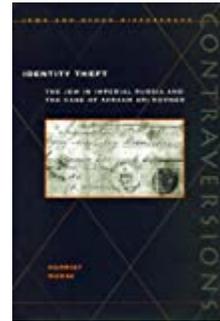




Harriet Murav. *Identity Theft: The Jew in Imperial Russia and the Case of Avraam Uri Kovner.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003. xiii + 244 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3290-1.



Reviewed by Michael C. Hickey (Department of History, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-Russia (June, 2004)

Acculturation and the Maskalic Confidence Man

Harriet Murav's brief, challenging volume uses Avraam Uri Kovner (1842-1909) to examine an alternative model of Jewish acculturation in tsarist Russia. Kovner, a self-made (and re-made) Jewish nihilist and literary figure, now is known mostly for his correspondence with Dostoevsky. Less well remembered are Kovner's efforts as a Russian-language journalist, critic, memoirist, and novelist. To his contemporaries, however—Jews and non-Jews—Kovner was best known for a highly publicized case of forgery and bank fraud, followed by a melodramatic chase and arrest in April 1875.

Murav's book is primarily literary and cultural criticism, although the author has a firm grasp of historical literature on Jews in late Imperial Russia. Kovner lends himself quite naturally to "post-modern" analysis: he was a shape shifter, a chameleon, who took on different names, tongues, cultural identities, and confessional affiliations in an effort to make of himself a man "without a label." Devoted to fundamental universalistic principles of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), he was deeply suspicious of all universalism. Supremely and arrogantly self-confident, he could not sustain a stable identity. Mu-

rav uses an eclectic mix of theoretic constructs to get at Kovner; in particular, she employs Bakhtin's dialogical approach and Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theory.

Murav weaves a complex argument. She holds that Kovner took up and shed elements of Russian and Jewish identity, adjusting them to suit his aim and his audience of the moment. His acculturation into Russian society is perhaps best understood as an attempt to create a cultural hybrid that transformed both its Jewish and its Russian elements. Kovner ultimately failed to gain acceptance in either world—Jews spurned him as a heretic, criminal, and convert to Christianity; Russians rejected him as a Jew, whose body and voice would always carry the mark of his difference. This reflected fundamental Russian insecurity over what it meant to be Russian. Russians, uncertain of their own modernity and civilization and of their own relationship to Europe and Asia, defined Jews in terms of differences that confirmed their own relative superiority. For Murav, Kovner's work—both literary and performative (and the two are inseparable)—reveals this complex colonial relationship between Russian and Jewish culture. Rooted in mimicry and "dialogical interac-

tion,” Kovner’s fictive life and acts of identity theft—be it his attempt to write in Russian as a Russian, his conversion to Russian Orthodox Christianity, his commission of criminal forgery, or his provocative correspondence with Dostoevsky and with philosopher Vasilii Rozanov—effectively destabilized both sets of cultural identities.

Murav’s first four chapters examine Kovner’s life and careers before his 1875 crime. Chapter 1 discusses Kovner’s family childhood in Vilna, his rather “traditional” Jewish education, his youthful attraction to the universalizing ideals of the *maskilim* (proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment), and his “escape” from the Pale of Settlement into Russia’s interior. When in the early 1860s Kovner first picked up a pen, he cast himself as a young *maskal*. Chapter 2 discusses Kovner’s encounter and absorption with nihilism in the mid- and late 1860s and his Hebrew and Russian-language literary and journalistic efforts during this period. Cast by the Hebrew press in the role of a dangerous nihilist, Kovner actually found in the work of Pisarev a guide to a new literary identity—an ironic voice that used both Russian and Hebrew and that challenged “the unitary authorship of the self and text” (p. 58). Chapter 3 examines Kovner’s role-playing as a Russian literary figure and analyzes his 1872 novel *Without a Label*. Kovner’s fiction breaks up stereotypical aspects of Jewish identity and distributes them among characters who are not Jews. Murav argues that this “responds to the double crime of the acculturating Jew (being a Jew and trying to conceal it) by challenging the model of totalized and essential identity on which the perceived criminality rests” (p. 82). Chapter 4 discusses Kovner’s brief incarnation as a Russian-language journalist and the feuilletons he penned for the newspaper *Golos* in 1872-73. Murav argues that these provided Kovner a means of “inserting himself into the nascent Russian public space of the time” (p. 83). Kovner’s ironic voice questioned Russia’s status as a western, civilized country. His most frequent target was Russia’s new, “chameleon-like” entrepreneurial element. For Murav, these essays functioned to deflect stereotypical criticism of Jews and expose fundamental Russian cultural insecurity; critical to this task was Kovner’s own chameleon-like capacity to take a Russian voice.

