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

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conviction, which is conveyed clearly in articles in the journal, can be gleaned in part from the programmatic use of Yiddish in the drafting of the journal itself. According to the *Nitzotz* group, only by maintaining this positive outlook towards the future would it be possible to “give meaning to the Nazi crimes” (quoted p. 10). And although the journal’s editors were fervent supporters of Zionism, they had the good sense to develop a version of Zionism that was vague enough to leave room for debate even from beyond the narrow circle of their group. *Nitzotz* is significant not only because it was in essence a document of moral resistance, but also because it tried to avoid, to some extent, the sectarianism and particularism that were so marked (and harmful) in the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe at that time.

The editor stresses not only the ethical and political importance of the work, but also its value as an example of the aggregation and discussion of issues: “Between eighty and one hundred people were active in IBZ during the ghetto years,” she writes (p. 31), and we can estimate that the journal, passing from hand to hand, had quite a wide readership both in the ghetto and in Kaufering. The hope of the authors of *Nitzotz* that “spiritual resilience would equip them to lead the postwar Zionist campaign” (p. 70) seems otherwise to have been deluded—as the editor of the collection herself, whose human sympathy towards the group is fully evident, is forced to conclude.

All in all, the book offers the reader a detailed and sympathetic reconstruction of the story of a group of men and women who struggled to maintain their dignity in horrific circumstances. It gives us at the same time an important documentation of the strength of a group of Jews in reacting to the inhumane and terrible conditions they experienced in the face of extermination.

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Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust, David Shneer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 304 pp., cloth \$39.95, paperback \$32.50.

Focusing on an area of Holocaust representation largely overlooked in the scholarly literature, this meticulously illustrated volume provides a wealth of information about individual Soviet Jewish photographers and their work. Shneer’s analysis integrates the work and the complex identities of photographers who documented both the construction and devastation of Soviet society, Axis atrocities against Jews and other Soviet civilians, and the Soviet defeat of the invaders. The governing rubric of the book, the “Jewish eye,” entails the question whether the Jewishness of the photographers had an impact on the content of the photos. In the end this “Jewish eye” emerges not from any social critique or traditional Jewish content of

the images, but from the complex hybrid identities Shneer identifies in the photographers.

Part One establishes the background of Soviet photojournalism and Jewish photographers' roles in it. Shneer argues that the field was more welcoming to Jews than others were; it offered "a means for Jews to gain access to power without being part of power" (p. 15). Jewish photographers had documented Russia's expanding empire and its increasing ethnic diversity in the late nineteenth century, gained permission to stay in the capital (they otherwise had been excluded from St. Petersburg), and helped establish the market for photography. While the Revolution and Civil War slowed the development of photojournalism, the "ideological imperative" (p. 25) of Soviet socialism ensured the survival and growth of illustrated journals, including *Ogonëk* (Little Flame), a turn-of-the-century upper-class magazine resurrected as a mass medium. Jewish itinerant budding photographers made it or related publications their first stop in the new capital, Moscow. This group "gave birth to Soviet photojournalism" (p. 30), the distinctive trait of which was promoting socialism. In the 1930s they were joined by a "second generation" of socialist-realist photojournalists born after the 1905 Revolution; their work developed alongside the rapid technical innovations of the era: flight, modern communications, and better cameras such as the Leica. The ideological purpose of socialist realism led to ongoing debates about staging photographs, while Soviet support for the "progress" of ethnic minorities put Jews on both sides of the camera, for instance documenting the Birobidzhan experiment in creating "new Jews."

Part Two brings the reader to World War II and the Holocaust. Photojournalists deployed a "dual narrative strategy of celebrating Soviet heroism and publicizing Nazi atrocities [in order to] visually [define] the war for the Soviet population" (p. 96). It wasn't until January 1942 that Jewish photojournalists, as Soviet liberators in the southern city of Kerch, documented the mass murder of Soviet Jews at the hands of the Nazi Einsatzgruppen; but the victims' Jewishness was largely overlooked in the service of the pan-ethnic ideal of the Soviet state. Shneer details the involvement of photojournalists in the battle for Stalingrad and then "the ambivalence of liberation" in late 1943 and 1944 with images and essays that were not unambiguously positive, but rather tempered the depiction of triumph "with images of the violence and destruction that had defined the German occupation" (pp. 124–25); these images thenceforth fueled the case for vengeance. As the front moved toward Germany, the narrative focus shifted to the anticipated occupation and reconstruction of Germany, even as photojournalists sustained the interest in vengeance, though now directing it against only the "Hitlerites" and not all Germans.

Chapter 5 discusses Soviet photography dealing with the Holocaust, beginning with the context of the Extraordinary Commissions, whose work intensified after Stalingrad and whose findings supported the first war crimes trials in 1943.

