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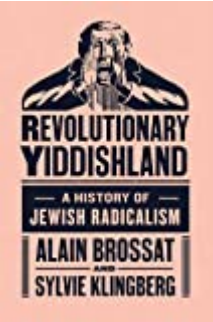

Alain Brossat, Sylvie Klingberg. *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism.* Translated by David Fernbach. London: Verso, 2016. 320 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78478-606-9; $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-78478-607-6.

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Commissioned by Katja Vehlow (University of South Carolina)

One of the recurring characters in the narrative of *Revolutionary Yiddishland* is Adam Paszt, a peripatetic Eastern European Jewish Communist. The book takes up his story in the latter half of the 1930s, when Paszt had volunteered for the International Brigade in Spain. It was in Spain that underhanded Soviet machinations began to contribute to a slow souring of his views of the USSR. After fighting in Spain, he was interned in a prison camp in France with other *Brigadistas* where he continued the struggle for his idiosyncratic interpretation of Communism. He escaped shortly after the Nazi invasion of France but was recaptured and sent to a labor camp in the Atlas Mountains in French Algeria. In this camp he again worked to establish Communist cells, until he was freed in 1943 after the Allied invasion of Algeria. Taking the advice of a visiting Soviet delegation, Paszt left for the USSR, traveling through Tunisia, Egypt, British Palestine and Jordan, and Iraq and Iran. During his brief time in Palestine he serendipitously met with a long-lost sister who urged him to stay, but to no avail. He sailed across the Caspian Sea in 1943. Arriving in the USSR, he soon became disillusioned; evidence of repression was blatant and corrupt black-market dealings soured his romantic notions about the Socialist fatherland. By 1945, Paszt was working in the Polish diplomatic service, as military attachÃ© to the embassy in London. Furloughs back to Poland in the later 1940s deepened his sense of despair. He later moved to Israel, but remained chary about the less-than-perfect utopias of the twentieth century; Mizrachi-Ashkenazi tensions reminded him of antisemitism in Poland, religious obscurantism repelled him, and he despaired at the gulf between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Pasztâs life trajectory highlights many of the themes explored in *Revolutionary Yiddishland.* He was part of a Jewish diaspora, but of an unconventional sort: the dispersion of Jewish Communists, Socialists, Bundists, and hard-left Zionists forced out of various East European countries (the eponymous *Yiddishland*). Now stateless, they found a type of solace in their extant internationalist politics. Many of them fought in Spain and many of them became deeply disillusioned with the Soviet Union after Spain. After 1948, many of this *Yiddishland* diaspora ended up in Israel, some reluctantly, others less so; it is in Israel that Alain Brossat and Sylvie Klingberg interviewed them.

Revolutionary Yiddishland is a spirited and politically engaged study of the lives and ideas of mid-twentieth-century Jewish revolutionaries, with the authors being

very open about their own political sympathies. At the heart of the book are a series of oral interviews carried out in the early 1980s by Brossat, a philosopher, and Klingberg, a sociologist and member of the now-defunct Israeli socialist organization Matzpen. *Revolutionary Yiddishland* was originally published in France in 1983 and is here translated into English for the first time. Much of the claims made in the bookâthat Jews were a people apart in late nineteenth-century Europe, that the Bund have been erased from an Israeli-centric Jewish history of the latter half of the twentieth centuryâwould hardly be taken seriously today (and perhaps would not have passed much muster when *Revolutionary Yiddishland* was first written). The true value of the book, though, is in the richness of the oral interviews and the fresh ground-level perspective they offer on the leftist Jewish milieux of the interwar years.

