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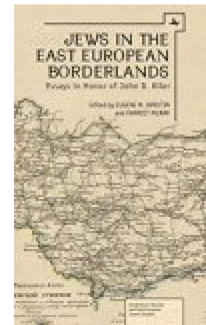

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A Fitting Tribute to a Great Scholar

John Doyle Klier was one of the preeminent scholars of Russian and east European Jewish history of our time. This volume of essays dedicated to his memory highlights his influence on a rising generation of Jewish scholars interested in all aspects of Russian and east European Jewish culture and history, especially as it occurred in the borderland areas where most of the Jews under Russian imperial control made their homes. While Klier's work focused primarily on the history of the Jews in the Russian Empire, and most particularly on the pogroms, he emerges from these essays as an individual who encouraged scholars to explore a wide variety of avenues pertaining to every aspect of Jewish life in eastern Europe. The essays included in this collection reflect this wide focus. As a historian, I am not really in a position to comment on the essays that specifically examine literature and poetry, but because they appear in a volume whose contributions on history display innovative methodology, particularly the essays by Gabriella Safran and Olga Litvak, as well as raise new questions about old conclusions, I can only trust that they too are as original in concept as some of the essays on history. Although my acquaintance with Klier has come primarily from his writings and few short meetings with him at conferences, I am confident that he would have endorsed these efforts at new scholarship with enthusiasm.

According to editors Eugene M. Avrutin and Harriet Murav, the contributions are organized into two parts, the first exploring "the intersections of history, culture, and the everyday" (p. 20). Because the questions examined in part 1 occurred "against the backdrop of ongoing political upheaval and anti-Jewish violence," the essays in part 2 "explore its history in the context of daily life and the process of community building and reconstruction of individual and collective Jewish identity" (p. 23). The editors assert that all the essays reflect new sources, methods, and approaches to Jewish history and culture.

In her contribution, ChaeRan Freeze explores the activities of the Mariinsko Sergievskii Shelter for Converted Jewish Children in St. Petersburg. The vast majority of work on Russian Jewry has concentrated on Jews who remained Jews whatever the circumstances while rarely addressing the fate of those who chose to convert to advance in the Russian Orthodox world, which, on the surface, should have offered great opportunity. Through this very interesting case study, Freeze allows us to glimpse not only the aspirations of Jews who decided to convert, but also the ambivalence of the authorities who sought to integrate the new Christians into the Russian state. Freeze's focus on individual cases permits us to understand the difficult process by which young persons entered into the Christian universe closed to them as Jews, but not particularly welcoming to new converts. Her work poses the ongoing question of whether Russians understood Jews as following a misguided religion or as members of a race whatever their religious confession.

Those who follow the scholarship regarding the use of Yiddish as a literary language in the second half of the nineteenth century are familiar with its transformation from the despised "jargon" to the language of choice for many major Jewish writers. Gennadi Estraikh's piece highlights a new aspect explaining the elevation of Yiddish–its use by elite-run philanthropic organizations, such as the ORT. In doing so, he illustrates how Jewish philanthropic organizations were significant contributors to the Yiddish language's renaissance.

Alice Nakhimovsky and Roberta Newman's exploration of how letter writing manuals provided models for private correspondence reveals to readers how these examples helped Jews create narratives for their own day-to-day experiences. While these "how-to" books were commonplace in the Russian world, the authors explore how the Jewish versions addressed specifically Jewish concerns, and in doing so, the many fascinating examples they include offer readers a path into "ordinary" or everyday Jewish life. As the authors note, while the letters avoid politics, they do explore Jewish concerns about how to best acquire learning and skills that can be used in the world outside the shtetl. These glimpses into the dilemmas and successes of Jewish men and women brings us insights into how Jews coped with the difficulties they encountered trying to fashion their lives.

The second part of the volume also offers essays that definitely try to chart new directions in east European Jewish history. Shaul Stampfer's piece, "Violence and the Migration of Ashkenazi Jews to Eastern Europe," disputes the traditional understanding of how and why Jews migrated into eastern Europe in large numbers. Using demographic analysis and a variety of other sources, Stampfer suggests that we need to reexamine our belief that the large east European Jewish population resulted from a mass migration of Jews from Germany in the high to late Middle Ages. Rather, he argues that the numbers were probably smaller than we have thought, but that through such natural forces as exponential population growth, the relatively small Jewish population of Poland in 1500 had increased more than tenfold by 1700 (pp. 133-134). Pointing to such factors as lower mortality rates for Jewish children, Stampfer posits that a population growth rate of 1.7 percent over two centuries could account for the population increase in the Polish lands from approximately twenty-four thousand to the estimated over three hundred thousand at the turn of the eighteenth century (p. 133). To corroborate his argument, Stampfer examines both family and personal names as well as other sources. I am not in a position to judge the accuracy of Stampfer's argument, but I was fascinated by his contribution, challenging the general explanations for the growth and origins of east European Jewry.

Sam Johnson's exploration of how and when the term "pogrom" came into common use in the West, specifically in the United States and Britain, offers yet another illustration of examining closely the language of reporting regarding the phenomenon of anti-Jewish activities. He also discusses when the term came to be applied to these events. I particularly appreciated his essay because many years ago, I raised similar questions in evaluating an article that I strongly believed mischaracterized events as "pogroms" when they did not seem to have the characteristics generally associated with the term. Johnson's efforts to pinpoint the exact period when the term gained widespread usage in English as well as to determine its meaning in an Jewish and non-Jewish context struck me as an important contribution to our understanding of how these events came to be understood by the Western press and Western public.

