



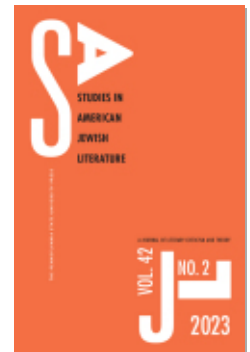
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*How the Soviet Jew Was Made* by Sasha Senderovich (review)

Brett Winestock

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**SASHA SENDEROVICH. *HOW THE SOVIET JEW WAS MADE.***

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In a season 13 episode of *The Simpsons*, the family travels to Brazil. At one very inopportune moment, Homer proclaims he has to urinate because he has a bladder the size of a Brazil nut. “Uhh,” demurs his kidnapper, “we just call them nuts here.” I thought of this joke while reading the introduction to Sasha Senderovich’s wonderful new book, *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*, when he reminds us that in the Soviet Union what we call “Soviet Jews” were just Jews. The term itself, therefore, inherently implies a view from the outside, such as in the encounter that began in the 1970s when Western Jews rallied to “save Soviet Jews.” Today, such a view from the outside is possible even for those who were once on the inside. Just as there is no more Soviet Union, there are no more Soviet Jews: instead, there are only former Soviet Jews and their descendants scattered around the world.

This book tells the story of the development of the unique cultural type of the Soviet Jew during the first two decades of the Soviet Union’s existence. Ironically, Senderovich’s sources—which include a Yiddish novel written by David Bergelson in Berlin, works created in conjunction with an American research trip to Birobidzhan, and films about Jews from the United States and Mandatory Palestine returning to the USSR—prove that the Soviet Jew was actually formed in large part in dialogue with forces outside the USSR. Senderovich takes up the mantle of Harriet Murav’s landmark monograph *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* (Stanford University Press, 2011), which

calls for readers of Soviet Jewish literature to put aside their expectations of what makes a text “Jewish” in order to discover new constellations of meaning behind Jewishness in the Soviet context. He argues that the Soviet Jew emerged as a distinct cultural type that represented something of a vestige of the past: unable to shake the trace of the dissolved Pale of Settlement and unable to fully embody the New Soviet Man, the Soviet Jew was a liminal figure forced to forever wander in the (creatively fruitful) space between these points.

To make his point about the Soviet Jew as a cultural type, Senderovich rightly turns not to political programming, anthropological studies, or archival materials but to cultural artifacts. Each chapter is based around the close reading of one (or more) artistic texts emblematic of a stage in the fashioning of the Soviet Jew. Chapter 1 is based on David Bergelson’s novel *Judgment*, which takes place in a shtetl somewhere on the border between the newly forming Soviet Union and Poland as the Bolsheviks try to solidify power in the region during the Civil War, in the aftermath of a horrific wave of pogroms. Senderovich reads the novel as an example of Gothic literature, in which the vanquished past threatens to reemerge in the present. Neither the old Jewish type from the Pale nor the threat of pogrom violence is fully gone: while the Bolsheviks did promise to root out antisemitism, they also destroyed the fabric of the community by cracking down on the traders, small businessmen, coachmen, and others who made up the bedrock of prerevolutionary Jewish towns. The Jewish embrace of the Red Army was thus an ambivalent one. For Senderovich, Bergelson’s novel serves to encapsulate “the indeterminacy of outcomes, the ambiguous relationship to power, and the lingering shadow of historical violence” (73) that would go on to become telltale signs of the Soviet Jew as well as the threads that unite his book.

Chapter 2 deals with Moyshe Kulbak’s serialized novel *The Zelmenyaners*, which tells the story of one Jewish family residing in Minsk between 1929 and 1935. Due to its extended time in serialization, the novel captures “the evolving figure of the Soviet Jew” (76) in the very process. One of the strengths of Senderovich’s book is his engagement with the critics contemporary to his protagonists: when scholars today dismiss the Soviet critics of the 1930s due to their overly ideological conclusions, they miss the astute readings Senderovich shows us they performed. Though Yasha Brontshteyn and others at the time condemned the ambiguity of Kulbak’s novel, they did rightly identify it, whereas Western critics have missed it, quick to disparage the author for overly identifying with the communist cause. Integrating both these approaches, Senderovich shows how the textual space of the novel actually gives Kulbak room to identify with both impulses, represented by two of the Zelmenyaner cousins: the melancholy Tsalke, who mourns and collects the fragments of his destroyed home, and the revolutionary Tonke, who celebrates the coming age. He argues that it was at this paradoxical intersection that the figure of the Soviet Jew was formed.

