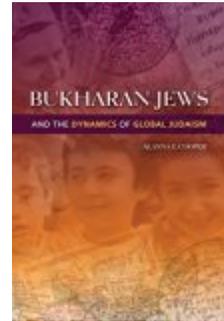


Alanna E. Cooper. *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*. Indiana Series in Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. xxix + 305 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00643-1; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-00650-9.

Reviewed by Zeev Levin (Hebrew University)

Published on H-Judaic (November, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



Tracing the Identity of Bukharan Jews

Spanning three centuries, Alanna E. Cooper's *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism* provides a glimpse into the establishment and formation of Bukharan Jewish identity. Through various "test cases" divided by time and place, Cooper sets the stage for her main argument: that continuous and ongoing center-periphery (and vice versa) "conversations" have shaped the complex of self and group identities of Bukharan Jews. Cooper describes her book as neither an ethnography of Central Asia's Bukharan Jews, nor an overview of Judaism as a global religion, but rather a project that aims to capture *both* simultaneously. It is a courageous endeavor to which she has devoted more than a decade to research and an additional decade to refining her ideas and formulating her thoughts into a complete volume. The manuscript is divided into four sections. Excluding the introductory part, each of the remaining three sections covers "conversations" (her term) that took place during different centuries in different political and geographical environments in Central Asia and beyond. All in all, the volume covers three centuries from the eighteenth to the twentieth and its geographical scope moves between Central Asia, the Middle East, and North America.

The introduction provides an ethnographic account of an encounter between Bukharan Jews and Ashkenazi teachers in a religious school in New York City in the early 1990s. It presents the different approaches and various labels attached to new immigrants by the main-

stream (Orthodox) religious establishment in Brooklyn. The second chapter frames the study and describes the setting and theoretical approaches on which the research is based.

The second part of the volume opens with an encounter between a renowned emissary from the Holy Land, Rabbi Yosef Maman, and the Jews of Central Asia. This historical narrative takes the reader back to the eighteenth century and its legacy. Two chapters present the encounter and the transformations that the Jewish community in Central Asia underwent as a result. While revising the memory of this encounter through historiographical analysis, the author presents the center-periphery paradigm through whose prism the memory of this interaction was shaped and written.

The third part skips forward to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It presents the transformations that took place in Jewish communities in the region following Russian subjugation of Central Asian regimes. Cooper describes relations and influences that developed between the Bukharan Jews and other Jewish communities in Russia, as well as Jews in Ottoman Palestine. As a case study, this part presents a religious dispute that arose over ritual slaughtering which became entwined with a controversy over religious authority. Basing her analysis on primary sources, Cooper applies an ethnographic lens to define the setting of relations and religious influences from and to the "Center" as well as

from and to the “Periphery,” with no clear-cut winners or losers in the religious dispute, but rather a dynamic and ongoing struggle of influence and subordination. In the late nineteenth century when Bukharan Jews established their own neighborhood in Jerusalem, their path was finally defined. The author argues that in regard to disputes about center-periphery influences, Central Asian Jews became a defined *edah*, a unique group with its own history, religious customs, and traditional rituals that set them apart, but at the same time made Bukharan Jewry a part of a greater global Judaism, as she labels it.

The fourth and last part of the book presents center-periphery encounters that have unfolded in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This section is the product of anthropological fieldwork conducted by the author in Central Asia in the 1990s. Cooper describes the operation of two international Jewish organizations in Uzbekistan: Chabad-Lubavitch and the Jewish Agency for Israel. She examines their activities—an effort to reconnect local Jews with the wider Jewish world by introducing a variety of abstract and global definitions of Judaism and Jewishness—through the responses (and conflicting perceptions) of various local informants. Following her informants to Tel Aviv and New York, Cooper presents various migration experiences that have created generation gaps and dramatically influenced traditional family bonds, self-esteem, and norms among Bukharan community members.

In her conclusion, Cooper presents a metaphor of “conversation” to define the relationship between global and local forms of Judaism, a debate that is still going on.

Despite its significance, in my view, the book has a number of shortcomings that cannot be ignored. Cooper claims that the narrative need not be read as pertaining to Bukharan Jews alone and suggests that it offers a more general framework for understanding how throughout Jewish history, certain groups have been labeled and treated by other Jewish groups as marginal, deviant, or backward. Yet the author does not provide any discussion about how this is reflected among other Jewish groups or other Central Asian minorities, thus the reader is left with little understanding about whether presented cases are unique to Bukharan Jews or are similar to many other groups.

The book focuses on Bukharan Jews being part of a center-periphery paradigm—part of a Jewish religious debate—but it almost totally neglects the fact that Bukharan Jewish identity was also negotiated, influenced, and affected by other circles, such as various government

regulations and the surrounding Muslim environment. This perspective is especially important when presenting the “ritual slaughtering” case in Samarkand (chapter 6). The same omission is germane in regard to the activities of various international organizations that operated in Samarkand in the late 1990s (chapter 9). Unfortunately, Cooper’s discussion excludes presentation of the different local (Uzbek) regulations that were set in place to coordinate the activities and framework according to which international organizations, both religious or cultural, would be permitted to operate by authorities—a fact that affected how and where they could operate and what they could do, and who could or could not attend their activities.

Historical background is not the core of the study, but it is essential for understanding the changing realities and living conditions of the Jewish population in Central Asia. Unfortunately, historical sections of the work are the most problematic, revealing the author’s weakness in this area. For one, the research does not refer to quite a few important secondary studies published over the last decade, and is accompanied by (with a few exceptions) an outdated bibliography. Furthermore, the critical approach of secondary sources which was so well-developed in the third chapter, suddenly disappears for no apparent reason in subsequent chapters. In addition, there are numerous factual errors that mar the work. Some involve small inaccuracies, such as claiming that the house of Kalantarov in Samarkand “is home to a museum of Jewish artifacts” (p. 85), and that members of the Komsomol wore red scarfs (p. 216). Other are substantive and quite disturbing, such as misunderstanding of Soviet nationalities policy and citizenship realities (pp. 16, 165, 166), using and criticizing Ya’ari’s edited version of Neumark rather than referring to the source (chapter 3), misunderstanding and misinterpreting Russian Imperialist policies in Central Asia (p. 73), disregarding the role of Russian policies and Bukharan Jewish newspaper in Central Asia as the forces-agents that coined and formed the notion of Bukharan Jews (pp. 128-9), and more.

The work provides important documentation in its presentation of the activities of various Jewish international organizations in Uzbekistan facing the wave of mass migration in the late 1990s (chapter 9) and the formation and organization of various community organs in the face of changing needs of a community in transformation (chapter 11). Both efforts are innovative and groundbreaking. Unfortunately, the description of the activities of international organizations as new community structures ends in the late 1990s. Since then, un-

precedented rates of Jewish migration from the region combined with changes in government policies regulating the operations of international organizations have gravely changed realities on the ground. Simultaneously, the Bukharan Jewish Diaspora had built new community and religious organizations which have evolved and developed significantly in many localities worldwide. These and other issues hopefully will be at the core of future research.

Overall, the book is an important work that offers readers a insightful perspective of a Jewish group as it is transformed and shaped. Its broad chronological canvas and unique geographical setting provide the reader with a bird's-eye view of how negotiation and formation of Jewish identity occurs. The book is well written, well argued, and very readable. It will definitely become a must read in curricula dealing not only with Jewish studies but nationalities, Diaspora, and minorities studies as well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Zeev Levin. Review of Cooper, Alanna E., *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39670>



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