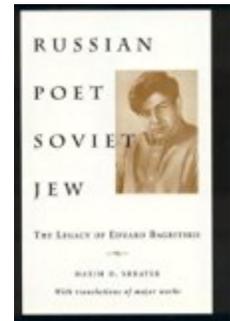


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The Path of a Russian Jewish Writer

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Eduard Bagritskii died in 1934 shortly before the First Soviet Writers' Congress. Nearly seventy years later, Maxim Shrayer, an Associate Professor of Russian Language and Literature at Boston College, has written a well-researched and thoughtful testament to his life and work. Shrayer's task is to aid in the process of rehabilitating many Soviet (Jewish) writers, whose work was suppressed or narrowly interpreted. More specifically, Shrayer is interested in excavating a Jewish Bagritskii to create a more complete picture of the life and work of one of the Soviet Union's most important poets.

Born in 1895 in Odessa, Bagritskii was raised in a secular, urban petit bourgeois Jewish family. The family spoke Russian at home, but according to Shrayer, Bagritskii could read Yiddish. He started writing poetry on the eve of World War I. After the October Revolution, Bagritskii served as a political officer in the Red Army and wrote agitational poetry and propaganda leaflets. Until 1920, Odessa, along with St. Petersburg, was the center of the Russian (language) Jewish intelligentsia. The city was also the home of Hebrew-language Jewish culture in Russia. But after the Soviet takeover of Ukraine in 1920 and the emigration/exile of Hebrew-language cultural activists, Odessa's Jewish intelligentsia found itself in the provinces again, as Moscow assumed the status of political and cultural center of the Soviet Union. Bagritskii joined the 1920s mass migration of Jews and moved to Moscow in 1925.

In many ways, Bagritskii followed his family's path

of Russian assimilation to its logical conclusions. He supported the February and October Revolutions as liberations from the narrow Jewish past; he married a non-Jewish woman in 1920; and he moved to Moscow, where he eventually became part of the developing class of Soviet culture functionaries. Aesthetically and politically, Bagritskii situated himself in the center of the Russian avant-garde as a leading member of the Constructivist movement. During the Cultural Revolution (1928-1932), Bagritskii, like many of his fellow avant-gardists, joined RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, and in Shrayer's words, "became part of the Soviet literary establishment."

His early death allowed the Soviet literary establishment to fashion Bagritskii's posthumous image according to its own devices. Thus Bagritskii emerged as an ardent supporter of Socialist Realism. By the same token, his modernist and constructivist experimentation as well as the "Jewish" Bagritskii were glossed over. Soviet literary criticism about Bagritskii completed his assimilation into Russian culture by emphasizing his Russian and Ukrainian influences, and suppressing the fact that he also engaged German liberalism, literary symbolism, and Jewish culture. During the anti-semitic, Anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, Bagritskii Studies virtually ceased as did republications of his work, and the effects of this suppression were far from ephemeral. Even though Bagritskii's rehabilitation started as early as the 1960s, he never regained his place of importance—either in the Soviet Union, or in "the West," in the pantheon of early Soviet writers like Akhmatova, Blok or

Mayakovsky.

Shrayer wants to further Bagritskii's rehabilitation by doing three things: first, reinserting Bagritskii into the history of Russian modernism, second, publishing excellent English translations of some of his work, and third (and perhaps the primary motivation for this book), complicating Bagritskii's work and identity by examining his use of Jewish themes. Shrayer's key question, the one that frames the entire narrative, is the following: "By writing in Russian, a Jew becomes a Russian. But does he also cease to be Jewish, and, furthermore, what shape does this cultural assimilation take when riddled by Soviet rhetoric on Jewish identity?" (p. 1). In asking this question, Shrayer joins a growing chorus of scholars, many of them Russian-speaking/writing Jews themselves, who want to explore the formation of a particular Russian-Jewish identity by studying the work of Russian-Jewish writers.

Shrayer shows that Bagritskii's work charts a new path into Russian culture for the Jewish intellectual, and compares his path with that of two other well-known Russian "Jewish" writers. On one side, he puts Osip Mandel'shtam, raised Jewish, but converted to Lutheranism in 1911. He argues that Mandel'shtam's early career was an abnegation of his Jewish self and a celebration of Hellenism. According to Shrayer, Mandel'shtam felt shame toward underassimilated Jews and toward Yiddish culture, and in general suggests that he always had personal, psychological problems as a Jew in Russian culture. Isaac Babel is on the other side, as his work seemed to embrace a particular Jewish experience in Russia, and as others have read his work accordingly. Although he was not officially marked as a "Jewish writer," because he wrote in Russian rather than Yiddish, Babel, even more than Bagritskii, was interested in representing a Russian-Jewish cultural experience. Babel and Bagritskii were friends for most of their adult lives; both were from Odessa, and migrated to Moscow, but both longed for a return to the capital of Russian-Jewish culture.