In keeping with the growing use of imagery to explain historical phenomena, Robert Weinberg's discussion of how depictions of Jews transformed or influenced the nature of anti-Semitism from an anti-Judaism to a hate grounded in racial stereotyping relates clearly to issues Freeze raises in her essay about the treatment of young Jewish converts to Christianity. Weinberg explains that attitudes toward Jews in late imperial Russia were similar to those being expressed elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, we have always been aware that anti-Jewish tracts, such as the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" which originated in Russia, circulated widely throughout Europe and even in today's Middle East, so it should not surprise anyone that anti-Semitic ideas moved from west to east as well. However, as an exception to what is otherwise a very clear and thoughtful discussion, Weinberg does err in one of his points. He writes that although Russian Orthodoxy may have been the offspring of the Byzantine church, it was not cut off from Western (read Catholic) influence. Although Weinberg's point is well taken, the sentence that follows is highly problematic. "By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Russian church had picked up elements of the Latin rite, a state of affairs that prompted church officials under the direction of Patriarch Nikon in the mid-seventeenth century to purge Russian Orthodoxy of offending accretions and led to the formation of the Old Believer schismatic sects that rejected Nikon's reforms" (p. 173). While Nikon rejected what he called "Polish" or "Latin" styles,

especially in iconography, and tried to purge them, he actually tried to incorporate certain aspects of Latinate culture; the idea of textual analysis to determine “correct” readings; the meticulous detailing of “proper” rituals (determined by reference to the “classics” of church literature–the early Greek church fathers); and the insistence on a well-disciplined, hierarchical clergy culminating in a patriarch who claimed supreme authority, even over the tsar, were all inspired by the Roman Catholic Church. The Old Believers rejected these particular aspects of Nikonian reforms; they were not, as the text of the essay implies, defenders of “Western” or Latin ideas in the Russian church, rather they fled Moscow when they failed to prevail against Nikon’s standardization of Russian Orthodox ritual to conform with that of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which they claimed rejected the special “Russianness” of their Orthodox Church. While the error is minor in the context of the essay, it might convey to the reader that Old Believers were proponents of Westernisms in the Russian church, which would be a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the Raskol or church schism of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, this error notwithstanding, Weinberg’s contribution highlights how examining anti-Jewish imagery incorporates all aspects of culture and shows that assuming that Russian anti-Semitism was one-dimensional misses the complexity of both its origins and its practice.

In keeping with examining old tropes in new ways, Oleg Budnitskii’s discussions of the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1918-21 underlines that many of the accusations leveled at Jews to justify the violence against them did not originate in the chaos on the borderlands during the Civil War, rather that such concepts as “Shots in the Back” can be traced to Russian imperial military attacks on Jews as early as 1915. Budnitskii’s essay fits easily into the growing reconceptualization of traditional periodization of Russian history which now regards the period between 1914 and 1921 as one continuous set of developments rather than using 1917 as a breaking point.

Joshua Karlip’s investigation into Simon Dubnow’s historiographical approach to Jewish history and how it changed during the period immediately following the February Revolution provides a very useful mirror into the way Jewish intellectual leaders understood their position in the Russian state in the aftermath of the fall of the tsarist regime. It also casts an important light on how Dubnow viewed Jewish suffering as a rationale for Jewish identity.

The final two essays bring us to World War II and its destruction of Russian and east European Jewry. David Schneer’s exploration of Soviet Holocaust photography provides us with a new way of examining the imagery of Jewish slaughter. He rightly asserts that Jewish/Soviet photographers had very different objectives than their Western counterparts who came upon the death camps not only from west to east, but took their photographs for very different audiences. According to Schneer, much of Soviet/Jewish photography had a forensic purpose–to document specific crimes. Yet the photographers also were limited by ideology. Their task was not to document the fate of Jews, but the fate of Soviet citizens. Consequently, Schneer argues that the character of Soviet photography often means that we as viewers are looking for absence as much as presence. Soviet photography was more likely to show Poles being brought to death camps, specifically Majdanek, as a punishment for tolerating the crimes against Soviet citizens. Schneer suggests that we look for the absence of Jews in contrast to the photographs of Western journalists, such as Margaret Bourke White whose photographs emphasized liberation from terrible suffering and whose photographs are populated by those who survived.

In the concluding essay, Marat Grinberg explores what happened to language in post-Holocaust poetry, focusing on the work of Boris Slutsky. He cites Slutsky’s poem, “I Was a Liberator of Ukraine,” which he calls “a requiem to Yiddish, the language the Nazis murdered,” along with two other poems (p. 247). Ironically, Slutsky’s poem was written in Russian. Grinberg’s examination of Slutsky’s postwar poetry brings the essays in the volume to an appropriate end. The final pages of the book are devoted to a complete bibliography of Klier’s work, a testimony to his prodigious output, and a variety of interests to which the volume’s editors and contributors often allude.

This volume is an appropriate way to commemorate Klier’s contribution to our knowledge of Russian and east European Jewish history and culture. May those who follow in his footsteps continue to prosper.

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