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JEWISH LIFE IN BELARUS: THE FINAL DECADE OF THE STALIN REGIME (1944-1953)

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LEONID SMILOVITSKY (LEANID SMILAVICKI), chief researcher at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Centre at Tel Aviv University, has authored a series of fine books and articles on twentieth century Belarusian-Jewish history, including the monograph *Catastrophe of Jews in Belarus, 1941–1944* (Smilovitsky, 2000). In *Jewish Life in Belarus*, Smilovitsky chronicles both grass-roots efforts to sustain Jewish tradition after the Holocaust and Soviet government efforts to erase Jewish culture in Belarus. He describes three phases in regime policy towards Jews in Belarus: a very brief period of relative *liberalism* after the Red Army drove out the Germans in 1944; approximately three years (1945 through 1948) characterised by obstructionism and neglect; and a dark period from late 1948 until Stalin's death in 1953 during which the most hostile aspects of state anti-Semitism became manifest. Moscow routinely provided the regional party and state apparatus with policy guidelines, but left their interpretation and implementation to local regime operatives. In dealings with the local regime, dwindling but steadfast communities of observant Jews demonstrated what one communist official described as "*obtrusive and exasperating persistence*" (p. 276). That persistence is at the heart of Smilovitsky's story.

While Smilovitsky does not ignore secular culture, he contends that Jewish life – the tissue of daily behaviours that made people feel Jewish, such as details of food and dress or rituals of marriage and burial – cannot be conceptually divorced from communal religious culture. His primary focus is on activities associated with core Jewish religious institutions, particularly the synagogue, the *shtiebel* (a small, often clandestine, prayer house), and the *minyán* (the gathering of at least ten adult males necessary for communal prayer). The Soviet regime

conflated all aspects of Jewish religious and traditional culture with “bourgeois Jewish nationalism” and the “anti-Soviet” Zionist movement. It therefore subjected observant Jews to intensive surveillance, which has bequeathed historians a staggering abundance of documentary source material. Smilovitsky has worked his way through mountains of documents in archives in Russia, Belarus and Israel, including former KGB archives. He also has assembled a sizable personal archive of individual historical testimonies (gathered through his own interviews and correspondence with Belarusian Jews), which he uses to supplement regime-generated documents and to provide a counter-narrative to official regime discourses. The result is an exhaustive and informative monograph significant to both Soviet Jewish historiography and the study of post-war Belarus.

After an introductory overview of Belarusian Jewish history from 1917 to 1941, Smilovitsky provides nine thematic chapters covering the period 1944-1953. Each chapter examines the formation and implementation of regime policies as well as the actions of Jewish communal activists. Separate chapters cover the following themes: post-war demographic patterns; regime policy towards Judaism and the mechanisms created to implement that policy; contention over registration of synagogues; attempts to sustain religious ritual observance; efforts to memorialise Holocaust victims; the fate of Jewish cultural institutions; Jews’ participation in post-war economic and cultural reconstruction; contacts between Belarusian Jews and the world Jewish community; and the deepening of state anti-Semitism in the last years of Stalin’s life. Among the principle strengths of the book is Smilovitsky’s attention to regional and local contexts and the specificities of the Belarusian case in each chapter. The conclusion is followed by two extremely useful appendices: a selection of documents illustrating points made in Smilovitsky’s text; and a set of tables that includes lists of Jewish communal activists.

In his brief introduction, Smilovitsky’s primary concern is the impact of Soviet antireligious and anti-clerical campaigns on Jewish religious life in 1917-1940.¹ He argues that the combination of repression,

¹ Readers interested in pre-revolutionary Belarusian *shtetl* life have many other places to turn, including: Kaganovitch, 2013. Those seeking to understand the complexities of urban Jewish politics and society in early Soviet Belarus would be well served by consulting: Bemporad, 2013; Zeltser 2006).

coercion, and cooption had weakened Jewish traditional life, undermined the old world of the *shtetl*, broken down the Jewish community's resistance to communism, and erected the framework of a secular Jewish (Yiddish) communist culture by 1940.² During 1941-1944, German occupation forces and their local collaborators murdered some 80 percent of Belarusian Jewry. Smilovitsky sees this near-total eradication as a key to understanding why, after a very brief *liberalisation* in 1944, the regime adopted policies aimed not just at "total control" of Jewish communities, but at the erasure of Jewish culture.