Shrayer suggests that both writers also felt confined "by the narrow world of their ancestors," showing that each was tormented by a physical incapacity attributed to being Jewish. It is important to remember that such pronouncements are reflections of the characters in each author's works, not necessarily of the author himself. Neither Bagritskii nor Babel invented the literary image of the weak, emasculated Jewish male. This image of the weak Jewish male (and its virile Gentile counterpart) was an invention of nineteenth-century Eastern Euro-

pean, male Jewish literati, who usually wrote in Hebrew and sometimes in Yiddish. Like Bagritskii and Babel, these writers often attributed this weakness to their Jewish upbringing. In this particular case, Shrayer would do well to situate Babel and Bagritskii's emasculated male within Jewish literature more generally. Such a comparison would strengthen the argument that Bagritskii must be seen as a Russian Jewish writer, even if he wrote in a non-Jewish language.

In order to find traces of Bagritskii's coming to terms with his own Jewishness, Shrayer focuses on two of his later works, which Shrayer views as constituting the "Jewish period" of his oeuvre. (Bagritskii rarely touched on Jewish themes in his earlier work, and when he did, he took a sarcastic, even scornful, tone. Shrayer calls Bagritskii's earlier work the period of "self-fashioning," a time of crafting a new, post-revolutionary self.) By 1930, Bagritskii began reexamining his relationship to Jewishness. He underwent an aesthetic, personal, and political transformation by adopting a more critical stance toward the Revolutionary project and giving greater emphasis to Jewish themes. According to Shrayer, at the time, the Soviet press was examining an increase in antisemitism in the Soviet Union. Shrayer speculates that this may have caused Bagritskii to see a betrayal of the revolutionary universalist ideals and to question Soviet rhetoric on Jewish identity. But combating antisemitism had been a trope of the Soviet state since the early 1920s. His new interest in Jewish issues could also be related to a more personal issue—his own mortality. Bagritskii grew very ill around this time, and after 1931 rarely left his small Moscow apartment. Imminent death may have encouraged him to reflect on his past and find new attachments to childhood and family.

As he became sicker, he replaced the scornful tone of the early post-Revolutionary years with what Shrayer calls "Judaic pride," the word "Judaic [*iudeiskii*]" chosen over "Jewish [*evreiskii*]" to emphasize a historic religion rather than an ethnicity. Shrayer argues that Bagritskii does this to reconnect himself with a centuries-old Jewish tradition, but a perhaps more salient reason would be that seeing Jewishness as a religious identity (something Jewish modernizers in western Europe had been doing for more than a century) would render Russianness and Jewishness compatible, rather than mutually exclusive. In *February*, which was written on his deathbed in 1933-34 and first published in 1936, Bagritskii never once uses the word "Jewish [*evreiskii*]," which in Soviet parlance became the adjective that defined the Soviet Jewish nationality (distinct from Russian nationality). Instead Bagrit-

skii uses “*iudeiskii*” (Judean, Judaic), which had religious, in particular Biblical, connotations.

February is one of Bagritskii’s more autobiographical works. It depicts a Jewish teenager struggling to come to grips with being a Jew in tsarist Russian society. In the story the protagonist courts an upper class, presumably non-Jewish girl. After he musters the courage to talk to her, she rejects him and humiliates him by calling on a Russian policeman to escort the young Jewish man away from her. Following her rejection, the narrative jumps to the period after the February Revolution, when the young man had become a criminal investigator for the local police department, a position a Jew could not have aspired to before the liberal revolution. One of his assignments is to arrest several gangsters, who all have Jewish-sounding names and are carousing in a local brothel. As he inspects the premises, he finds his object of desire prostituting herself. The final scene shows the girl telling him “I don’t want your money,” and the young man raping her, screaming, “I take you to avenge the world / From which I couldn’t break away” (p. 40).

