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BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Anna Shternshis. *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006. 248 pp. $65.00 cloth; $24.95 paper. ISBN: 0-253-21841-1.

In August 1999, Sara F., an elderly Jewish woman born in Ukraine but now living in Brooklyn, instructed Anna Shternshis on the secrets of making "kosher pork." If you have a "Jewish soul," she pointed out, then any food that you make becomes kosher. For Shternshis, the seemingly outrageous idea of "kosher pork" has its origins in the transformation of Jewish cultural identity in the USSR during the 1920s and early 1930s. Like other authors before her – most notably, Yuri Slezkine, in *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) – Shernshis notes that the early Soviet regime offered unprecedented career opportunities for Jews and that rapid movement into urban professional strata profoundly affected Jewish culture. Whereas Slezkine sees the NEP-era shift in Jewish culture as a "Jewish revolution against Jewishness," however, Shternshis sees it the product of a "transitional" Jewish identity, shaped by young Jews' responses to the Soviet regime's policies and their internalization of lessons from Soviet propaganda. She argues that what young Jews actually took from those lessons differed significantly from what the propagandists had intended.

Shternshis focuses on the reception of Soviet propaganda by the "transitional" generation that learned to read and attended school in the 1920s and early 1930s. For their parents, Jewishness was defined by the very religion and religious rituals under attack in NEP-era Soviet propaganda. For their children, born in the 1930s and 1940s, Jewishness would be something to hide, something associated with thinly-veiled official persecution and open public displays of anti-Semitism. But for Sara F.'s generation, Jewishness meant a set of positive (secularized) cultural practices and cultural achievements of which they learned largely from state-produced mass culture.

Shternshis recognizes that the Soviet regime sought to "productivize" Jews – to transform them into peasants and/or proletarians – but her main emphasis is on anti-religious campaigns and the effort to discredit the "old world" of rabbis, the synagogues, and *khedars* (religious-oriented primary schools). The regime produced a mass of Yiddish-language propaganda material – guides for the celebration of secular holidays, amateur as well as professional literature and theater, mock-trials, films, and popular songs – that Shternshis analyzes successively in the book's five chapters. To deliver this propaganda and to engage youth in the reproduction of official ideology, the regime created networks of Yiddish-language schools, clubs, and youth activities; special Jewish soviets; and Jewish Party and *Komsomol* organizations. Shternshis presents evidence on these propaganda efforts drawn from archival files of the *natsmen* (national minority) sections of various central state educational agencies and annual reports submitted to the center by local *Evsektsii* (Jewish sections of the Communist Party). She also has studied more than two dozen periodicals (including Yiddish

newspapers and magazines), scores of contemporary books, pamphlets and brochures on Jewish affairs, and dozens of popular songs and films.

Shternshis points out that the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* (which she translates as "nativization") dictated that agitation and propaganda materials be presented to Jews in a "purified" form of Yiddish (which the Party treated as the "national" language of the Jewish proletariat). The new Yiddish material (and particularly that created by amateur authors) depicted new Soviet Jews engaged in socially useful activities in what Shternshis describes as the "Potemkin shtetl," a term she adapts from Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Stalin's Peasants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Soviet and Party agencies concerned with Jewish affairs also disseminated Yiddish literature and theater from Tsarist Russia and from abroad, but only when these could be spun to create new heroes who anticipated the revolution or otherwise conformed with the official themes of Soviet propaganda on the Jewish Street. The most common of these themes, according to Shternshis, is the systematic negation of all things associated with the "old world" of religion and rabbinical authority.

Shternshis' analysis of state policy nicely supplements recently published work by David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Gennady Estraikh, *Soviet Yiddish: Language Planning and Linguistic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Her discussion of the cultural work of grass-roots Party institutions complements Zvi Gitelman's seminal *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1918-1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), although her thesis (like Shneer's) challenges some of Gitelman's major conclusions. But the most original aspect of her research, and the basis on which her thesis rests, is evidence regarding popular reception of propaganda.

