Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century***, Princeton — Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. VII-438 (2nd ed., 2006; Fr. transl.,** *Le siècle juif***, Paris: éditions La Découverte, 2009, pp. 427).**

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Published first in 2004, and in French translation in 2009, Yuri Slezkine's *The Jewish Century*, an epic, witty, and, at times, elusive book, has reached a vast audience and fueled a heated debate about Jewish history and modernity. Its style is provocative. Numbers and statistics are interspersed with references to literary and social science classics. Each chapter mirrors a great text of the European literary canon.

The book is divided into four chapters of increasing length, which build steadily on its main theme — Russian Jewry and its relationship to modernity — all the while touching on a wide array of 20th century Jewish topics involving the Soviet Union, United States and Israel.

Slezkine interrogates Jewish history from an innovative standpoint: instead of discussing its uniqueness, as Shmuel Eisenstadt does in *Jewish Civilization*, Slezkine proposes a social theory grounded in the idea that the Jewish experience is actually somewhat universal.

The first chapter of *The Jewish Century*, entitled "Mercury's Sandals: the Jews and Other Nomads," describes the traditional position of the Jews within European society in terms of the seeds of modernity. Slezkine uses the term "Mercurians" to describe a number of religious and ethnic groups, including Jews; i.e., guest groups providing the host society with crucial services such as money-lending and the practice of medicine. The Mercurians are "service nomads," performing vital functions for the so-called "Apollonians," the host society traditionally devoted to agriculture and war.

Europe's Mercurians were primarily Jews, Greeks, and Gypsies, but service nomads are common in world history: Parsis in India; Indians in Africa; Chinese throughout Asia; Lebanese and Syriac Christians in western Africa, Caribbean and America; Armenians and Fanariot Greeks in the Ottoman empire; etc.

The dynamic tension between Mercurians and Apollonians recalls Nietzsche's description of the apollonian and dyonisian drives within Greek literary tradition, an idea that was taken in a different direction by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict's classification of "cultures." Slezkine's bibliography suggests that his research on the economics of minority groups was influenced by both views.

Mercurians, being essentially powerless in Apollonian society, are forced to answer power with wiles. Slezkine paints them as "tricksters," inheritors of the "cunning intelligence" of Homer's Odysseus.

Despite being separated by history and geography, Mercurians have

developed surprisingly similar strategies for separating themselves from Apollonian societies: doctrines of pollution, such as food taboos; culturally exclusive languages, such as Roma and Yiddish, which are often linked to the preservation of a sacred tongue; and an emphasis on family-kinship ties over pride of place.

While the differences between Gypsies and Jews may seem manifold and significant, Slezkine chooses not to insist on them, a strategy both interesting and somewhat misleading.

As he says at the outset: "Modernization is about everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible. It is about learning to cultivate people and symbols." Modernization, in other words, is all about "becoming Mercurians." Modernity and capitalism require Mercurian attributes like literacy, mobility, and expertise. The Age of Universal Mercurianism owes its Jewish flavor to the fact that it began in Europe.

Modernity's second "leap forward" is somewhat more ambiguous. Slezkine's second chapter, "Swann's Nose: Jews and Other Moderns," inspired by Proust's masterpiece, is a learned and ironic journey through the landmarks of 19th century culture: nationalism, Marxism and Freudianism — the latter two teachings, according to Slezkine, being particularly Jewish ones. The mechanics of secularization and modernity are described as far more complex than Max Weber has suggested. Weber emphasizes the rise of capitalism, a product of Calvinist ethics, and the process of rationalization that led to abstract norms and the modern state. Slezkine underlines that while modernity seems to preach individualism, it cannot practice it wholly (p. 43). After all, the modern state is by its nature national — that is, tribal. Nationalism is read as a kind of secularization of the biblical model. In other words, "…every nation was to become Jewish, every people were to be chosen, every language sacred, every land promised" (p. 44).

The rise of modernity — the so-called "unbinding of Prometheus — " was perhaps a Pyrrhic victory for Jews in Western and central Europe, who advanced so many aspects of European society and culture (pp. 46-52). At the end of the 19th century, their extraordinary achievements became a matter of debate — and, I would add, an occasion for a new kind of hatred of the Jews —anti-Semitism (p. 72).

Jewish success was judged in the light of attitudes towards modernity generally. If the critic's outlook on the modern world was positive, then the Jewish achievement was celebrated. If, on the other hand, the critic feared modernity, as in the case of Houston Stewart Chamberlain or Werner Sombart, Judaism was seen as strange and dangerous. Jews were perceived as an alien and inferior "race." Lamarck's language of inherited cultural features was deployed with great success (pp. 52-59).

