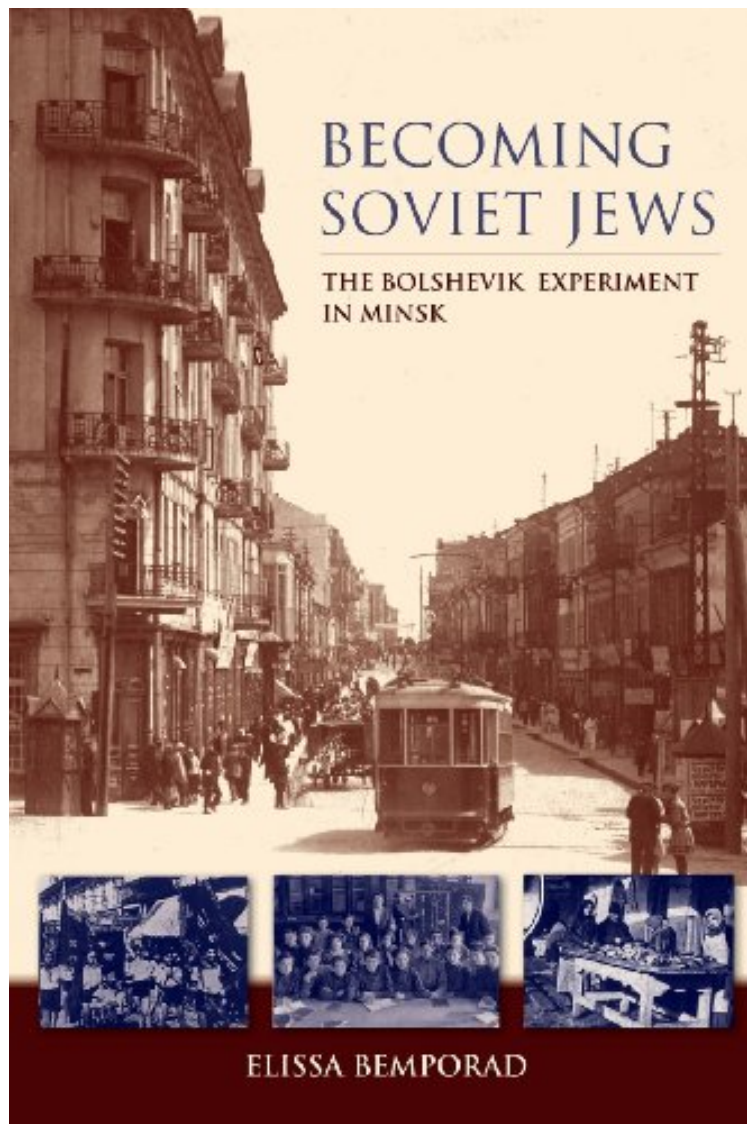


[Mobile ebook] Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk (The Modern Jewish Experience)

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Elissa Bemporad

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Elissa Bemporad : Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk (The Modern Jewish Experience) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk (The Modern Jewish Experience):

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. BREATHTAKINGLY NEWBy Jonathan Porathoutstandingly

researched and wonderfully well written. a must for anyone in the field. it brings the interwar period alive and sets the stage for the destruction of the holocaust to come. invaluable. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Jews Profit From and Suffer From Communism. 1920 War. Jewish Leadership of NKVD. Jewish Communists Unequivocally Remain Jews By Jan Peczkis Elissa Bemporad, a Professor of East European Jewish History at Queens College of the City University of New York. Her work presents a wealth of information, and I focus on a few issues.

THE LITVAKS (LITWAKS): JEWS AS A TSARIST RUSSIAN TOOL AGAINST POLISH NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS Author Elissa Bemporad inadvertently confirms Endek sources as she writes, (quote) Following the 1831 and 1863 Polish revolts, the northwestern provinces of Minsk, Vilna, Grodno, and Kovno were exposed to an efficient and at times violent Russification campaign intended to stifle the Polish independent movement and its local supporters. Sponsoring the use of Russian in lieu of Polish, tsarist functionaries hoped to ensure the political loyalty of the Minsk population to the Russian empire The policy was relatively successful in the Jewish milieu. (unquote). (p. 15).

COMMUNISM AND JEWISH LEFTIST ORGANIZATIONS Fast forward to the years immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917. While there was a variety of leftist Jewish organizations in existence, it appears that they differed little from mainstream Soviet Communism other than on Jewish-specific matters. For instance, in describing the Bund, Bemporad writes, (quote) While many Bundists embraced Communism as an ideology, they still remained committed to the Bundist idea of a separate Jewish organization and a distinctly Jewish political identity. (unquote). (p. 58).

