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THE JEWS OF THE SOVIET UNION

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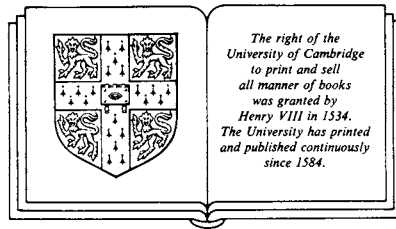
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THE JEWS OF THE SOVIET UNION

The History of a National Minority

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Introduction

The study of the history of the Jews of the Soviet Union has made considerable progress in the last thirty years. The subject has been treated from new angles, using new methods of research, and central issues have been tackled that were previously almost completely ignored. Nevertheless, the results have been patchy and we still lack even the raw materials for a definitive history of the Soviet Jewry.

The aim of the present book is modest: to present the successive stages in the annals of Soviet Jews since the outbreak of the October Revolution. There will be little descriptive writing, only essential quotations, and a pre-defined set of central themes.

As early as 1891, Shimon Dubnov, the most influential historian of East European Jewry, asked, 'Is there a historiography of the Jews of Russia?' and replied without qualification, 'No such historiography exists in the true sense of the word.'¹ He may have been right, and the general and specialized works on Russian Jewry that began appearing early in the nineteenth century were of little help in the historiography of Russian Jews towards the end of the century. This writing reached its peak, in quantity and quality, between 1900 and 1917.

Interest in the history of Russian Jewry was first aroused in the 1870s by the publication of a two-volume collection of articles by a young Jewish jurist, I. Orshansky.² Orshansky did not have much historical material at his disposal³ but he strove to apply methods of comparative historical research in 'placing' the legal and economic status of Russian Jews as regards that of Jews in other countries. Orshansky rejected the apologetics common to most Jewish publicistic writing in Russian at that time. He concentrated on research into the whole body of legislation on Jewish matters, basing his work on facts and striving for objectivity.⁴

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A key figure in the legal school of history-writing in the 1880s was Sergei Bershadsky, a pupil of Leontovich and Gradovsky.⁵ Bershadsky worked on numerous documents concerning Lithuanian Jewry in the state archives of Poland and Russia. His publications on the history of the Jews of Lithuania and Russia were the basis of the historiography of Russian Jewry at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the legal material collected by Bershadsky mainly concerned the relations of the Jews with the outside world and the attitude of the administration towards them, the unique internal community life of the Jews was ignored.

The second historical school, which could be termed archaeological in its search for origins, is represented by the pioneer studies on the Khazar Empire by A. Harkavy and his original approach to the earlier language of the Russian Jews.⁶ His 1865 study gave rise to academic disputes, but stimulated research in this difficult field.⁷

The first historian to attempt to provide a complete history of the Russian Jews was Gessen. His publications – seventy-five between 1900 and 1917⁸ – on a wide range of subjects covered virtually all aspects of the life of Russian Jewry from the first settlement in the Princedom of Kiev to the 1890s.⁹ His work on the publication of the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* in Russia (between 1908 and 1913) and his help in establishing the Ethnographic–Historical Society made Gessen the central link in the chain connecting early research into ‘external’ legal–political history with later more comprehensive social, economic and cultural research.

Gessen came under heavy fire when Dubnov reviewed his book¹⁰ and has remained so. He is still being criticized for his one-sidedness, for his apologetics and for his ignorance of the internal community life of the Russian Jews.¹¹ These criticisms are only partly justified. It is not accurate to say that Gessen used only official Russian sources, since his source material included extensive literature that cannot be considered official, both in Russian and in other languages. The main deficiency in his sources lay in his failure to use archive material in Hebrew and Yiddish. While there are mistakes in Gessen’s writing, it is going too far to speak of ‘superficiality’ and ‘distortions’.

The central criticism of Gessen’s one-sidedness and ‘external’ approach, voiced by Dubnov and others, is that his books constitute ‘a chapter of Russian history concerned with the Jews’, and not Jewish history. Was Gessen really no more than ‘an expert on the history of the Jewish question in Russia’? A more just evaluation would be that

although Gessen's writings need supplementing and updating they remain among the best basic books on the history of Russian Jews from 1772 to 1882.

We come now to Dubnov himself, the greatest Russian-Jewish and 'general-Jewish' historian since Graetz.¹² The development of Russian-Jewish historiography is unthinkable without Dubnov's work. His contribution is not confined to 'pure' research, to the publication of many articles and the creation of a school of Jewish historiography based on the history of Jewish autonomy; nor even to his new methodology in Jewish historical study. It also encompasses years of collecting and publishing extensive source-material, establishing the Ethnographical-Historical Society and founding the historical periodical, *Evreiskaya starina*. Around Dubnov were gathered the finest Jewish historians of Eastern Europe.

