
The history of the Soviet Jews, particularly for the time period immediately following the 1917 revolution, has attracted in recent years much scholarly attention from historians, literary scholars and folklorists (Yuri Slezkine, Gennady Estrikh, David Shneer, Arkadi Zeltser, Michael Beizer, Anna Shternshis, Jeffrey Veidlinger, et al). Elissa Bemporad’s *Becoming Soviet Jews, The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* is an excellent addition to this body of work. Unlike many scholars working on this topic, Bemporad concentrates on neither the negative nor the positive aspects of Soviet experience. Instead she analyzes the formation of Soviet-Jewish identity in Minsk and in doing so she details multiple sites of compromise between Soviet policy and traditional Jewish life that previous studies have left largely unexplored.

Located in the Pale of Settlement, Minsk was an urban enclave in largely agricultural Belorussia. Local artisans and workers were largely Jewish. After the 1917 revolution, Minsk became capital of the Soviet republic of Belorussia and thus gained significant influence. The local political establishment, interested in promoting multiculturalism, actively promoted the idea of Minsk as a primary center of Soviet-Jewish culture. Still, as Bemporad emphasizes, Minsk retained its provincial character and its pre-revolutionary Jewish milieu – neighborhoods where Jews constituted the majority of the population. The interaction between this provincial but confident Jewish milieu and the new policies of the Soviet state and the resulting Jewish identity is the focus of Bemporad’s study. This is interesting since, as Bemporad, shows in her book, the Jewish experience in Minsk differed in some ways from Jewish experience elsewhere. In fact it seems that more in-depth local research dealing with different locations of Jewish habitation will result in a considerably more nuanced picture of a Soviet-Jewish experience.

Bemporad claims that while the Soviet regime destroyed the pre-revolutionary Jewish institutions in Minsk and left destitute numerous Jews previously engaged in trade, Soviet policies that promoted multiculturalism encouraged the creation of a new Soviet-Jewish identity and a new Soviet-Jewish culture. The interaction between Soviet and traditional practices catalyzed this phenomenon. Through an in depth analysis of the treatment of destitute Jews, the place of ex-Bundists within the Bolshevik establishment, the promotion of Yiddish-language schooling, scholarship and culture, the retention of traditional cultural practices (kashrut, circumcision, yeshivas), the advancement of women, and Jewish reactions to the 1937-38 purges, Bemporad demonstrates how this development proved possible and what about it made the Soviet-Jewish experience in Minsk special.

One of the key points that Bemporad addresses is the status of Yiddish-language schooling, culture, and research. In an effort to translate its anti-imperial ideology into practice, the Soviet government supported local cultural practices and the use of native languages in schools. The government of Belorussia, cognizant of the weakness of Belorussian culture, strongly favored cultural pluralism within the republic, so as to counterbalance the more dominant Russian language and culture. It encouraged schooling in various national languages, including Yiddish. It promoted the use of Yiddish in courts and in government offices, and helped turn Minsk into the main Jewish cultural center in the Soviet Union. The Belorussian government also established research centers that fostered research aimed at creating a special Belorussian Jewish identity. The encouragement of Yiddish generated pride among Minsk Jews at being Soviet, especially in comparison with neighboring Poland’s discriminatory policies towards Jewish education.
While study, research and culture represented a crucial dimension of Jewish life in Minsk, labor and economics constituted another. Many Jews in Minsk, as former traders, were adversely affected by the Soviet class differentiation policies. They had neither the right to vote nor the right to social nor employment assistance from the government. During the 1920s many such families became destitute and relied heavily on assistance from Joint Distribution Committee or from relatives abroad. Still, Bemporad points out that in Minsk during this time period an independent organization of Jewish doctors provided medical assistance to Jews and later also to non-Jews without consideration of their pre-revolutionary social status. The unhindered existence of this charity was one of these compromises between Minsk Soviet policies and traditional views, which Bemporad discovered and which created the local Soviet-Jewish identity.

