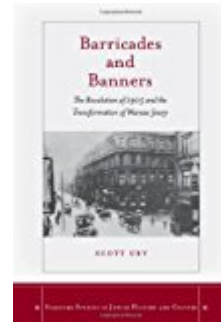




Scott Ury. *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 448 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6383-7.



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## Warsaw's Jewish Public

Long dismissed as an interim period or “dress rehearsal,” historians now regard the period surrounding the 1905 Russian Revolution and the sitting of the first two Russian Dumas in 1906 and 1907, as an integral turning point in the formation of political and national consciousness across the Russian Empire. Scott Ury’s *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* is an important and innovative contribution to this scholarship. Ury’s focus, as the title makes clear, is on the transformative role that the revolution of 1905 played among the Jews of Warsaw. But, in reality, his book’s argument and significance is much broader than that.

Ury deliberately and aptly chooses as his case study a large urban center within the territory known as “Congress Poland” or the “Kingdom of Poland.” His introductory chapters provide a colorful look at the challenges that urbanization posed to the Jewish immigrants who flooded the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on memoirs and newspaper reports, he shows how the anonymity of the urban space induced a climate of fear, anxiety, and crisis that tested

the limits of the officially recognized Jewish community, the *ghema*. It was in Warsaw, he notes, where the 275,000 Jews in the city who constituted about a third of the population, developed many of the institutions and ideologies that came to define what Ury argues was a genuine Jewish public sphere. The core chapters of the book are focused on the institutions that Ury believes constituted that public sphere—coffee houses, the theater, the press, and the “public will” that emerged in the elections to the Russian State Duma.

Certainly much has been written on the growth of Jewish political movements in early twentieth-century Poland, and Ury is expertly familiar with this scholarship. His innovation, though, is to refocus our attention away from the particular and parochial interests of the varying political entities, and instead to demonstrate the ways they adopted common symbols and assumptions, which enabled them to work in concert to fashion a collective political and national identity. Even as Zionists and Bundists sparred with each other on policy matters, they shared the fundamental assumption that the political apparatus could be “used to mobilize a specific col-

lective via a discourse of order and discipline.” This, Ury, contends, “marked the final entry of Jewish politics into its modern phase” (p. 173).

This type of public sphere could only emerge in an urban center. It was here that new structures—safe houses, street corners, and public parks—emerged away from the prying eyes of traditional communal authorities, where young people could meet and establish their own communities. The city allowed for a certain degree of anonymity that fueled the conspiratorial climate of the early revolutionary movement. Ury’s analysis of the potent symbols of revolutionary discourse, including nicknames and propaganda, provide fresh insight and perspective into both the appeal of the revolutionary movement and its ultimate failure to attract the masses and regenerate itself into a viable political movement.

Once political activity moved out from underground and into more public and participatory spaces, it began to have a larger impact. It is during this phase that Ury believes a public sphere was established. One could, however, question Ury’s characterization of this element as a public sphere. Given the tsarist police’s oversight over all voluntary associations and the continued prevalence of censorship over the press and the theater, some may find the application of the terminology of the public sphere to be overstated. Certainly ideas and institutions that had previously functioned only clandestinely were brought out into the open, and there was a flourishing of public activity that followed the new 1906 laws on voluntary associations, but such activity remained under the thumb of the police authorities: each society had to submit a charter and list of members to the police before it could function, and was required to obtain official permission for any public activity. There was, by all means, a flourishing of public culture, but the argument that this transformed into a Habermasian public sphere does not pay enough attention to the continued interference of the state. Nevertheless, regardless of the terminology one chooses to describe this phenomenon, clearly something new was underway, and Ury’s penetrating analysis of that process sheds new light on the processes of Jewish modernization.

If coffee houses, theaters, and the press could not yet break free of the state, they could break free of Jewish religious authorities and the *ghema*. This growth of a new secular culture and secular authority posed a genuine threat to the established Jewish community and helped foster the creation of an alternative secular Jewish community. As Ury writes, “Yiddish dailies would help re-

construct the nature and contours of Jewish society by enabling total strangers to imagine one another as comrades, brothers, and intimates who shared a common community and fate” (p. 164). Even if the press, the theater, and coffee houses could not create a full-fledged public sphere, they certainly succeeded in establishing an imagined community.

Ury’s analysis of the run-up to the elections to the first Duma present some of his most original insights. It is here that he dissects the process of political education that all Jewish parties shared to demonstrate how a conception of Jewish political unity was established, embracing Zionists, Communists, liberals, and at times, even the religiously orthodox. Through the use of the press and the political campaign, a new Jewish leadership emerged separate from the *ghema*, whose authority rested on their ability to muster public support rather than appointment by an elite. At the same time, though, the forging of a Jewish voting bloc, which was a counterpart to the right-wing National Democrats’ creation of a Polish voting bloc, established a system by which political divides in Poland followed and reinforced ethno-linguistic lines: “As a result, the ethno-linguistic community soon became synonymous with political lines of separation, community, and, ultimately, redemption” (p. 212).

Ury’s final chapter turns our attention to the ways in which ethnic Poles constructed their own political identity in opposition to Jews. It was, he writes, a “politicization of ethnicity” in which “the politics of hate would repeatedly feed off of one another in a seemingly never-ending cycle of fear and mistrust” (p. 229). The National Democrats portrayed their political opponents as “Jewish” and promoted an association between Jews and Communists and Jews and Russian imperialism, which would have a lasting and catastrophic effect on Poland’s political future. Ury here makes an important contribution to the long-standing debate on the origins of Polish antisemitism.

Ury frames his argument as a reconsideration of the paradigm of Jewish modernity established by the eminent historian Jacob Katz in the 1950s (most notably, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, originally published in Hebrew [1958]). Like Katz, Ury offers a grand explanation for the breakdown of traditional authorities and the rise of new power structures that focus on the tectonic shifts underlying the institutional underpinnings of society rather than the surface changes. By turning his attention to the twentieth

century instead of Katz's eighteenth and by bringing in newer cultural modes of thought, Ury illuminates different facets of these modernizing trends. With his impressive debut book, Ury has firmly established himself as a worthy heir to Katz's legacy. It is essential reading for historians of the Russian, Polish, and Jewish experiences.

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