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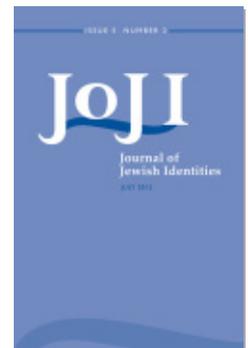
Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust by David Shneer (review)

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Ozsváths were robbed by the liberating Red Army—the family arrived back at the building at 10 Abonyi Street. This homecoming symbolizes survival: 10 Abonyi Street is not marked anymore by yellow star, but it is now commemorated by a well-written memoir.

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David Shneer. *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii, 283. Cloth \$39.95. ISBN 0813548845.

On March 2, 1942, the Soviet illustrated weekly *Ogonyok* published a two-page photo essay titled “Hitlerite Atrocities in Kerch.” Eight images of corpses and wailing residents amounted to what was the first photojournalistic account of the Nazi murder of Soviet Jews. The Germans had occupied Kerch in mid-November, but only held the city for six weeks before the Soviet army liberated it, giving journalists and photographers one of the first opportunities to witness Nazi crimes. (And a brief opportunity at that: the Germans quickly retook Kerch, in May 1942.) Among those who arrived in Kerch were three Soviet Jewish photojournalists. Based on interviews with townspeople and witnesses, they ascertained that the dead were Jews. The *Ogonyok* article only obliquely noted the Jewish identity of the victims. While it did not occlude the particularity of the Nazi genocide of Jews altogether, it universalized the atrocity as a crime against the Soviet population in general and not one specifically against Jews. Still, the photo essay powerfully documented mass murder, and to careful readers it was clear that the victims were Jews.

In *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, David Shneer unearths little-known accounts such as this in his stimulating new book on Soviet Jewish photojournalism. While Shneer focuses on Jewish photography during the Holocaust—and these chapters are bound to be of most interest to scholars—his book stretches far outside the wartime period and beyond Eastern Europe. It moves from the 1830s to the 2000s; from Eastern Europe to Central Asia; from photos of Jewish colonial agriculturalists to an image of Mao Zedong. The book’s analytical coverage is equally wide-ranging: it explores Soviet and Jewish narrations of the Holocaust; the historical trajectory of Jewish participation in Soviet photojournalism over three decades; the use of photography to legitimize Soviet Communism from 1917 to 1945; the expression of Soviet and Jewish identities in photography; and the shifting histories of photographs from the 1940s to the present. All the while Shneer analyzes some ninety images, which are reprinted in the text.

What holds these multiple parts together is Shneer’s focus on Soviet Jewish photographers, in particular, their role during World War II as witnesses

of atrocity, battle, urban ruination, and liberation. Building on the work of historians such as Zvi Gitelman and Karel Berkhoff, Shneer refutes the claim that Soviet officials universalized and subsumed Nazi crimes against Jews into the pan-ethnic category of Soviet national suffering. To be sure, the word “Jew” and the Jewishness of Nazi victims were often absent from the Russian-language press. But this obfuscation was inconsistent and at times subtle traces of Jewishness could be found. Discussion of Jewish victims was especially apparent in the tiny, yet important, Soviet Yiddish-language press, which had much greater latitude to discuss the Holocaust than Russian-language periodicals did. Shneer skillfully situates these differences in coverage within the contexts of time, place, language, and audience, emphasizing that the Holocaust was mediated differently to the Soviet populace and to Jewish readers. He also shows that Jewish editors, writers, and photographers struggled to find the right balance between particularity and universalism in their stories and captions; some Jews *wanted* to place the genocide of Jews within a broader, universal narrative about Nazi violence against the Soviet Union because they saw themselves as “part of a larger collective, even in times of great suffering.” (169)