Another such local compromise Bemporad noted was with local Bundists, a popular Jewish Social-Democratic Party in Minsk. As in many locations throughout the Soviet Union, Minsk Bolsheviks lacked sufficient manpower. The Jewish Bund provided a solution to this problem. Ideologically close to the Bolsheviks, the Bundists, often (though not always) collaborated with the new government and eventually merged with the Bolsheviks. According to Bemporad, the Jewish Committees (Evsektsii) of the Bolshevik Party in Minsk mainly consisted of former Bundists, thus providing continuity between the old Bundist political culture and the new Bolshevik one. For example, the Central Workers’ Club was still named after a Polish Bund activist Grosser; the name of the main newspaper remained Der Veker, and the worker hero whose statue replaced the one of Alexander II was Bundist Girsh Lekert. Initially, this arrangement satisfied every one. However, as the absolute dominance of Bolshevik political culture became the norm in Soviet Union, local Bolsheviks became dissatisfied with the persistence of Bundist traditions, put an end to compromise, and replaced Bundist names with Bolshevik ones. More importantly, they initiated an attack on ex-Bundists. They accused the former Bundists of having contaminated Bolshevik ideology and redefined them as an enemy. Eventually, they expelled them from the party, which for many translated into arrest and heavy prison sentences.

Still, in the 1920s, as Bemporad emphasized, Jews had gravitated to the Bolshevik party precisely because of the party’s retention of familiar Bundist traditions. The Minsk Evsektsii evinced pride in their propaganda successes among the local Jews as well as in their location in a capital of a republic with a substantial Jewish population. They engaged in an ongoing battle with their counterparts in Moscow over the place of their center within the Soviet Jewish political hierarchy.

In addition to discovering these interesting local compromises between Soviet policies and popular views in fields of culture and scholarship, Bundism and charity, Bemporad also found a major local compromise in the field of Jewish religious practices. Local Minsk authorities tried to negotiate a middle way between Soviet anti-religious principles and Jewish life within the city with its traditions and habitual behaviors. For example, they often chose to overlook persistence of traditional behaviors (circumcision, kashrut, religious study). Bemporad also points out that while the authorities closed many synagogues and all heders, the old korobka (tax on kosher meat) system in Minsk financed a vital Jewish religious life and the same authorities did not interfere with the arrangement until the early 1930s. Even later, the vast majority of local butchers were former shohatim and as such provided kosher (or perceived as kosher) meat to the population as a whole. According to Bemporad numerous Jewish party members, while atheists, still had their sons circumcised, assigning responsibility to their
allegedly unenlightened wives. After all, they still lived in the Jewish social milieu and had to consider the opinions of their families and neighbors.

Another compromise detailed by Bemporad concerned the status of women. Bemporad claims that while some Jewish women made full use of the newly opened opportunities and of Soviet policies encouraging the promotion of women in the workplace and within the party, many encountered much resistance from Jewish men, including within the party, and ended up in the same role of a housewife or a secondary breadwinner, as before the revolution. According to the author, Jewish women were better educated than other local women and often had some pre-revolutionary Bundist political experience. As such they could better utilize the opportunities which the party created for women. Still, Jewish men, often newcomers from the shtetls, found the idea of newly liberated women threatening. They countermanded it by notions of women as uninterested in promotion or in politics and by behavior which made the lives of ambitious women extremely difficult (anything from refusals to assist with childcare up to refusal to promote women). In the case of women as well there was a compromise between Soviet ideas of equality and traditional notions of women as inferior.

The last issue that Bemporad addresses is Jewish reaction to the purges of 1937-38. Bemporad points out that in spite of the arrests and the attacks on Yiddish-language education, culture and scholarship, the majority of Jews could still enjoy plays, songs, and literature in Yiddish. Government propaganda continued to present Jews as citizens possessing the same rights as non-Jews and as an integral part of the Soviet experience. Local Jews, acutely aware of the governmental and popular anti-Semitism faced by friends and relatives in Poland, still felt pride in their Soviet identity.

The Minsk Jewish elite reacted to the purges by championing ideological purity to an extent unknown in Moscow. Bemporad claims that this was another way to emphasize the importance of Minsk in Jewish life – a claim that the Minsk Jewish elite was ideologically purer than its Moscow counterpart.

While I enjoyed Bemporad’s fresh look at the Soviet Jewry in Minsk, I have two minor criticisms. First, based on the introduction alone, one might conclude that this work is just another account of the woes of Soviet Jewry. The author’s introduction does not do justice to what is original in Bemporad’s work. The other is that while ‘on the Jewish street’ is a nice expression here it is somewhat overused. But overall this is an excellent book, offering a fascinating case study of how a Soviet-Jewish identity in a particular Soviet city came into being.

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