Shternshis has conducted more than 200 oral history interviews and has read dozens of memoirs by Jews born and raised in the USSR in the inter-war period. On the basis of this evidence she concludes that the young Jews who eagerly consumed Soviet-produced Yiddish culture did in fact come to see the world through the lenses of Soviet ideology. Antireligious propaganda had contributed to the uncoupling of Jewishness from Judaism and religious ritual. Sarah F.'s generation forged a "hybrid" value system that fused elements of Jewish tradition with elements of the official Soviet world view. Contrary to the regime's aims, this new belief system did not set them against their more devout parents; rather, they learned to be Jews at home and Soviet on the street (to paraphrase Moses Mendelson).

Although young Jews' reading habits contributed to their "sovietization," what they took from regime-orchestrated Yiddish literary culture often differed from its conductors' intentions. They understood literacy as the key to both social mobility and a "cultured" life and many engaged in amateur literary activities modeled on the workers' correspondent movement. State-approved Yiddish classics actually fostered their pride in being Jewish. Most, however, preferred the Russian-language press to the rush of new Yiddish print materials with their "Potemkin shtetl," as the latter seldom addressed the problems of real life on the Jewish Street. Young Jews understood regime-propagated Yiddish theater in its various forms as an exclusively Jewish pub-

lic space, through which "they asserted their culture and identity" (p. 105). They also "read" popular songs in ways that undermined the regime's intended messages, generally by dwelling on or finding nostalgic references to the old shtetl while ignoring of forgetting a song's more overt political content.

While the regime offered Yiddish as the Jewish national language, upwardly mobile Jews quickly adopted Russian as their primary tongue (often at the urging of their parents). As a result, Shternshis explains, two Jewish cultures coexisted: Yiddish-language Jewish culture lived on in the shtetls, particularly among the elderly, while Russian-language Jewish culture found its home among the young, particularly in Soviet cities. The state produced literature directed at Jews almost exclusively in Yiddish, so that Russophone Jews had to glean information and images about what it meant to be Jewish from literature intended for gentile readers – materials related to the regime's campaign against anti-Semitism. In refuting popular anti-Semitic myths and slurs, these publications presented exclusively positive, and often heroic depictions of Jews and Jewish culture. Moreover, they often contained defenses of Judaism as a progressive form of faith. While the campaign against anti-Semitism appears to have done little to dampen popular anti-Jewish myths, Shternshis argues, young Russophone Jews used these materials to build a sense of Jewish identity and pride. When the Holocaust decimated the last vestiges of the shtetl-based Yiddish culture, this Russophone culture was all that remained. For the survivors, Jewishness was embodied in "the things that Jews do." Thus for Sarah F., pork could become kosher if prepared by a Jew.

Soviet and Kosher fits nicely into historiography on the complex and often paradoxical ways in which "ordinary people" received and adapted to (and sometimes resisted) the Soviet regime's transformational agenda in the 1920s. Shternshis not only engages with other literature on Soviet Jews in this period, but also draws linkages between her findings and recent works on the gentile population by Julie Cassiday, William Husband, Daniel Peris, Elizabeth Wood, and Glennys Young (although she does so largely in her endnotes). Shternshis' field is Yiddish literature, and the volume is strongest when she is dissecting popular literature or parsing the language of popular songs. She offers readers long excerpts from such sources (in Yiddish or Russian, followed by English translations). While Shternshis is well aware of the plasticity of memory and recognizes that a lifetime of subsequent experience has shaped the testimonies of her oral history informants, some readers might wish that she had given more explicit consideration to the mediated nature of this evidence, as, for instance, Lawrence Langer does in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991). At times Shternshis' attention to chronology lapses (she occasionally uses evidence from 1918-1922 to make points regarding policies implemented after 1923), and I found myself questioning some of her generalizations about the local implementation of state policies. Nevertheless, these are relatively minor problems in a solid, informative, and entertaining volume that should appeal to general readers as well as to undergraduates and specialists studying Soviet and Jewish literature, culture, and history.

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