

Valérie Pozner, Natacha Laurent, eds. *Kinojudaica: L'image des juifs dans le cinéma russe et soviétique*. Toulouse: La Cinémathèque de Toulouse, 2012. 585 pp. no price given (paper), ISBN 978-2-84736-575-7.

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Jews in Russian Cinema: Characters, Themes, Contexts

The thirteen chapters of this large new French-language anthology focus primarily on the representation of Jews in Russian cinema from its origins to the era of perestroika. Inevitably, however, the authors' concerns branch out to include observations about the participation of Jews in the broader film industry and, even more important, analyses of the pressures the czarist and Soviet governments brought to bear on producers attempting to portray Jewish life across decades of Russian social and political turmoil. In every respect, the various authors provide crucial information about chapters of Russian film history that have been almost entirely ignored in the standard English-language sources.[1]

As in other Western countries, Jews were active at all levels of the Russian film industry from its earliest days. Abram (alias Alexander) Drankov and Iosif Ermoliev were among the leading producers soon after the arrival in the empire of the new French invention, the "*cinématographe*," around the turn of the twentieth century. Jews soon also became leaders in the distribution and exhibition circuits of the empire from Warsaw in the East to Odessa in the South, although the Bolsheviks' seizure of power led many to follow Drankov and Ermoliev into Western exile. Over the decade under the last Romanov czar, the creation of Jewish film companies catering to the increasingly assimilated and Russified Jewish audiences not surprisingly led to Jewish-themed films that appeared with considerable frequency on Russian screens. Animated by contemporary Jew-

ish character types, such films not only attracted large numbers of Jews eager to see themselves and their problems dramatized, but industry records suggest that Gentile audiences also patronized these movies, apparently for what they regarded as their "exotic" content.

After the revolutions of 1917, which removed many of the constraints on where Jews could live and eliminated long-standing barriers to Jewish employment in many government positions and business enterprises, even larger numbers of Jews were able to enter the cadres of the new, state-sponsored cinema. Famous actors, such as Solomon Mikhoels, Venyamin Zuskin, and Serafima Birman, lit up Soviet screens from the late 1920s onward, while an extraordinary wave of talented directors of Jewish origin, such as Boris Barnet, Abram Room, Grigori Kozintsev, Leonid Trauberg, Sergei Yutkevich, Yuli Raizman, Mikhail Romm, Mark Donskoi, Grigori and Pavel Chukhrai, and Iosif Kheifits, contributed many of the most memorable fictional films in the first fifty years of Communist rule. Meanwhile, their nominal coreligionists who specialized in documentaries—Dziga Vertov (born David Abelevich Kaufman in Bialystok), Esfir Schub, Mikhail Kaufman, and Roman Karmen—offered ideological "truths" in their films that the Communist regime wished to publicize from the beginning of the 1920s almost until the final collapse of the USSR in 1991.

One of the volume's coeditors, Valérie Pozner, offers a pioneering, vividly detailed look into the role Jews

played in the development of the film industry during the Russian Empire's last days and the ways in which both Jewish and non-Jewish producers represented Jewish characters. Most of the Jewish firms were managed by assimilated, Russian-speaking businessmen who nevertheless were alert to the needs of the vast majority of Jews who spoke Yiddish as their first language in the so-called Pale of Settlement. Most of the films she describes—apparently, almost all were melodramas—were made during the last years of czarist power. These are almost entirely unknown in the West and, sadly, many no longer exist. By using accounts in the trade press (often sponsored by Jewish firms), however, Pozner manages to provide the basic story outlines, describes the religious rituals they portrayed, and defines the typical characters they deployed. A major theme was the emergence from the ghettos in the Pale of ever larger numbers of younger Jews and the temptations posed by assimilation, something very much on the minds of those engaged in the process of casting off what they regarded as the heavy yoke of religious tradition and social custom.

Anti-Semitism has always been very much present in Russian gentile society, and Pozner devotes another excellent chapter to a brief period in the late 1920s when the Communist Party itself actively encouraged films combating this scourge. The economic downturn during the period between the ending of the New Economic Policy, which had allowed Jewish small entrepreneurs a measure of independence, and Joseph Stalin's effort to collectivize agriculture during the first Five Year Plan primed many Russians' traditionally negative views of Jews. However, the Communists needed the Jews who, though only 2 percent of the population, were far better educated and could serve the Soviet state in important ways, including staffing the state-controlled economic ministries and dreaded CHEKA (the Soviet secret police). Many Jews, moreover, were grateful to the Soviet state for their new social mobility and were therefore responsive to the allure of the regime's grand plans. The Agitprop campaign that Communist authorities mounted produced dozens of brochures, newspaper articles by famous authors like Maksim Gorki, stage plays, and films. Most of the latter apparently reverted to "conversion" plots set in pre-Bolshevik times in which Jews gradually came to see the iniquity of the czarist regime in order finally to embrace the social liberation that Communist ideology offered. Interestingly, these films often targeted rabbis as particularly sinister figures supporting czarist repression, and they also beckoned younger Jews to assimilate through intermarriage and participation in sports. All the while,

representations of traditional ways of life in the shtetls, most especially the evocation of religious practices, were closely monitored by authorities who regarded such images as dangerously nostalgic and a potential threat to the state.