Some intellectuals disagreed. Thorstein Veblen, the American sociologist, attributed Jewish preeminence not to Jewish tradition, but precisely to its radical rejection (pp. 56-60). Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu — the French intellectual who so deeply loved American democracy — stressed, in a famous book against anti-Semitism, that modernity was not created by Jews, but that Jews, by virtue of the rejection of their religious identity, became its best practitioners. He insisted that modernity started, in fact, with Christians of varying beliefs.

Slezkine doesn't really develop this idea. Instead, he focuses on the kind of modernity that requires a nation-state and a reconfiguration, or rejection, of religion. Some religions were worse than others at managing this change.

The coming of the modern age called into question the relevance of traditional religion, and forced a cycle of crisis, death and reconfiguration. Slezkine devotes beautiful pages to the crisis of identity in modernist literature. He celebrates Kafka and Proust, but for him the quintessential Mercurian is Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Slezkine speaks of the rise of modern "secular religions," such as nationalism and Marxism, although his inclusion of Freudianism in this group is problematic. He argues that secular religions share certain features: a concept of evil and redemption; and an apocalyptic or redemptive path to salvation. In my opinion, these secular ideologies shared more features with Christianity than Judaism, particularly in the overall coherence of their goals, and their obsession with mythmaking and cult organization. Overloaded with apocalyptic imagery at the turn of the century, these new belief systems would eventually metastasize into totalitarianism. Slezkine's third chapter, "Babel's First Love: The Jews and the Russian Revolution," deals with the realization of this dire prophecy by taking up the central story of the book: the response of Russian Jewry to modernity. The Russian empire was home to many Mercurian groups, some of them, like the Baltic Germans, quite important to the smooth functioning of the imperial bureaucracy. There were nomadic peoples from the most remote corners of the empire. Despite their religious, ethnic, and cultural differences, all of these nomadic groups shared the Jews' precarious social position. Unlike other powers in Western Europe, including the Habsburg empire, Russia afforded these groups minimal legal protection (pp. 110-114).

The process of economic modernization in Russia unleashed, as it did everywhere else, an enormous amount of entrepreneurial energy. But balancing these new opportunities were serious assaults on traditional life. The *shtetl* was a perfect incubator for these changes. There were economic losers, particularly in the middle stratum of society, and winners who were able to make the most of their talents, professional

connections, and family ties. The result of this chaotic process was both mass emigration, mainly to America, and the rise of a powerful Jewish financial and economic élite, made possible, in many cases, by the decision to convert to Christianity (pp. 115-127).

Slezkine links the cultural transformation of the second half of 19th century to the emergence of a cult of Russian literature. He uses the Jewish-Russian case to talk more broadly about a similar dynamic in many other countries, although each with its own characteristics: the mass conversion of the younger generation by way of a national literature.

Many young Russians were drawn into the *intelligentsia*, that is to say, as Hertzen puts it, "a community of more or less unattached intellectuals trained to be urban moderns in a rural empire; raised to be 'foreigners at home.'" Suspended somewhere between the state and the peasants, whom they called 'the people,' and trapped by an economic system unable to make use of them, this highly alienated intellectual class became the vanguard of a messianic movement with millenarian expectations. These intellectuals — Russian radicals and Jewish fugitives, both — shared a love for the "common man," first in the form of the Russian peasant, and ultimately in the men and women of the proletariat. Moreover, they shared a common hatred for their parents' values. They represented a generational break from traditional culture and politics, which they saw as fiercely resistant to modernization.

This conflict between "fathers and sons" was seen in Manichean terms: the possibility of a new era of peace freedom and light pitted against the backwardness, doom, and darkness of tradition. With an eye to the complex ethnic, national, and religious texture of the Russian empire, Slezkine points out the large number of Jews and Latvians in the radical movements, arguing that "most Jewish rebels did not fight the state in order to become free Jews; they fought the state in order to become free from Jewishness — and thus Free. Their radicalism was not strengthened by their nationality" (p. 152). Unlike the "Latvian or Polish socialists," Jews were not fighting for universalism and Jewishness at the same time — with one exception, dismissed as never being a serious contender for a national movement: the Bundists (p. 148).