Shrayer focuses on two issues to support his reading of *February*: the reception by Russian critics and the final scene. Many Soviet critics had a difficult time incorporating this poem into the rest of Bagritskii’s work. It was both too Jewish and not Bolshevik enough. It is entitled *February*, not *October*, and it ends with a Jewish man raping a Russian woman. The poem was only republished three times during the Soviet era—1940, 1949, and 1964—and the Jewish theme was rarely mentioned in critics’ accounts (and when it was, only to tarnish his reputation). And more overtly, Russian nationalist writers and critics took issue with Bagritskii’s assertions of, as they saw it, Jewish nationalism. Shrayer spends quite a bit of time debunking the arguments of the Soviet-era critic, Anatolii Tarasenkov, and the more contemporary nationalist poet and essayist, Stanislav Kuniaev, whom Shrayer interviewed for this book, to explore how Russians deploy the trope of Jewishness in a negative way when discussing Bagritskii. Both show Bagritskii to be a Jewish nationalist and, at the same time, a self-hating Jew, arguments that Shrayer dismisses as poor literary criticism, but also as illogical antisemitic rants.

Much of Shrayer’s dismissal of their criticism rests on competing interpretations of the final scene of *February*, in which the protagonist has sex with the Russian girl/prostitute. Tarasenkov and Kuniaev, who read Bagritskii’s work autobiographically, see the final scene as a rape, perhaps from Bagritskii’s own experience; an

uppity Jewish man unnaturally thrust into power over Russians, uses his power to violate women. Bagritskii admitted to the autobiographical nature of *February* in interviews, but stressed the fictionality of the final sexual scene. But Shrayer wants to move away from an autobiographical reading, which has been used to slander Bagritskii as a nationalist and, worse, a rapist.

To undermine the antisemitic argument, Shrayer reinterprets the final sex scene by arguing that it is “a rite of passage for the protagonist, the completion of his Russian-Jewish identity....Still, it is one thing to accuse Bagritskii’s main character of cruelty—and cruelly he did act—and a totally different one is to charge him with rape. In my view, the poem’s evidence does not support such a charge. The prostitute says to the protagonist that she does not want his money. She never says that she will not have sex with him—although such a response would be quite plausible even at this point given her past rejections of the timid protagonist” (p. 87). Shrayer’s prose then assumes a didactic tone, as he discusses how rape has been used as a trope to dehumanize the Other. He mentions the oft-cited notion that African-American men had a predilection to rape white women. More relevant for this case, he discusses the use of rape in antisemitic discourse to show that only antisemites who wanted to tarnish this Jewish writer’s reputation would see the final scene as rape. “The alleged rape of an ethnic Russian woman by a Jewish man bears ritualistic significance, religious, historical, and cultural. Such a charge is familiar to students of anti-Semitism and racism” (p. 87).

While Shrayer reads the scene as a rite of passage toward a completed Russian-Jewish identity, the scene can also be read as one of taking and asserting power, of hierarchies being overturned. The bourgeois girl has become a prostitute, the lowly Yid a policeman, dressed just like the policeman, who pulled him away from the girl in the earlier courting scene. The Revolution has given him the power to control her physically, whereas she had the power to control him physically before the Revolution. In the protagonist’s final monologue, he uses the language of power, the language of rape, to show his dominance over his former tormentor: “I am taking you because my age / Was shy, because I am so bashful, / Because of the shame of my homeless ancestors, / Because a chance bird twitters! I take you to avenge the world / From which I couldn’t break away” (p. 40). The protagonist wants to rape the woman. It was the perfect way to physically consummate the new relationship of Jews to Russia.

A second problem with Shrayer’s criticism of the an-

tisemite's rape reading is that it too fails to distinguish between social reality and textual representation. He re-reads the rape in Bagritskii's work in order to defend Bagritskii the person from attack. Moreover, using sexual relations to frame questions of Jewish identity and politics in text has its own history within Jewish literature. Several Yiddish writers have used rape to discuss Jewish/non-Jewish relations as well. It appeared in the Yiddish writer Lamed Shapir's 1909 story, "The Crucifix," in which a Jewish man rapes and kills a Russian woman, all within the context of Revolutionary struggle. In the original Yiddish version of his book, *Night (Un di velt hot geshvign)*, Elie Wiesel portrays liberated Jewish concentration camp survivors raping German women in revenge (no one suggests that Wiesel himself necessarily took part in this). Bagritskii's rape scene should be

read on the background of these other representations of Jews asserting power to rebel against a history of seeming Jewish powerlessness.

The difference between these writers and Bagritskii lay in the language of choice. Shapiro and Wiesel both wrote in the Jewish language and wrote for a Jewish audience. When Wiesel wrote the French version of *Night*, on which the English version is based, he removed the rape scenes. Bagritskii's radical act lay in portraying Jewish revenge in Russian, and it earned him the wrath of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian nationalists. By denying, however, the power issues involved in the sex scene, Shroyer undermines his own argument, which is a convincing one that Bagritskii's late-in-life project was to show how intertwined Jewishness and Russian culture were for many Jewish intellectuals after the Revolution.

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