THE 1920 POLISH-BOLSHEVIK WAR During the 1919-1920 Polish-Soviet War, the Minsk-area Bund, Poale-Zion, Labor Zionists, and various politically-unaffiliated Jewish workers, all formed armed units that fought on the side of the Red Army against the Polish forces. (p. 27). This confirms Polish sources about extensive Jewish-Soviet collaboration against Poland. [This was no parlor game. Poland's very existence hung in the balance!]

TEMPORARY JEWISH PRIVILEGES UNDER COMMUNISM The author points out that the Russian Revolution caused the end of tsarist-era legal restrictions against Jews at universities, government, and other institutions. However, that was only one side of the coin, as we shall soon see, and the privileges did not last. The reader learns that Jews constituted only 1.8% of the population of the pre-WWII Soviet Union (p. 217) and 6.7% of the Belorussian SSR. (p. 3). They accounted for 19.1% of white-collar positions of the BSSR in 1939. (p. 217). During 1934-1941, Jews held 33.7 percent of the posts of the central apparatus of the NKVD, 40.5% of the top leadership and secretariat of the NKVD, and 39.6% in its main State Security Administration (GUGB). (p. 3). [See the first Comment under this review.] Clearly, the Jewish share of the top leadership of the dreaded Communist security forces was at least twice that of their share of white-collar positions. This refutes the exculpation that would have us believe that the Jewish overabundance in the top leadership of the NKVD was an artifact of their overabundance among white-collar workers. Jews flooded the universities. Not surprisingly, the Jewish share of the student body at Belorussian State University, at Minsk, skyrocketed, and spaced-out other ethnic groups. In the early 1920s, it was in the 54%-67% range. (p. 44). Obviously, this was unacceptable in the long-term. Thus, even in the USSR, Jewish admission to universities did not stay absolute. For instance, in Bemporad's words, the Soviets instituted affirmative action policies in order to get more Belorussian students into universities. (p. 44). (This makes the Jewish attacks on Poland, for its numerous *clausus* policy of limiting the Jewish student body to the Jewish share of Poland's population 10%--all the more ironic. See below.) Especially after WWII, the Jewish advantages under Communism waned considerably. Later, the Soviet Union was widely considered to be anti-Semitic.

EARLY SOVIET COMMUNISM: NO PARADISE FOR THE JEW Thanks to the social changes wrought by the Russian Revolution, many Jews lost their livelihoods, (quote) Because of their pre-revolutionary occupation, more Jews than non-Jews faced legal restrictions under the new regime. According to one source, 40 percent of Jews and 5 percent of non-Jews were disenfranchised in the Minsk Province. (unquote). (p. 34). (Quote) While opening its doors to Russian Jewry, the Soviet regime banned Jewish political organizations outside the Communist Party, denied religious Jews and their institutions the right to continue playing a role in Jewish life, and destroyed a wide range of autonomous Jewish organizations. (unquote). (p. 4). In terms of specifics, Bemporad comments, (quote) The Sovietization of Minsk involved an onslaught against Jewish life. Shortly after taking over the city in July 1920, the Bolsheviks dismantled most existing Jewish institutions. Many religious and educational institutions such as synagogues and HADORIM (Jewish religious schools) as well as the Minsk KEHILLA, all of which formed the core of Jewish life before the Bolshevik rise to power, were closed down and their buildings municipalized. The Jewish cemetery on University Street was requisitioned from the Jewish community by the Land Commission of the City Executive Committee and turned into a grazing field for goats. (unquote). (p. 31). By 1924, about half of the synagogues and houses of prayer in Minsk had been confiscated by the Soviet authorities. (p. 115).

A SELECTIVE JEWISH INDIGNATION AGAINST INJUSTICES FACING JEWS? The many Jewish supporters of Communism (and not a few non-Communist Jews)--in the USSR, Poland, and the West--all turned a blind eye to all these gross Soviet Communist injustices against Jews, while freely railing against non-Communist Poland for relatively minor things such as the numerous *clausus* at universities. (pp. 202-204). Author Bemporad, though making the erroneous statement that Jews in Poland were marginalized (they were a flourishing civilization), and forgetting that the Jews in Poland WANTED to be separatist, nevertheless acknowledges that, (quote) Of course, interwar Polish Jewry enjoyed a degree of cultural, political, and religious autonomy unknown to Soviet Jews.

