

Review

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

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cause to wonder whether we ought to think in terms of a continuum of crisis, along the fault lines delineated above, throughout the imperial period. To be sure, ecclesiastical officials, clergy, and believers during the last decades of the tsarist period proclaimed that “their” crisis was new and different; and Shevzov shows, for example, that debates among Orthodox thinkers about ecclesial community from 1905 to 1917 were “of a different quality” (14) in that, in contrast to prior debates that had focused on defining corporate boundaries in relationship to Eastern Christianity, Western Christianity, and the Old Believers, they had for the first time become “inwardly focused” (14). But until we have even more research on lived religious experience in Russia prior to 1861, we should be somewhat skeptical about taking at face value contemporaries’ insistent claims about the specificity of the crisis on the “eve of revolution.” At the same time, Shevzov’s work suggests questions for scholars working on Russian Orthodoxy after 1917. There is still so much to understand about the “sacred centers” of religious life in the Soviet period (possibly, though not necessarily, the same ones that Shevzov has identified in the religious lives of Russians in the late imperial period). To give but one example, did the building of chapels, a trend that became more pronounced after 1861, continue after 1917?

Shevzov’s hugely important book makes a major contribution to religious history and to the history of Imperial Russia. This book allows even experts to enter into a previously closed world and, consequently, to think about Russia, Russian Orthodoxy, and ordinary Russians in new ways. It almost goes without saying that this book deserves a wide readership.

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Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1930. By

David Shneer.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 300. \$45.00.

This is a carefully wrought, scrupulously annotated, and densely written story of how a relatively small group of poets, young men (mostly) and women, born toward the end of the nineteenth century in Russia, Belorussia, Lithuania, and Ukraine, set about to create a new cultural genre, at once Jewish and secular, national and socialist. They chose to do so in a language—Yiddish—that had been spoken for centuries by the vast majority of East European Jews but that had only recently embarked on the road to modernity.

The poets were a diverse lot, some more, some less gifted, but the best were among the most superb artists produced by Yiddish poetry in the mere seven decades of its existence. (The author devotes one chapter to one of the most interesting Soviet Yiddish poets, Izi Kharik, many of whose works reflect his ambivalence and the conflict between his nostalgia for the world of the *shtetl* and the new world he dreams will replace it.)

It is something of a miracle that it was precisely in the Soviet Union, which legitimized Yiddish only as part of the struggle for a new socialist culture gradually to be shorn of all the excrescences of religion, Hebrew, traditional Jewish lore, Zionism, and sundry varieties of “bourgeois nationalism,” that some poets reached the breadth and heights of lyrical expression, seldom achieved by their colleagues in New York, Warsaw, or Bucharest. Only in Vilna, part of independent Poland in the 1920 and 1930s, did a group of poets, the so-called Young Vilna, manage to produce verse of comparable

intensity. I confess that I don't know why this was so. Few Yiddish poets are as profound or intellectually challenging, and few express the tragedy of the Jewish people in the twentieth century as movingly as the American poets H. Leivick, Moishe Leyb Halperin, and Jacob Gladshteyn. Yet only in the greatest of the Young Vilna poets, Avrom Sutskever—recently turned ninety, and still active—do we find such a remarkable fusion of linguistic innovation, striking imagery, and shattering simplicity.

Perhaps it was because the revolutionary dreams that inspired so many of the Soviet Yiddish poets had a greater impact in Lithuania, or, more precisely, Vilna—once part of Russia—than anywhere else? Unlike their colleagues across their eastern border, forced to accommodate the demands of *partiinost'* and *ideinost'*, they could engage in formal experimentation; moreover, they were free to borrow from medieval Yiddish, something the “builders of a socialist Yiddish future” could not attempt without provoking obloquy and more severe forms of “socialist justice.”

David Shneer describes in fascinating detail the Byzantine battles among various groups of Yiddish poets, on the one hand, and the struggles between individual poets and the Soviet bureaucrats (always prepared to detect yet another “ideological error”), on the other. Though not all were Communist Party members, most of the poets were communists, who, as one of the major Yiddish poets and critics put it, considered Yiddish “not a goal in and for itself, but only a means for Communist education of the Jewish masses. But does this mean that the culture building that we have done in Yiddish is just a tactical maneuver? . . . Is it just meant to elicit sympathy from the world-wide Jewish masses to our work in the Soviet Union? And finally, does it mean that . . . after we find the key to the hearts and minds of the Jewish workers, we will suddenly throw out, as unnecessary baggage, all of Yiddish-language culture building?” (quoted on 6). Decidedly not, he assures his readers. As Shneer himself puts it, “Soviet socialism and secular Jewish nationalism were not the opposite ends of the spectrum in which the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia operated” (10). But he illustrates again and again how in practice these two goals collided.

