

## Issues of Gender, Sovietization and Modernization in the Jewish Metropolis of Minsk

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### Abstract

*By using the case study of Minsk - a historic Jewish center in pre-revolutionary Russia, and capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic after 1917 - this article explores the Sovietization and modernization of Jewish women in an urban setting of the former Pale of Settlement during the 1920s. The study of a "Jewish metropolis" like Minsk, situated in the heart of the pre-1917 territory of designated Jewish residence, provides a better insight into the ways in which most Jewish women adjusted to the Bolshevik rise to power, negotiated between Communism and Jewish identity, and integrated into Soviet society. By focusing in particular on the Minsk branch of the Women's Department of the Communist Party (Zhenotdel), this article reveals the evolution of the gender discourse on the Jewish street, the changing roles of Jewish women in the new revolutionary society, as well as the challenges they faced when attempting to modernize according to Bolshevik guidelines.*

### From Russian Jews to Soviet Jews

Beginning in February and October 1917, a small, but fiercely committed and highly organized group of Bolsheviks gradually took over the territories that had once formed the core of the Tsarist dominion. Under the leadership of Lenin, the revolutionary vanguard of the Bolshevik Party began to create a one-party political system, a state-controlled economy and an official atheistic culture.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it brought about many changes in the lives of its residents, including the Jews. With a population of more than 3,000,000, the Jews who lived on the territories of the newly established Soviet Union constituted one of the largest demographic concentrations of Jews in the world.

Before the Bolsheviks came to power, nineteenth and early-twentieth century Russian Jewry was, with few exceptions, largely excluded from

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on the Bolshevik Revolution is vast, but see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996); Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); and Leonard Schapiro, *Russian Revolutions of 1917: The Origins of Modern Communism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Russian society. Legal restrictions on the admission of Jews in military and state services, education and local administration, were complemented by the compulsory residence within the boundaries of the Pale of Permanent Jewish Settlement.<sup>2</sup> The yearning to belong to the society of their residence was voiced time and again by the leaders of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, and was frustrated on a number of occasions, first in the 1860s at the time of the failed reforms of Alexander II and later in 1905, following the abortive First Russian Revolution. With the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire, the Provisional Government - brought into power by the Revolution of February 1917 - introduced freedom of speech, press and assembly for all citizens, thereby granting Russian Jews an array of political and civil rights and ending their decades-long social segregation. The Soviet regime confirmed the legal emancipation of its Jewish residents, allowing Russian Jews to join the political system, become citizens of the state and participate in the newly established socialist society without quotas or discrimination. Upward mobility was the most striking consequence of the shift to full-fledged citizenship. The number of Jews employed in the offices of the Soviet government was so remarkable that it gave the impression, mostly at the popular level, of Jewish domination of the new regime. By the mid-1920s, the Jews constituted six percent of the Soviet ruling elite and ten percent of the leadership of all Soviet economic agencies; a number of Jews held important posts in the high echelons of the Communist Party and the Red Army command.<sup>3</sup> Institutions of secondary and higher learning were open to young Jews, who were no longer forced to travel abroad to evade the existing *numerus clausus* or take a high-school equivalent exam as *externs*, as the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow and the Russian Jewish writer Isaac Babel had done.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Tsarist legislation, Jews belonged to the legal category of *inorodtsy* and were subject to special laws. This category also included indigenous ethnic groups such as the native tribes of Siberia, Central Asia and Trans-Caspia, the nomadic Kalmyks and Kirghizes of the steppes and the Samoeds of the region of Archangel. See Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 26. On the influence that Russia's lack of law and arbitrariness had on the plight of the Jews under the Tsar, see Michael Stanislawski, "Russian Jewry, the Russian State, and the Dynamics of Jewish Emancipation," in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, eds. Pierre Birnbaum, Ira Katznelson, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 262-283. The Pale of Settlement included much of present day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and parts of Western Ukraine. Jewish residence beyond the Pale was generally prohibited.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority*, (Cambridge - New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 83.

<sup>4</sup> See Simon Dubnow, *Kniga zhižni: vospominaniia i razmysleniia dlia istorii moego vremeni*, (St. Petersburg, 1998). Isaac Babel tells about the exam he took as an *extern* in Odessa in the short story "My father's dovecoat"; see *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, (New York: Norton, 2002).