One aspect of Dubnov's work that requires elucidation is the contrast between the considerable attention given to the Jews of Poland and Russia in his *History of the Jewish People*, and the much briefer mention of them by Jost and Graetz, the two 'general-Jewish' historians who preceded him. Concerning Jost, writing in the 1820s, the 'lack of sources' argument is perhaps applicable; but it is less convincing in the case of Graetz, writing thirty to fifty years later. Dubnov himself dealt with this question in his article, 'Graetz: Historian of the Jewish People',¹³ noting that Graetz was considered suspect in Russia, both because he allotted little space to that country's Jews and because he ignored the Jewish 'Enlightenment' in Russia. Dubnov contended that Graetz did all the research he could on Polish Jewry, but less than he might have done on Russian Jewry. Dubnov thus appears to agree with the prevailing opinion that Graetz's attitude towards Russian Jewry was prejudiced, possibly even contemptuous.¹⁴

How far was Dubnov's writing on Russian Jewry affected by his views on autonomy and the historic Jewish centres, his sociological method and his desire to free himself from the metaphysics and mystique of Jewish history? He sought to free himself from all the main conceptions and preconceptions of his predecessors. He rejected the view of Jewish history as the history of the Jewish religion only, to the exclusion of the secular, national element. He turned away from the formless eclecticism of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ('Science of Judaism'), which dealt with Jewish cultural and intellectual life on the one hand and on the other dwelt on the millenary annals of Jewish mar-

tyrology, suffering and affliction. He found the legal-external approach formalistic and inadequate. He sought a historical theme that would bind the data together and explain Jewish historical developments satisfactorily, but he only partially succeeded.

Dubnov's central theme was the Jewish community, with Jewish self-rule as the dominant factor in the life of the Jews in the Diaspora. Around this he constructed his historiosophy of autonomy, which he sought to impose on historical reality. The artificiality of this system was sometimes apparent; for example, it led him virtually to sever the Russian Jews from other Jewish centres throughout the world! He gave only superficial treatment to the complex connections and reciprocal relationships of the various Diasporas, as well as to their influence on governments, and vice versa. His idealization of the community as such resulted in inadequate social analysis of the community's internal regime.

The synthesis Dubnov aimed at, which he wrote about at length,¹⁵ calling it 'the unfolding of the general historic development latent in the mass of facts', his attempt to fuse 'external-political with internal-social and intellectual-literary manifestations', was also only partially successful. Because of his reaction against the 'external' legal-political approach – and certainly also because of the difficulty obtaining the material he needed from the Russian State Archives – Dubnov's work contributed little to an understanding of the legal-political status of the Russian Jews. More seriously, the desired fusion of 'external' and 'internal' spheres, essential to his system, was handled mechanically. He failed to achieve a blend of the complex reciprocal relationships and of the dynamic and static elements which exist both in the life of every people and in that of an extra-territorial, national minority.

Dubnov's sociological conception is not convincing, either. He apparently thought that his conception was sociological because he made 'the people' a decisive factor in the way he saw history; but this was too facile. 'It can be said', comments Rotenstreich,¹⁶ 'that the question of sociological understanding begins where Dubnov leaves off.'

These are criticisms of central issues, and much could be said about details; but criticism cannot detract from the importance of Dubnov's work. His greatest contribution to historiography was the impetus he gave to his many pupils and followers to pursue the study of the Jews of Russia and of Eastern Europe. They then studied two spheres – the

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economic and the demographic – which their master had neglected. To name them – Yitshak Shiffer, Meir Balaban, Mark Wischnitzer, Dov Weinryb, and Yaakov Leshchinsky – is sufficient to attest to the scope and value of their contribution; without them, the historiography of the later period would not have been born. Other scholars studied religion, education, folklore, literature and art – S. Ginzburg, P. Marek, I. Tsinberg, L. Bramson, S. Pozner, V. Pereferkovich, and others.¹⁷

Only three general histories of Russian Jewry have appeared in the last sixty years: those of J. Meisl in the early 1920s, in German;¹⁸ of L. Greenberg in the years 1944 to 1951, in English;¹⁹ of S. Baron, part of which is devoted to the Jews of the USSR, in the 1960s, in English.²⁰ None of these historians has used new primary sources; they have not made any methodological breakthrough, nor was their work based on original studies. Compared with their predecessors, their importance lies in having supplemented and brought up to date a number of themes which had previously received little attention. Since the 1940s, there has been a great increase in the preparation and publication of important monographs.