This last point is important, and it raises a key question: If some Jews viewed themselves more as “Soviets” and less as “Jews”—as it seems many Soviet Jewish photojournalists did—does it make sense to label and analyze them as Jews? Shneer, whose previous work has added much to our understanding of the contextual and fluid identities of Jewishness, is well aware of the problem. In his introduction, he recounts a meeting with the daughter of photojournalist Dmitrii Baltermants, who disagreed with Shneer labeling her father Jewish: “His identity—what a question. He was Soviet. Nothing else. Well, he was also a photojournalist, but he was so totally Soviet. His Jewishness did not matter to him at all.” (8) Throughout the book, Shneer remains attuned to this dilemma. Nevertheless, he wants to argue that the Jewishness of these photographers—whom he counts as Jewish based on their categorization as such by the Soviet state—affected their work in a variety of ways, including as an identity to be downplayed in importance (as Baltermants’s daughter did.)

Some readers will quibble with this externally imposed definition of Jewishness, a criticism Shneer recognizes. More important is his argument, posited mostly in the introduction and reinforced in the book’s title, that Soviet Jewish photographers had a distinctive way of seeing and photographing, what Shneer calls the “Jewish eye.” It is one thing to say that someone is a Jewish photographer; it is another to claim that someone’s Jewishness influences his or her way of photographing in discernible, seemingly hermetic ways. How is one to go about empirically identifying and theoretically conceptualizing Jewish ways of seeing? What precisely makes these ways of seeing “Jewish,” beyond that the researcher has identified the photographer as Jewish? How, in other words, does one define Jewishness and its relationship to other identifications like class, gender, sexuality, profession, and so on? I do not mean to imply that Shneer’s argument is tautological or apodictic. On the contrary, he aspires to reconstruct the historical contexts and meanings of Soviet Jewishness; he strives to avoid turning Jewishness into a presumptive,

idealist category of analysis. The issue, though, is that these historical contexts are underdeveloped in the book. For example, the collective experiences that tie Shneer's Soviet Jewish photographers together are striking: most of them came from southern Russia, spoke Russian, moved to Moscow, were acculturated, and were attracted to the cosmopolitan utopianism of Soviet culture. While Shneer provides short biographies of some of these photographers and periodically notes their shared backgrounds (on pages 5 and 23–25), a richer portrait of their individual lives, their similar intellectual-cultural milieus, and their common experiences of acculturation and migration may have provided fuller frameworks for untangling the intricacies of their Soviet Jewishness and its *possible* impact on their photography.

Nevertheless, Shneer has written a fascinating and ambitious book that deserves a wide readership among scholars of twentieth-century Jewish, Holocaust, East European, and Russian history. His pioneering chapters on the war years enhance substantially our understanding of the complex ways that Jews and non-Jews responded to the Holocaust.

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Miryam Kabakov, ed. *Keep Your Wives Away from Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010. Pp. xxii, 169. Paper \$16.95. ISBN 9781556438790.

If Orthodox Jew and lesbian may at one point have seemed contradictory identities, then allow Miryam Kabakov and the writers in her edited collection to show once again why this is no longer the case. The release of *Keep Your Wives Away from Them* in 2010 situates it amongst a wave of books reconciling Jewish and queer identities. The past ten years have been a renaissance of sorts in literature surrounding LGBTQ Jews. Shneer and Aviv's (2002) *Queer Jews* and Dzmura's (2010) *Balancing on the Mechitza* offer personal accounts of coalescing Jewish and LGBTQ identities, and Drinkwater's (2009) *Torah Queeries* and Boyarin, Itzkovitz and Pellegrini's (2003) *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* provide theoretical, historical, political, and religious understanding to the intersection of Jewish and queer identities. Where once works on the subject were few and far between, now educators choosing books for course syllabi and lay readers in search of better personal understanding have an abundance of books from which to choose.

Kabakov's contribution adds a variety of personal narratives by Orthodox lesbians. Described by the editor as an anthology meant to "shed a new light on the resilience of individuals and communities who live at the intersection of conflicting religious and sexual identities" (xi), *Wives* offers stories about both the hardship and beauty of coming to terms with one's Orthodox-lesbian self. Many of these obstacles are struggles common to all lesbians, and so it is their uniquely Jewish experiences and interpretations that give depth to the