In the last two decades after the collapse of Communism and the opening of the former Soviet archives, scholars have published many works devoted to the history of Soviet Jews. Mordechai Altshuler and Yaacov Ro’i have written about the history of Jews in the Soviet Union in the first postwar decade. Leonid Smilovitsky’s book *Jewish Life in Belarus: The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime, 1944-1953* is a pioneering work focused on the history of Belarussian Jews in the last year of the war (after the liberation of Belarus) and the first eight years after World War II. Basing his work on extensive research of documents in Belarussian, Russian, and Israeli archives, Smilovitsky adds a rich perspective to the existing scholarly literature on the topic of Soviet Jews.

In his introduction, Smilovitsky surveys Jewish life in Belarus before World War II. He briefly describes the life of Jews in tsarist times, when this territory was part of the Pale of Settlement. Smilovitsky claims that “Jewish religious life in Belarus was an integral part of Jewish Lithuania” (p. 2). The majority of Belarussian Jews were *mitnagdim* (opponents of Hasidism); however, in southern Belarus Hasidism was also present. The ideas of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, and the assimilation process affected only a small percentage of the Belarussian Jewish population before World War I, while the majority remained Orthodox in belief and practice.

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks began an antireligious campaign, resulting in the closing of many synagogues and all Jewish religious schools. According to Smilovitsky, from 1917 to 1940 the number of synagogues declined in Belarus from 704 to 71 (p. 10). World War II and the Holocaust had an even more devastating impact on Belarussian Jews. Over 80 percent of the Jewish population of Belarus was murdered by the Nazi invaders.

The misfortunes of Belarussian Jews did not cease with the end of World War II. After the war, Soviet authorities continued to suppress Jewish religious life. Religious Jews who attended a synagogue were subject to surveillance by police. And authorities placed many obstacles in the way of Jewish religious practice.

In response, Smilovitsky writes, some leaders of Jewish religious communities demonstrated their loyalty to Soviet authorities, hoping that this would allow observant Jews to continue their traditional religious practices. In their prayer for the state, for example, they referred to Joseph Stalin as “dearest savior” (p. 28). The traditional Jewish policy of compliance with the authorities, however, could not protect Jews from further persecution in the toxic atmosphere of growing state anti-Semitism in the postwar years.

Smilovitsky shows that the Soviet policy toward religion in general, and Judaism in particular, was quite hypocritical. Although the Soviets declared the principle of freedom of conscience, authorities relentlessly persecuted religious institutions and religious people. As an
example of the double standard, Smilovitsky describes the work of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC). The CARC stated that its goal was to look after the needs of its religious citizenry, but in reality its commissioners did everything possible to decrease the number of religious communities, churches, mosques, and synagogues.

By January 1, 1949, only two synagogues functioned in Belarus, in Minsk and Kalinkovichi. This was a very small number even compared to other Soviet republics. According to Smilovitsky, at that time seventy synagogues functioned in Ukraine, thirty-three in the Russian Federation, thirty-one in Georgia, and thirteen in Moldova. There was no direct connection between the size of the Jewish population and the number of synagogues in the Soviet republics. For example, the Belarussian “Jewish population was three times as large as that of Georgia,” yet Georgia had far more synagogues (p. 48).

Antireligious pressure from Moscow was presumably the same in all republics. Smilovitsky attributes the small number of synagogues in Belarus to several factors. Many synagogues along with other buildings were destroyed during the Nazi occupation. Due to a shortage of facilities after the war, Belarussian authorities turned some synagogue buildings that survived the war into residential buildings, manufacturing plants, and storage spaces. The tolerance of local authorities toward religious life and their implementation of directives from the center may have also varied in each Soviet republic. Smilovitsky shows that Belarussian Jews petitioned local authorities numerous times asking to be allowed to reestablish previous or to open new synagogues, but all their requests were denied.

Jewish communities in Belarus also faced significant financial difficulties after the war. The Jewish population was impoverished; Jewish property in many cases was destroyed or stolen either by the Nazis or by the local gentile population. Many religious Jews donated modest sums to synagogues, but Soviet authorities eventually banned this practice. Smilovitsky points out that “local authorities in Belarus, as well as in other parts of the country, viewed the operation of synagogues as a manifestation of Jewish nationalism” (p. 80). So they tried to deprive the synagogues of financial resources, hoping that this would put an end to their existence.

