

Fall 2010

Review Of "In Search Of Milk And Honey: The Theater Of "Soviet Jewish Statehood"" By B.B. Kotlerman

Robert Weinberg

Swarthmore College, rweinbe1@swarthmore.edu

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robert Weinberg. (2010). "Review Of "In Search Of Milk And Honey: The Theater Of "Soviet Jewish Statehood"" By B.B. Kotlerman". *Slavic Review*. Volume 69, Issue 3. 775-776.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/91>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Review

Author(s): Robert Weinberg

Review by: Robert Weinberg

Source: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (FALL 2010), pp. 775-776

Published by: Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25746316>

Accessed: 11-04-2016 13:33 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Slavic Review*

photograph of the book. If true, the logic of Rosenfeldt's argument would require us to shift our scrutiny from the Politburo and Stalin's inner circle to the several dozens, if not hundreds, of functionaries in Stalin's personal chancellery. Moreover, not only must we redefine what we mean by Stalin's "inner circle"; we need to reconsider what exactly Stalin knew, since it was Poskrebyshv and other functionaries who synthesized and decided what information Stalin saw. Do we now need to reconsider who, in fact, ruled Stalin?

Rosenfeldt has added much empirical archival evidence to document earlier speculative versions of his argument, but this book is plagued by the same two problems that characterized his earlier work. First, there is still too much argument by supposition, conclusions based on deductive logic of the type, if X was true, then surely it would be reasonable to assume that Y was true. Such is the supposition, for example, about N. F. Sveshnikov, the political police head of the Leningrad Party's Secret Sector under Sergei Kirov. According to Rosenfeldt, Sveshnikov must have been a Stalin "plant." Rosenfeldt deduces this since, as head of the Secret Department, Sveshnikov was in charge of Kirov's security, and yet he was not touched by the sweeping purges of the Leningrad political police that followed Kirov's assassination in December 1934. Second, Rosenfeldt dedicates many pages to the intricacies of how various "special departments" and Stalin's chancellery system may have functioned, but he does not concretely address how Stalin's use of the chancellery system subverted or at least influenced the decision-making process to produce specific policy outcomes. Are there examples of the way in which chancellery functionaries manipulated specific pieces of information in order to isolate or promote certain individuals or policy decisions? Also unclear is how all the various special sections and departments were tied together. Rosenfeldt proves, for example, what is already known about the special departments in the military and economic organs—that they were controlled by the political police—but he does not clarify how they were supposedly tied to Stalin's direct control, or to control by Stalin's chancellery.

Rosenfeldt presents some provocative arguments, but one needs to dig for them. They are obscured by detail and, even more, by a heavily labored writing style. Moreover, Rosenfeldt's biased language (such as his casual use of the descriptors "henchman" and "henchmen") does little to encourage a considered acceptance of some of the author's more intriguing hypotheses. This may be Rosenfeldt's most developed study of the secret workings of Stalin's dictatorship, but there is still much to do to understand how information and secrecy were tied to power in the Soviet ruling system.

DAVID SHEARER
University of Delaware

In Search of Milk and Honey: The Theater of "Soviet Jewish Statehood" (1934–49). By Ber Boris Kotlerman. The New Approaches to Russian and East European Culture. Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica Publishers, 2009. xiv, 302 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Indexes. Illustrations. Photographs. \$29.95, paper.

Beginning in 1928 the Kremlin initiated the campaign to establish a territorial enclave for Soviet Jewry in the Soviet Far East. Popularly known as Birobidzhan, and after 1934 officially named the Jewish Autonomous Region, the territory was designated as the national Jewish homeland that was supposed to become the center of a Soviet Jewish culture and society rooted in Yiddish and socialist principles. While other historians have told the story of the political fate of Birobidzhan, Ber Boris Kotlerman, a native of the region, focuses on one aspect of Soviet Jewish cultural construction, namely the history of the Birobidzhan State Yiddish Theater (BirGOSET) from its creation in 1934 to its demise in 1949 during the regime's campaign against "rootless cosmopolitanism" and "Jewish bourgeois nationalism." *In Search of Milk and Honey* is a comprehensive case study of cultural politics during the Stalin era that explores the efforts of BirGOSET to fulfill the promises of Jewish nation building in the context of the Kremlin's shifting policy toward Soviet Jewry. The artists responsible for the expression of Jewish national character on stage not only had to determine how best to do so but, like others involved in artistic endeavors, had to respond

