



**Kenneth B. Moss.** *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. x + 384 pp. Illustrations. One online resource. ISBN 978-0-674-05431-8.

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## Envisioning Jewish Culture in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1919

Kenneth Moss's *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* is a deeply interesting and engaging study, which makes a strong and valid contribution to the fields of Eastern European Jewish history and modern Jewish studies at large. As with any volume of such scope and ambition, it provokes and challenges, causing the reader to contemplate and debate with its conclusions, findings, and assumptions.

The value of Moss's book is not so much in covering new historical ground—although it does bring to the fore figures both neglected and known only to a handful of specialists—but in its focus. Moss is specifically interested in the cultural aspects of Jewish nationalist project, as it evolved and flourished during the period of 1917-19. To its proponents, both Yiddish and Hebrew, culture meant, first and foremost, highbrow literature and the arts. According to them, Jews could only become a developed *volk*, when they possessed a secular literary and artistic tradition of their own, equal in grandeur to the European ones, particularly Russian and German. Moss sets out to challenge a number of central shared assumptions about the period and the dimensions of Jewish culture in it. His criticism is directed both outward in speaking to the wider field of cultural history and inward in that it addresses Jewish cultural history in particular.

First, clearly cognizant of contemporary theory which seeks to portray cultural activity as a mere mask, epiphenomenal to more concrete interests, com-

mitments, and social conflicts (p. 12), he advocates instead a more sincere approach which tries to understand the cultural activists on their own terms, taking their values and beliefs at face value. Second, he aims to de-emphasize the role of revolution both as a social and artistic force in shaping cultural programs and models of the era, stressing instead their continuity with the late nineteenth century and World War I thinking. Third, Moss shifts the attention from the idea of modern/modernist Jewish culture as essentially renegotiating Jewish sacred texts and paradigms for secular aims to how determined a number of important Jewish cultural ideologues, again both Hebrew and Yiddish, were in calling for de-Judaizing Jewish literature and art and hoping that the only Jewish traces they would exhibit would be their language. Fourth, while Moss acknowledges that divisions between Yiddish and Hebrew intelligentsia were serious and often unbreachable, he stresses that collaboration between the two camps, within the framework of such umbrella organizations as the Yiddish Kultur-Lige and the Hebrew Tarbut, was not uncommon and was done for the sake of preserving the unity of Jewish cultural enterprise. Finally—and this is perhaps the book's main thesis—he shows that most of the writers and critics discussed here were deeply engaged in their respective political, often radical, causes and yet absolutely committed to protecting the independence of artistic visions from any narrow prescriptive programs. *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* presents and

elaborates on these five points eloquently and in detail.

One dissatisfaction that this reviewer, a literary scholar, felt with the book was its relative dearth of textual analysis. Clearly, while both literary scholars and historians of culture and ideas are invested in readings texts, they ask different questions of them. Both, however, need to engage with literature, be it a story, a novel, or a poem, on a serious level. Moss does cite poems, for instance from the Yiddish writers Dovid Hofshsteyn, or Leyb Kvitko, but leaves unexplained why Hofshsteyn's poems seemed "promising" (p. 46), or what made Kvitko's children's verse particularly "strange but cheerful" (p. 72). These omissions stand in stark contrast with Moss's detailed and often fresh examination of journalism and critical essays, or indeed his occasional analysis of poetry, such as Hofshsteyn's "Evening" (p. 200). Thus, he devotes seven pages to an analysis of Haim Nahman Bialik's seminal essay "Halakhah and Aggadah," but speaks of his poetry in very general terms. Potentially serving as test cases for theoretical pronouncements of the era, Moss's readings of Bialik and the other poets would have been particularly welcome. The relationship between manifestos and artistic works is always marked by discrepancies, revealing the near-sightedness of the former. Bialik, frustrated by how insufficient the "national" content was in his own verse (p. 207), hardly fit the bill of his own call to *halakhize* the Jewish artistic project, while those who wished to paganize Hebrew poetry, such as Saul Tchernikhovsky (pp. 122-126), would later speak both gloriously and disparagingly of the promised land.

