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Cecile Esther Kuznitz. *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 324 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01420-6.

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Yiddish on the Frontiers of Science

Early in Cecile Esther Kuznitzâs new book, we meet the high school teacher Aron Mark, a resident of the interwar city of Vilna/Wilno/Vilnius.[1] A labor activist, journalist, and grassroots intellectual, Mark was, above all, an enthusiast for Yiddish culture and language: he wrote for Yiddish newspapers, taught in a Yiddish-language gymnasium, and translated contemporary European literature into the first language of millions of Jews around the world. Mark and others like him were precisely the constituency targeted by the Yiddish Scientific Institute upon its founding in 1925âthe vanguard of a modern, secular Yiddish culture. Meanwhile, Markâs own enthusiasm for YIVO (as the institute was familiarly known) was eloquently captured in the name he and his wife chose for their first-born son, Yivo Mark (Yivele for short).[2]

In a footnote, we learn that Yivele and most of his family were killed in the Ponary Forest in World War II. As with any treatment of east European Jewry on the eve of the Holocaust, a sense of impending tragedy is difficult to repress while reading, for example, of Markâs optimistic hopes for Yiddish culture. However, Kuznitzâs well-written, meticulously researched, and richly detailed book, focusing on YIVOâs founding, achievements, and travails up to the outbreak of the war, is in this respect a model for historians of a period defined by discontinuity. Drawing on YIVOâs institutional archives, including a large cache of materials previously thought lost but recently recovered in Vilna, Kuznitz writes a non-teleological history, refusing to let the Holocaust overshadow her narrative.[3]

In particular, Kuznitz vividly captures the precarious contingencies of institution-building in an impoverished semi-periphery: the devil here is very much in the nitty-gritty details of fundraising, budgets, and internal politicking in the period 1925-39. Kuznitzâs reconstruction of these logistical challenges brings YIVO alive as a functioning institution, tacking against tendencies (criticized already by YIVO director Max Weinreich in the 1930s) toward mythologization. Yet the way the book positions YIVO against a broader historical canvas is less persuasive. YIVOâs story is told in terms of a kind of Yiddish ex-

ceptionalism, of a Jewish diaspora nationalism that does not conform to other histories of east European nationalism. However, the evidence presented raises more questions in this regard than it answers, suggesting, indeed, the many ways in which YIVO's story partakes of and illuminates larger trends in the history of science and society in this period.

Diaspora nationalism, which arose in the late nineteenth century, opposed two polar extremes of Jewish responses to modernity: linguistic and cultural assimilation, on the one hand, and Zionism/Hebraism, on the other. By contrast to Zionists, diaspora nationalists advocated *doikeyt* (hereness): the development of Jewish national life in the countries where Jews were then settled and the cultivation not of Hebrew, but of Yiddish, the language used by eleven million Jews in their everyday lives, as the national tongue. But as a stateless nation, Jews had no academies, universities, or national theaters that could elevate Yiddish to the level of standardization and development considered necessary for a modern national culture to thrive. YIVO, ambitiously, was meant to fill this gap. Initially conceived as a philological institute, it quickly evolved into a multipurpose scientific institute with sections on history, the social sciences, and pedagogyâall conducted in Yiddish. Some foresaw the day when YIVO would become a fully-fledged Yiddish-language university.

As Kuznitz shows, YIVOâs supporters faced extraordinary obstacles, in realizing even their most modest visions. When the earliest programs for a Yiddish institute were formulated before World War I, even many committed Yiddishists viewed them as hopelessly unrealistic; it was only the turmoil of war and revolution and the collapse of empires that made YIVO seem not just desirable but attainable. Financial problems, moreover, plagued YIVO throughout the interwar period. Initially, supporters had hopedâin vain, it turned outâfor backing by wealthy philanthropists in Germany or America (âwhere can one find a Jewish Carnegie or a Rockefeller for our YIVO?â the historian Simon Dubnow lamented in 1935) (p. 197). Ultimately, YIVO came to rely on funding from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, but an early injection of support from eastern Europe helped the institute get off the ground.

