



Brendan McGeever. *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xi + 247 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-16449-8.

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In the midst of the centennials of the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent Russian Civil War, scholarly publications addressing these events and Jews' violent experiences of them have proliferated. Brendan McGeever is among the still-growing list of scholars to recently address this topic, with his book, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*. Generally, recent publications have focused primarily on political instability, national ambitions, counterrevolutionary forces, and longer trajectories of anti-Jewish violence, as manifested in the rash of pogroms that broke out across the emerging Soviet landscape (primarily in Ukraine). While the pogroms certainly factor heavily into McGeever's analysis, he approaches the intersections of Jewish experience and the Revolution through a slightly different lens. He focuses on Red pogroms, anti-Jewish ideas within the Bolshevik party and among the working class that supported it, and, to a much lesser extent, the global reverberations of so-called Bolshevik ideology, particularly the idea of anti-antisemitism and its impact on antiracist movements in the United States. In doing so, McGeever breaks down the false dichotomies of anti-antisemitism and antisemitism, revolution and counterrevolution.

McGeever dispels the notion that anti-antisemitism's roots lay in Bolshevism, tracing it instead to a group of non-Bolshevik Jews who parti-

cipated in *Evseksii* (the Jewish sections of the Communist Party) and Jewish commissariats (organizations tasked with representing the Jewish population in the Soviet government and spreading Bolshevik messaging in the Yiddish language). McGeever shows that anti-antisemitism was a Jewish idea shaped by Jewish diaspora politics and distinctively Jewish experiences within Russian imperial social and political landscapes, and that it crystalized against the backdrops of revolution and anti-Jewish violence. As McGeever demonstrates, Lenin's decree of July of 1918, which officially wedded Bolshevism and anti-antisemitism, was not the beginning of the latter. Rather, it represented the Bolshevik appropriation of an idea that had percolated in radical Jewish communities for some time. Lenin's decree was the culmination of this longer movement. As Avrom Merezhin, an *Evseksiia* leader, famously said, "The Jewish question was the door through which they [the Bolsheviks] came to us" (p. 9). Indeed, as the Red pogroms, in which Bolsheviks and Red Army soldiers participated in the murder, rape, and pillage of Jews, clearly demonstrate, Bolshevism and anti-antisemitism were hardly synonymous. They had to be rendered so.

A succinct writer—sometimes too much so—McGeever packs an introduction, seven chapters, epilogue, and conclusion into less than 250 pages.

His overarching organization is chronological, starting in 1917 and moving through the tumultuous year of 1919. The bulk of the chapters focus on 1919. McGeever's primary argument is process-oriented; thus, this organizational scheme suits his assertions quite well. While not the primary thrust of this text, the first four chapters, taken together, offer a contribution to current understandings of the construction of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth and underscore the fallacies of *Żydokomuna* (the claim that all Jews collaborated with the Soviet regime and/or were the primary drivers of Bolshevism). They focus on the Red pogroms of 1918, which are more often than not overshadowed by the unprecedented violence of 1919, as well as responses to them within predominantly non-Bolshevik Jewish political bodies and the Bolshevik party. McGeever clearly demonstrates the existence of anti-Jewish sentiments among the working class and growing Red Army ranks. Here, antisemitism often became the populist terrain on which Bolsheviks and the toiling masses met. Recognizing this phenomenon, key Bolsheviks were initially hesitant to legislate anti-antisemitism, perceiving it as a much smaller part of a larger revolution. Instead, a group of dedicated, mostly Menshevik and Bundist, Jews, like Zvi Fridliand and Il'ia Dobkovskii, under the leadership of the Bolshevik true believer Semon Dimanshtein, began conceiving ways to enact and enforce policies of anti-antisemitism. For these men, anti-antisemitism was the revolution.

While McGeever is a sociologist, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* is a truly interdisciplinary work, excellently fusing the methods and theories of history, sociology, psychology, and political science. McGeever offers a relevant contribution to each one of these fields. However, as with any interdisciplinary work, he occasionally omits or glosses over information and theory that, when viewed from any single discipline, seems crucial. For example, his five-page address of anti-Jewish violence, anti-Jewish ideas, and their intersections with socialist movements prior to 1917 left this reader (a historian) with more questions

than answers. If, as McGeever argues, anti-antisemitism is the culmination of Jewish ideas and experience over time, which is certainly believable, why are these developments treated as an afterthought and occasional flavor for individual biographies? A deeper dive into this historical context and its nuances across the Russian Empire and its Jewish communities (both profoundly diverse entities) would have strengthened McGeever's claims. Nonetheless, McGeever's archival work and documentary analysis stand up to critique. Working predominantly in Russian and English, and to a much lesser extent in Yiddish, McGeever combines materials from fourteen archives in Russia, Ukraine, the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. As is to be expected, a large swath of these materials comes from archives located in contemporary Russia. However, considering the actual geography of the pogroms and Jewish settlement in the former Russian Empire, one would have expected McGeever to address more materials both from Ukraine and in the Ukrainian language. This would have only strengthened his claims that anti-antisemitism developed in the political, social, and geographic peripheries of the emerging Soviet Union.

In the conclusion, McGeever offers his interpretation of the larger contemporary implications of the Russian Revolution, radical Jewish grassroots organization, and the anti-antisemitism movement. While only briefly alluded to in the introduction and body of the text, McGeever asserts that these developments could and perhaps should serve as a blueprint for socialist revolution and marrying antiracist ideas on the left. To a historian well versed in the events that followed the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the long and violent aftereffects of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth, people's very lived experiences under communist regimes, and contemporary racism and antisemitism in eastern Europe, this interpretation does not sit particularly well. Moreover, McGeever's conflation of racial antisemitism, anti-Jewish ideas, and racism is problematic. Nonetheless, McGeever

leaves readers with much to consider. For scholars interested in the Russian Revolution, Jewish political movements, the relationship between the political Left and antisemitism, and anti-Jewish violence, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution* is a worthwhile and thought-provoking read. McGeever introduces new questions, leaving the door open for continued scholarly discussion. That is always a sign of good scholarship.

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