The first two volumes of Antony Polonsky’s magisterial *The Jews in Poland and Russia* trilogy provide a much-needed addition to the landscape of Jewish historical studies. For generations, the Eastern European Jewish experience has been overshadowed in historical scholarship by the experience of Jews living in German lands. Cold War politics was certainly a contributing factor: Western ideological investments made serious scholarship of the Eastern European Jewish experience uncomfortable at times, and those who persisted were thwarted by limited access to documents. In the last two decades or so, however, scholars of the Jewish historical experience have focused their attention on those parts of the world from which most American Jewry originates. The study of the Eastern European Jewish heritage is rapidly becoming one of the most exciting fields in Jewish studies. An outpouring of groundbreaking specialized studies of specific aspects of the Eastern European Jewish experience has transformed the way that historians understand that civilization. In the last few years, there have been a few attempts to synthesize this scholarship and to present it to nonspecialists in an effort to publicize these findings to broader readerships. The *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2008), for instance, produced an essential refer-
ence work that drew on much of this scholarship. Polonsky has now completed an equally significant achievement in presenting the most modern findings in a clear, readable, comprehensive survey of the Jews in Poland and Russia.

It is fitting that Polonsky dedicates the volume to Shimon Dubnov and Majer Balaban, the last two historians to have approached this type of comprehensive scholarship with any success. Although Dubnov and Balaban shared the goal of strengthening Jewish identity by bringing the history of their people to light, in many ways they adopted opposite approaches. On the one hand, Dubnov, who was predominantly an autodidact, preferred monumental sweeping narratives. His ten-volume *Weltgeschichte des Jüdischen volkes* (World History of the Jewish People, 1925-29) and his three-volume *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (1916-20) epitomize this approach; they embody the grand narrative tradition in history that fueled national sentiment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Balaban’s strength, on the other hand, was his meticulous eye for detail and professional historical training. His greatest contributions were small-scale studies of particular communities, studies that today could even be called microhistories. Polonsky combines the best of both approaches: his narrative is grand and his analysis is tight.

One of Polonsky’s major strengths is his ability to contextualize the story he tells within the broader history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the first volume, and the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires in the second volume. In this sense, Polonsky builds on recent studies conducted by Moshe Rosman, Gershon Hundert, Adam Teller, ChaeRan Freeze, and others who have mined Russian and Polish archival sources as well as Jewish narratives. These scholars have shown that in contrast to Dubnov’s perceptions, Jews were relatively secure in their daily lives. In the first chapter of the first volume, “Jews and Christians,” Polonsky details this tenuous relationship, showing how the disdain that often existed between the two communities—and not just by Christians directed against Jews, but the other way around as well—was balanced with economic security.

In the second chapter, “Jewish Autonomous Institutions,” Polonsky looks at the local *kehilbot* (communities) and the larger Jewish Council of Four Lands. While modern antisemites often accused these communal organizations of functioning as “a state within a state,” Dubnov and others have celebrated them as expressions of Jewish national autonomy. Polonsky shows how the councils interacted with Christian authorities, at times reinforcing restrictions on Jewish activity imposed by the Sejm, including the issuing of edicts forbidding Jewish settlement in specific areas. Polonsky ascribes some importance to the Council of Four Lands and the Council of Lithuania but maintains that the “core of the system of Jewish self-government lay in the local *kehilbot*.” He sees communal self-government as “one important element in the democratic tradition of the State of Israel” and “one of the most fundamental legacies of the Jewish experience in Poland-Lithuania” (vol. 1, p. 67). Communal self-government was clearly an important legacy in the State of Israel, but the Polish Zionists who formulated that legacy were probably more likely to look for precedents of self-government in medieval Spain and Babylon than in their own lands.

Polonsky’s study of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth period includes chapters on Jewish settlement patterns, differentiating between the growing number of Jews living in private towns under the protection of the Polish nobility and those living in royal towns. In the second volume, he also devotes a chapter to “Jewish Spaces,” demonstrating the variations in Jewish demographic, social, and cultural life across the vast geographic space of Poland and Russia. Since comparatively few recent studies have focused on the economic and demographic history of the Jews of
the region, these chapters are perhaps the most familiar. The chapter on “Religious and Spiritual Life” shows the importance of the institution of the rabbinate as well as the limitations of that position and the changing role of the cantorate. Following the 1648 Khmelnytsky rebellion, esoteric and mystical thought flourished, culminating in the excitement that surrounded Shabbatai Zevi and later Jacob Frank. Polonsky draws on the work of Ada Rapoport-Albert and Michael Silber to show that Hasidism was not a direct outgrowth of Sabbatianism, though. Like Rosman and most other scholars of Hasidism, Polonsky links the origins of the movement to the spread of mystical preachers and kabbalists, who formed new power centers within the kloyzn (prayer rooms) that competed with the established synagogue for attention. The chapter on “Jewish Religious Life” in the second volume provides in-depth discussion of the nineteenth-century spread of Hasidism, particularly into Polish lands, a period often overlooked by those who focus primarily on the origins of the movement in Ukrainian lands.

Following his discussion of the period of the Polish partitions, Polonsky appropriately divides the remainder of the first volume and first third of the second volume along geographic lines. His study of the struggle for legal equality among the Jews of Galicia is based overwhelmingly on the excellent scholarship that Artur Eisenbach and Balaban had conducted on this subject. The sections on the Kingdom of Poland focus on the less successful struggle for legal emancipation waged by the Jews there. Polonsky is eager to correct the common misconception that equates the fate of the Jews of the Kingdom of Poland with those of the Pale of Settlement. The opportunities for integration with Polish society in the Kingdom of Poland were clearly better than the opportunities for integration into Russian society in the Pale, but the Polish integrationists had a much more difficult path after the 1863 uprising and subsequent Russification. Polonsky sees the failure of integration in the kingdom as “a story of lost opportuni-
of Jewish cultural expressions in multiple languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and German) complement recent studies that have sought to highlight the multilingual nature of Jewish cultural life in Eastern Europe.

*The Jews in Poland and Russia* is an excellent synthesis of this community's history, incorporating much of the groundbreaking scholarship that has been conducted on the topic over the last few decades. Repeatedly, the volumes remind us of the many lost opportunities for real reform in the region. They help correct the nostalgic and romanticized portraits of what is sometimes considered a lost civilization, while simultaneously demonstrating the vibrancy and diversity of Jewish life in the region. The volume is essential reading for those seeking a thorough and balanced understanding of Jewish life in pre-twentieth-century Eastern Europe.

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