Chapters 3 and 4 are twin chapters of Jewish journeys, the first focusing on “non-arrivals” to Birobidzhan, the Autonomous Region set aside for Jewish settlement in the Soviet Far East, and the second on Jewish characters returning to the USSR after temporarily settling abroad. The connection to the past that the Soviet Jew continued to embody in Bergelson’s and Kulbak’s novels was supposed to disappear when transplanted to Birobidzhan, but by showing how Jews didn’t show up—in actuality or in the artistic works discussed—Senderovich proves that the desired transformation never took place. Instead of becoming the New Soviet Man (and it was always a man) toiling in the fields, the figure became the Soviet Jew. Chapter 4 focuses on several films of the 1930s, showing how the Soviet Jewish male body was formed not just by the Pale of Settlement but also by its wanderings in the West, marked by an unshakeable “freakishness” amid the “discourses of reformability and irreformability in Soviet culture” (182).

The final chapter returns to perhaps the most famous Soviet Jewish writer, Isaac Babel, but focuses on his lesser-known cycle of stories of Hershele Ostropoler, a trickster from Yiddish folklore. In his original context in the Hasidic world, Hershele’s “jokes could deflate the authority of the rebbe just enough to expose his human foibles to his followers but not too much so as not to topple the entire system” (224). Senderovich sees Babel’s Hershele, transplanted into the Soviet context, performing similar by critiquing the new Soviet order, but only ever within the realm of acceptability and thus helping to maintain the system itself—embodying precisely the ambivalence of the Soviet Jew. Refreshingly, Senderovich allows himself to revel in the formidable artistic texts he has chosen, such as in an extended passage examining Babel’s use of the intricacies of Russian grammar to adapt a folktale originally told in Yiddish (228–32).

Chapter 5 is also where Senderovich comes as close as he ever does to addressing what is perhaps the elephant in the book—Yuri Slezkine’s (in)famous *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2004), with which this book constantly engages but seldom acknowledges. Slezkine had memorably described Jewish intellectuals in the USSR as having taken up residence on “Pushkin Street” as a sign of their acculturation and rejection of traditional Jewishness. Senderovich reads a scene from Babel’s story “Karl-Yankel” in which the narrator observes the literal Pushkin Street in Odessa at its intersection with Malo-Arnautskaya Street, a street marked as Jewish. Whereas others have viewed this as a clear-cut choice between the two intersecting streets and identities, Senderovich argues that it is more nuanced than a simple intersection: the Soviet Jew “is a figure whose Jewishness manifests not in the stable cultural markers . . . but instead, remaps cultural elements that became dislodged from their traditional context in the former Pale of Settlement and became diffused within the evolving Soviet culture” (266). In other words, it is not a crossroads where a singular choice must be made.

The book begins with a wonderful map showing the old Pale of Settlement overlaid on the Soviet Union's borders from 1922 to 1939, which stretched all the way from Poland to the Sea of Japan. It well illustrates the point of this book: that the Soviet Jew carried the memory of the Pale even when scattered about the huge Soviet empire. The map includes the railway lines that connected the former Pale to the rest of the country, and the book's epilogue notes that it was thanks to storytelling that the figure of the Soviet Jew "was propelled into the vortex of Bolshevik modernity" (275). This again emphasizes why it is so important to study narrative art when considering the emergence of the Soviet Jew as a type, but also why the title of this book, *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*, is so misleading. The book's overly simplistic title, which implies some kind of conscious act of identity-making in which the state forges a new Soviet Jew much like it tried to do a New Soviet Man, is its only fault: the story Senderovich actually does tell—of the ambivalent, indeterminate, and liminal figure of Soviet Jew who emerged organically—is an infinitely better one.

BRETT WINESTOCK is a Research Associate at the Leibniz-Institute for Jewish History and Culture (Simon Dubnow) in Leipzig, Germany. He received his PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures and Jewish Studies from Stanford University in 2020. He works in both Russian and Yiddish, and his research focuses on Jewish literature and culture in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet space.