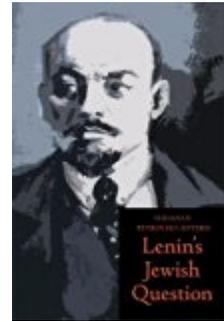


Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern. *Lenin's Jewish Question*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. 224 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-15210-4.

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## The Politics of Lenin's Ethnicity

Vladimir Il'ich Lenin was biologically one-quarter Jewish. This is a genealogical fact that has evoked intense controversy, having been exposed with malice by his detractors, concealed with anxiety by his followers, noted with fascination by casual observers, yet historically irrelevant for understanding Lenin, the Bolshevik Party, and the Russian Revolution. Such is the premise of Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern's *Lenin's Jewish Question*, a lively monograph that tracks the origins and fate of Lenin's "Jewish" biography. With self-effacing irony, Petrovsky-Shtern makes it clear from the outset that this is a story in need of telling precisely because his main character, a "Jewish Lenin," never existed; Lenin emerged from a linguistically, culturally, and spiritually Russian Christian milieu and became an ideologically committed Russocentric Bolshevik driven to construct a centralized communist state. He probably did not know of his Jewish ancestors and even if he did, Petrovsky-Shtern argues, it would not have had any impact on his conception of Bolshevism or the Jewish question. Yet the postmortem discovery of Lenin's forgotten Jewish ancestry was deemed to be a bombshell whose revelation could have profound political consequences. Deified as the linchpin of Soviet power, Lenin *had to be* Russian, for to be Jewish—even in part—would undermine the party's authority, which was rooted in its allegedly indigenous Russian credentials, the legitimate heir to the tsarist autocracy. Lenin's genealogy was trivial, but its subsequent assessment was not.

Petrovsky-Shtern devotes two fascinating chapters to

the turbulent life of Lenin's insignificant ancestor, his great-grandfather Moshko Blank, born into a Yiddish-speaking traditional Jewish family in mid-eighteenth-century Poland. He resided for several decades in Starokonstantinov, a predominantly Polish Catholic and Jewish town of ten thousand. Blank disdained the local Jewish community for their insularity, devotion to the Talmud, and refusal to see the great benefits of assimilating into Russian Orthodoxy and culture. He repeatedly ran afoul of the local Jewish authorities, regularly denounced their lack of patriotism and alleged treachery in his petitions to Nicholas I, and ultimately resettled in Zhitomir, the regional capital where he could fulfill his dream: to efface his Jewish origins and raise his family as Christian subjects devoted to tsar and empire. His children were baptized (as was he at the age of eighty) and attended Russian schools, and his two sons obtained permission to reside in St. Petersburg, where they became physicians. One of his sons, Alexander (née Yisroel), went on to have a successful career, marry a Russified German, and raise children with no memory of their shtetl ancestry; the Blanks were now Russians in every respect, thus fulfilling the dream that Moshko had for his progeny. And in 1870, Alexander's daughter Mariia bore a son, Vladimir, the future revolutionary and founder of the Soviet state.

Lenin and his relationship to the Jewish question in Russia is the subject of Petrovsky-Shtern's third chapter. The author insists that Lenin did not see the Jewish question as relevant for achieving his ultimate goal,

the creation of a centralized Communist Party which would serve as a model for his envisioned Soviet state. Anti-Semitism and, for that matter, all forms of ethnic discrimination were a byproduct of capitalist exploitation. All such issues would be solved under communism once all citizens would be free and equal. The Jews and other ethno-cultural communities would vanish through assimilation into, quite naturally, the dominant nation—the Russians; there would be no Jewish question because there would be no Jews. In this sense, Lenin became a Russian imperialist, though not because he was an ethnic chauvinist or a racist. Lenin judged people according to their utility to his revolutionary agenda and quest for power. And for such a state to be seen as the legitimate successor to tsarist Russia it was imperative that the party and Lenin—its human embodiment—be seen as Russian. A “Jewish Lenin” would delegitimize the party as a foreign entity.

Petrovsky-Shtern examines the fate of Lenin’s ethnobiography in the book’s final two chapters. It was his sister Anna who, shortly after Lenin’s death in 1924, uncovered archival documents attesting to the Blanks’ Jewish genealogy. Anna wanted the information to be released to the public, convinced it would illustrate how the USSR brought all nations together into a community of equals. But the party ordered the information suppressed, tacitly recognizing “the power of a racist belief: once marred by Semitic blood, an individual was never able to wipe it off” (p. 105). Anti-Soviet propaganda already vilified “Judeo-Communism” with prominent Bolsheviks of Jewish descent—Lev Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev—being held up as perfidious infiltrators. A “Jewish Lenin” was simply not an option, and despite several attempts to get them released in the 1960s, the documents remained buried as state secrets until the USSR’s collapse. Once the information came to

light in the 1990s, it was seized upon with great fanfare by Russian nationalists and neo-fascists who sought to condemn the Soviet era as a tragic aberration in Russian history; the alien “Jewish Lenin” and his Judeo-Bolsheviks had sought to destroy Holy Russia. Thus, Petrovsky-Shtern concludes, the Communist Party’s censorship and the Russian fascists’ invectives were rooted in a common belief: “the Jews had no place in Russian history, either Imperial or Soviet” (p. 134).

For the student of Russian-Jewish history, much of this book treads on familiar terrain, especially the sections on Lenin’s nationality policy and the history of Russian fascism. Petrovsky-Shtern also makes a handful of conclusions that are in contention among scholars. For instance, he argues that the disproportionately large representation of Jews among the Bolsheviks says “nothing historically relevant,” because the Jews who joined the party did so “to discard their Jewishness” (pp. xiii-xiv). Yet such a sweeping statement belies the heterogeneity of Lenin’s followers who, for various reasons, embraced his vision of communism. A “Jewish Lenin” may be fictitious because Lenin’s family had discarded Judaism and erased its memory two generations earlier; this was not so for many Jewish Bolsheviks who were intimately connected to (or at least consciously aware of) the world of their ancestors they yearned to abandon. Such an awareness undoubtedly influenced their political commitments.

Nevertheless, *Lenin’s Jewish Question* is an important book, for it illustrates how a minor element in one man’s genealogy could have such a profound psychological effect on those who knew the secret, and how the knowledge of this secret could be mobilized to shape the representation of Russia’s past and to legitimize a course for its future. Petrovsky-Shtern underscores the absurdity of a “Jewish Lenin” with wit and irony, making his work a pleasure to read.

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