

Review

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

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ability but from a flawed agenda. However, more linkage to reality would have strengthened Gaida's implication that liberal ascent to power was a dubious achievement.

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***Music for the Revolution: Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia.*** By Amy Nelson. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004. xvi, 300 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Photographs. Musical Examples. \$40.00, hard bound.

Amy Nelson undertook a difficult task: the description of musical life in the first decade of Soviet power. In writing about literature or films it is possible to describe stories, and when discussing fine arts the writer can provide illustrations, but the scholar of music history is forced to attempt description of matters that cannot easily be expressed in words. Nelson attempts to ameliorate the problem by occasionally providing illustrations of musical scores, but it is not likely that many of her readers would be able to sight-read, or to take the trouble to go to the piano and attempt to make out the musical motives that were meant to illustrate her points.

Nelson, however, is as good a guide as anyone could be: she is well acquainted with Soviet history, in particular Soviet cultural history, and also, obviously, she is a musician who can make sense of musical issues. As her notes demonstrate, she knows the secondary literature and did exemplary work in the archives. Her goal in this book is not to deal with the music of the famous composers of the day, but to describe the debates that took place in the exciting years of the 1920s. The Bolsheviks were ambitious: they did not merely want to govern the country; they aimed to remake society and humanity. They wanted to bring "culture" to the Russian people, and music, obviously, was part of "culture," but what kind of music would be appropriate for the revolutionary state? "Serious" musicians and Bolshevik politicians shared a distaste for the dancehall and gypsy music that people actually seemed to enjoy, but there was no consensus concerning what should take the place of that kind of entertainment. What role could modernist music play in a proletarian state when that music was frankly elitist and inaccessible for the vast majority? Nelson is very good in describing the complexity of the relationship between politicians and musicians and convincingly argues that a simple juxtaposition of oppressed artists and oppressing politicians is misleading. Politicians often acted as patrons of musicians, groups of musicians competed with one another for favor, and Bolsheviks and artists together ultimately arrived at what would be the dominant, "Soviet" music in the age of Iosif Stalin.

There was no aspect of life that escaped the attention of the victorious revolutionaries. Given the nature of music, however, this tutelage at least in the 1920s could not be as burdensome, the state could not be as interventionist as it was in the case, for example, of filmmakers. The interesting decade of the 1920s can be regarded both as the tail end of prerevolutionary culture and at the same time as a preparation of things to come. Some of the themes that would become dominant a few years later were first introduced in the period of New Economic Policy. The overwhelmingly significant difference between the age of Stalin and the decade of the 1920s was that the multiplicity of voices was ultimately reduced to one during Stalin's "cultural revolution"; socialist realism triumphed.

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***Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918–1930.*** By David Shneer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. x, 300 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$45.00, hard bound.

*Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* examines the use of the Yiddish language in the making of a Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. The book discusses the efforts of an

elite group of Jews to turn Yiddish into the core element of a Soviet Jewish identity. This group was comprised of organizers who argued the case for Yiddish with the government authorities and creative artists—writers and poets—who worked at forging a new Soviet Jewish identity out of the declining world of the shtetl. The pro-Yiddish elite battled other forms of Jewish expression, in particular Hebrew language publications. After achieving considerable success in the 1920s, the tightening noose of Stalinist antinationalism gripped members of the pro-Yiddish elite. Many were arrested and executed in the purges of the 1930s, while others met the same fate in 1952.

David Shneer sees the flowering of Yiddish language culture in the Soviet Union in the 1920s as an act of cultural imagination on the part of Jews close to the Soviet regime. In the 1920s, the Soviet regime allowed—even encouraged—ethnic groups to preserve their native culture. This, the regime believed, would lead the ethnic groups to embrace communism. But there was a catch. While the forms of ethnic group expression might be unique—Yiddish language—the content had to be consistent with communist perspectives. Over time, ethnic group culture would be undermined and ethnic content would be replaced by communist content.

Within this ambiguous context, the author argues, Jews and other ethnic-group leaders tried to create a space in which genuine cultural expression could occur. This hothouse atmosphere produced memorable Yiddish poetry and spawned newspapers, journals, and schools. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet Jewish writers produced a high percentage of original materials (as opposed to translations).

The book, originally a doctoral dissertation, is based on archival research in Russia and the United States, the reading of Soviet Jewish newspapers, literary analysis of several poems, and interviews. Yiddish and Russian are the primary languages of the documents. The book also refers to a number of academic studies of Soviet Jews, completed for the most part since the demise of the USSR.

*Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* has a number of strengths. Using Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community, the author argues that too much writing on Soviet Jews—and other Jews—falls victim to “backshadowing”: a focus by analysts on the ultimate failure or tragic outcome of efforts to sustain ethnic identity. What is more important is what the participants in a particular historical moment imagined and achieved. A historian's own understanding of an event is necessarily affected by “backshadowing”—knowing the outcome. But too much weight can be placed on this. After all, the participants in the events did not know how they would turn out, and their actions matter most.