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 an important role in the Jewish community, and destroyed a wide range of autonomous Jewish organizations. The Soviet leadership conveyed to its citizenry a clear message: those who did not conform, politically, culturally and socially to the new tenets of the Soviet regime would be severely punished. As early as December 1917, Lenin had called for “a purge of the Russian land from all vermin, by which he meant the idle rich, priests, bureaucrats and slovenly and hysterical intellectuals.” On August 31, 1918, *Pravda* wrote “The towns must be cleansed of this bourgeois putrefaction... All who are dangerous to the cause of the revolution must be exterminated.”<sup>5</sup> Lenin confirmed his intention by imprisoning, deporting and sentencing to death thousands of potential or real opponents. According to historian Robert Conquest, from 1917 to 1923 200,000 persons were killed by the Cheka and 300,000 as a result of repressive measures, such as the containment of risings and mutinies.<sup>6</sup> Summary trials against Jewish political, religious and cultural leaders who did not succeed in fleeing the country were followed by mock ones against religious Judaism, held responsible for perpetuating “bourgeois” and anti-Soviet behaviour among Soviet Jewish citizens. With the exception of Soviet Yiddish culture, most forms of Jewish particularity, be it allegiance to the Zionist or Bundist parties, observance of religious rituals, or commitment to Hebrew language and culture, were delegitimized as part of the general drive to get rid of political opposition and to wipe out clericalism. Supporters of political parties, members of religious communities and owners of non-Soviet businesses or enterprises were pushed to the margins of the new society. This also was an expression of Lenin’s intent to establish power with no concession to and compromise with the “bourgeois enemy.” In the early phase of the Revolution, this intent found its high point in the bloody suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion of March 1921.<sup>7</sup>

### **Soviet Jewish Women**

While several studies have examined different aspects of Soviet Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> Both quotes are from Geoffrey Hosking, *The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union from Within*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 70. Instituted in December 1917, and later renamed GPU, the Cheka, or the Extraordinary Commission for Struggle with Counterrevolution and Sabotage, was the Soviet state security organization.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> On the Kronstadt rebellion, see Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); and Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

life, the specific ways in which Jewish women confronted the Bolshevik experiment remain largely unknown to historians.<sup>8</sup> The study of the roles and representations of Jewish women in the cultural, social and political settings of modern Eastern Europe has been confined to Tsarist Russia and interwar Poland.<sup>9</sup> Writing about Jewish women in the Soviet context is challenging not only due to the lack of preexistent scholarly work on the subject, but also because of the absence of institutions specifically created for and/or by Jewish women to address educational, legal, economic or social questions related to their lives. Institutions such as schools for Jewish girls or philanthropic associations run by Jewish women, which existed elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and which could serve as a starting point in evaluating Jewish women's integration into the political, economic and cultural life created by the Bolsheviks, no longer existed under the Soviet regime. The Bolsheviks wiped out most separate spheres of public activity for Jewish women, such as the religious, cultural and welfare societies established in late Imperial Russia. Deemed as bourgeois institutions, these societies for Jewish women posed a threat to the unity of the Bolshevik cause, which indeed advocated fighting for the equality of sexes but not based on women's specific national, ethnic or religious identity.

Using the case study of Minsk - a historic Jewish demographic, religious and political center in pre-revolutionary Russia, and capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) after 1919<sup>10</sup> - this article

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Zvi Y. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU 1917-1930*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Mordechai Altshuler, *Ha-yensektsiya bi-vrit ha-mo'atsot: beyn komunizm ve-leumiyut*, (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po'alim, 1981); Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Arkadi Zeltser, *Evrei v sovetskoi provintsi: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917-1941*, (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> No mention of Soviet Jewish women appears in the collection of essays edited by Judith Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, in Paula Hyman's pioneering work *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, or in the most recent volume of *Polin*, devoted to Jewish women in Eastern Europe. See Judith R. Baskin ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995); and, "Jewish Women in Eastern Europe", eds. Chaeran Freeze, Paula Hyman, Antony Polonsky, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 18 (2005).

