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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* by Shneer, David.

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Alexandre Safran (1910–2006), chief rabbi of Romania between 1940 and 1947, to protect his people from the state-licensed brutality of the extreme-right Iron Guard movement which came to power in September 1940, and then, shortly after Romania's attack alongside Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union in June 1941, from deportation.

In his comprehensive introductory study Professor Iancu traces Safran's meteoric rise from rabbi in Bacău in Moldavia to his installation as chief rabbi of Romania in March 1940 at the age of twenty-nine — the youngest chief rabbi in the world at the time — at a time when the Jews of Romania were faced with a threat to their very existence. Alongside his friend Wilhelm Filderman, the head of the Federation of the Union of Jewish Communities, Safran bombarded Romania's pro-Nazi dictator, Ion Antonescu, with pleas to alleviate the sufferings of their people and were both instrumental, amongst others, in persuading the Romanian leader to halt the deportation of Jews to Transnistria and to renounce his intention to accede to German wishes that he deport Romania's surviving Jews to the death-camps in Poland. This volume stands as a moving companion to Iancu's earlier work on Safran.

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DENNIS DELETANT

Shneer, David. *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*. Jewish Cultures of the World. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ and London, 2011. xiii + 283 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Index. \$39.95.

*THROUGH SOVIET JEWISH EYES*, by David Shneer, is in a class all its own. With some notable exceptions, such as *Photographing the Jewish Nation: Pictures from S. An-Sky's Ethnographic Expeditions*, edited by Eugene Avrutin et al (Lebanon, NH, 2010), and a brief biography of Evgenii Khaldei (1917–97) by Alexander and Alice Nakhimovsky (New York, 1997), work that intelligently bridges Jewish history and the history of photography is sparse. Shneer is the first scholar, however, to recognize the extent to which photography was largely a Jewish domain in the tsarist empire and the Soviet Union — even if no one was prepared to admit it. The historiographic lacuna he confronts is especially striking given the overwhelming Jewishness of this cohort and unmistakable traces of their solidarity. Jewish networks and concerns were integral and persistent (p. 37). This work, therefore, addresses critical issues pertaining to the bizarre dynamics of the Soviet Union, Jewish social and economic history, antisemitism, cultural studies and European history generally that few scholars have grasped or even registered. Furthermore, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* is

an indispensable contribution to the burgeoning interpretations of 'memory work' and obfuscation related to the Holocaust, and our understanding of the resuscitation of post-Soviet Jewish culture.

In his previous major book, *Yiddish and the Creation of a Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1939* (Cambridge, 2004), Shneer offers a keen analysis of diverse genres and graphic images within a shifting and often contradictory political landscape. One of the many strengths of that book is Shneer's close attention not only to the Jews' writing per se, but also the environments and structures that fostered Yiddish cultural products and institutions — and subsequently smothered them. Here he likewise is superb at reconstructing how different types of publications and the photographs that featured within them came into being. Shneer is exceptional in reading photographs and excavating the complex relations between levels of officials, editors and the photographers. When he has access to negatives and contact sheets, Shneer illuminates the evolution of the photo from conception to print, and sometimes, different incarnations of the same photograph. Shneer's sophistication in dealing with visual culture, in Jewish Studies and contemporary history, has few if any equals. In addition, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* is one of the only studies of photojournalism that seriously engages ethnic difference and religious origins that often played significant roles in the evolution and life of the field. It is one of the most brilliant books, ever, in the immense field of media studies. It is difficult to think of any single work on photojournalism, in any national setting, that rivals Shneer's deep archival forays, expert use of memoirs and interviews, and sharp analysis.

This study is divided into two major sections: 'Part One: When Photography Was Jewish', and 'Soviet Jewish Photographers Confront World War Two and the Holocaust'. Given the counter-intuitive thrust of the thesis, that the subculture of secular Jews in photography was important and possessed more than some semblance of agency, perhaps it is not surprising that the each topic Shneer engages complicates or scrapes against the grain of widely-held assumptions about Soviet society.

Through the excellent histories of Robert Weinberg and Jonathan Dekel-Chen we are aware of Jewish agricultural 'colonization' in the Crimea and the 'autonomous' far eastern enclave of Birobidjan. Shneer's book complements this work and helps explain why Jews beyond the Soviet Union often held a positive image of the USSR, finding the efforts to place Jews 'on the soil' especially impressive.

Among the many penetrating insights is Shneer's examination of Jewish photographers' roles in what came to be seen as obscuring the Holocaust — as distinct peoples, especially Jews, were subsumed in the mass of 'victims of Fascism'. 'In the American context,' he writes, 'the question "Why divide the

dead?” reflected Jews’ own yearning for the universal, to not be divided from the others, to be considered American citizens like everyone else. Ironically, in the Soviet context, the phrase *Do not divide the dead* has usually been used to describe Stalin’s postwar silencing of the attempt to document and commemorate the Holocaust on Soviet soil. But perhaps both are true. Like many American Jews who were using the war experience to finally make themselves into Americans, some Soviet Jews were doing the same’ (p. 170).

This is not a book for those seeking clear-cut divisions and simple answers. *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* will, however, be appreciated by those who wish to better comprehend the part Soviet Jews played in the rise of the nation and its struggle against Nazism from a fresh perspective — which also exposes the country’s self-destructive harassment of its Jews. It should be a serious contender for major prizes.

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MICHAEL BERKOWITZ

Fürst, Juliane. *Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2010. xiv + 391 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. £60.00.

*STALIN’S LAST GENERATION* is a study of a cohort of young people who came of age in the later stages of Stalin’s rule, whose childhood was shaped by the trauma, loss and deprivation of the Second World War and whose education and professional trajectories were lived out in the shadow of *frontiviki* ideology. This cohort of people, the book’s author argues, constitutes a ‘generation’ in Mannheim’s sense (‘The Problem of Generations’ [1952], *Collected Works*, vol. 5, London, 1997) because of its peculiar generational location; the shared experience of a traumatic event — the Great Patriotic War — in which, significantly, members of this generation themselves did not fight. Indeed, the voice of a cohort of the dispossessed, as returnees from the war were prioritized materially and ideologically, resounds clearly throughout the book thanks to the author’s excellent use of a rich range of published and archival sources, interviews, memoirs and diaries.

The author does not use the term ‘generation’ lightly. She recognizes the problematic nature of generational ‘consciousness’ in Mannheim’s theory and argues that neither self-identification nor age-driven conflict is necessary to form a generation or make it an agent of change. Notwithstanding this critical approach to the concept of generation, the book has a tendency to