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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918-1930 by David Shneer

Review by: Sean Martin

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Despite these shortcomings, Wynot's work is essential reading for scholars and students who seek a more comprehensive explanation of religious responses to the Soviet experience.

Edward E. Roslof, Fulbright Program in Russia, Moscow

Shneer, David. *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918–1930*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. x + 300 pp. \$45.00. ISBN 0-521-82630-6.

With *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918–1930*, David Shneer has significantly enhanced our understanding of the role of ethnic minorities in the creation of Soviet culture by showing how minorities acted as policymakers and as cultural leaders. Shneer's signal contribution is his explication of how the Yiddish-speaking Jewish intellectual elite developed Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union on Soviet terms. The story Shneer tells is one of a group identifying with two separate cultures, a story common to Jewish history but one only recently being told for East European Jewry. Shneer describes a Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia that created a culture that was both Soviet and Jewish. He examines the intelligentsia's role as creators and, significantly, as regulators of Soviet culture in Yiddish, paying careful attention to internal Jewish debates, such as the struggle between Hebrew and Yiddish, and to fundamental Soviet debates, such as the definition of proletarian literature.

Shneer's masterful account of Soviet nationalities policy and Yiddish language politics sets the stage for his discussion of how activists like Esther Frumkina, Moshe Litvakov, and Semen Dimanshteyn promoted Yiddish as Soviet policy. Modernizing Soviet Jews required reforming Yiddish and creating a standard that could unite "high and low, city and shtetl, intelligentsia and folk" (p. 87). Shneer's thorough description of developments in Yiddish philology, especially the orthographic changes made by Soviet Yiddishists, will benefit Yiddish students and others interested in language standardization. Shneer also explains in detail the complexities of Yiddish publishing. His history of the Yiddish press in the Soviet Union considers regional differences between Moscow and the former Pale; economic challenges (a paper shortage); ideological imperatives (the creation of Soviet Jewish citizens); the content of the Yiddish press (including images and cartoons); and the regulation of the industry (especially increasing centralization).

In his study of Soviet Yiddish modernist poets, Shneer shows how literary groups in Moscow, Ukraine, and Belorussia reflected Soviet ideals by imagining a revolutionary future that included Yiddish. He discusses the work and ideologies of Peretz Markish, Itsik Fefer, David Hofshhteyn, David Bergelson, and Leyb Kvitko. As an embodiment of the ideals of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia, the poet Izi Kharik, who wrote about the destruction of the *shtetl* but who looked forward to the creation of a Soviet Jewish culture, is the subject of the book's final chapter.

Shneer chose to end his work in 1930 because that year marks a change in the power of the intelligentsia to create culture independently. He might have chosen 1937, the year

Kharik and others were killed in the Purges, or 1952, when Markish, Fefer, and Bergelson were executed. Shneer argues that his story ends “ambivalently,” as the Yiddish activists of the 1920s were aware of the power of the state to crush their ideas and, indeed, their lives. A more extensive consideration of this later period would have clarified this ambivalence for the reader.

Shneer’s story focuses on only a small and atypical segment of the Soviet Jewish community. While Shneer appropriately regards Soviet Jews as more than just victims of Soviet rule, his focus on Yiddish culture excludes a full examination of the story of the Jews’ linguistic assimilation toward Russian. Readers should also be aware that Shneer’s sharp focus on Yiddish and Soviet policy also excludes any significant comparison between Yiddish in the Soviet Union and Yiddish in other, changing East European Jewish communities. Ultimately, though, Shneer’s impressive contribution to both Soviet and Jewish history will enable us to ask and answer better questions about how Soviet Jews struggled to define their Jewish identities and to live as Soviet citizens.

Sean Martin, Cleveland, Ohio

Iunge, Mark and Rolf Binner. *Kak Terror stal “Bol’shim”*: *Sekretnyi prikaz no. 00447 i tekhnologiia ego ispolneniia*. Moscow: AIRO-XX, 2003. 352 pp. ISBN 5-88735-108-X.

A combination of monograph, annotated collection of documents, and multiauthored volume, this book aims to be a “survey of the genesis, purposeful arrangements, and execution of [NKVD] order no. 00447” from July 1937 through November 1938 (p. 13). In addition, it seeks to demonstrate that what made the terror of 1937–38 “great” was not the show trials or the killings of the various elites, but rather order 00447’s victimization of a far greater number of common folk, until recently largely ignored. This operation against “former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements,” along with the “national” operations against certain minority and diaspora nationalities, produced the gruesome statistics for 1937 and 1938; “around 86 percent of all political executions carried out in 1921–1953 took place during the period of the Great Terror” (p. 217). Iunge and Binner marvel that no other twentieth-century crime of such scope has been as well documented as has the “kulak operation;” unlike Nazi Germany’s “final solution,” this one had signed instructions.

An important contribution of this work is its detailed discussion of the *troiki*. These extrajudicial organs became the “main instruments” of the Stalinist terror, dispensing high-speed “conveyor justice” and pronouncing sentences of execution or imprisonment for arrestees whom *troika* members never saw and whose files they scarcely had time to read. This allowed far greater numbers of people to be “processed.”

Another strength of this book is its focus on the different groups of targeted victims. For example, in a section devoted to religious believers, Iunge and Binner stress that a greater proportion of clergy were killed in 1937–38 than at any other time during Soviet rule—another reason to call this terror “great.”

A third advantage of the work is its use of local materials, especially the “memory books” published by organizations (such as Memorial) and individuals from the various territorial units of the former Soviet Union. These books contain much information from secret police files and include reproductions of some of the most important orders and