

novel provides the complex cultural, moral, and intellectual soil out of which it will grow.

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

DAVID SHNEER, 2004

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

ix + 300 pp, \$50.00

David Shneer, assistant professor of history at the University of Denver and director of its Center for Judaic Studies, wrote the dissertation on which this book is based when he was a graduate student at Berkeley. His advisor, Yuri Slezkine, had recently published a major study entitled *The Jewish Century*,¹ and Shneer broadly follows Slezkine's approach. That is, he explores the interrelationship between Soviet and Jewish cultural politics in the first decade of Soviet rule by identifying the state's interests and their relatively brief convergence with those of the Jewish intelligentsia, who had multiple motives for adapting their own Jewish agendas to the Bolshevik program. Hoping to illuminate the vibrant, vital struggles of the 1920s as experienced by those actually involved and affected, he deliberately avoids what Michael Bernstein calls "backshadowing," or holding the men and women of the 1920s responsible for failing to foresee the profound darkness of what came later, at Hitler and Stalin's hands.

The result is an engrossing book that adds substance, detail and nuance to our understanding of an always complex and sometimes chaotic set of tensions. Political forces buffeted Jews, certainly, but so did linguistic, national, and cultural battles. Yiddish versus Hebrew, Yiddish versus Russian, particularist Jewish self-definition versus assimilation, national versus proletarian and/or internationalist identity—these, plus the pragmatic considerations whose importance in Bolshevik policies we have relatively recently come to understand, resulted in overheated rhetoric, feverish activity, absurd factionalism, and some outstanding Yiddish poetry.

Shneer contextualizes Jewish issues within the larger "nativization" policy of the early 1920s. The Bolsheviks, propagandists *par excellence* before the October revolution, promoted language-based social and cultural institutions as a means of disseminating their ideas. For Jews "this meant the creation of Jewish courts, Jewish town councils . . . and Jewish cultural organizations, which operated in Yiddish" (p. 22). Though Hebrew and Russian claimed many adherents, a significant segment of the Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia saw "nativization" as a golden opportunity to create a secular Yiddish culture and a new kind of Jew.

In his second chapter Shneer traces the language wars within the Jewish community from the Enlightenment until the late 19th-century, when

¹ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Perets legitimized Yiddish as “a language of self-expression rather than a language of didacticism” (p. 36). Nevertheless, teaching “cum” preaching remained a core concern, fostered by the Bolshevik empowerment of schools to instruct students in their native language. Printed Hebrew, doubly damned as chauvinist and religious, virtually disappeared when the Nationalities Commissariat authorized the Jewish Division (*Evseksiia*) to supervise all Hebrew alphabet publishing, i.e. gave it control of all print production, from textbooks to magazines, specifically marked as Jewish by its very form. (Exceptions, such as a modernist literary Hebrew publication in 1926, slipped through, to bitter complaints from the *Evseksiia*.)

With his chapter on modernization of Yiddish, Shneer recognizes both parallels with other languages—orthographic reforms in Russian, for instance—and a “lack of interference from non-Jewish state and Party officials” unique to Yiddish (p. 62). Originally stemming from Yiddish linguists themselves, whose goals involved rationalization and simplification (like Shaw’s proposals for revising English spelling), the reforms were once again orchestrated pragmatically. Publishing houses insisted on the new orthography; by 1930 authors who did not conform would have to pay for corrections themselves.

Similarly practical considerations—the rationing of paper, the absence of local Jewish-language printing facilities—influenced control of publishing throughout the 1920s; manuscripts had to go where the typeface was, which meant Vitebsk, Berdichev, and even abroad. The *shul un bukh* (School and Book) publishing house, established in Moscow in 1923, balanced its budget both by exporting Yiddish books for hard currency and by importing foreign books for sale at home. (The film industry did much the same thing until about 1927, earning major revenues from, for instance, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford pictures.) Soviet Yiddish culture joined mainstream Soviet culture in attacking the *shtetl*, perceived like the Russian village as a site of obscurantism and clericalism. “Soviet” holidays supplanted traditional Jewish holidays, which the Yiddish press denigrated; a favorite Passover song might replace God with Marx and the Haggadah with a Komsomol version. (Anyone remember the “Cesar Chavez” Haggadah popular in the late 1960s?) Because Soviet Jews had no territory of their own until Birobidzhan was so designated in 1934, Soviet Jewish culture avoided the “specter of nationalism,” a charge leveled against Belorussian, Ukrainian and other publishers (p. 132).

The relatively porous Soviet borders of the early 1920s encouraged travel. Yiddish writers felt themselves part of an international community stretching to Berlin, London, and New York. Shneer writes about lesser-known poets who, before the centralization of the early 1930s put paid to diversity, belonged to various literary groups—I confess the details become a bit overwhelming here—as well as about the famous: Fefer, Hofehteyn, Kvitko, Markish, and Bergelson. And he devotes his final chapter to Izi Kharik, chosen both for the quality of his verse and the level of his involvement in “envisioning a Soviet Jewish future” and in the “debates about Jewish aesthetics and politics” (p. 179).

Kharik is a good choice, not least because of the arc of his career, which peaked in 1936 before his arrest and execution in 1937.

Shneer is right, of course, in trying to examine the culture wars of the 1920s on their own terms. Nonetheless, one cannot read his book without a sense of bitterness and impending tragedy. Those men and women who were trying to forge a secular Soviet Yiddish culture could not have known what was coming. But given their fates as individuals and the fate of Soviet Yiddish culture as a whole, we neither can nor should avoid such knowledge. It's an essential, terrible part of the story that Shneer tells so well.

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Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia

STEVEN DUDLEY, 2006

New York: Routledge

280 pp., \$21.95

Writing a book about the conflict in Colombia can be a dangerous task. Steven Dudley, an American journalist who spent five years in Colombia researching his new book, found that out the hard way. He had to leave Colombia before his book was published and is doubtful he can ever return. The reasons for Dudley's situation are, in the Colombian context, simple enough. In *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* he has written a profoundly honest book that casts a critical eye on all sides in the ongoing conflict. And in today's Colombia, that's enough to get you killed.

For the most part, two sharply opposed views have dominated the discussion about the violence in Colombia. The first view sees the conflict as a struggle between Colombia's democratic government and the narco-funded terrorists of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), with the former being aided by overly maligned right-wing paramilitaries. The second view sees the conflict as a social revolt, pitting the peasant guerrillas of the FARC against an army and death squads that fight on behalf of Colombia's economic and political elite. To his credit, Dudley avoids both of these simplified scenarios, and instead opts to paint a more complex picture.

What makes Dudley's book so valuable is that he focuses on the political and ideological dynamic that has shaped the conflict. While a substantial number of academic and general studies have been published on Colombia's history of violence and the recent "drug war," this is one of the rare English-language works to closely examine the role of the Colombian Communist Party in the FARC insurgency. This focus on the Marxist ideology and the communist politics of the the FARC is crucial to understanding the guerrilla war. Yet, outside Colombia the ideological and political roots of the violence have been downplayed by both the allies of the government and the partisans of the guerrillas, each for their own reasons.