to changes in the political line set in Moscow. The book is an important contribution to our understanding of the history of Soviet Jewry during the rule of Stalin.

Kotlerman argues that BirGOSET played an important role in promoting the construction of Jewish statehood in Birobidzhan and acquired prominence in the regime's efforts to construct a national Jewish culture and identity. By offering synopses of every play performed on the stage of BirGOSET and analyses of their staging and acting, the author is able to evaluate the theater's repertoire in terms of the demands made by the Kremlin. Kotlerman convincingly shows that the history of BirGOSET forms an integral part of the overall story of Birobidzhan, where activists in the theater strove to create a vibrant Yiddish theater that hewed closely to the Kremlin's demands. Despite these efforts to toe the party line, BirGOSET did not always grasp the nuances of the state's cultural policies, which required attentive reading between the lines of government and party directives and pronouncements. Thus, many of its stars suffered imprisonment and death during the purges of the 1930s and the late 1940s.

One of the many merits of *In Search of Milk and Honey* is the comparative treatment of BirGOSET's repertoire with those of other Yiddish theaters in the Soviet Union, particularly the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, the country's marquee troupe under the direction of Solomon Mikhoels. Unfortunately, Kotlerman does not offer any comparisons between BirGOSET and the theaters of other national minorities, a shortcoming that prevents the reader from drawing conclusions regarding the role of the stage in nationality policy in the 1930s and 1940s.

In Search of Milk and Honey is a fascinating portrait of artists seeking to satisfy their creative impulses while at the same time fulfilling the dicta of "socialist realism." The tragedy of Yiddish theater in the Soviet Union is not that the dramaturgs, playwrights, directors, and actors opposed the goals of the state or were poor readers of what policymakers in the Kremlin were thinking. Rather, the ideological demands of an interventionist state intent on social engineering and cultural homogenization straitjacketed artistic expression, depriving it of the nuances and multiple meanings that are crucial to serious art.

ROBERT WEINBERG
Swarthmore College

The Holocaust in the Soviet Union. By Yitzhak Arad. The Comprehensive History of the Holocaust. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009. xvi, 720 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. Maps. \$45.00, hard bound.

This comprehensive account of the Holocaust in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union is long overdue. For decades, as scholars issued histories of the Holocaust throughout Europe, and as memoir literature by survivors added vivid biographical detail, the full terror and significance of the German massacres directed against Soviet Jews remained under a veil. Several reasons can be cited for this oversight. It was not until Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost in the late 1980s that historians began to examine Soviet archival material from the war. Until then, the Kremlin had adopted an inconsistent policy about the mass murder of its Jewish citizens, with only fleeting official recognition of the Germans' unique hatred for the Jews. The politics of the Cold War also played a role; if the west found it inconvenient to acknowledge the full role of the Red Army in defeating the Wehrmacht, it also found it difficult to recognize that Soviet Jews were the first victims of the Germans' explicit plans to annihilate European Jewry.

Between 1939 and 1941, the German occupation of Poland involved a cruel targeting of the country's Jews. As the Nazis constructed large ghettos in Warsaw and Łódź, as many as 50,000 Jews lost their lives to random shootings, disease, and exposure. But this was not yet genocide. As Adolf Hitler prepared Operation Barbarossa—the invasion of the Soviet Union which began on 22 June 1941—he made clear to his generals that the war on the eastern front would be different from the fighting in the west. The Wehrmacht and four mobile shooting units, the Einsatzgruppen, would employ "ruthless and determined