The situation of the Jewish population and Jewish religious communities deteriorated further with the rise of state anti-Semitism and the beginning of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the late 1940s. However, as Smilovitsky shows, neither anti-Semitism nor political repression could “force observant Jews to abandon their faith and their values” (p. 30). Because of the absence of synagogues in many cities and towns, Jews gathered for prayer in private homes. Soviet authorities banned such gatherings and fined homeowners who made their houses available for prayer.

In spite of persecution, observant Jews celebrated Jewish religious holidays. Many sacrificed their professional careers and accepted low-paid manual jobs to avoid working on Saturdays. (Sunday was the only weekend day in the Soviet Union in these years. Local authorities sometimes made an unofficial exception for observant Jews if they had a shortage of labor.) Synagogues in Minsk and Kalinkovichi were filled to overflowing during the high holy days. Jews who did not have a chance to attend services in synagogues celebrated Jewish holidays in their homes. Observant Jews often skipped work on these days in spite of threats of being fired and punished by authorities.

With the rise of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, all public discussion of the Holocaust was forbidden. Smilovitsky writes that Holocaust sites were completely neglected by Belarussian authorities: they were turned into pastures and fields or used for new construction. Jews petitioned Soviet authorities to allow them to erect monuments on Holocaust sites. Reluctantly Belarussian leaders granted permission for the construction of some monuments, under the condition that the monuments be erected at the cost of the Jewish communities and be dedicated to Soviet citizens, victims of the Nazi occupation. Specific mention of Jewish victims of the Holocaust was not allowed. The only exceptions were one monument erected in Minsk and three in small towns of the Minsk region—Uzda, Uzlian, and Kidanovo—which included signs in Russian and Yiddish that mentioned Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The suppression of Jewish culture in Belarus, as well as in the Soviet Union, had already begun in the interwar period. In the second half of the 1930s, all Yiddish schools were closed. In the late 1940s, the last Jewish cultural institutions and organizations were liquidated in the Soviet Union. During the anti-cosmopolitan campaign (late 1940s-1953), many Jewish intellectuals were arrested and accused of Jewish bourgeois nationalism. Smilovitsky shows that Belarussian authorities faithfully fulfilled orders from Moscow directing the suppression of Jewish culture and the persecution of Jewish intelligentsia. Belarussian leaders often used Jews as scapegoats to explain
the economic difficulties and plan failures. "They accused the Jews of professional incompetence, greed, and pursuit of narrow ethnic interests to the detriment of common production goals" (p. 202).

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union followed a policy of isolationism that affected the Jewish population. Anti-Jewish persecution increased after the Soviets revised their attitude toward the State of Israel from supportive to negative. Smilovitsky writes that this immediately put all Belarusian Jews under suspicion. Many were accused of "a lack of patriotism, and a readiness to collaborate with the US and other imperialist powers" (p. 228). The worst period of Soviet state anti-Semitism ended with Stalin's death. Innocent victims of the Stalin regime, including Belarusian Jews, were rehabilitated, many of them posthumously.

Smilovitsky concludes that the situation of Jews in Belarus in Stalin's last decade was quite difficult. As he shows, "Belarusian Jewry had no public Jewish life" (p. 261). Jewish religious communities in Belarus were smaller compared with those in Ukraine. State anti-Semitism in Belarus "directed from above was complemented and strengthened by grassroots anti-Semitism still extant among much of the population" (p. 264).

The book reveals many unknown pages of Jewish life in Belarus in these years and illustrates various aspects of Soviet policy toward the Jewish population. The only thing that could improve our understanding of this period would be more attention to the persecution of Jews in Belarus during the "Doctors' Plot" campaign (January to March 1953). This campaign is described only briefly and the author does not show the full range of its negative impact on Jewish life in Belarus.

Smilovitsky’s well-structured and well-edited book is a solid and important contribution to the history of the Jews in the Soviet Union. It is written in a scholarly popular style that makes it accessible to a wide audience. Smilovitsky makes extensive use of documentary sources from eleven libraries and archives. He provides clear arguments and conclusions in each chapter. In the appendix, the author reproduces important documents that can be used along with the book for teaching Soviet Jewish history. Hopefully other works that show the specifics of Jewish life in the different Soviet republics will follow this breakthrough research.

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