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Review Of "Jewish Renaissance In The Russian Revolution" By K. B. Moss

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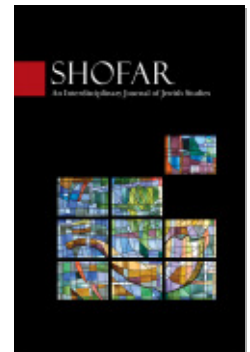
Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution (review)

Robert Weinberg

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ism? Nor does Green explain another social paradox: their close friendships with arch-conservatives, who opposed the emancipation of Britain's Jews, and Protestant conversionists. These relationships must have reflected more than just political pragmatism (p. 215). Finally, one wonders why popular enthusiasm for Montefiore was so ephemeral if his impact was global (p. 421).

Green concludes by dubbing the nineteenth century "an age of incipient globalization" (p. 135) and claims that Moses Montefiore's public endeavors were part of an "emerging Jewish solidarity" (p. 300). Especially in the context of Jewish history, this view calls for refinement. United by a common written language, responsa literature, and messianic fervor, one might argue that Jews had enjoyed varying degrees of global solidarity since the destruction of the Second Temple. Surely communal causes, like certain false messianic movements, redemption of captives, and disaster relief for Palestine, elicited global, cross-communal Jewish responses well before the nineteenth century. Perhaps, then, the question should not be about the "emergence" of solidarity in the Jewish diaspora, but rather its intensification and redefinition with the advent of the press, railroads, and religiously based volunteerism in civil society.

Aviva Ben-Ur

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Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution, by Kenneth B. Moss. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 384 pp. \$39.95.

Kenneth Moss has written an erudite and fascinating account of how the collapse of the Romanov dynasty and the establishment of Bolshevik rule in the Russian Empire provided a brief window of opportunity for the Jewish intelligentsia (culturists in Moss's terminology) to renovate Jewish culture. Between 1917 and 1921 Jewish writers and intellectuals in Ukraine and Russia, in the midst of war, social turmoil, and economic collapse, sought to carve out a Jewish niche in the world of modern culture. Along with mobilizing for political campaigns committed to liberalism, socialism, autonomism, and Zionism, the Jewish intelligentsia dedicated itself to the reconstruction of Jewish culture that would be rooted in secularism, individualism, and cosmopolitanism, and yet would represent the national aspirations of Jewish society by expressing Jewish culture in one of two languages, Hebrew and Yiddish. According to Moss, the culturists were "cultural nationalists" intent on creating a modern Jewish nation that was not necessarily defined "by some essential Jewishness." They drew upon pre-World War I ideological and aesthetic trends and "dreamed of a Hebrew- or Yiddish-language culture characterized by universality of theme and individuality of expression" (p. 5). While many culturists

were politically engaged and committed to a variety of political agendas and parties, they insisted that organized politics and culture belong to separate and autonomous realms of endeavor.

Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution explores the meaning of modernity and nationalism for East European Jewry, the largest Jewish community in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike the Jewish intelligentsia in the rest of Europe and the Ottoman Empire, who embraced the emancipatory bargain of acculturation and integration predicated on the attenuation of Jewish identity on both a collective and individual basis, Jewish culturists in the Russian Empire, conditioned by political circumstances specific to Eastern Europe, redoubled efforts to find a path to modernity devoted to the development of a particularly Jewish culture and identity that drew sustenance from prevailing aesthetic, intellectual, and artistic trends in non-Jewish society.

The bulk of the book focuses on the ways Jewish writers and intellectuals—many prominent and undoubtedly known to informed readers and others whose ideas and activities are getting their first airing in English due to Moss's mastery of materials written in Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew—conceived the new Jewish culture they believed the Russian Revolution made possible. The final two chapters explore how Jewish culturists adjusted to the demands of the revolution in both Russia and Ukraine, with many of them deciding to throw their lot in with the Bolshevik cause that seemed to promise the flourishing of a renovated Jewish culture and society. Moss argues convincingly that many aspects of Jewish culture that took shape under the imperative of Stalinism had already grown roots during the initial years of the revolution as the Kremlin tried to impose its organizational and ideological will on Jewish culturists, some of whom shared the excitement, allure, and hegemonic values of communism. The culturists' insistence on the separation of politics and artistic endeavor began to collapse well before the *velikii perelom* (the Great Turn) and the cultural revolution of the late 1920s and early 1930s, thereby paving the way for the bolshevization of Jewish culture.

Moss's research is impressive, as are his lucid and cogent analyses of the literary outpourings of the culturists he examines. *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* vividly conveys the efflorescence of Jewish intellectual and cultural life during the first quarter of the twentieth century and underscores the unbridled hopes and aspirations unleashed by the collapse of the autocracy. Moss offers astute observations on a range of subjects—nationalism, socialism, modernity, and culture—that make the book not only an obvious

choice for specialists in East European Jewry but also a recommended read for a broad and diverse readership.

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A Living Revolution: Anarchism in the Kibbutz Movement, by James Horrox. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009. 168 pp. \$17.95.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of James Horrox's slim 2009 volume *A Living Revolution: Anarchism in the Kibbutz Movement*. Given the centrality of Israel's role in the geopolitical landscape, as well as its obvious imbrications within the larger workings of the American military-industrial complex, any text that cogently highlights an alternative narrative at the heart of Israel's national ethos merits our critical attention. The fact that Horrox is able to accomplish this aim so spectacularly and vividly in so brief a treatment is testament not only to his evident mastery of the subject matter, but also to the indomitable spirit of anarchism—and in particular Jewish anarchism—he chronicles.

Largely unknown to both its inhabitants and outsiders alike, the modern state of Israel bears little resemblance to the values held by most of the early pioneers who started Jewish settlements in Palestine in the late nineteenth century. By the time the first coherent settlement communities (*kvutzot*) were developed in the early twentieth century, values of cooperation, voluntarism, agrarianism, and sustainability were already woven into the ideological fabric of these nascent systems (p. 18). Concomitantly, the working version of Zionism embraced by these pre-state pioneers devolved principally upon pacifism, anti-militarism, harmony with the land, and peaceful coexistence with the Arabic communities in the region—with little concern for the development of a nation-state (p. 27).

Up to the creation of the Israeli state in 1948, this early vision crystallized into a federated network of autonomous communities (*kibbutzim*) predicated largely upon anarchist tenets of mutual aid, direct democracy, common property, horizontal power, and a radical egalitarianism that imbued all aspects of communal life from interpersonal relationships to political economy. As Horrox details in a rich historical analysis, “the works of Kropotkin, Proudhon, Gordon, Tolstoy and Landauer were widely read and respected among the kibbutz pioneers,” and even more important, “many figures influential in shaping the direction of the movement embraced the ideas of these thinkers and actively promoted the realization of their ideology in Palestine” (p. 61). The net effect was to engender the creation of a web of organic communities