(unquote). (p. 95). So why all the selective Jewish anger about the comparatively trivial hindrances faced by Poland's Jews? It could not owe to, as sometimes exculpated, ignorance of the situation of Jews in the Soviet Union. In fact, according to Bemporad, Poland's Jews were very familiar to the Jews of Minsk, who often had friends or family across the border. (p. 204). So what was the actual reason? Could it be that, for some Jews, opportunism, careerism, and the acquisition of power were more important than the truth? PERSISTENCE OF SHEHITAH (SCHECHITA) IN COMMUNIST MINSK Jewish ritual slaughter persisted in Minsk, on a significant scale, through the early 1930s, albeit in a rabbi-less, Sovietized form. (p. 113, 128), before declining to a trickle. (p. 130). The persistence of ritual slaughter owed in part to the fact that nearly half the population of Minsk was Jewish, and to the fact that at least half the local butchers were SHOHTIM or former SHOHTIM. (p. 127). The author describes the post-Revolution persistence of the indirect levy on kosher meat (the KOROBKA), (quote) The SHOHTIM worked under the supervision of the city's rabbi, a MASHGIACH, or ritual supervisor, made sure that the slaughtering process strictly abided by Jewish dietary laws, and collected a tax on each animal slaughtered according to the ritual. The tax was passed on to consumers in the price of each individual chicken or cut of beef. The proceeds of ritual slaughter were then divided between the ritual slaughterers and the rabbi, while the meat was sold to the local Soviet food cooperatives, at a higher cost than nonkosher meat. (unquote). (p. 121). [The informed reader may recall that the SCHECHITA Law of 1937, in Poland, did not abolish ritual slaughter for religious purposes. It only curtailed the SCHECHITA establishment, thus ending the hidden tax that non-Jews had to pay to support the Jewish religion.] JEWISH COMMUNISTS REMAIN JEWS A number of authors (e. g., neo-Stalinist Jan T. Gross) have argued that Jews who became Communists were not really Jews. This was hardly the case. Let us first consider bris. Many Jewish Communists had their sons circumcised, and this custom persisted even under the harsh conditions of Stalinism in the 1930s. (p. 140). This prompted Bemporad to raise a Why? and then to answer it, (quote) Why were many Jewish Communists so committed to this one element of traditional Jewish identity? The practice of circumcision, it seems, was integral to the question of being a Jew. (unquote). (p. 142). Jewish Communists reconciled the international aspects of Communism, with their Judaism, by means of a privatization of the latter, (quote) In Soviet public settings away from the family, these Communists acknowledged the importance of the Marxist idea of the merging of nations to build Socialism, but in the private sphere of their home they could not fully renounce the deeply entrenched notion that only through circumcision would their son be truly Jewish. (unquote). (p. 142). In addition, traditional Jewish practices were commonly secularized, and not eliminated. Bemporad quips, (quote) The persistence of kosher meat production (often without rabbinic supervision) and circumcision (often by a medical doctor) are indicative of the evolution of Jewish practices from religious commandments to ethnic habits and the transformation of Jewish identity from a religious to an ethnic category. (unquote). (p. 144; See also p. 134). (Across the border, in Poland, in the city of Grodno, the local Jewish population also underwent a decline in religion, and increasingly replaced their religious Judaism with an ethnic Judaism: p. 212). THE TERM SHEYGETS CAN BE PEJORATIVE By the 1930s, Soviet policies had notably turned against Jews. For example, Bemporad comments, (quote) As a rule, the charge of Bundism and not of Zionism could descend on those who abided by certain religious practices, or on those who, like the Jewish director of a wine-cooperative in Minsk, exhibited Jewish chauvinism by calling Russian and Polish coworkers with the derogatory Yiddish term SHEYGETS, or non-Jew. (unquote). (p. 193). (The reference to this (number 101, p. 247) is an article in the Yiddish-language newspaper OKTYABR).

Minsk, the present capital of Belarus, was a heavily Jewish city in the decades between the world wars. Recasting our understanding of Soviet Jewish history, *Becoming Soviet Jews* demonstrates that the often violent social changes enforced by the communist project did not destroy continuities with prerevolutionary forms of Jewish life in Minsk. Using Minsk as a case study of the Sovietization of Jews in the former Pale of Settlement, Elissa Bemporad reveals the ways in which many Jews acculturated to Soviet society in the 1920s and 1930s while remaining committed to older patterns of Jewish identity, such as Yiddish culture and education, attachment to the traditions of the Jewish workers' Bund, circumcision, and kosher slaughter. This pioneering study also illuminates the reshaping of gender relations on the Jewish street and explores Jewish everyday life and identity during the years of the Great Terror.

