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Review Of "Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment In Minsk" By E. Bemporad And "The Modern Jewish Experience" Edited By D. Dash Moore And M. L. Rozenblit

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Review

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the ground and uses cultural and social analysis to enrich her study of legal institutions. Artfully interweaving literatures from several disciplines and historiography from different national contexts, *Murder Most Russian* lucidly tracks Russia's path toward its own unique form of modernity.

FAITH HILLIS

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Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk. By *Elissa Bemporad*. The Modern Jewish Experience. Edited by *Deborah Dash Moore* and *Marsha L. Rozenblit*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv+276. \$80.00 (cloth); \$28.00 (paper).

Becoming Soviet Jews is one of the few books in English that explores the lived experiences of Soviet Jews in the first two decades of communist rule. Elissa Bemporad's decision to organize the book thematically allows her to (1) maintain a clear focus on how Jews in Minsk responded to the Kremlin's efforts to transform society and (2) challenge the received wisdom that the experiences of Soviet Jews were one of unrelenting repression and abuse. Rather, as the author demonstrates in chapters devoted to politics, culture, religion, gender, and daily life, Jews in Minsk retained a degree of freedom to challenge and thereby modify the policies of the communist regime.

Drawing upon extensive archival research and a careful reading of newspapers, journals, literatures, and memoirs, Bemporad examines the social and cultural transformation of Jews in Minsk, the capital of Belorussia and a center of Yiddish culture in the interwar years. She concludes that the revolution on the Jewish street did not erase Jewish identity: Jews in Minsk acculturated to Soviet norms and institutions while also retaining attachments to Yiddish culture, Jewish education, the laws of kashrut, and circumcision. Building upon recent work regarding Soviet nationality policy, Bemporad underscores the role that the Kremlin played in maintaining certain aspects of Jewish culture and society by celebrating a positive self-image of the new Soviet-Jewish man and woman.

To be sure, traditional forms of Jewish identity gave way under the impact of socioeconomic changes and opportunities, Stalinist culture and politics after the mid-1930s, the allure of Soviet culture, and the Holocaust. But the initial years of the revolution brought resilience and adaptation by Minsk Jews, who resisted rapid assimilation and searched for ways to accommodate themselves to the demands of the communist regime. Jews in Minsk were adept at adapting themselves to the requirements of Soviet socialism, redefining their Jewish identity in ways that enabled them to be loyal Soviet citizens and lead private lives still influenced by Jewish traditions and values. In the author's words, "It was possible to participate in the system without giving full support to its values and principles, as a complex civil society continued to exist, stifled but not wiped out by the system" (7). Bemporad confirms what other historians of Soviet society in the 1920s and 1930s have noted, namely, that daily life required negotiation and that the Kremlin did not always get its way. As in so many areas of government policy, intent did not necessarily translate into deed. Like so many other Soviet citizens during the early years of communist rule, Jews in Minsk experienced sovietization in fits and starts, managing to retain elements of tradition, despite efforts of the regime to undermine it. Bemporad characterizes adherence to the laws of kashrut and circumcision as an indicator "of the evolution of Jewish practices from religious commandments to ethnic habits and the transformation of Jewish identity from a religious to an ethnic category" (144).

Becoming Soviet Jews is rich with stories that allow the reader to glimpse Minsk Jews as they struggled to come to terms with the impact of world war, revolution, civil war, and communism. Bemporad cogently analyzes the complexities of Jewish life under Soviet power for the average Shlomos and Chanas, as well as the political and cultural elite of Jewish society in Minsk. She provides fascinating nuggets of information, such as when fistfights broke out after authorities in Minsk closed synagogues, or when one parent secretly circumcised a son without the other parent's knowledge. Likewise, she explores the challenges facing Jewish revolutionaries who found their embrace of Bundism under assault as the Bolsheviks refused to countenance the existence of other political parties. She also offers a sobering account of how Jews qua Jews fared in Minsk during the purges of the 1930s. For example, she reveals that the campaign against "bourgeois nationalism" among Jews focused on former Bundists rather than those once involved with Zionism. Finally, the author devotes one chapter to the ways Jewish women experienced the revolution, particularly in terms of their roles as wives, mothers, and workers. I wonder what a comparison between the gendered experiences of Jewish women and men in Minsk and those of Muslim women and men in Central Asia might do to Bemporad's analysis of male resistance to government efforts to empower women.

Bemporad has written an exemplary book in terms of its research, analysis, and argumentation. *Becoming Soviet Jews* should be essential reading for anyone interested in the transformation of Jewish society under Lenin and Stalin and how Jewish identity became uprooted from its religious foundations yet managed to endure in the 1920s and 1930s.

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Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia. By *Thane Gustafson*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 662. \$39.95 (cloth); \$39.95 (e-book).

Seldom is the sequel as good as the original. But this is the case with *Wheel of Fortune*, the sequel to Thane Gustafson's excellent *Crisis amid Plenty: The Politics of Soviet Energy under Brezhnev and Gorbachev* (Princeton, NJ, 1989). Together the two books provide essential reading for anyone interested in the oil industry in Russia. At times *Wheel of Fortune* ranges between a "who's who" of the Russian oil industry and political elite, to a "whodunit" in relation to the dodgy dealings, conflicts, and recriminations that characterize the Russian oil patch over the last twenty years or so. However, this is a serious piece of scholarship that provides unique insight into many of the issues that have helped to shape modern Russia, such as Boris Yeltsin's notorious "loans for shares" deals that handed over state assets to the oligarchs and the "Yukos affair" that saw the imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Gustafson combines his academic credentials as professor of government at Georgetown University with his role as senior director of IHS Cambridge Energy Research Associates to provide a firsthand account of the battle for oil and power in Russia. This is not a desk project, as the 110 pages of notes evidence; the author was in the front line of much of the action that is analyzed in the text. The general contours of the history of the post-Soviet oil industry in Russia are well understood by those in the field, but the detail, the roles played by particular actors and interests, and the interplay between and within the Russian state often remained a mystery. Gustafson provides the insights necessary to understand what happened and why, and thus what might happen in the future.