

François Guesnet. *Zwischen Graetz und Dubnow: Jüdische Historiographie in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert.* Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2009. 297 S. ISBN 978-3-931982-60-7.



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The past few years have witnessed the publication of a plethora of new studies on Jewish historiography. This significant contribution to the literature can be understood not only as part of a broad global phenomenon but as a result of new perspectives and questions that are of unique interest to modern day scholars of the history of Israel and the Jewish People. The new literature offers scholars and students alike a window into the many diverse streams of historical writing on Jewish history that have emerged over the past two centuries. It also provides us with an opportunity to get better acquainted with the numerous Jewish historians who have worked on different aspects of Jewish history in different countries around the world, some who are quite well known, others who are less known, and still others who wrote anonymously or have simply been forgotten.

“Jüdische Historiographie in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert” reflects some of the fascinating issues covered by this new body of literature. Its title, indicating Graetz and Dubnow makes reference to the two best known Jewish

historians of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, who wrote not only comprehensive accounts of Jewish history but a large number of more specific detailed studies as well. In addition to articles on these two giants in the field, the volume also contains articles on less known historians – many of whom are more local in character – and on historiographical subjects of rather regional nature. The volume, which focuses entirely on historiographical aspects of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, is composed of ten articles and an enlightening introduction by the editor. It also includes a prologue written in 1949 by author and journalist Moshe Szulstein after his visit to the grave of Heinrich Graetz, who had died 1891 in Breslau/Wrocław. The piece on Graetz as a man and a historian, and on his place of burial, is reflective of the overall approach of the book, which examines questions of Jewish historiography, research, and writings in Germany and the area to the east, with an emphasis on Poland. The articles in the volume reflect both the problematic and diverse nature of the research, as well as the complexity of Jewish history in general during the 19th century and the first half of

the 20th century. At the end of the book, readers are provided with academic information about each author, as well as a useful index, which is a welcome addition that edited volumes of this kind often lack.

Modern Jewish historiography was initiated in the early 19th century in Germany and the Austrian Empire by scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the most well known of whom were Markus Jost, Abraham Geiger, and Heinrich Graetz. Toward the end of the 19th century, Jewish historiography began to develop in Eastern Europe as well (in Russia, which at that time contained the majority of Polish Jewry), where the most prominent historian was Simon Dubnow. See the new biography of Dubnow by Viktor E. Kelner, *Simon Dubnow, Eine Biografie*, Göttingen 2010. He trained many students who in turn established the important historiographical centers of Russia and Poland during the 20th century. These centers provided frameworks for the work of dozens of Jewish historians until the Holocaust, when most were killed. Some of Dubnow's students who left Russia and Poland were among the founders of the centers of Jewish historiography in the United States (such as Raphael Mahler) and in Israel (such as Ben-Zion Dinur) during the first half of the 20th century. Some scholars believe that the Dubnow School still provides the dominant approach to the study of Eastern European Jewry. Jonathan Frankel, *Assimilation and the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Toward a New Historiography?*, in: Jonathan Frankel / Steven Zipperstein (eds), *Assimilation and Community. The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 1-37. Without a doubt, Jewish history has not remained static, and continues to be characterized by lively debate today.

The volume highlights a number of important aspects of the evolution of Jewish historiography over the years. One is the extremely negative image of Eastern European Jewry typically espoused by the Jewish historians of Germany, which stood

in stark contrast to the positive light in which the same group viewed the Jews of Germany and Central Europe. They praised the latter group for the spirit of modernization and *Haskala* which they introduced to Judaism and for their integration into German society. Eastern European Jews, who studied *Kabala* and mysticism, were regarded as primitive people who continued to live as in the Middle Ages. Carsten Schapkow's article explores this dynamic by highlighting how Jost and Graetz compared 19th century German Jews, who were becoming integrated into society and were working toward further integration, with Sephardic Jews in Muslim Spain during the Middle Ages (11th-13th centuries) and subsequently in the Iberian Diaspora in Western Europe (16th-18th centuries), whom they interpreted as the "bearers of culture to Europe" (*"Kulturträger für Europa"*, p. 73). In contrast to the positive image of the Jews of Spain and Germany, Graetz and his associates depict Eastern European Jewry, which they viewed as backward and reactionary in essence, in a particularly negative light.

This image changes in the writing of Dubnow and his students, although his writings also contain manifestations of criticism of Eastern European Jewish society (for example, Dubnow's studies of the Hassidic movement). Dubnow, who was a Jewish national autonomist in political and ideological outlook, viewed autonomous concentrations of Jews as the major thread of development of Jewish history as a whole. He therefore believed that Jews living in the large Jewish center in Eastern Europe should also enjoy autonomy within their countries of residence. For this reason, neither he nor his students emphasized integration within surrounding society but rather stressed the autonomous aspects of Jewish social and economic life. This subject is addressed by a number of articles in the volume, particularly those by Natalie Aleksion and Stefan Litt. In its own way, each demonstrates the uniqueness of the Eastern European historians in comparison to those from Central Europe. Aleksion discusses

one of the most interesting phenomena in the history of Jewish historiography in Poland between the two world wars: the seminar of Majer Balaban, who during this period worked within the Institute of Jewish Studies (in Polish: Instytut Nauk Judaitycznych) in Warsaw. The seminar was attended by dozens of students, some of whom went on to become well known historians, and others who were killed in the Holocaust. The seminar and the studies undertaken by Balaban's students and some of his fellow historians (Mojżesz Schor, Emanuel Ringelblum, and others) reflect theses regarding Polish Jews that differed from those advanced by Graetz and his colleagues in Germany. The Poles contended with Jewish Autonomy, with everyday life and its material aspects, and with social issues (see, for example, the article by Cornelia Aust).

In addition, François Guesnet's article addresses Ezriel Natan Frenk, the historian who was "unjustly" ("zu Unrecht", p. 119) forgotten. Frenk's writing combined a number of different worlds: the Hassidic world in which he lived, the world of the Haskala, and the world of Zionist and even socialist ideology. He wrote for a readership that was as broad as the subjects he covered, collecting Hassidic stories and translating books on the Kabbala from Aramaic to Hebrew and studies by Polish historians from Polish into Yiddish. He also wrote about Polish-Jewish relations and about the conversion of Jews in Poland. All this was in addition to his work as a journalist. The differences between the Jewish historiography of the German School and that of the Polish School even found expression in the scientific publication of historical documents, as reflected in the article by Litt. Whereas documents regarding the spiritual life of Jews and their integration within greater society were published in Germany, Polish publications placed greater emphasis on documents reflecting social life and Jewish autonomy.

Another major subject explored by a few of the articles in this volume is historical studies on

peripheral and border regions between Western and Eastern Europe. These include Louise Hecht's article on the historiography of Bohemian Jewry, Heidemarie Petersen's and Guy Miron's articles on the historiography of Hungarian Jewry, Kerstin Armbrorst-Weihs' article on Galician historians who wrote in Russia, and Krzysztof Makowski's article on the historical writing about the Jews of Poznań-Posen. These articles provide insight into Jewish historians' varying perspectives on peripheral communities and the self-image of the communities themselves. They also reflect the diversity and great complexity of the Jewish communities of Russia, Poland, the Southern countries and Germany's Eastern territories.

In conclusion, this volume contains a collection of important articles written by a group of talented young scholars (which is always encouraging) that sheds new light on various aspects of the historiography of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. Each individual article makes its own unique contribution to our understanding of the history and historiography of European Jewry during the modern era, as does the volume as a whole.

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