Brossat and Klingberg are conscious of the problems inhering in their oral history approach, recognizing that their interviewees may, intentionally or not, misremember key elements of their own past: âAt twenty, thirty, forty or even fifty yearsâ remove, the memory of dates and facts may be uncertain, certain memories that are painful to recall are bowdlerized. Some of them are unduly modest; others tend to strike a pose. Sometimes, also, the witnesses reinterpret their memories and past acts in the light of their later convictions. These are the risks of oral history. But one thing is certain; the motif, the insistent melody that steadily emerges from the mosaic of these testimonies, speaks the integral truth of this historyâ (p. 22). And despite the title, they focus on Yugoslavia and Spain (neither of which are known for their Yiddish-speaking communities) as well as France and Palestine, following their informants to wherever they went, and following their own interests in Jewish radicalism across Europe.

The narrative moves from childhood, through their informantsâ enlistment into the revolutionary movement. The majority of the interviewees came from relatively similar Yiddish-speaking backgrounds in the former Pale of Settlement, a world that was being ruptured by industrialization and capitalist modernity. Several of Brossat and Klingbergâs interviewees display a clear nostalgia about this world. Ideological divisions within individual families was a leitmotif in memoirs. Yet Brossat and Klingberg also claim that family ties remained strong, which they ascribe to the survival of traditional social values. This leads the authors to a complex and worthwhile description of this Jewish experience of capitalist modernity: âthe transition from the closed world of tradition to the open world of modernity is not expressed in terms of violent rupture, rather of evolution, reconciliation between what embodies the deep identity of Judaism and the rationalist, enlightened aspiration for the promotion of a more just and humane worldâ (p. 47).

Their chapter on the Spanish Civil War is perhaps the highlight of the book, presenting the war as a turning point in twentieth-century Jewish history and a key moment in the ideological development of their interviewees. For sure there are still problems here. Brossat and Klingberg talk about the Jewish volunteers in Spain as âYiddish craftsmen born to a spirit of revolt and struggleâ and say that they had been âradicalized and made ready for revolutionary actionâ by interwar politics (p. 100). This is overly romantic and does little to explain all those products of a *Yiddishkeit* sensibility who never even considered going to Spain, in other words, the vast majority of the residents of *Yiddishland*. Though Brossat and Klingberg are surely on more solid ground when they argue that the approximately six thousand Jewish International Brigade volunteers (out of a total of thirty-five thousand to fifty thousand) were motivated to fight fascism both by universalist socialism and by particularly Jewish concerns (pp. 102-103). The accounts of those who fought in Spain are of great historical interest. The authors also uncover some fascinating anecdotal evidence from the Jewish experience of fighting in Spain, not least the Palestinian Arab who was reportedly sent to the Polish Dombrowski Brigade because he could speak Yiddish and another because he had a command of Hebrew.

Later chapters recount the experiences of Jewish partisan fighters in France particularly but also across the continentâthe authors see their analysis of Jewish resistance fighters as a counterpoint to the standard Jewish image that has emerged from the war, that of victims of the Holocaustâand the experience of Jews in the Soviet Union after 1945. Radical militancy and despondent realizations about the failures of the Socialism in One Country experiment recur throughout these accounts. Out of step with the rest of the book, the chapter on the Soviet Union, post-1945, is based almost completely on secondary literature and breaks little new ground, though their observation that Jews were also prevalent among the several various enemies of Bolshevismâliberal cadets, anarchists, Mensheviks, Socialist revolutionariesâis well made.

Brossat and Klingberg end with an extended *discursus* on the contemporary (1980s) politics of Israel-Palestine

and show how it relates to their own study of mid-century Jewish radicalism; they end as they proceeded, with latter-day politics informing their analysis of the past. At an earlier point in the book, Brossat and Klingberg criticize historicist interpretations of the Bund that condemn their naivetÃ© about antisemitism and for not foreseeing the Holocaust; they strongly argue against understanding the past in terms of future events. Yet it is not clear that they are not committing the same historicist sins here. Nonetheless, the oral interviews utilized in *Revolutionary Yiddishland* are still a rich source for Jewish social history and for the history of the subalterns of the Jewish left in the twentieth history.

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