This last detail, as Kuznitz suggests, is crucial for understanding YIVOâs evolution as an institution firmly rooted in eastern Europe, despite its cosmopolitan and transnational roots. The countless small contributions that YIVO received from east European Jewsâwhether from communal organizations like the Warsaw-based Central Yiddish Schools Organization (TSYSHO) or from individual supportersâmade the difference. In 1927, Vilna, rather than Berlin as originally planned, was chosen as YIVOâs central headquarters, signaling an eastern orientation that was more a matter of necessity than design.

This orientation shaped YIVOâs character in important ways. For one thing, what YIVO lacked in financial security it gained in an energized and highly politicized base. Kuznitz conveys the tremendous (and often contradictory) expectations held by YIVOâs supporters, ranging from those who saw its new headquarters in Vilna as an awe-inspiring secular templeâthe âcapitol of Yiddishlandââto those who insisted YIVO join the struggle for workersâ revolution. The institute attempted to steer a middle course, Kuznitz shows, between high-level scholarship and its stated goal of âserving the Yiddish masses in their fight for their cultural emancipation.â This did not keep some critics, however, from complaining that YIVOâs work was âtoo abstract and cut off from the massesâ (p. 142). YIVO waged a similarly thankless struggle to navigate the scylla of Zionism and charybdis of socialism: it was attacked for its âanti-Zionistâ stance by some and its âreactionary petit bourgeoisâ culture by others (pp. 142-143).

The bookâs narrative follows YIVOâs ups and downs throughout the thirties, from near bankruptcy in the early 1930s to its emergence on a more stable footing in mid-decade, with a much-admired building on Wiwulski Street in Vilna, innovative work in its sections, and an active *aspirantur* (graduate studies) program. In an epilogue, Kuznitz concisely reviews scholarsâ Herculean efforts to preserve YIVOâs collections during World War II, the instituteâs postwar regrouping in New York City, and the evolution of its mission in the wake of the Holocaust.

Kuznitz concludes by evaluating YIVOâs legacy and achievements during what Weinreich called that âlegendary golden timeâ before the large-scale destruction of Yiddish-speaking Jewry. On the one hand, she argues that YIVOâs symbolic importance always outstripped âthe less exalted reality of its day-to-day existenceâ: perpetually short-staffed and underfunded, YIVOâs outreach among Yiddish speakers was negligible compared to that of the regular Yiddish press, for instance. But although YIVO was âunable to realize the vision of a stable, ramified culture in the Yiddish language,â Kuznitz concludes that it offered a persuasive model of âscholarship … as a powerful tool for negotiating the challenges of moderni-

tyâ (pp. 190-191, 197-198).

How this model may have related to any of the others simultaneously on offer, however, is not a question Kuznitz proposes to answer. Indeed, the book's most serious flaw is to tell us so little about the contextsâpolitical, intellectual, or culturalâwithin which YIVO operated. To begin with one fairly obvious example, there is almost no sense here that YIVO formed part of the scientific or political landscape of the Polish Second Republic, despite many hints of YIVOâs embeddedness in a complex ecosystem highly dependent on the new state. This ranged from the instituteâs symbiotic relationship with Yiddish state schools to the seemingly remarkable fact (which Kuznitz mentions in passing) that part of YIVOâs budget was initially made up of subventions from Polish municipalities. (That these subventions later dried up is surely another significant datum point.) To put it another way, YIVOâs history is, at least in part, a specifically post-Versailles story: it suggests the way the independent states of eastern Europe created new opportunities for culture and science, even as they presented new pitfalls and dangers (not through the âscientificâ classification of populations).