Although seventy years have passed since the Russian Revolution, the historiography of Soviet Jews is still in its infancy. The explanation is mainly objective. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the necessary historical perspective was lacking. Sharp ideological confrontation and political controversy, together with the solutions which the new regime proposed and sought to implement *vis-à-vis* the Jews, deterred some students from engaging in this field and led to distortions in the work of others. In addition, the task of the historian of the Soviet Jews is hampered by the continuing difficulty of access to archives, a problem overcome by research methods worked out over the last thirty years by general historians of the USSR.

A turning point, both in methods of research and in objective reassessment of the role of the Evseksia, came with the doctoral dissertation of Ch. Shmeruk, presented to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1961.²¹ In addition an interesting attempt to apply the research methods of the social sciences to the study of Soviet Jewry was made by Z. Gitelman in his doctoral dissertation for Columbia University (later published in book form)²², and in M. Altshuler's doctoral dissertation – an important supplement to the study of the Evseksia and of Soviet Jewry in the 1920s.²³ The 1930s, so important for the understanding of extensive changes in the life of the Soviet

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Jews and in government policy towards them, have for some reason not been studied seriously.

The many obstacles to research on Russian and Soviet Jewry come under three main headings: (1) finding and utilizing the sources; (2) working out methods of research, (3) periodization.

SOURCES

Despite the denial of access to Soviet archives in the 1920s, the sources for the history of pre-Soviet Jewry are satisfactory, although many of them have not yet been used for research. As classified by Dubnov and Ginzburg, the sources are both internal and external; the *internal sources* are the registers of Jewish communities and societies of various kinds; rabbinical literature (meditations and *responsa*); memoirs; travel literature; folklore; letters; wills; marriage contracts; business papers, and so on; and the *external sources* are laws, decrees, decisions concerning Jews; archives of various ministries, the Senate, the State Council, the Holy Synod, and of Jewish committees; the Jewish and the general press.

Access to sources for the Soviet period is more difficult. The Soviet archives have never been open for independent research. The only archives at our disposal are those of the Smolensk District, and the private files of individuals and institutions active in the USSR, mainly in the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s. Special mention must be made of the files of Yosef Rosen, Lucien Wolf and Elias Cherikover and the letters of Soviet writers and officials, located in the Yiddish Scientific Institute in New York. The New York archives of the *Bund* also contain some relevant material. In Israel there is important material on the Zionist Movement in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s in the General Zionist Archives in Jerusalem and in the Labor Movement's archives in Tel-Aviv. Some additional material is also to be found in the National and University Library, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, and in the Centre for Research and Documentation on East European Jewry; all three are in Jerusalem.

As far as printed material is concerned, the Soviet periodical and daily *press*, both Jewish and general, is particularly important. A partial comparison of the Smolensk archive material (some of it classified 'top secret') and reports on the same subject in the local press show no significant divergences between the two sources. The press, therefore, at least as regards the 1920s and perhaps the 1930s and

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even later, could be a crucial source for the study of Soviet Jewry. Then there are important *collections of documents* which have been published throughout the period since 1917; a number of *surveys, memoirs and studies published in the USSR* on the history of the Jews there; and the *Samizdat* materials. Finally, there are the *personal memoirs and oral history* of people who lived in the USSR and were involved in public activity relating to the Jews.

METHODS

We must try to fuse 'internal' and 'external' aspects, common features and divergencies. The history of the Soviet Jews cannot be adequately described in any one dimension. The 'external' dimension is the history of the Soviet Union and its people – among whom live the Jews – and it includes that country's complex relations with the rest of the world. For each period, there has to be an examination of the legal–political status fixed by the government for the Jews as a minority – national, religious, or other. In spite of the difficulties, it is important to tackle the question of whether this status is the same as that of other minorities, or different, or perhaps unique. Then there is the reciprocal relationship between the majority population and the minority; this is the essence of the story, ranging from brotherhood and cooperation to hostility and repulsion. The relationship was expressed in scientific and publicistic thinking, in *belles-lettres*, and in daily acts, which are, however, difficult to verify, because of the lack of data.

This method of approach does not endorse any foregone conclusion about congruence between the 'external' history of the ruling majority and the 'internal' history of the national minority; but there is no doubt that the connection between them is close and the influence reciprocal. The 'internal' dimension is made up of demographic, economic and social processes, simultaneously affecting, and affected by, national life within the frames of reference of religion, education and culture.

Finally, criss-crossing these two dimensions is another complex network of ties, between the national minority in the country and its own mother-country, and between this same minority and its sister-minorities in the other Diasporas.

