has already brought on board the second generation in the tradition he has founded, in the erudite work of Shai Secunda and his Talmudic blog.

Elman's work on the Iranian philology of rabbinic literature is to be compared to Saul Lieberman's on the Greek foundation. But Greek was