Kovner’s infamous 1875 crime takes center stage in chapter 5. Murav begins by pointing out that Kovner’s bank fraud had no particularly “Jewish” features—crimes of this sort committed by non-Jews had received considerable publicity. Nonetheless, the Russian press depicted white-collar crime as a “Jewish” vice. The press had a feeding frenzy with Kovner’s attempt to defraud

his employers (the Jewish-run St. Petersburg Discount Lending Bank), his flight across western Russia with his new bride, and the *skandal* that accompanied his arrest in Kiev. Murav argues that, by depicting Kovner as a Jewish criminal, the press “temporarily suspended his attempt to invent himself” (p. 122). This cast Kovner as a duplicitous fraud, a Jew whose “essential characteristics” denied him the ability to acculturate. Murav dwells at some length on Kovner’s “imposturous personality,” a concept borrowed from 1950s-vintage psychoanalytical theory, which she manages to meld with Bakhtin, Bhabha, and Benedict Anderson. Acculturation in the Russian colonial context required that Jews act as imposters, taking on Russian language and culture in a way that fundamentally challenged the authenticity of Russian claims to cultural distinctness and superiority. Again, the fragility of Jewish identity acted as a mirror of the fragility of Russian national identity.

The remainder of the book examines Kovner’s various assumed selves between his 1875 conviction and his death in 1909. In chapter 6, Murav interprets the well-known Kovner-Dostoevsky correspondence of 1877-78 as Bakhtinian dialogical theater. She argues that Kovner used these letters to implicate a willing Dostoevsky as his literary father—yet again, Kovner re-created himself, this time as a character from the novelist’s fiction. In return, Dostoevsky implicated a willing Kovner in his own fraud—denial of his own Judeophobia. Chapter 7 discusses Kovner’s 1901-1903 correspondence with philosopher Vasilii Rozanov, which Murav describes as a “flirtation.” In the 1880s, Kovner had recreated himself yet again, as a Russian Orthodox “apologist” for Jews; he initiated contact with Rozanov by criticizing the latter’s portrayal of Jewish sexuality. Rozanov hoped to extract from Kovner intimate details of his own sex life, to prove his theories regarding Jews’ reputed primal sexual vitality; Kovner used the opportunity to play Casanova, emphasizing his own erotic adventures in a manner that, according to Murav, feminized Rozanov, thus turning on its head Rozanov’s implicit feminization of Jews.

Although technically this book has only seven chapters, the 26-page conclusion in fact contains another chapter, on the relationship between Kovner’s later writings and the trope of the “return” to the Jewish community common to Russian-Jewish literature after the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. Murav argues that after Kishinev, Kovner could no longer indulge in self-invention. Instead of “leading him back” to Jewish culture or to Zionism, the pogrom reinforced Kovner’s commitment to acculturation. He railed against Russian anti-Semitism and de-

fended Jews' rights to civil equality, but did so from "the borderlines of Russianness and Jewishness" as "not only a non-Jewish Jew, but a non-Christian Russian-Orthodox Russian" (p. 176).

This leads Murav to one of her main conclusions, which adds Walter Benjamin to the mix of her theoretical influences. Kovner's model of assimilation, Murav concludes, was a translation project directed towards transforming both cultures. Kovner's life was a series of performances and literary fictions that employed mimicry, irony, inversion, attempts at intercession, and even crime to free him from the constraints of the Jewish world by forcing the transformation of the Russian world. Murav concludes that Kovner offers an alternative model of acculturation as dialogical cultural hybrid, and notes that this was neither unique nor a dead end. It faced a Russia that was ambivalent to Jews at its best (and violently hostile at its worst), and that needed to define Jews as a colonized Other to compensate for Russian cultural insecurity.

I found Murav's arguments compelling but not always convincing, often because I considered the evidence presented rather thin. In chapter 5, for instance, Murav makes some sweeping generalizations about Russian press coverage of Kovner's fraud trial on the basis of only two accounts, one of which was written by a feuilletonist, not a reporter. Murav elsewhere distinguishes between the two journalistic forms, but when generalizing about press coverage she repeatedly refers to the feuilletonist "Gamma" as a reporter. Moreover, her narra-

tive of Kovner's crime and trial draws from these same two sources, and I was left wondering if there are no extant archival records of Kovner's prosecution. Unfortunately, at no point in the text (or notes) does Murav answer this question. Chapter 7, on Kovner's "flirtation" with Rozanov, presents the book's only "new" documentary material. If I read Murav correctly, her main argument rests on the claim that by breaking a promise to his wife and bragging to Rozanov about the narcissistic nature of his sexual conquests, Kovner was indulging in adulterous homoeroticism. I would have been more thoroughly convinced had Murav delved more deeply into the textual elements of Kovner's letters that reveal this "flirtation." Also, while Murav makes good use of historians' works to discuss aspects of Jewish life in late imperial Russia, the book contains some rather odd gaps on matters that must have shaped Kovner's story. These include the absence of the 1905 Revolution from the text; one wonders in particular how the Revolution influenced Kovner's later correspondence with Rozanov (which continued into 1907).

In sum, Harriet Murav has written a very interesting interpretative analysis of an intriguing marginal figure in Russian and Russian-Jewish cultural history and raises some stimulating arguments about possible models of acculturation. The book will probably prove of greater interest to literary scholars and to those wrestling with Dostoevsky and Rozanov than it will to historians, but it deserves attention of anyone engaged in the study of Russian-Jewish history in the late imperial era.

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

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

Citation: Michael C. Hickey. Review of Muraev, Harriet, *Identity Theft: The Jew in Imperial Russia and the Case of Avraam Uri Kovner*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9518>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.