Historiographic methods were coloured in the past by ideology and by the temptation to try to make the facts fit rigid systems. As against this, a research instrument, the model, limits the effects of

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ideology and permits the analysis of complex processes involving a large number of variables. Models help the historian to sort out from the mass of available facts those elements that recur most often in given combinations, without pigeon-holing them in a pre-fabricated framework. The criterion in choosing a model must be its effectiveness in enabling the researcher to carry his investigation to the requisite depth. The most relevant model for analysis of the 'external' dimension seems to be authoritarian-totalitarian, emphasising the political elements; for the second and third dimensions, I suggest a modernization model, emphasising the economic and social elements. The models focus on different elements, thereby complementing each other.

PERIODIZATION

Historians differ as to when Jewish history in Russia actually begins, and this raises another, more important, question: is the history of the Russian Jews separate from that of the Polish Jews, or do they form an organic unity, which split up in one historical period and reunited in another?

How have these questions been treated by the historians of Russian Jewry? The history of European Jews is generally divided into two periods – the Middle Ages and the modern era; but division into periods is little help when applied to the history of Russian Jewry, because of the differences between the various Diasporas. Virtually all historians of Russian Jewry, even if they accept the basic assumption that 'The Jewish nation constitutes a particular national entity, whose parts are connected and inter-connected by life-processes unique to them alone',²⁴ adopt an 'external' division into historical periods, based on Russian history, regardless of the differences between the historians about the importance of 'internal' factors in determining the development of Russian Jewry.²⁵

On the second question, the interconnection between the Jews of Poland and those of Russia, Dubnov maintains that their common past precludes any separate treatment.²⁶ His view is reflected not only in the title of his *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, but also in the space he devotes to Polish Jews.²⁷ Gessen, on the other hand, does differentiate between the histories of Polish and of Russian Jewry, as the title of his book makes clear, yet he too spends a lot of time on the

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Polish Jews;²⁸ indeed, the first volume of his collected work, *History of the Jews of Russia*, which appeared in 1914, is devoted to Polish Jews.²⁹ In contrast, the later historians Greenberg and Baron totally ignore them. This approach was supported by Dinur in his article, 'On the Historical Nature of Russian Jewry and Problems in its Study':

The name 'Russian Jewry' is usually given to the Jewish community which was concentrated within the Russian Empire from 1772... it does not include the Jewish settlements in the lands of the Empire prior to 1772, in the lands of the Caucasus, the Khazar Empire, Kievan Russia or the Russian districts that were linked to Lithuania and Poland in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the modern era.³⁰

In this book, the division into the periods listed below aims at both 'internal' and 'external' factors. It does not accept Dubnov's approach on the inseparable link between the Jews of Poland and of Russia; but it rejects Dinur's ruling that the history of Russian Jews begins in 1772. To ignore the situation of the Russian Jews before that date would mean neglecting to trace the causes that affected the determination of the legal-political status of Russian Jewry after 1772.

Historical periods

- (1) *The ancient period and the Middle Ages* – from the earliest Jewish settlement on Russian soil to the first partition of Poland.
- (2) *The early modern period* – from the first partition of Poland to the pogroms of the early 1880s (1772–1881).
- (3) *Into the modern era* – from the pogroms of the early 1880s and the formation of the major political movements to the October Revolution.

The October Revolution began a new chapter in the history of the Russian Jews. As far as Jewish national survival was concerned, it marked profound changes and radical reforms that shattered the foundations of the former structure of Jewish life, where modernizing processes had only just begun. Amidst the bloodshed, new ways of life came into being, and new patterns of thought.

It is not easy to draw up a satisfactory list of periods from 1917 to

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the present day, because the revolutionary changes themselves suffered more than one reversal and there was continuity in many spheres – all this taking place simultaneously, without clear dividing lines. Nevertheless, three sufficiently different periods can be discerned, each with distinguishing features peculiar to itself:

The years of construction – from the October Revolution to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The years of destruction – from the beginning of the war until the death of Stalin.

After Stalin – from 1953 to the present day.

Each period can be divided into sub-periods, which I will indicate at the appropriate time.

I shall, therefore, examine first the external factors, by analysing the official approach to the Jewish national question expressed in the Soviet theory of nationalities, which settled the juridical–political status of the Jewish national minority as one of the extra-territorial nationalities. The degree of autonomy or ‘statehood’ granted was based on an amalgam of this theory with a pragmatic solution arising from the changing historical conjuncture. I shall then try to estimate how far the Soviet Jews fitted into the new regime. I shall close this section with an analysis of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism in its new form, as part of the relationship between Soviet society and its Jews.

I shall consider next the overall ideological, political and economic changes which profoundly affected every nationality; in particular, religion, education and culture reflected the degree of the Jews’ sense of their national identity.

In the third section, I shall consider the network of relations between Soviet Jews and world Jewry, and observe the results of all the processes operating simultaneously in everything concerned with the Jews’ national survival.