In Chapter 1, Smilovitsky examines the demography of the post-Holocaust Belarusian Jewish community. He argues that Jewish traditionalists made up the vast majority of those killed by the Germans, while that minority of Jews who escaped the Nazi occupation (and were dispersed across the Siberia and Soviet Central Asia) generally were more secular. After the liberation, Jews who resettled in Belarus concentrated in urban districts, and were on a whole younger, better educated, and more thoroughly assimilated to Soviet norms than had been the occupants of pre-war *shtetls*. The elderly dominated the demographic profile of religiously observant Jews, which the Soviet regime attempted to monitor in great detail. Soviet policies aimed at isolating this observant element and circumscribing its influence, in expectation that its "natural" death would extinguish Jewish religious and national consciousness. Smilovitsky contends that policies obliterating Jewish public space could not reach effectively into those Jewish private spaces where traditions were maintained, and instead tended to reinforce Jews' sense of separate national identity.

Chapter 2, on post-war Soviet religious policy, provides an excellent introduction to the activities of the Soviet government's Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), created in 1944 to oversee state relations with religious communities. Material generated by CARC forms the backbone of this book, and Kondrati Alekseevich Ulashevich (Kandracij Ulaševič), the CARC Commissioner for the BSSR Council of Ministers from late 1945 through 1955, is a central figure in Smilovitsky's narrative. In addition to implementing state policy, CARC

² Space constraints limit Smilovitsky's discussion of the impact of the Soviet Union's annexation of western Belarus and its large Jewish population following its invasion of eastern Poland in 1939. He does note, however, that the annexation heightened regime surveillance of all Jewish institutions.

supposedly would represent the needs of legally-established religious communities in dealings with the state. In practice, though, it functioned as a bureaucratic tool for monitoring and controlling religious communities, with a primary focus on Jews. Smilovitsky shows that CARC's woefully under-staffed regional apparatus in Belarus failed to defend Jews from local officials who violated civil rights promised by the Soviet constitution. He concludes that CARC embodied the Soviet state's "double standard" in regard to Jews.

One manifestation of this double standard was administrative obstruction of the observant Jews' attempts to rebuild their faith communities, including refusal to register synagogues as legal centres for worship. In 1949 in all Belarus, the regime registered only two synagogues. (In contrast, in Georgia – with one third the Jewish population of Belarus – the Soviet state registered thirty-one synagogues). In Chapter 3, Smilovitsky reviews state policy on registration of synagogues and examines regime-created impediments to this process in Belarus. After the Holocaust the registration of synagogues took on great significance not only for observant Jews, but also for secular Jews who saw it as symbolic recognition of Jewish wartime sacrifices. Smilovitsky catalogues the quixotic efforts of Jews in Minsk and a dozen other towns and cities to register and fund synagogues. He similarly recounts the repertoire of bureaucratic and financial obstructionism employed by local communist officials, for whom the synagogue represented resurgent Jewish nationalism. The result was a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: by denying Jews the right to legal places of worship, the regime hardened observant Jews' resolve to sustain their faith.

In Chapter 4, Smilovitsky discusses steps taken by CARC and by local and regional officials to disrupt, prevent, and punish manifestations of Jewish religious life. Observant Jews often were subjected to arrest and repression. But other forms of pressure, such as removal from professional or educational posts, and especially the threat that one's children would be denied opportunities, proved even more effective in dampening religious activity. Yet what this chapter shows – in more than seventy-five pages of detail on the keeping of the Sabbath, celebration of Jewish holidays, the baking and distribution of Passover matzo, arrangements for covert prayer houses, the maintenance of ritual baths and cemeteries, means of following Jewish dietary laws, sustaining the ritual of circumcision, holding Jewish weddings and

organising communal charity, and employment of religious officiants (such as rabbis and ritual butchers) – is that Jews routinely found ways to circumvent obstacles that the regime built against observance. This was true not only of the devout, but also for those non-observant Jews to whom rituals such as circumcision represented an important link to Jewish national culture.

Smilovitsky's Chapter 5 examines efforts to commemorate the Holocaust in Belarus. In the first months after the liberation from German occupation, the regime seemed relatively open to Jewish concerns. All that quickly evaporated when spontaneous attempts to memorialise those lost to the war and genocide gelled into a grass-roots movement, which Soviet officials understood as a manifestation of Jewish nationalism. Not only did regime (locally and at the centre) obstruct efforts to build memorials to Jewish victims, but it turned a blind eye to the desecration of such monuments. Smilovitsky, like many other scholars, notes that the Soviet leadership on a whole, and the Belarusian communist leadership in particular, refused to admit Jews any special status as victims of Nazi atrocities. Those who died at the hands of the fascists could be described only in ethnically undifferentiated terms, for example, as *Soviet citizens*. He also contends that recognition of Jewish suffering could have cast the entire war in terms unacceptable to the regime (for example, by suggesting that the Red Army had fought to protect Jews, or by admitting that the Soviet state had failed miserably to protect its own citizens).