[A] book that is highly readable and brimming with novel facts and insights . . . *Becoming Soviet Jews* is a rich and engaging portrayal of a previously overlooked period and place. (H-Judaic) This thoroughly researched study illustrates the tenacity of Jewish identity in the face of significant repression. (The Russian) With this history of Jewish Minsk, the distinguished roster of books on Soviet Jewry has acquired a new and endlessly rewarding addition. Elissa Bemporad's focus on this single, once largely Jewish, city gives us both the local picture and the larger one. . . . the details are fascinating, and the author's analysis is nuanced and respectful of human limitations. (Slavic) [T]his is an excellent book, offering a fascinating case study of how a Soviet-Jewish identity in a particular Soviet city came into being. (The NEP Era: Soviet Russia 1921-1928) This well-written, thoroughly researched book is a superb case study of the complex and contradictory effects of the Soviet regime in one of the most important centers of Jewish life in pre-Holocaust Russia. . . . A major contribution to understanding a crucial aspect of modern Jewish history in eastern

Europe. . . . Highly recommended. (Choice) This book is one of the most accessible of a number of recent studies that both analyze and describe [the transformation of Jewish life in the USSR]. . . . Although technically the focus of this book is on social history, it is also an important contribution to the history of Jewish religion in the USSR. (Religious Studies) By bringing together local factors as well as the Soviet and international contexts, Bemporad opens new ways of looking at Soviet Jewish history and reveals not only the uniqueness of the Minsk context but also the personal and collective strategies adopted by Jews to accommodate their religious, ethnic, social, and economic identities to the new context. (Ab Imperio) The acculturation of Western European Jewry that occurred in the nineteenth century (i.e., Jews in their outward appearance came to be more or less indistinguishable from their compatriots, spoke the local languages, and made contributions to local cultures) was telescoped in the newly established Soviet Union. How this rapid transformation took place in one city, Minsk, is the subject of Elissa Bemporad's fine book. 119.1 2014 (American Historical) [This is] a clearly written, well-researched and impressive study that enriches our understanding of Soviet Jewish life before the Second World War. (Revolutionary Russia) [Significantly advances] the scholarly understanding of the history of Soviet Jews. [Makes] a valuable contribution to the recent historiography that attempts to construct a balanced picture of the cultural, ethnic, and professional profile of Soviet Jewry. 16.1 Winter 2015 (Kritika : Explorations Russian Eurasian History) Challenging traditional interpretations of Jewish life under Soviet rule as one of continuous oppression, stagnation, and deterioration, Bemporad's book instead demonstrates the complexities of the Soviet Jewish experience. (Jeffrey Veidlinger author of Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire) Elissa Bemporad has deepened and enriched our understanding of the social transformations Soviet Jews experienced in the two decades after the revolution. Mining hitherto inaccessible archives, she deftly links larger historical processes to the changes in the lives of ordinary and some extraordinary Jews in one of the great centers of Yiddish culture and Judaism. Judiciously using photographs and the prose and poetry of the time, Bemporad vividly shows that tradition exerted a powerful influence even in Soviet times but was eventually defeated by the combination of attractive new opportunities, intensive resocialization, and terror. (Zvi Gitelman author of A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present) Bemporad has written an important study of Minsk's Jewish community in the period of Sovietization. . . . She convincingly shows that Sovietization was a complex and often tense process of negotiation, with Red Army soldiers eating kosher meat, fist fights breaking out after synagogue confiscations, and men wondering if their wives were secretly circumcising their children. A great contribution. (David Shneer author of Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust) Winner, 2012 Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History Winner, 2013 National Jewish Book Awards, Writing Based on Archival Materials; Finalist, Modern Jewish Thought and Experience Honorable Mention, 2014 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award This is a very important study. It does not follow the well-trodden paths, and does not employ the phraseology frequently found in books on Soviet Jewry. This study opens up vistas for additional work that will be written in its spirit. It successfully analyzes the deep social and cultural processes that took place in Soviet Jewry. (Mordechai Altshuler Hebrew University) An original study that makes a major contribution to our understanding of the history of Soviet Jewry. Bemporad modifies old stereotypes about the rapid assimilation of Soviet Jews in the interwar period. This is wonderful book that is clear, well-argued, and beautifully written. (Samuel D. Kassow author of Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Ar) About the Author Elissa Bemporad is Jerry and William Ungar Assistant Professor in East European Jewish History and the Holocaust at Queens College, City University of New York. She is editor (with Margherita Pascucci) of Conzeniana, a series in Yiddish literature and culture.