Much as they were the most devoted nationalists, Jews were the most devoted revolutionaries, truly faithful to the religion of revolution. They were often among the sternest soldiers, and later, among the first martyrs to be devoured by the new order. The massive participation of Jews in the revolution and the civil war, not to mention the terror afterwards, fueled deeply rooted Russian anti-Semitism, as reflected in the call for Jews to accept "ethnic responsibility," a concept elaborated by the notorious Russian anti-Semite Vasily Shulgin (pp. 180-181).

Among the many Jews who rejected the radical ideology of Bolshevism, there were some who tried to understand the complex interconnection of Bolshevism and Judaism, and who did, after all, "plead guilty" (p. 183).

Even so, Slezkine argues that "ethnic responsibility" and "national guilt" are not particularly useful ideas: "members of nations might feel ashamed, but nations cannot go to confession, do penance and eventually appear before their creator" (p. 185). Simon Dubnow, the distinguished professor of Jewish history, asserts that Bolsheviks of Jewish descent were not actually Jews (p. 185) — at any rate, not if we acknowledge individual freedom. But individual freedom has proven less relevant and less rooted than ethnic and national classification, both in Soviet Union and in the United States — not to mention western Europe. The radical political choice of many young Jews in the Pale of Settlement isn't difficult to rationalize— there were many superficial, but magnetic, similarities between Marxism and Jewish Messianism; and the ranks of the radical *intelligentsia* were more open and less anti-Semitic than the population at large. A thornier problem, however, is understanding the way Jewish radicals so readily embraced violence. Slezkine skillfully sifts through memoirs, fictional narrative, poetry, and art of the early Soviet period, searching for answers. Perhaps the violence, to paraphrase one poet, was an act of vengeance representing the "rape of Russia;" or, in another sexual interpretation, a violent "congress" meant produce the offspring of a Jewish-Russian symbiosis (pp. 201-203).

Whatever its source, the tragic outburst of Jewish rage validated the paranoia of anti-Semites, especially the Christian ones who for decades had been describing Talmudism as the quintessence of violence. Ironically, the radical sons were to suffer from the same backlash as their pious fathers who preached against violence.

Slezkine's fourth and last chapter, "Hodl's Choice: the Jews and the Three Promised Lands," inspired by the short novel of Sholom Aleichem, *Tevye the dairyman*, is about emigration, both beyond Europe and within it, a path eventually chosen by millions of Jews. Slezkine focuses on Tevye's daughters, speculating on their destiny and the destinies of their children. Sholem Aleichem's Tevye had at least five daughters, who were whittled down to three in Norman Jewison's famous American musical adaptation, *Fiddler on the Roof*. We find three daughters in Slezkine's discussion, too: Chava the Zionist, Beilcke the American, and Hodl the Bolshevik, representing the three migrations of the Russian Jews: to Palestine, to America, and from the Pale of Settlement to the big cities of the Soviet Union (p. 206).

The Soviet migration was the most important, according to Slezkine, since the majority of Jews either remained in, or returned from abroad

to, the Soviet Union. Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, and Kiev — the four main Soviet cities — witnessed a major influx of Jews from the Pale of Settlement (p. 217). It's interesting to note that Jews moving to these cities shared an element of idealism with emigrants to Palestine. According to Slezkine, both "Palestine and Soviet Russia were real new worlds" (p. 211) because they were truly revolutionary. Both countries needed a new kind of man, coupled with a radical effacement of the past, in order to create heaven on earth.

The post-revolutionary Jewish generation in Russia was urbanized, expert in the Russian literary canon and the teachings of the revolution, and was well represented "at the very top of the Moscow and Leningrad cultural elite" (p. 225). In fact, according to Slezkine, they were "the most important and most influential generation in the history of the Soviet cultural elite" (p. 232). Of course, "most members of the new Soviet elite were not Jews, and most Jews were not members of the new Soviet elite," although, "in absolute terms they were second to the Russians" (p. 236). Theirs was a success story of upward mobility. They were heroes of the revolution, and hoped eventually to become its prophets. The loyalty of Jews to the young Soviet state and society is a controversial topic, often expunged from Jewish historiography. Their prominence was a matter of discussion and resentment among enemies of the new order, which attempted to control the spread of anti-Semitism through strategies such as surveillance, repression (p. 245), and the politics of "normalization."

