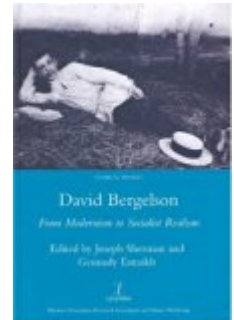


**Joseph Sherman, Gennady Estraiikh, eds.** *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism*. Leeds: Legenda, 2007. xiii + 363 pp. \$69.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-905981-12-0.



**Reviewed by** Anna Shternshis

**Published on** H-Judaic (January, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

David Bergelson (1884–1952), one of the most accomplished modern Yiddish writers, was born in Ukraine and lived in the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union. His stories, novels, and documentary writings cover the major transitions and traumas of the European Jewish population during the twentieth century, including two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the Holocaust, and the experience of immigration (to the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union). An accomplished writer and journalist, he saw his work included in all major Yiddish publications and translated into dozens of languages. His work, never predictable, always of immense depth, profoundly influenced the world of the Yiddish intellectual elite, provoking fierce arguments and discussions. In addition to being a fiction writer, Bergelson was an important political figure, who, as a member of the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, worked to raise the Jewish world's awareness of the Soviet war efforts in the 1940s. Like many other members of the committee, Bergelson was arrested in 1948, and later shot

on August 12, 1952. His death signified the end of the era of Yiddish intellectualism in the Soviet Union.

Bergelson's work is hard to read in its original language today and was hard to read for his contemporary audience. Today, many readers have difficulties with idioms that are a bit too intellectual. Then, editors of *Forverts*, the largest Yiddish weekly in the United States, noticed that their readers could not always comprehend the complex structures of Bergelson's sentences (see Ellen Kellman's essay in this volume, "Uneasy Patronage: Bergelson's Years at *Forverts* 1922–1926," p. 199). Similar problems were encountered in the Soviet Union, where he wrote for *Der Emes*, the Soviet Yiddish daily. Perhaps the difficulty in understanding Bergelson's Yiddish provides one of the reasons that serious studies of Bergelson's work were scarce, at best, until just a few years ago. Only a handful of Yiddish scholars, including Avrom Novershtern, Mikhail Krutikov, Heather Valencia, and Gennady Estraiikh, have published work on some of Bergelson's writing, but only

now has his multifaceted life, work, and impact been examined comprehensively by an interdisciplinary group of top-notch scholars.

The editors of this volume have done a wonderful job in making sure that all significant aspects of Bergelson's complicated life and creativity are addressed. Joseph Sherman's biography of Bergelson creates a useful framework for understanding the rest of the essays. Lev Bergelson's memoirs of his father provide a priceless inside look into the writer's private life and explain many of Bergelson's decisions (including those that involved moving from one country to another) (pp. 79-88). The memoirs also shed light into Bergelson's personal friendships, including those with important Yiddish writers and literary critics, and, in many ways, help explain the dilemmas that the writer faced in the 1920s and why he invested in a future with the Soviet Union, rather than the United States. Two essays, one by Kellman and another by Estraiikh, are devoted solely to the American period in Bergelson's life. Kellman analyzes Bergelson's writings published in *Forverts*, and Estraiikh deals with Bergelson's work in other American publications. The German period of the author's creativity is represented by a well-researched essay by Sasha Senderovich, "In Search of Readership: Bergelson among the Refugees (1928)." Both Senderovich's piece and Krutikov's contribution, "Narrating the Revolution: 'From Tsugvintn' (1922) to *Mides-hadin* (1929)" discuss his transition from a prose modernist into a communist propagandist in the 1920s. Krutikov presents Bergelson as an experimental writer, and proves that, up until 1929, when Bergelson wrote *Mides-hadin*, the writer played with expressionist features that were common in contemporary European literature. Similarly, in her analysis of Bergelson's *Nokh Alemen* (1913), arguably the first modern Yiddish novel, Daniela Mantovan compares it with Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), "the first European novel to break all the traditional classical rules" (p. 92). Through a detailed textual analysis

of the structure of Bergelson's dialogues, she concludes that Bergelson, though profoundly influenced by Flaubert, moved away from his language and practices, and created his own images and structures, which mark his unique style. In the process, he took Yiddish literature to a new level. Essays studying the literary works of Bergelson include Seth Wolitz's thought-provoking discussion of the novella *Joseph Shur* (1911-13) as a concentration of tensions between the Jewish upper middle class and working poor, Judaism and Christianity, capitalism and socialism, tradition and modernity.

Five essays are devoted solely to Bergelson's Soviet writing. This is the first English-language volume that seriously studies this aspect of Bergelson's creativity. Previously, his writings in support of the Communist system were dismissed by scholars as influenced by ideology and not worthy of literary research. The essays gathered in this volume prove otherwise. Boris Kotlerman covers the relationship between Bergelson and the Birobidzhan project. Harriet Murav's detailed analysis of the novel *Baym Dnyepri* (1932-40) discusses how Bergelson struggled in finding a way to portray the past, though he himself used to attack Yiddish literature for its preoccupation with the past. Murav argues that even in his most "Soviet style novel," which firmly placed Bergelson in the socialist realist tradition, Bergelson refused to amputate the Jewish past from the Soviet present of the Jewish Communists. David Shneer's "From Mourning to Vengeance: Bergelson's Holocaust Journalism (1941-1945)" analyzes a completely different side of Bergelson: a journalist covering the destruction of Soviet Jewry and encouraging revenge through his articles. This is the period when the elitist writer became one of the most influential voices in Jewish public life. Jeffrey Veidlinger provides a fascinating analysis of Bergelson's play *Prints Ruveni*, which was planned for production in the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, but canceled due to the death of Shloyme Mikhoels. Both Shneer and Veidlinger document

the revival of Jewish consciousness that took place in the 1940s, and explain the key role that Bergelson played in articulating this new shift in Soviet Jewish identity.

Certainly, one volume cannot touch on all issues related to the work of such a multifaceted writer. The volume clearly identifies a number of areas still in need of research. To cite just a few, there is nothing about the public perception of Bergelson's work or his place in Russian and Soviet literature. However, the editors have done a remarkable job collecting essays that finally put Bergelson on the map of literary and historical scholarship. This is the necessary first step in assuring that the contribution made by this important Yiddish writer to the development of world's literature does not remain unnoticed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Anna Shternshis. Review of Sherman, Joseph; Estraiikh, Gennady, eds. *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23793>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.