In Chapter 6, Smilovitsky chronicles the regime's attempts to squash any revival of Hebrew language or religious publication, destroy the remnants of Yiddish-language literary life and silence Jewish writers who attempted to explore the Holocaust or other explicitly Jewish themes, and dismantle the State Yiddish Theatre of the BSSR (one of the premier Jewish theatre institutions in the USSR, one of the first to be criticised for "formalism," and the first to fall victim of the wave of Jewish theatre closures in 1949). Chapter 7 emphasises the role of Jews in the reconstruction of Belarusian economic and cultural life in 1944-1948, a period when the shortage of trained specialists and experienced professionals necessitated that Soviet officials ignore ethnic distinctions. The doors slammed shut to Jews, though, with the escalation of state anti-Semitism in 1949-1953. Smilovitsky argues that specificities of the Belarusian case, particularly BSSR leaders' fear the Jew-

ish intelligentsia might somehow subvert Belarusian statehood, made the consequences of state anti-Semitism more acute in Belarus than elsewhere in the USSR.

Smilovitsky emphasises the close connection between the onset of the Cold War and the rise of state anti-Semitism in the USSR. As he demonstrates in Chapter 8, in 1945-1948 the government tolerated limited contact between Belarusian Jews and Jews abroad, including aid packages from relatives and charities in the United States. Indeed, stage-managed contacts with the international Jewish community served the Soviet government's propaganda needs. CARC officials, though, saw all foreign aid as serving religious-nationalist-bourgeois aims, and treated all Jews with foreign connections as suspect. Again, doors slammed shut in late 1948, concurrent with the turn in Soviet policy towards Israel (from an initial stance of support to overt hostility) and the hardening of relations with the United States. While many Belarusian Jews, who on a whole were loyal to the Soviet state, found themselves torn between intense pride in the Jewish state and opposition to *bourgeois Zionism*, local communist functionaries responsible for "controlling" the Jewish community saw no ambiguities. From 1948 they equated all demonstrations of support for Israel with Jewish nationalist sentiment hostile to Soviet state.

Chapter 9 follows the unfolding of state anti-Semitism, a rubric that for Smilovitsky covers behaviours ranging from failure to support efforts at reviving communal life, to state anti-religious campaigns, to the slandering of Jews in the press, to blatant acts of repression (i.e., the arrest of anyone associated with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the purge and repression of "rootless cosmopolitans" in cultural institutions, the arrest and imprisonment of local communal leaders as "bourgeois Zionist and nationalist" activists and "agents" of western imperialism, and Stalin's unrealised *coup de grace*, the "Doctor's Plot"). Here again, the deepening of Cold War tensions provides a vital backdrop for the hardening of regime policies. In 1945, CARC limited itself to measures against Hebrew culture and religious activists. In 1946 it broadened its campaigns against "nationalist manifestations" that included Yiddish cultural activity. In 1946-1948, the Communist Party leadership conducted a "vigilance campaign" that facilitated attacks against expressions of Jewish nationalism, an umbrella term that in Belarus applied to any discussion of Jewish culture or history, including

discussion of the Holocaust. In 1948 the regime launched its campaign against “rootless cosmopolitanism,” and with it the wholesale arrest and imprisonment of Jewish cultural figures. Smilovitsky provides a wealth of regional case studies, including a very interesting narrative on the persecution of members of the Minsk Synagogue Board in 1951-1952. He also discusses the protracted process of rehabilitation of Jewish victims of late Stalinist repression in Belarus. The authorities granted most members of the Minsk Synagogue Board amnesty or nullified their convictions within three years of Stalin’s death, but at least one victim waited for exoneration until 1963. Smilovitsky argues that de-Stalinisation resulted in a shift in regime tactics, but did not bring an end to official anti-Semitism.

In his conclusion Smilovitsky stresses that the Soviet regime in general, and the Belarusian Communist leadership in particular, could not understand Jewish culture or fathom the linkages between “secular” daily life and “religious” rituals and traditions. Instead, they took all manifestation of “Jewishness” as signs of hostile “bourgeois nationalism” that could be eradicated by isolating observant Jews and dismantling religious institutions. That effort failed, and Jewish life persisted.

This is a generally well-organised and well-written book, although some readers might find themselves distracted by the author’s encyclopaedic explanations of matters peripheral to his main topic. Smilovitsky might have discussed some of the conceptual problems of working with his sources (such as matters of source criticism when dealing with oral history accounts and with reports generated by CARC). But these are minor criticisms of a fine book that will prove useful to anyone interested in Soviet Jewish history, late Stalinist nationality policy, or post-World War Two Belarus.

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