The chapter dealing with the “modernization” of Yiddish is a case in point. Many languages went through a period of reform, or modernization, in the early part of the last century, but in no case was the process so complicated by ideological factors as it was with Yiddish. There was, first, the “Germanization” of Yiddish, introduced toward the end of the nineteenth century, intended to make the language more “elegant” and “European.” Most Yiddishists, in Russia as well as in Poland, were eager to establish basically a phonetic orthography. But politics complicated orthography in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. It had been traditional to spell all Yiddish words of Hebrew derivation in their Hebrew form (which generally dispenses with vowels). To the radical reformists, however, such spelling retained the religious component of Yiddish, with which they were eager to dispense. Instead, they resolved to spell Hebrew-derived words phonetically, thus presumably scuttling their religious dimension, and some even demanded the substitution of new words borrowed from Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian for many Hebrew-derived words. (Used sagaciously, the borrowings helped to enrich the poetic vocabulary of Yiddish; used as a political instrument, they sowed confusion.) Still others demanded the abolition of the Hebrew alphabet altogether, in favor of Latinization—though most found this a bit outré, and the proposal was withdrawn. Perhaps most bizarre was the elimination of the orthographic distinction in some Yiddish letters depending on their placement in or at the end of a word (the so-called final nun or final mem). With this “victory”—attained after literally years of polemics—the anti-Hebraists finally relaxed. Clericalism received its final blow.

It is worth noting that when Yiddish was finally reestablished in the early 1950s

(after a more than ten-year hiatus), some of the more extreme innovations of the Soviet Yiddish orthography were revoked. For most Yiddish readers (reduced from 97 percent of Yiddish speakers, as listed in the 1899 census, to about 10 percent in 1980) this came with rather belated relief.

Was the experiment in creating a secular Yiddish socialist culture, therefore, a failure? Indeed it was—and not only because of the lethal antisemitism of Stalin and his cohorts, as is so often assumed, though it was in the terror-stricken 1930s and 1940s that Yiddish effectively disappeared. It was also because, to the millions of Soviet Jews, the “radiant future” of Yiddish meant as little as sundry other abortive “radiant futures” did to the population at large. Why would Jewish parents send their children to Yiddish schools when they offered so much less a path to a career than Russian schools? And who in the shtetlach of Belorussia and Ukraine really gave a damn about the “final nun” and the “final men”? This much—and more—clearly emerges from Shneer’s astute and comprehensive study.

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Der Feind ist überall: Stalinismus im Kaukasus. By Jörg Baberowski.
Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2003. Pp. 882. €59.90.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, interest in the non-Russian periphery of the Soviet state has surged. Using newly declassified archives and other previously untapped sources, historians have challenged the Russocentric narrative of Soviet history, arguing that the study of Soviet rule in the borderlands is essential to understanding the Soviet project as a whole.

Jörg Baberowski’s book is an important and welcome contribution to this burgeoning literature on the “Soviet empire.” A comprehensive history of Azerbaijan in the years between the Russian Revolution and the Second World War, *Der Feind ist überall* tackles aspects of Stalinism in the Transcaucasus ranging from agricultural collectivization and political purges to the campaign against Islam and the emancipation of Muslim women. Conceptually sophisticated and based on a wide array of archival and published sources in Moscow and Baku, this book would be important even if it were solely about Stalinism in Azerbaijan. But Baberowski also makes claims for the larger significance of Azerbaijan within Soviet history. He views the ethnically diverse republic as a microcosm of the Soviet Union and as a laboratory in which Soviet authorities experimented with policies that would later be exported to the rest of the country. Perhaps most provocatively, Baberowski argues that the forced collectivization and terror that shook the entire Soviet Union in the 1930s grew out of the failure of the “civilizing mission” of the 1920s in the Muslim periphery. In his account, the Bolsheviks’ frustration at their inability to transform Azeri society bred anxiety about the subversive efforts of class enemies and saboteurs, eventually leading to the massive political witch hunts of 1937–38.

An important focus of Baberowski’s work is the Stalinist regime’s nation-making project in Azerbaijan. Through the policy of “indigenization,” the Soviets divided the ethnically diverse Caucasus into national republics in which a single “titular nationality” and its native language would receive preferential treatment. Unlike the tsarist regime, which deliberately fomented ethnic conflict as a way of consolidating its power, the Bolsheviks sought to prevent a revival of the terrible ethnic violence of the early