The book's description of the crumbling and eventual demise of "new Jewish culture" under the assault of the Bolsheviks is provocative, but somewhat inconclusive. For Moss, there are clearly good and bad guys here. One can infer from his analysis that not only the Hebrew, but also the Yiddish literati seemed startled by what was expected of them in the aftermath of the Bolshevik coup. As other studies of the period suggest, the internal divisions within the Yiddishist circles seem to have been as responsible for the imposition of harsh limitations on writers and the dissolution of the Kultur-Lige as was the general post-revolutionary policy on literature. Moss himself spells it out, when he claims, "demands for the revolutionary mobilization and servitude of culture flourished among Marxist Yiddishists well beyond Bolshevik circles" (p. 290). Yet he does not mention how the notion of *fellow travelers*, which accounted for much of artistic freedom in Russian literature in the 1920s, applied to the Yiddish scene.

Moss writes, "By the time official Soviet Yiddish culture was essentially dismantled in the 1930s due to shifting party-state policy and the massive Russification of Soviet Jews, it was an unrecognizable deformation of what 'Jewish culture' had once meant" (p. 290). This statement is only partially valid, since we should recognize that there was an inherent continuity between the modernist David Bergelson of *Opgang* and the socialist-realist Bergelson of *Bam Dniepr*, or the symbolist Der Nister and the late Der Nister of *The Family Mashber*. The role of Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia during the war and its immediate aftermath needs to be taken into account as well. In this light Moss's assertion that "whether we can speak of a private sphere [in the Soviet Union] at all is debatable" (p. 291) seems itself highly debatable. The fact that in 1930s, Itzik Fefer, an "indigenous" Soviet poet, would say to Sholem Ash, "A bullet in your head, Sholem Ash, Sholem Ash" (p. 269) does not mark him as in any way different—Perets Markish and Bergelson were saying something very similar in the 1930s in Moscow as well. How that coincided with their private thoughts is another matter. Furthermore, as insightfully argued by Gennady Estraiikh, in the 1930s socialist-realist mottos found a fertile ground in Yiddish literature, for they were a continuation of *shund*—lowbrow literature of the nineteenth century, "a part of the *maskilic* drive to modernize East European Jews." [1]

There is a great deal of truth to Moss's final comparison between some of the Jewish universalistic cultural searches of 1917-19 and the Hebrew culture of the State of Israel, whose Jewish content is often reflected solely in its choice of language. The inventive comparison, however, is also anachronistic, with all the inevitable shortcomings. Another comparison, which the book does not explicitly make, seems more apt. The more this reviewer read Moss's volume, the more he realized how closely the Jewish case resembled the Russian one. The Russians too came to European cultural debates somewhat belatedly and hence always felt themselves to be inferior, trying to compensate for the "abnormality" of their nation by building great literature and arts, European in content and form. Always torn between service to the people and independent artistic calling, the Russian intelligentsia, its writers and poets, would have understood well the dichotomy and dilemmas of Bialik's "halakhah and aggadah." Russian might have ceased to play a significant role in the Jewish cultural debates of the period covered in the book, but its players essentially remained Russian thinkers to the core. Just as there was a great deal of continuity between the searches of Russian intel-

ligentsia in the nineteenth century and those of the revolutionary era, in all its uneasy manifestations, so there was one in the Jewish case. During the modernist period and beyond, Jewishness would enter serious Russian literature, often in coded and masked ways. What this coding entailed and what relationship existed between the Russian Jewish realms and the Yiddish or Hebrew ones is a fruitful direction of inquiry.

It is fitting to recall here that it was a Jew, Leyb Bronshteyn (Leon Trotsky), who wrote in 1938, in the midst of the Stalinist purges, in a letter to Andre Breton, "The unhappy Soviet press, evidently on orders from above ... reproaches Soviet artists and writers with lack of sincerity, courage and vitality. One can't believe one's eyes: the boa constrictor delivers to the rabbit a homily on independence and personal dignity. Hideous and ignoble

picture, but how worthy of our time. The struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin once again with the struggle for artistic *truth*, not in terms of any single school, but in terms of *the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self*. Without this there is no art. "You shall not lie!"—that is the formula of salvation." [2] The characters in Moss's study who would still be alive by 1938 would have, at least privately, concurred.

#### Notes

[1]. Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers's Romance with Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 145.

[2]. Paul N. Siegel, ed., *Trotsky on Literature and Art* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 124.

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