Kuznitz likewise neglects opportunities to relate YIVO to other trends in the history of science. In the case of the fascinating phenomenon of *zamlen*, for instanceâthe collection of materials by amateurs at the local levelâKuznitz suggests rather than asserts that this was a unique feature of YIVOâs scientific practice. Yet recent scholarship has highlighted amateur data collection as an essential feature in the development of modern scientific disciplines ranging from ethnography to seismology.[4] More broadly, YIVOâs goal of an engaged scholarship âclose to the peopleâ was shared by many nationalists on Europeâs peripheries. The Finnish Literature Society, for instance, solicited ethnographic and literary materials from ordinary, often self-educated enthusiastsâ*zamlers* by another name.[5] The Polish sociologists who first introduced memoir competitionsâa method YIVO used in its youth competitions of the 1930sâwere motivated by similar visions of a participatory and socially transformative scholarship.[6] The study circles for young workers in which Emanuel Ringelblum taught history had much in common with peasantsâ and workersâ universities operating throughout Poland and elsewhere in Europe.[7] Only if we understand YIVO as reflecting and contributing to these larger trends can we understand what, if anything, was truly innovative about its approach or appreciate the tremendous range of influences that fertilized Yiddish intellectual and cultural life in this period.

Finally and relatedly, Kuznitz raises unanswered (and admittedly, perhaps unanswerable) questions about the nature of Jewish life in the diaspora. In the bookâs geographical imaginary, YIVO was a pillar of Jewish Vilna (the âJerusalem of the Northâ) and/or the capital of a nonterritorially specific Yiddishland. Yet the question of how Jewish and non-Jewish geographical, cultural, and/or linguistic spaces interpenetrated is not problematized. This is a pity, both because it was one that preoccupied many of YIVOâs scholars and because it was of immediate relevance to YIVOâs rank-and-file members in their everyday lives.

A failure to engage with these questions weakens Kuznitzâs assertion that YIVOâs historyâin particular, the active, grassroots participation by enthusiasts like Markâis irreconcilable with the hypotheses of elite-led nationalism (Miroslav Hroch) or national indifference (Tara Zahra) that dominate the historiography on nationalism in eastern Europe. However, the fact that YIVO had widespread support among ordinary Jews is hardly incompatible with the possibility that many (or even most) Yiddish speakers adopted a âfluid and pragmatic attitude toward language loyalty,â just like most Czechs or Germans (p. 7). As the memoirs of Jewish youth gathered by YIVO in the 1930s suggest, and as YIVOâs own scholars recognized, the cultural and linguistic identities of east European Jews were complex and becoming ever more so.[8] Perhaps what distinguished diaspora nationalism from other nationalist movements was not so much its participatory nature, but the way it acknowledged precisely the possibilityâand even necessityâof such hybrid identities.

Notes

[1]. In keeping with the reviewâs focus on a Yiddish-language institution, I use the cityâs Yiddish name, Vilna, instead of Wilno (Polish) or Vilnius (Lithuanian).

[2]. YIVO is an acronym for Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut.

[3]. On the Vilna Collections, see `https://vilnacollections.yivo.org/Story`.

[4]. See, e.g., Deborah R. Coen, *The Earthquake Observers: Disaster Science from Lisbon to Richter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 31.

[5]. Kaisa Kauranen, âDid Writing Lead to Social Mo-

bility? Case Studies of Ordinary Writers in Nineteenth-Century Finland,â in *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and Early 20th-Century Europe*, ed. Martyn Lyons (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 51-68.

[6]. Katherine Lebow, âThe Conscience of the Skin: Interwar Polish Autobiography and Social Rights,â *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3, no. 3 (2012): 297-319.

[7]. See, e.g., Feliks Gross, *The Polish Worker: A Study of a Social Stratum* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1945).

[8]. See Alina CaÅa, ed., *Ostatnie pokolenie: Autobiografie polskiej mÅodzieÅ¼y Å¼ydowskiej okresu miÄdzywojennego ze zbiorÃ³w YIVO Institute for Jewish Research w Nowym Jorku* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2003); and Jeffrey Shandler, ed. *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven: YIVO and Yale University Press, 2002).

Editor's note: Due to an editing error, this review was published prematurely. The current version reflects corrections to the originally published version.

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