

How the Soviet Jew Was Made

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2022, ix + 352 pp., 24 illustrations, notes, index, \$41 (hardback), ISBN
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BOOK REVIEW



How the Soviet Jew Was Made, by Sasha Senderovich, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2022, ix + 352 pp., 24 illustrations, notes, index, \$41 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-674-23819-0.

Sasha Senderovich's important book charts the image of the 'Soviet Jew' that developed out of the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and with it the dissolution of the Pale of Settlement. Taking his story through the end of the 1930s, Senderovich analyses how Jewish habits and practices transferred across the 1917 revolutions and met up against the new Soviet state's demands. *How the Soviet Jew Was Made* is an engrossing read and makes important interventions in Soviet cultural history as well as the debate on Soviet subjectivities.

Senderovich persuasively argues that the cultural construction of the Soviet Jew created a 'layered, intermediate, and fluid figure', one that emerged from the debris of imperial collapse and one that 'remained in perpetual motion' (2) for the first two decades of the Soviet Union's existence. In part, the ever-moving Soviet Jew was a product of Russian Jewish emigration, when nearly two million residents left the Pale between 1881 and 1917. Those that remained – nearly three million – experienced the end of the Pale and the beginning of Bolshevik demands all at once. Thus, as Senderovich writes, the construct of the new Soviet Jew took place 'at the intersection of practices of Judaism both active and defunct – unique customs or their remnants that were expressed in rich folkways of Jewish life in the former Pale – and the experience and historical memory contained in and shaped by Yiddish' (3–4).

How the Soviet Jew Was Made traces several literary and cinematic figures who took journeys within the USSR that in turn reflected those taken by actual Soviet Jews. Chapter 1 focuses on David Bergelson's Yiddish-language novel *Judgement (Mides-Hadin)*, (1929), which narrates the lasting trauma of tsarist-era pogroms and the lingering threat of violence even in the new post-revolutionary era. Chapter 2 takes the reader to Minsk through Moyshe Kulbak's *The Zelmenyaners* (which, like Bergelson's novel, was translated into English by Senderovich). The fictional family history that Kulbak creates serves as a sort of 'salvage ethnography' for Jewishness, a 'site of the emergence of a figure of the Soviet Jew characterised by both modernising and preservationist tendencies' (79). Both Bergelson's and Kulbak's Jewish characters seem stuck in between the old and the new, between stasis and transformation.

Chapter 3 focuses on travels to Birobidzhan, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast created by the Soviet state. Senderovich examines two 1929 texts about an expedition there, Semyon Gekht's *A Ship Sails to Jaffa and Back (Parokhod idet v Iaffu i obratno)* and Viktor Fink's sketches *Jews in the Taiga (Evrei v taiga)*, which both outline the new contours of what a Soviet Jew should be. Senderovich notes that both writings feature a curious absence of Jews in favour of descriptions of nature, thus indicating that no real connection exists between Soviet Jews and their new 'homeland'. Chapter 5, the final one, suggests that Isaac Babel's fictional trickster, Hershele Ostropoler, is a useful embodiment of the journeys Soviet Jews took on page and in real life from 1917 through the 1930s. Ostropoler's story serves as a 'cultural site where the

figure of the Soviet Jew is playfully woven together from the seemingly disjointed bits of multiple cultural systems during the first twenty years of the Soviet experiment' (272).

Readers of *Studies in Russian & Soviet Cinema* will find Chapter 4 to be a particular treat. In it, Senderovich analyses Jews who first emigrated from tsarist violence and then returned to the USSR. His focus is on cinematic journeys, specifically Boris Shpis's *The Return of Neitan Bekker* (*Vozvrashchenie Neitana Bekkera*, 1932, released in both Russian and Yiddish), Vladimir Korsh-Sablin's *Seekers of Happiness* (*Iskateli schast'ia*, 1936), Mikhail Dubson's *The Border* (*Granitsa*, 1935), and Lev Kuleshov's *Gorizont* (1932). All four films cast these returnees within a remade Wandering Jew trope, living a purgatory-like existence in the new USSR, a place where 'historically suspect ethnic minorities [find] themselves included in a newly proclaimed brotherhood of peoples' (171). All four films feature Soviet Jews whose very 'Sovietness' is in doubt. Thus, Senderovich argues, 'the figure of the Soviet Jew can never fully separate from the Wandering Jew's ceaseless travels or ever learn to speak in ways that don't contain lingering traces of its inassimilable past' (217).

How the Soviet Jew Was Made contains rich insights throughout. Senderovich is also to be commended for utilising not just Russian-language sources, but also Yiddish sources written in the first two decades of the Soviet experiment. In the end, as he concludes, the Soviet Jew remained a deeply ambiguous figure well into the Stalinist era, neither a New Soviet Man nor a Jewish Bolshevik, but a cultural type always trying to negotiate the demands placed on him by the past and the present.

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