How The Soviet Jew Was Made by Sasha Senderovich

Beyond the Pale

The precarious existence of a ‘hybrid’ figure

By Bryan Cheyette

Poster for the Organization of Jewish Land Workers, Russia, c.1900 | © Buyenlarge/Getty Images

March 3, 2023

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In this review

HOW THE SOVIET JEW WAS MADE

368pp. Harvard University Press. £34.95 (US $39.95).

Sasha Senderovich

In his introduction to Isaac Babel’s *Collected Stories* (1955), Lionel Trilling pondered why he was so disturbed, as a young radical, by Babel’s Russian-Jewish fiction. He concluded that it was “all too heavily charged with the intensity, irony and ambiguousness from which I wished to escape”. The literature of the Bolshevik Revolution should instead have had “classical” precision and been devoid of modernist vagueness. Babel’s oblique *Red Cavalry* stories appeared in 1926, less than a decade after the revolution and, as Trilling came to realize, constituted a “clear threat to the passivity of the State” (ie to its

unbending resolve), a judgement confirmed by Babel's execution in 1940. Many of the Soviet Jewish writers of the 1920s and 1930s, his contemporaries, were likewise murdered by Stalin.

This post-revolutionary generation is the subject of Sasha Senderovich's *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*. It is a story of enormous creativity in both Russian and Yiddish, which revealed the tensions inherent in being a "Soviet Jew". This victimized figure may have needed "saving" by the West during the Cold War in the form of safe passage out of the USSR, but Senderovich's meticulous study is less interested in how the Soviet Jew was viewed from outside the USSR than in the struggle that his chosen writers and film-makers underwent in the attempt to make sense of their post-revolutionary selves. While the communist authorities had fixed ideas about the place of Soviet Jewry – not least because Jews gained equal citizenship in 1917, after the February Revolution – such clarity tended to elude these figures.

Before their emancipation Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement, the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, and lived mainly in shtetls or small towns where they could trade and practise their religion in a distinct Yiddish vernacular. According to communist ideology this was a type of "backwardness" that needed transmuting. Soviet Jews were to be "born anew", their shtetls modernized and turned into factories, and the "national" language of Yiddish was to conform to a socialist agenda to reflect the interests of the Soviet state. But this was not a straightforward "conversion", a complexity dramatized by Moyshe Kulbak in his subversive Yiddish-language novel *The Zelmenyaners*, serialized between 1929 and 1935 (see *TLS*, May 24, 2013).

These "deeply ambivalent" Soviet citizens were haunted by pogroms such as the infamous massacre in Kishinev in 1903, and the violence continued as late as the Civil War (1918–21), during which about 100,000 Jews were murdered, among many millions, for being on the "wrong" side. The fear of recurring pogroms across porous borders was the subject of David Bergelson's Yiddish-language novel *Judgment* (1929), which Senderovich recently helped to translate into English (see *TLS*, February 23, 2018). Set during the Civil War, around a fictional shtetl in Ukraine, it reveals anti-Jewish sentiment to be prevalent among both warring factions, even though the Bolsheviks claimed to have shunned such hatred. Bergelson uses gothic imagery – his novel is full of rotting bodies – to indicate vividly the inability of shtetl dwellers to overcome their pre-revolutionary trauma.

Soviet Jews were supposed to be refashioned as well as relocated to their utopian "national" homeland, Birobidzhan, established in 1931 on the Trans-Siberian Railway in far eastern Russia, about 600 miles north of Vladivostok. This was the Communist response to Jews colonizing Palestine and was in line with Soviet policy, which included a plurality of nationalities within the revolutionary embrace. But as Senderovich reveals in a series of deft readings – of ethnographies, dramas, children's and adult literature – only a small number of Soviet Jews actually arrived there. This was particularly galling to the Soviet establishment because many Russian-language films included the figure of the "wandering Jew", whose constant journeying did not end in Birobidzhan. Such were the limits of Jewish transformation.

It took the genius of Babel to turn such indeterminacy into Russian literature of the highest order. Sasha Senderovich, in his convincing account, characterizes him as a "trickster" and focuses on Babel's characterization of the Yiddish version of the trickster figure – both oppressed and persuasive. Babel's ability to have two "distinct cultural systems" in play – embodied in his persona in *Red Cavalry*, a self-proclaimed Jew among Cossacks – is crucial for understanding the Soviet Jew as a hybrid. Babel was well aware, after he witnessed the intentional mass starvation of Ukrainians by Stalin in the early 1930s, known as the Holodomor ("death by hunger"), that he could write about such "horror" only indirectly in his stories and journalism. Those who did not conform to a rigid ideology were treated barbarically.

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