Four chapters concentrate on single films or the work of individual directors. Coeditor Natacha Laurent provides an astute profile of Romm, whose long career began in the early 1930s. Romm's cinema always remained very much within the confines of the prevailing ideological strictures, so much so that his most notable work, the compilation propaganda film about Nazi atrocities, *Ordinary Fascism* (1964), failed even to mention Jews as Adolf Hitler's special victims. Still, as early as 1943, at the very start of the government-controlled, anti-Jewish campaign that erupted in full force after the end of World War II, Romm proudly asserted his ethnic origins, a dangerous move. In later years, moreover, when Romm worked as a major pedagogue at the state institute for cinematography, he continued to support the work of his students—Alexander Askoldov is only the most prominent—who referenced Jewish themes at a time when they were not welcome on Soviet screens. One of the rare occasions in which Jews were included in a film about the "Great Patriotic War" is explored by Olga Gershenson. Donskoi's *The Unvanquished* (1945), based on a novel by Jewish writer Boris Gorbатов, featured scenes of a Nazi massacre by bullets of a Jewish community in the Soviet heartland. That such a film came to be made at all was a minor miracle given the obvious bias of Communist Party officials, but the support of the eminent director Sergei Eisenstein was evidently decisive. Eisenstein, the son of a converted Jewish father from Riga, was then at the height of his post-World War II power and influence. Solid archival research grounds Gershenson's study, and this commitment is equally in evidence in Pozner's searching essay on Mikhail Dubson's fictional portrait of a shtetl (*Frontier*, 1935), and the well-written chapter on Leon Mazroukho's *In the Name of the Living* (1964) by Vanessa Voisin. Throughout the volume, the authors' documentary grounding allows for a clearer understanding of the shifting Soviet bureaucratic controls over representing a problematic minority group the authorities would no doubt have been all too happy to see disappear in distant exile in Birobidzhan, the homeland Stalin set up for the Jews in the desolate Far East of the USSR.

Films about this mythical Soviet homeland for the Jews and the Jewish agricultural communes that were in a sense its precursor were part of Soviet propaganda

from the mid-1920s on. Eric Aunoble's and Alexander Ivanov's essays describe the many propaganda "documentaries" about the Soviet programs to transform the traditionally urban-dwelling Jews into progressive peasants. Most were never screened in the West, although the few that were did inspire some emigrants to go back to their country of origin to build socialism. Much better known is Roman Karmen and Elizaveta Svilova's film about the trial of major German war criminals at Nuremberg (*Sud Narodov* [The Peoples' Tribunal], 1946), which scooped Western filmmakers by offering the first account of the proceedings. Jeremy Hicks gives a lucid account of the vicissitudes of its production against the background of Soviet efforts to document Nazi atrocities, both in the USSR and in several Polish camps, including Auschwitz. He stresses how much the Soviets attempted to name specific victims, some of whom were clearly of Jewish origin. Yet he also notes how often punches were pulled, as it were; Jewish victims were routinely not identified as such, nor that they were particular targets of Nazi violence. Soviet policy insisted that Jews not be singled out—they were to be designated only as "peaceful Soviet citizens."

Not the least merit of this volume is an extensive filmography listing key films representing Jews made in Russia. Inevitably, there are omissions. I would have liked someone to discuss Mikhail Kalik's *Goodbye, Boys* (1964), set in Odessa, the city in which Isaac Babel's famous criminal character Benya Krik briefly reigned over the underworld. This is outside the scope of Oleg Budnitzki's otherwise fascinating look at this ostensibly Jew-

ish "motherland of crime." One might also have looked more closely at the depiction of Jewish life in Askoldov's *The Commissar* (1967), based on a short story by the eminent Jewish writer and journalist Vasily Grossman. Much more also needs to be said about the legion of Soviet filmmakers, scriptwriters, and editors, including Eisenstein and Vertov, who are best described in Isaac Deutscher's famous phrase as "non-Jewish Jews." What contributions, if any, did they make to the topic of representing Jews, and if not, why not? To what extent are Jews still involved in the Russian cinema and media in the post-Soviet, post-immigration era? What role, if any, do Jews play in the film culture of other states within the former Soviet Union like Ukraine and Belarus? These and other tantalizing questions remain. Happily, this important book provides a useful framework and scholarly standard for future research.

Note

[1]. Jay Leyda, *Kino* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960); Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses. Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000); Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001); and Birgit Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2009).

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