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Review Of "Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, And The Holocaust" By D. Shneer

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Review

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again, Mark refers to his subjects “writing” (151, 160–61) their life stories, when the excerpts provided almost never give a hint of such a process. But as with his mini-study of antifascism, Mark has succeeded in drawing attention to questions we need to ask about the communist experience.

As have other observers, Mark notes the slide from the focus on perpetrators and resisters to a virtual obsession with victimhood in eastern Europe. Yet he is less interested in exposing the impossibility of universal suffering than in understanding how victimhood is constructed. He shows how his interlocutors incorporate communist language to describe their victimhood, using class terminology and similar concepts of conflict. Even a familiar tale of social mobility could be turned into a narrative of victimization. Mark surely raises an eyebrow as a well-born Hungarian with connections to the regime of Miklós Horthy thus frames her path to communist-era medical school on a coveted scholarship. Yet he keeps his gaze trained on the victim frame itself, not the hypocrisy. This stands him in good stead when, in the final chapter, he turns to the stories of rape by Soviet soldiers in 1945, again looking at how stories of victimhood, survival, and collaboration intertwine with political contexts, both in the communist period and after.

Any book that ranges across so many cases and times will make a few errors. One wishes that Mark did not perpetuate the myth that communism fell in Hungary and Poland “almost entirely without popular participation” (3). The appeal of the Czech Communist Party most assuredly has not “withered” (17). Mark is not the first to mix up Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński (16), but more important, the ascent to power of their party came in 2005, not 2007 (56). These errors do not detract from the boldness of Mark’s vision. By refusing to take his subjects to task, he has reset the terms of discussion on memory and historical practice in the communist and postcommunist eras and also contributed a new perspective on the experience of communism itself. Far more than a working through of the past, *Unfinished Revolution* is one of the best books on east European communism in the last few years.

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Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust. By David Shneer. Jewish Cultures and the World. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011. xiii, 282 pp. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$39.95, hard bound.

The communist regime in the Soviet Union relied on the visual arts to legitimize itself and consolidate its rule. Along with film, graphic arts, and painting, photography in the 1920s and 1930s played a critical role in documenting the revolution and building socialism, and after 1941 took on the task of portraying the events of World War II to the Soviet public. In this handsomely produced volume, David Shneer offers a compelling and nuanced analysis of how photojournalists plied their craft as photographers of the early Soviet experience. *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* is as much about photojournalism as a profession as it is about documentation of the Holocaust and Soviet Jewish identity. The book covers a lot of territory, from the emergence of photography in the late imperial period to its coming of age as an artistic profession in the 1930s, from its role producing iconic images

of Vladimir Lenin and workers to providing readers of newspapers and periodicals with graphic images of the barbarity of the German army on Soviet territory. Photojournalists also supplied the first photographs of the death camps, offered crucial documentation of the Germans' efforts to implement the Final Solution, publicized the victory of the Soviet Union, and created a visual narrative and record of the war, the crucible that defined life for those Soviets who had the good fortune to survive. The book is replete with well-chosen, evocative photographs that Shneer analyzes in terms of content, message, technique, and artistic quality. Shneer's biographical sketches of such photographers as Arkadii Shaykhet, Semen Fridlyand, Evgenii Khaldei, Dmitrii Baltermants, and others offer insights into their artistic visions and how they helped create what we refer to as Soviet Jewish identity through their photography.

Photojournalism was the preserve of Jewish photographers. Just as virtually all violin prodigies from Odessa were Jews, so too were Soviet photojournalists, with many coming from the southern area of the Pale of Settlement. At the turn of the twentieth century, young, artistic Jews flocked to photography as a way to earn a living, just as immigrant Jews in America became the early moguls of Hollywood. This new medium lacked an entrenched power hierarchy and enjoyed relatively low cultural status, and therefore Jews encountered no legal or social obstacles to taking portraits (including those of the royal court) and supplying the burgeoning periodical press with photographs that accompanied texts. Jewish photographers also played a prominent role in the emergence of photojournalism, the visual chronicling of newsworthy events such as the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, and the civil unrest of 1917. Once the Bolsheviks came to power, photographers were called upon to employ their craft in the service of the revolution. They took pictures of the new political and intellectual elite, including an iconic shot of Lenin in 1918, used the camera to document the spread of the revolution, and depicted the ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union as part of the Kremlin's campaign to bring modernity to the far reaches of the country. In the 1930s Jewish photojournalists focused their efforts on the building of socialism, particularly among Jews who dedicated themselves to agricultural colonization in Birobidzhan and Crimea.