By then, Shneer notes, a new photographic genre had been born: “the Nazi atrocity photo essay” (p. 143). With the liberation of Kiev in late 1943 and the discovery of the killing site at Babi Yar, photojournalists participated in creating “the biggest and most lasting symbol of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” surpassing even the extermination camps on occupied Polish soil (p. 149); however in the official Commission report, the Jewish identity of half of the seventy thousand victims was elided.

By the time Majdanek was liberated, new visual idioms were conveying the fixed nature of the death camp, as opposed to the trench or the gas van. Majdanek itself was so thoroughly documented that the forensic photography of the Commission reports grew into the “more aesthetically . . . compelling” Soviet “iconography” of representation (pp. 156–57). The evolving series of emblems included images of material remnants: shoes, gas canisters, the exhumation of mass graves, crematoria, and, most notably, the very absence of victims’ bodies. This latter emptiness elicited viewers’ imagination, moving photographs into the memorial realm (if still de-emphasizing the victims’ Jewishness). Politically, Shneer suggests that the de-Judaization of Majdanek manifested three factors: the deliberate editing out of Jewish specificity; the need to make this particular story Polish; and the fear that assimilated Jews in the USSR might make Majdanek a “universal human tragedy, precisely because Jews were the primary victims” (p. 169).

Curiously, the liberation of Auschwitz six months later did not receive as much media attention, though it introduced yet another innovation: survivors. In one of the most arresting of Shneer’s exhaustively collected photographs (by Vladimir Yudin) a survivor kneels by a pile of glasses apparently spilling far beyond the photographic frame, trying on a pair (p. 180), enacting a “desperate need . . . to see again. . . . Yudin reminds us that *seeing clearly* was one of the first things a survivor wanted to be able to do” (p. 179). The introduction of images of survivors, however, complicated representation of the war, since readers had no preparation for distinguishing between Jews and non-Jews in these photographs; it forced readers to ask who these new figures in striped garb were, and how they had survived. Indeed, Shneer explores the tension between Soviet universalism and Jewish particularity in Chapter 6, devoted to the depiction of the war in the Yiddish-language press and the record of Jewish photojournalists’ own struggles with their Jewish identity.

Finally, Shneer addresses the iconic afterlife of Soviet wartime photographs in a postwar era of “public, politicized” antisemitism (p. 211). During that era a number of the Jewish photojournalists active during the war were purged, though after Stalin’s death “Soviet Jewish photographers were still among the most active . . . in the country” (p. 218). When war commemoration returned to Soviet public culture in the 1960s following its fifteen-year absence, photographs by the

World War II Jewish photographers resurfaced—albeit sometimes “retouched,” along with their creators, in the interests of evolving postwar needs.

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***The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, edited by Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiii + 776 pp., hardcover, \$150.00.**

It is unlikely that many readers will read this densely packed volume from cover to cover, as I did in preparation for this review. Those who choose to do so will be impressed by the scope, depth, and analytical sophistication to be found within this relatively new area of research. Many of the contributing authors, scholars of distinction in their specific sub-fields, are well-known for their work on the Holocaust: Richard Levy, Eric Weitz, Doris Bergen, Christopher Browning, Debórah Dwork, Robert Ericksen, Martin Dean, Peter Fritzsche, Sara Horowitz, James Young, Deborah Lipstadt, Jeffrey Herf, Lenore Weitzman, Dan Michman, Henry Greenspan, and Rebecca Wittmann, to name just a few. To capture the current state of the field, the editors invited contributions from Holocaust scholars of the second and third generations—a decision that pays off handsomely. In addition, the *Handbook* successfully encompasses the wide range of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches to the study of the Holocaust while moving beyond the analytical categories typically employed in works of this kind.

The chapters are grouped in five broadly thematic sections. The section on *enablers*, containing chapters on antisemitism, science, nationalism, colonialism, fascism, and the world wars, concentrates on “the broad and necessary contextual conditions for the Holocaust” (p. 4). The chapters in the section on the *protagonists* disaggregate the perpetrator, victim, and bystander categories—notably so in the latter category, which includes representatives of religious and governmental institutions—and considers rescuers as well. The chapters on *settings* each cover a particular space or location in which persecution and murder occurred: Greater Germany, “Living Space” (*Lebensraum*), occupied and satellite states, ghettos, camps, and forced labor sites. The chapters in the section on *representations* address the challenges of how to apprehend the Holocaust; they reflect the reliance of Holocaust studies “on historical analysis, interpretations of texts, artistic creation and criticism, and philosophical and religious reflection to find the most adequate . . . ways to state what happened and what the meaning of the event(s) or lack of meaning may be” (p. 12). The section on *aftereffects* explores “the Holocaust’s impact on politics and ethics, education and religion, national identities and