The book helpfully sheds light on the lives of prominent members of the Soviet Jewish elite, including Esther Frumkin and Moshe Litvakov. Frumkin, a rabbi's daughter, left the world of Jewish religious tradition to become first an activist for Jewish workers and later a “Leninst” who could provide ideologically acceptable answers to any question—all the while working for a carefully guarded ethnic agenda. Litvakov, named in 1923 as the censor of Yiddish publications, could advance some ethnic goals from the ideological control room.

The book details the daily struggles of the champions of Yiddish in the Soviet Union. Under pressure to divorce Soviet Yiddish from Hebrew and Judaism, they designed a unique Yiddish orthography, for example. Thus Soviet Yiddish no longer resembled an emerging standard Yiddish. To erase any connection to Hebrew, some thought was given to Latinizing Yiddish letters. The author provides an interesting assessment of the work of Israel (Izi) Kharik, whose 1920s poetry threw questioning glances at both the declining shtetl and the emerging revolutionary project.

The book's political focus could be sharper. The efforts to create a Yiddish-language culture in the USSR occurred in an intense political atmosphere. At the same time as activists like Frumkin were working for the Yiddish project, they were working against other projects, such as efforts to create a Jewish homeland in the Crimea. The book does refer to efforts by the pro-Yiddish forces to eliminate Hebrew. But it could have paid more attention to how the Soviet regime looked at Yiddish—as a way of defeating Zionism in the USSR and improving the Soviet image internationally.

Shneer mentions that most Soviet Jews wanted to integrate into the Russian-language culture. In part, this reflected the economic reality that led Jews to migrate to cities in

search of professional opportunities. The book might have included more discussion of the demographic challenges facing the conceptualizers of Soviet Yiddish, whose population base was shrinking steadily.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on Jews in eastern Europe. It will appeal to readers in the fields of Russian, Jewish, and cultural studies. It could also interest people delving into the cultural aspects of the Jewish past.

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***Keeping the Faith: Russian Orthodox Monasticism in the Soviet Union, 1917–1939.*** By Jennifer Jean Wynot. Eugenia and Hugh M. Stewart '26 Series on Eastern Europe. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. xviii, 235 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Tables. \$45.00, hard bound.

Recent scholarship has gone a long way in explaining why the Russian Orthodox Church crumbled with breathtaking speed during the first decades of the Soviet regime. Jennifer Jean Wynot's book concentrates on popular faith and contributes to the growing body of evidence that believers in the 1920s and 1930s proved far more resilient and steadfast than the church in their resistance to the machinations of their antireligious enemies. Through her examination of monasticism, Wynot adds to our knowledge of varieties of Orthodox piety and its significance in Russian history. Early Bolshevik and Soviet religious policy followed logically the reforms of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great that definitively subordinated the church to the state by confiscating monastic lands and wealth. Yet, as happened repeatedly throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, attacks on the Orthodox Church as an institution triggered a groundswell of religious support among ordinary believers. Handicapped but not dispirited, monasteries became important cultural centers and social forces as Russia struggled on the uncertain path toward modernization. Asceticism, combined with spiritual athleticism and a Russian folksiness, endeared otherwise isolated monks to the masses of Russians who streamed to the most famous and lesser known monasteries to observe the lifestyle, seek the advice of, or commemorate the memory of famed religious achievers.

Monastic communities that emerged as important centers of spirituality in the century before the Bolsheviks assumed power did so in part by manipulating prevailing expectations of society. The result was the creation of a strong link between monasticism and Russian identity that resonated throughout all corners of the empire, from the least literate to the cultural literati. The connection between monasticism and Russian identity implied a distance between the church as an administrative unit and Orthodox religious sentiment as a primal characteristic of Russianness. Wynot argues that these nineteenth-century developments that had strengthened Russian monasticism proved to be critical to the church's downfall after 1917 because organized religion too closely resembled independent public activism that could be mobilized in opposition to the Soviet regime.

Wynot is at her best when she describes the effects of the complex relationship between religion and the state. Building upon historical precedent, Soviet authorities, monastics, and ordinary believers established norms of behavior that permitted monasteries a semi-independent existence and condoned the faithful's adoration of holy places while the parish clergy and churches were assaulted with relentless fervor. The number of functioning churches dropped precipitously from nearly 40,000 in 1917 to no more than 14,000 in 1936, which underscores the weakened position of religion. Faith, however, remained strong and the 1937 census revealed that the number of self-defined Orthodox believers was nearly the same as professed nonbelievers. The large number of declared believers, alongside a sense of social responsibility, led church officials to actively support the Soviet regime in the 1937 elections for the Supreme Soviet in the hope that this support might stem the closure of parish churches. In the end, the organizational skills of the Orthodox leadership proved too reminiscent of semi-independent public institutions of the late tsarist era and prompted vigorous persecution by the Soviet leadership.