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Review Of "The Anti-Imperial Choice: The Making Of The Ukrainian Jew" By Y. Petrovsky-Shtern

Robert Weinberg

Swarthmore College, rweinbe1@swarthmore.edu

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Review

Author(s): Robert Weinberg

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The Anti-Imperial Choice: The Making of the Ukrainian Jew. By Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xv, 344 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$65.00, hard bound.

This book is an ambitious and bold attempt to reconsider the encounter between Jews and non-Jews in eastern Europe, specifically Ukraine. By examining the literary output of five Jewish writers who wrote in Ukrainian (Hryts'ko Kernerenko, Ivan Kulyk, Raisa Troianker, Leonid Pervomais'kyi, and Moisei Fishbein), Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern explores a subsection of the Jewish intelligentsia that identified with Ukrainian culture, history, and national aspirations from the late imperial era to the independent Ukraine of the 1990s. Traditional wisdom posits that Jewish intellectuals in Ukraine embraced the language and culture of Russia, but Petrovsky-Shtern demonstrates that a strong Ukrainian-Jewish identity emerged among Jews living in the colonized Ukraine of the Russian and Soviet empires.

The decision of Jewish literati to construct a Ukrainian-Jewish identity via literature, especially poetry, was historically informed and underscores a conscious choice to speak on behalf of suppressed Ukrainian national, linguistic, and cultural ambitions. In short, an emphasis on cultural relations between Jews and Ukrainians reveals the existence of Ukrainophile Jews whose creative output represents the rapprochement between two minority peoples who have been historically wary and suspicious of each other and reflexively pronounce their victimization by the other. As the author notes, the book traces, "the spiritual biographies of the Jews who considered identification with the Ukrainian national cause part of their personal spiritual quest. This integration buttressed their attempts to reconcile Jewish and Ukrainian historical narratives traditionally regarded as incompatible" (23).

Petrovsky-Shtern's findings force us to rethink the paradigm about Jewish acculturation and integration into the societies and cultures of eastern Europe. For many scholars the creation of a Ukrainian-Jewish identity seems an unlikely, if not oxymoronic, enterprise given that the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of Jews distinguished them from the rural, agrarian world of peasants. Yet there were Jews living in Ukraine who preferred to speak and write Ukrainian to Yiddish and Russian and who took up the cause of the Ukrainian nation and culture, choosing to side with what they considered the colonized oppressed. For Petrovsky-Shtern the poems and stories he examines can be read as "reflections on the colonial status of Ukraine and a plea for its national revival" (11). In other words, the writers Petrovsky-Shtern studies chose to adopt an anti-imperial stance, an unusual position for the Jews of the Russian and Soviet empires.

The Anti-Imperial Choice is an impressive piece of scholarship that benefits from exhaustive research in libraries, archives, and collections held in private hands. Petrovsky-Shtern is equally at home with literature, history, and biography. He mixes sensitive and nuanced analyses of literary texts with extensive reconstruction of the historical and biographical forces that shaped the intellectual and cultural milieus of the writers examined in the book. The book is too specialized for a general audience, but specialists in Jewish and Ukrainian history and literature will find it rewarding, as will those interested in colonial studies and postcolonial theory. Finally, the author displays a flair for writing, all the more commendable and remarkable given that English is his adopted language.

ROBERT WEINBERG
Swarthmore College

History of the Yiddish Language. By Max Weinreich. Ed. Paul Glasser. Trans. Shlomo Noble, with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman. 2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. xiv, 732 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$300.00, hard bound.

Max Weinreich's *History of the Yiddish Language* is regarded as almost sacred in Yiddish studies. This does not mean that every Yiddish scholar in the field has ever read the four-volume Yiddish edition (1973) or will now read this two-volume English edition. Especially