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Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern. *Lenin's Jewish Question.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. 224 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-15210-4.

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Moshko Blank, a maternal great-grandfather of Vladmir Ulianov (Lenin), was a Jew. In this volume, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, a prolific scholar of Russian Jewish history, meditates on the "irrelevant question" of Lenin's Jewish ancestry. ***Lenin's Jewish Problem*** is not a history of Jews or Jewish policies under Lenin. Instead, Petrovsky-Shtern is concerned with how Soviet ruling elites and post-Soviet xenophobes "used" Lenin's ancestry and what that can tell us about modern Russian history.

The book begins with two chapters on Moshko Blank, who was born around 1758 and died sometime in the 1850s. Here, Petrovsky-Shtern makes judicious use of evidence uncovered by other scholars, although he also employs new material from several Russian archival collections to set aspects of Blank's life in context. A third chapter, based largely on analysis of Lenin's collected works, discusses the Soviet founder's relationships with Jews and his attitude towards Jewish issues. A fourth chapter examines how and why the Communist Party leadership squelched research and publication on Lenin's Jewish family connections. The final chapter surveys right-wing Communist and post-Communist ultranationalist uses of Lenin's ancestry. For Petrovsky-Shtern, every aspect of Lenin's Jewish question--his great-grandfather's apostasy, Lenin's Machiavellian approach to Jews, the Soviet government's tortured efforts to hide Lenin's family past, and racist attempts to blame Lenin's supposed biological and cultural Jewishness for the traumas of Russia's twentieth century--can be boiled down to one issue: the centrality of Russian imperial identity as a means of power.

In the first chapter, Petrovsky-Shtern describes Jewish life in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Starokonstantinov, the shtetl Moshko Blank sought to escape, and in the district administrative town of Zhitomer, to which he "escaped." In the second chapter, the author sorts through details of court cases and official petitions that reveal Blank as a genuinely nasty man. Blank clearly disdained his fellow Jews, on whom he sought personal revenge and denounced to state authorities whenever possible. Petrovsky-Shtern argues that Blank's revulsion toward traditional Jewish life did not reflect reform or Haskalah principles. His motivation was personal power, status, and wealth. Above all, he sought to assume a Russian imperial identity, which he associated with power, both for himself and his sons. Blank arranged for the conversion of his sons to Russian Orthodoxy; his son Alexander (Lenin's grandfather) appears to have become a fully acculturated, assimilated Russian. Blank offered the government guidance on the "Jewish

Question" (how to turn Jews into "normal" Russians)--a proposal that actually made its way to Tsar Nicholas I. In his last years, Moshko Blank also converted to Russian Orthodoxy. In the official ideology of the Nicholean era, religion and culture were at the core of Great Russian imperial identity, not heredity. Conversion essentially erased one's Jewishness. By Lenin's birth in 1870, the family's Jewish past was not simply a secret--it was unknown to the entire Ulianov family.

Petrovsky-Shtern argues that Lenin (who knew nothing about his maternal great-grandfather) did not care one way or the other about individual Jews, Jews as a people, or Jewish questions. For Lenin, what mattered were pragmatic needs of the moment, toward achieving one overarching goal: power for the centralized Bolshevik Party. This goal conditioned all of Lenin's relations with Jews, both as individuals and collectively. For example, Lenin considered Julius Martov (Tsederbaum) a useful friend until the two broke over organizational questions in 1903, after which the Menshevik leader entered Lenin's enemies list. Similarly, Lenin valued the Bund's ability to organize and mobilize workers, but the Bund's refusal to dissolve itself into the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party made the Jewish socialists enemies. Petrovsky-Shtern explains that Lenin rejected the Bund's position on Jewish cultural autonomy in part because he believed that Jews were not, and could not become, a nation. But more importantly, the author says, Lenin saw the Bund as an impediment to centralization. Petrovsky-Shtern concludes that Lenin, both while organizing for revolution and once in power, did not "see" nationality; all that mattered was if a person or group was useful or a hindrance to Lenin's agenda. He hints that Lenin shared this character trait with Moshko Blank (although not that it was an "inherited" tendency).

Not long after Lenin's death, his sister Anna Elizarova-Ulianova discovered documents about their Blank ancestors. She repeatedly tried to convince the Communist Party and Soviet state leadership to support research and publication on Lenin's family roots (in part, she claimed, as a means of combating the rising tide of popular antisemitism in the Soviet Union). Petrovsky-Shtern points out that party leaders--Jews and non-Jews--flatly rejected publishing information on Lenin's "Jewish roots" and continued to do so until the collapse of the USSR. He provides a fascinating narrative of how various researchers in the 1930s and then the 1960s stumbled across the Blank family in various archives. In each case, the researcher naively thought that the party would want to publicize new discoveries about the beloved Lenin, but was silenced. In 1965, all traces of documents on the Blanks were systematically expunged from state archives and locked away (most likely in the closed archives of the Communist Party Central Committee). The reason, Petrovsky-Shtern argues, is that from the 1920s until its collapse, the regime needed a pure Russian Lenin. Again, the fundamental issue was power--in the USSR (as under the tsars), Great Russian identity was the glue that held the empire together. Russian imperial identity fostered power, and this required a pure Russian Lenin. Soviet leaders were conscious of--and indeed, generally concurred with—the widespread popular view that Jews were not and never could be Russian.

Petrovsky-Shtern points out that the early twentieth-century ultranationalist Russian Right latched on to the language of racial antisemitism and argued incessantly that Jews, as racially alien enemies of the Russian people, were scheming to destroy Russian culture. How else could social unrest and the revolutionary movement be explained in Holy Mother Russia, with its deep spiritual unity between tsar and people? After 1917, rightist émigrés (including Vladimir Shulgin, who gets special attention here) blamed Jews for the Russian Revolution. Jews, they claimed, had used the Communist Party and the Soviet state to enslave the Russians. Petrovsky-Shtern demonstrates that, in the late Stalin era, xenophobic ele-

ments in the Communist Party took up elements of the rightist émigrés' arguments, which continued to resonate in party circles through the Gorbachev years. Again, the author insists, this had more to do with the utility of Great Russian imperial discourse and identity than with antisemitism. The xenophobic, racialist discourse common in certain late Soviet literary journals actually highlighted the shallowness of the party's official class-based rhetoric. The author carefully dissects several "highbrow" and mass-market histories published in Russia since 1990 that treat Lenin's "Jewishness" as a kind of silver bullet, the single fact that explains all the calamities that befell Russia in the twentieth century. Petrovsky-Shtern concludes that xenophobic Communist and rightist "historians" have been fixated on nationality, race, and Jews because they are unwilling and unable "to understand Russian history, explain it, and assume responsibility for it" (p. 171).

The volume as a whole is well researched. When the author speculates on the basis of limited evidence, he lets the reader know. One of the book's strengths is Petrovsky-Shtern's sensitivity to language and texts, particularly in his discussions of Moshko Blank's petitions and appeals to the government; xenophobic themes in Brezhnev-era literary journals; and antisemitic pseudo-histories published since 1990. Specialists on aspects of modern Russian and Russian Jewish history will almost certainly find specific points on which they disagree (as I did in reading chapter 3). But that does not at all detract from the value of this excellent book, which is written with great wit and energy and is a simply a pleasure to read.

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