<sup>10</sup> In 1897, 47,562 Jews lived in Minsk, or 52, 3% of the city population; in 1923, the Jews numbered 48,312 and made up for 43.6% of the city population; in 1926, they amounted to 53,686, or 41% (Belorussians were 43% of the city population, Russians 10%, and Poles over 3%). "Minsk," *Bolsheia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, vol. 39, Moscow, (1926): 465-468. For more information on the demographics of the city, see also Arn Rozin, "Ha-yeshuv ha-yehudi be-Minsk beshanim 1917-1941", in *Minsk, ir va-em: korot, maasim, ishim, havai*, ed. Shlomo Even-Shoshan, (Tel Aviv: Irgun yotse Minsk u-venotecha be-Yisrael, vol. 2, 1985) 23.

explores some of the ways in which Jewish women adjusted to the Bolshevik rise to power and integrated into Soviet society. The setting of Minsk (located in the heart of the dense Jewish population of the former Pale of Settlement) provides a better insight into the ways in which most Soviet Jewish women reacted to the Bolshevik experiment, and attempted to negotiate between Communism and Jewish identity.<sup>11</sup> Like so many other middle-to-large cities in the former Pale, Minsk remains a most valuable source of information about “the gender revolution” on the Jewish street primarily by virtue of its demographic nature: throughout the interwar period Jews constituted the single largest national group in the city after the Belorussians, maintaining a proportion of approximately 40% of the local population.<sup>12</sup> The analysis of general Soviet agencies and organizations where Jews, and particularly Jewish women, represented a large percentage – such as the Minsk branch of the Zhenotdel (Zhenskii otdel Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuz, or Women’s Department of the Communist Party) are essential for the study of the challenges Jewish women faced when attempting to modernize according to Bolshevik guidelines. By exploring the *modus operandi* of the Minsk Communist agencies responsible for drawing Jewish women into the Revolution, and the strategies they envisioned to solve “the women’s question” on the Jewish street, this article begins to recreate the composite picture of the lives of “the other 50% of Soviet Jewish *history*.”<sup>13</sup>

### The Women’s Question on the Jewish Street: An Overview

During the nineteenth century a growing preoccupation with the social condition of women emerged on the agenda of the Jewish intelligentsia.

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<sup>11</sup> On the “Moscow-Leningrad Jewish path to acculturation” into the Soviet system, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); see, in particular, chapter 3 and 4.

<sup>12</sup> In Minsk, Jews came to play a special role not only by virtue of the city’s demographic nature, but also as a result of the ambivalent, uncertain and in-process-of-formation character of Belorussian nationalism and identity. See for example, Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956); B. K. Markiiianov, *Borba kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii za ukreplenie edinstva svoikh riadov v 1921-1925 gg.*, (Minsk, 1961); S. Khrushinsky, “Belorussian Communism and Nationalism: Personal Recollections”, (New York: Research Program on the USSR, n. 34, 1953); K. P. Buslova ed., *Iz istorii borby za rasprostranenie marksizma v Belorussii (1893-1917 gg.)*, (Minsk: Akademiia Nauk BSSR, 1958); and E. Bugaev, *Voznikovenie bolshevistskikh organizatsii i obrazovanie kompartii Belorussi*, (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1959); and *V borbe za Oktiabr v Belorussii i na zapadnom fronte*, (Minsk: Gosizdat BSSR, 1957).

<sup>13</sup> For a more extensive analysis of the Sovietization of Jewish women and gender tensions on the Jewish street, see my forthcoming *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in the City of Minsk, 1917-1939*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); in particular see chapter 6.