Slezkine addresses the history of Soviet Jewry in terms of the ethno-politics of the Soviet regime. The Soviet Union was not a Western-style nation-state. It was beholden to the colonial structure of the Russian empire, which it attempted to recast as "the first ethno-territorial federation in the history of the world" (p. 246). The construction of a new Soviet Jewish identity is one of the most interesting issues discussed in this chapter. What room was there for Jewishness in a state that pleaded universalism and the annihilation of cultural differences? What should replace the narrow confines of traditional Judaism that had been so readily cast aside by the young radicals?

The Soviet state initially promoted the ethnicities of peoples that had suffered under the yoke of the Russian empire. Special "ethno-units" that operated in traditional local languages were created to facilitate the transition to a new national "modern" culture. National territories were aggregated and clearly delineated. In 1932, nationality became a required marker in the internal passport system (p. 285). Slezkine reads elements of the Yiddish movement against the backdrop of these politics.

These ethnic politics proved to be a double-edged sword: belonging to an oppressed nation might provide a healthy career boost, but might just as easily single one out for persecution, especially for residents of

the so-called "diaspora nations" that were deemed, between 1937-38, internal enemies of the Soviet regime. Slezkine reminds us that the purge of enemies along ethnic lines provoked "a new, strictly genetic, procedure for determining nationality" (p. 286).

For a certain generation and class of Jews, the Thirties represented a golden period of integration in Soviet society, complete with nannies, good schools, and summer houses (pp. 259-260). However, that decade of privilege came to a violent end. The Great Terror (p. 269) devoured both the fathers and the children of the revolution. Jews were potentially vulnerable on two fronts: both as élites and as ethnic internal enemies. The purges were not purely anti-Semitic. At times, Jews were construed as dangerous foreigners like Poles, Germans, or Greeks; at others, as political enemies, members of Bundist or Zionist movements (p. 273).

Meanwhile, the Molotov – Ribbentrop Pact was encouraging racial anti-Semitism. Jewish lineage was being researched with an almost pathological zeal (p. 301). A shift in international alignment reversed this trend, at least for a while. When Hitler became the enemy of the Soviet Union, Stalin called on the entire nation, including the Jews, to put forth a great patriotic effort.

After the war, in the wake of the establishment of Israel, Stalin began to view the Jews as a "diaspora nation," and therefore as an internal enemy. His response to this perceived threat was a series of state pogroms. Intellectuals of the Yiddishist movement, "true communist believers" who had fought for the Soviet regime, were the first to be eliminated. The second wave of purges, known as the "physicians plot," was eventually halted only by Stalin's death.

From the Sixties on, it was clear that "Hodl's children" were increasingly critical of the Soviet regime. Jews, once the most fervent defenders of the system, became some of its most celebrated dissidents. By the Seventies, many of the Jewish grandparents who had survived war, prisons, and labor camps were finally convinced that they had made the wrong choice. They felt their lives should have been lived elsewhere (p. 344).

The Jewish Century is a book about modernity — that is to say, the rise of capitalism and its overarching victory — but also about the difference between modernity and modernization. Twentieth century Jewish history tends to focus on the overall failure of Jewish integration in Europe, culminating in the catastrophe of the Nazi genocide. Amos Elon proposes that the peculiar symbiosis of Jewry and modernity started in Germany with the arrival of a young Moses Mendelssohn in Berlin, and ended with the departure of Hannah Arendt for America.

But such a tight focus on the Holocaust obscures other histories, by no means less relevant or revealing, such as Slezkine's account of the

dramatic history of Russian Jews, with its achievements and tragedies. By tracking the relatively brief success of a small group of Jewish *élites* in the Soviet Union, followed by their tragic downfall, Slezkine illustrates the wild possibilities and crushing risks of the path to modernity. In the end, the most successful of Tevye's daughters proved to be Beilcke, the one who chose America.

Even as Jews exploited their skills as Mercurians to become modern, their journey through modernity has also exposed another deep-seated ambition: to become Apollonians themselves, just like their erstwhile masters. Slezkine understands the Zionist movement at the turn of the 20th century as the political embodiment of the Apollonian impulse.

The Jewish Century emphasizes the commonalities faced by all Jews on the "path to modernity" between the 19th and 20th centuries. It speaks of Jewish ambivalence towards modernity, an attitude typical of other religious traditions as well. It also speaks of the ambivalence of modernity towards the Jews. The modern state has demonstrated a tendency toward atavistic "tribal" impulses such as the rise of radical nationalism; the revolutionary upsurge proved no better choice in 20th century. They both merged into totalitarianism. The nature of Jewish integration in Europe has spoken volumes about the nature of the modern state itself and its capability to remain faithful to the principles of liberal democracy.

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