



Elissa Bemporad. *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk.* The Modern Jewish Experience Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xi + 276 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00813-8; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-00822-0; \$23.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-253-00827-5.

Reviewed by Eliyana R. Adler

Published on H-Judaic (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Minsk: Sovietization on the Jewish Street

A historian of Russian or Soviet Jewish history asked to pick a city of particular significance would probably not turn immediately to Minsk. A provincial town that could never measure up to the major Lithuanian Jewish center of Vilna during the tsarist period, Minsk was even more distant from the cultural capital in Moscow during the early Soviet years. Then, both the city and its Jewish population were devastated by the Second World War, leaving few traces of the past. Elissa Bemporad thus achieves a truly impressive feat in demonstrating that interwar Soviet Minsk not only was an important Jewish city but can also teach us a great deal about Jewish life during the two decades following the Bolshevik Revolution.

Bemporad is interested in Minsk's particularity and in using a local study to explore a relatively unknown era of Soviet and Jewish history. As she points out in the introduction, before the fall of Communism, Western scholars wrote about the Soviet period chiefly as devoted to the suppression of Jewish culture. Access to new archival sources has allowed scholars to look more closely at those assumptions, to differentiate periods, and also to trace common themes across periods. Integrating a discussion of continuities between pre-revolutionary and post-1917 life into the narrative of change, and analyzing the extent to which specific Jewish practices and beliefs persisted under the Soviets, sheds

new light on the quandaries of the Jewish response to the Bolshevik experiment (p. 6). Bemporad uses Minsk to illuminate Jewish life under the Soviets in the 1920s and 1930s.

Indeed, the most important insight of this book is that Jewish life went on and evolved under the Soviets. Each of the chapters focuses on a different aspect of Jewish life and adds nuance to the picture. After one chapter on Minsk before the revolution, there are chapters on early sovietization, the Bund, Yiddish, religion, and women. The chapters are more topical than chronological, until the final one on the Great Terror. In the chapter on Yiddish, Bemporad's careful research into schools, courts, university programs, and literary, demographic, and philological endeavors helps to demonstrate the tremendous Jewish cultural life available in Minsk in the interwar years. Perhaps even more surprisingly, the chapter on religion provides ample evidence that even while synagogues were being shut down and children penalized for missing classes on Jewish holidays, rabbis, ritual slaughterers, and an entire underground educational network thrived throughout the 1920s.

Much of what she uncovers is relevant to most of Soviet Jewry, and certainly to Jews living in the former Pale of Settlement. At the same time, Bemporad addresses peculiarities of Minsk. A recurring argument is that Minsk's high percentage of Jews, distance from Moscow,

and status as a regional capital combined to ease the quandaries of sovietization and create the circumstances that allowed for the particular development of Jewish life there. In a way, the geocultural nature of Minsk alleviated this thorny process: the city's Jewishness made the transition into Soviet society easier as it allowed for the possibility of retaining aspects of Jewish identity that might otherwise have been cast off in the acculturation process (p. 50). Bemporad also shows how the dominance of the Bund in prerevolutionary Jewish politics in Minsk had a major influence on the development of the *Evseksiia* there, extending even to the recognition and commemoration of fallen Bundist heroes.

The book is based on extensive archival research and uses frequent anecdotes and examples from committee deliberations within factories, newspaper treatments of events and individuals, and letters written to Communist bodies in addition to citations from literature, songs, and secondary scholarly work. Achieving a balance between telling the overall story and including all of the supporting facts can be tricky in books covering new territory. On the whole, Bemporad succeeds in integrating the many individual stories into the larger one. Her chapter on religion, for example, is laid out in a clear manner and closes with a thoughtful conclusion about the complexities of conformity in Soviet society. The chapter on sovietization, while full of interesting facts, does not flow as smoothly. There are also points where greater development of the conceptual framework or of particular stories would have served the narrative better than the inclusion of further details.

For example, the chapter devoted to women includes an impressive array of evidence showing both the participation of Jewish women in public life and male anxiety about that participation. Bemporad shows that religion proved to be a convenient accusation against women. "Female religious and political backwardness was therefore overstated. As the *maskilim* before them, Communist husbands could thereby always rely on the women's foil to explain their own shortcomings and rehabilitate themselves by blaming the other sex" (p. 159). Although she is certainly aware of other scholarship on gender, and refers to it briefly, this would have been an excellent opportunity to relate her own work to gender and the *Haskalah*, gender and the Soviet Union, and gen-

der and the Jewish family. In the midst of the chapter on the Bund, Bemporad mentions almost in passing that the Yiddish theater in Minsk had a different repertoire than the more famous one in Moscow. She suggests that the Minsk audience, closer to their shtetl past, had no need for nostalgic classics and was therefore more open to cutting-edge proletarian fare. This is a fascinating insight, and certainly worthy of more discussion.

For a reader conversant with the history of this part of the world, it is impossible to read about Minsk in the 1920s and early 1930s without an overwhelming awareness of the tragedies that would soon strike. Reading about the important literary experimentation and public presence of Yiddish writers like Moshe Kulbak and Izzy Kharik, it is difficult to escape the knowledge that both would fall in the purges. Similarly, the genocidal end of the Soviet Jewish experiment in Minsk is hard to ignore as the book nears the end of the 1930s. To Bemporad's great credit, she does not allow the shadow of events to come to bleed into the narrative. The final chapter is devoted to the Great Terror and the conclusion discusses the Holocaust in Minsk, but up until the end of the book the focus is entirely on the interwar period, without any hint of backshadowing.

In a book that is highly readable and brimming with novel facts and insights, Bemporad makes a convincing case that the city of Minsk provides the ideal setting for examining the Soviet Jewish experiment. Minsk emerged from relative obscurity during the tsarist period to serve as regional capital and laboratory for a variety of aspects of Soviet Jewish life in the interwar period. Bemporad's impressive research allows her to highlight radically new aspects and a great deal of continuity. She shows how Minsk was at the vanguard of Soviet Jewish culture, but also very much subject to the same pressures affecting Soviet Jews as a whole, as well as other national groups. The fact that certain areas could have been developed further only highlights how new and important this study is. Bemporad's work will undoubtedly serve as an inspiration to other scholars of the Soviet and Soviet Jewish past. It will also be of immediate use to those of us who teach about this period. *Becoming Soviet Jews* is a rich and engaging portrayal of a previously overlooked period and place.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Eliyana R. Adler. Review of Bemporad, Elissa, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39835>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.