Maskilic writers, such as Y. L. Gordon, Joseph Perl and Mendele Mocher Sforim, harshly condemned the submissive role to which the Jewish religion had confined women, both in public and private spaces.<sup>14</sup> In the 1850s and 1860s, the concern of the *Haskalah* movement for the plight of Jewish women resulted in efforts to make secular education available to young women. *Maskilim* believed that a modern educational system for women would eventually free them from the overriding socio-economical restraints imposed by the patriarchal religious society in which they lived, and transform them into enlightened mothers responsible for the reformation of future generations of Jews. At the same time, however, enlightened Jewish men also feared the “dangers” of urban, middle-class Jewish women entering general secular educational institutions, and straying from Judaism altogether. The main concern of most *maskilim* remained therefore to balance Jewish values with enlightened education, thereby guaranteeing that “Jewish daughters” remained Jewish enough while freeing themselves from Medieval traditionalism.<sup>15</sup>

In a speech delivered in 1867 to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of his private school for Jewish girls in Minsk, Chayim Funt spoke about the need to train the future modern Jewish mother, explaining that, “she must be reborn; she must prepare herself for this modest, but great mission; she must renounce superstition, improve her taste, ennoble her understanding, attach her soul to general human need”<sup>16</sup> More than 100 private Jewish schools for girls were established across the Pale of Settlement between 1844 and 1881.<sup>17</sup> With the

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<sup>14</sup> On Y. L. Gordon, see Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). On Joseph Perl and Jewish women, see Nancy Sinkoff, “The Maskil, the Convert, and the *Agunah*: Joseph Perl as a Historian of Jewish Divorce Law”, *AJS Review* 27/2 (Nov. 2003): 281-299. On the *Haskalah* movement’s criticism of traditional family relations, see, for example, David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); on representation of women in *Haskalah* writings and women’s roles in the *Haskalah* movement, see Tova Cohen, *Ha’abat abuvah veba’abat senuah: Bein metsiut lebidyon bete’urei ha’ishah besifrut habaskalah*, (Jerusalem, 2002); and on Jewish women’s reading habits, see Iris Parush, *Nashim korot: Yitronah shel shuliyut babevrab hayebudit bemizrah eiropah bame’ab hatesha-esreh*, (Tel Aviv, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> For many *maskilim* like Y. L. Gordon, “women were both the problem and the solution to the preservation of Judaism.” See Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); see in particular chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Eliyana R. Adler, “Women’s Education in the Pages of the Russian Jewish Press”, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 18 (2005): 123.

<sup>17</sup> Adler, “Women’s Education”, 126. On education among Jewish girls in Eastern Europe, see Shaul Shtampfer, “Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Woman in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe”, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 7 (1992): 63-87.

encouragement of their parents, who found a curriculum composed of Russian, German, French, arithmetic and religious courses attractive, many middle-class girls (indeed a small minority of Jewish girls) flocked to these new institutions.

By the time of the First Revolution of 1905, Russian Jewish politics had produced a remarkable number of multifaceted movements and parties. Most of these – especially, but not exclusively, general Zionists – did not try to attract women to politics. The un-receptiveness towards women and the so-called "women's question" is reflected in the absence of Jewish women in the movements' rank-and-file and leadership, as well as in the content of the parties' programmatic platforms; these generally avoided clauses on women's political mobilization and gender social inequities. A notable exception to the tendency of neglecting the "fair sex" occurred during the elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly, organized following the events of the 1917 Russian Revolution and held in November 1917. At this time, Jewish parties across the political spectrum, specifically addressed women in order to attract them to the polls and win over their support. The left - Jewish and non-Jewish alike - helped disrupt patriarchal social traditions and liberate women from family despotism, thus attracting a significant number of female members, who often joined the movement more out of commitment to their selfhood than to the general cause. Women made up one third of the terrorist movement of the 1870s and 1880s, and by World War I they comprised 15 percent of the underground political movements of Tsarist Russia.<sup>18</sup> Reacting against their parents' political beliefs, and the very foundation of Jewish society (namely, their own role as women in the family), many Jewish women joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the SRs.<sup>19</sup> However, the radical leadership clearly stated that there was no separate women's question and that the emancipation of the proletariat would automatically solve gender discrimination.<sup>20</sup>

The Jewish labor party Bund, and to some degree the Marxist Zionist Jewish workers movement Poale-Tsion - both established at the end of the nineteenth century - attracted a sizable female constituency, numerically more than any other Jewish or Russian socialist party did. In

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<sup>18</sup> As a comparison it is interesting to consider that by World War I, females comprised 16.1 percent of the membership in the German Social Democratic Party (some 175,000 women), and 2-3 percent in France (probably no more than 1,000). Marilyn J. Boxer, Jean H. Quataert, *Socialist Women, European Socialist Feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, (New York: Elsevier, 1978), 2.