Shneer devotes two-thirds of the book to an examination of the work of Jewish photojournalists during World War II, a new generation of photographers who came of age after 1917. He makes a convincing case that Jewish photojournalists mediated the war for the Soviet public by documenting the events as they were unfolding. The Soviet public learned about the war's progress from the work of the photojournalists. During the initial stages, photographs chronicled the savagery of the German invaders and the tragedy occurring on Soviet territory. Photographs of the Red Army's liberation of Kerch near the Black Sea offered the world the first visual documentation of the Holocaust. Photos were also used to publicize the heroism of the Red Army, in addition to providing a motivational tool of revenge. As the war progressed and the Red Army moved west, retaking territory from the Germans, photographs prepared the reading public for victory and helped the country celebrate the end of the war. But it was not until the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras that the commemoration of the war became a cottage industry for the Kremlin and the photographs taken during the war helped create the memory of the war for the Soviet people.

Shneer lays to rest the view that the Soviet government hid from the public that the German war machine focused on the extermination of Jews. During the initial years of the war the Kremlin did not conceal that the Germans were sin-

gling out Jews for destruction. Even after the Kremlin in 1943 began to erase the Jewish dimension from the suffering experienced by the Soviet citizenry, astute readers of the press could still grasp the monumental scale of the genocide of east European Jewry. The Kremlin may have been universalizing the war experience by eliminating Jewish victimhood from the historical record, but at times, particularly after the liberation of Majdanek in the summer of 1944, the blackout on news about the Holocaust was not 100 percent. This was particularly true in publications intended for the Jewish reading public. In an especially astute discussion, Shneer analyzes the different approaches taken by Jewish writers such as Vasilii Grossman and photojournalists covering the Holocaust toward the end of the war, with the former seeking to “embed even the most particular stories into broader narratives” (197). He also notes that the first visual images of the Holocaust that reached the American and British public functioned differently from those intended for the Soviet populace. Not only did the concentration camps such as Dachau and Buchenwald liberated by the Soviet Union’s allies differ from the extermination camps further to the east, but the liberation of Europe and the defeat of the Germans carried different meanings for Soviet, American, and British photojournalists. While American and British photojournalists and their audiences at home at first expressed skepticism about the Holocaust and had to be “convinced,” the Soviet and east European public had had firsthand experience of the Germans’ barbarity since at least 1941.

Through Soviet Jewish Eyes is also concerned with the meaning of “Jewishness” for the Jewish photojournalists. Identity is a malleable component of any individual’s sense of self, and we all have multiple identities that may coexist in varying degrees of tension. Thus it is not surprising to learn from Shneer that the photojournalists approached their subjects, particularly during the Holocaust, as both Soviet citizens and Jews. But he also suggests that they created their art through the lens of what he and others call the “Jewish eye.” In other words, he asks how the photographs of Jewish agricultural colonists in Birobidzhan, socialist construction in the 1930s, and the atrocities of the killing fields of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe were affected by the Jewishness of the men taking the shots. How did the products of their creative processes differ from the photographs taken by gentiles? How did Jewish photographers bring their Jewishness to bear on their subjects?

I have no doubt that their sense of Jewish selfhood affected their work, but I found Shneer’s answers to these questions the least satisfying part of the book. At the end of the book, he is no closer to defining the artistic “Jewish eye” in concrete terms than he was at the beginning. To be fair, Shneer admits from the start that identifying the “Soviet Jewish photographic eye” (4) will be difficult given the elusiveness of the subject. His discussion of how Jewish photojournalists presented themselves as Jews during and after the war and how they interpreted their work may tell us something about their self-identification as Jews, but it does not clarify the component parts of the “Jewish eye.” The mere fact of being Jewish and taking photographs of Jewish men, women, and children sheds little light on the matter since it is not clear if and how gentiles photographing the tragedy of the Holocaust did so through the lens of the *goyishe oyg*. But this is a minor quibble with a first-rate book that is intellectually ambitious, cogently argued, and analytically sophisticated.

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