<sup>19</sup> See Amy Knight, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party", *Russian Review* 38/2 (April 1979): 139-159; see in particular, 141-142.

<sup>20</sup> On the role of women in the Russian radical movement and on the relationship between feminism and socialism in the 1870s, see Barbara Engel, "From Separatism to Socialism: Women in the Russian Revolutionary Movement of the 1870s", in Boxer, Quataert, *Socialist Women, European Socialist Feminism*, 51-74.

1905, at the height of the Bund's influence on the Jewish public, Jewish women made up a third of the party's membership.<sup>21</sup> Actively engaged in the class struggle on the Jewish street, some women even came to play a leading role in the high party echelons. Two women (out of a total of thirteen founding delegates) participated in the 1897 clandestine meeting on the outskirts of Vilna, which resulted in the establishment of the Bund. Historian Henry Tobias mentions 6 women out of the 48 most important early Bundist leaders, and J. Sh. Hertz includes 55 women in his biographical profiles of the 320 most prominent Bundist leaders in the history of the party.<sup>22</sup> A Jewish woman worker by the name of Elke was the author of "Oh You, Working Masses" (*O ir arbets-masn*), considered by Bundist leader Shakhne Epshteyn the first "Yiddish marseillaise" and widely sang in Jewish revolutionary circles long before the official Bundist hymn "The Promise" (*Di shvne*).<sup>23</sup> And in 1917, a woman served on the party's Central Committee, the Minsk-born Malka Lifschitz, better known by her nome-de-guerre Ester Frumkin.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the remarkable presence of women in the Bund's leadership, as well as in the general party membership, hardly any Bundist activist openly addressed questions related to women. Ester Frumkin described her early propaganda work among Jewish women factory workers in Minsk, stressing their enthusiasm and interest in the cause:

I see them now, crate makers... soap workers, sugar workers... pale, thin, red eyed beaten, terribly tired. They would gather late in the evening. We would sit until one in the morning in a stuffy room, with only a little gas lamp burning... The girls would listen to the leader's talk and would ask questions, completely forgetting the dangers, forgetting that it would take three quarters of an hour to get home... through deep snow... With what rapt attention they listened to the talks on cultural history, on surplus value, commodity, wages, life in other lands.<sup>25</sup>

But despite the young women's dedication, with the exception of grievance over low female wages and competition between female and male workers, Bund party conferences nearly ignored questions related to the status of women. As Yelena Gelfand stated as early as 1892, at a May

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<sup>21</sup> Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 78.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Shakhne Epshteyn, "Di yidishe kemferin", *Der froyen tog*, March 8, (1921): 2.

<sup>24</sup> On Ester Frumkin, see Naomi Shepherd, *A Price Below Rubies: Jewish Women as Rebels and Radicals*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, "Ester Frumkin: Jewish Woman Radical in Early Soviet Russia", in *Di froyen: Women and Yiddish*, (New York: National Council of Jewish Women New York Section, 1997), 58-63.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, n. 2, 30.



Day celebration of Jewish workers in Vilna, “The women’s question is not a separate issue, but part of the great socialist question.”<sup>26</sup>

The Bolshevik Revolution brought the “women’s question” to the table making it a political priority for the Communist Party. After all, theorists of classical socialism and communism had concurred long before the revolution that women’s liberation, along with the liberation of the proletariat, was a necessary precondition to create a more just and equal society. In a private letter, Marx paraphrased the words of the founding father of utopian socialism Charles Fourier, saying that “social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex (the ugly ones included)”<sup>27</sup> The new Soviet system intended to transform the lives of women, liberating them from the “dark forces” of religion, drawing them to the Party and enticing them into playing an active role in the newly established Soviet institutions.<sup>28</sup>

### Communist Agencies Discuss Jewish Women

In the city of Minsk, capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, two political agencies dealt with the status of Jewish women, envisioning for them a new role to play in Soviet society. The first was the Evseksiia, or the Jewish Section of the Communist Party of Belorussia, CPB, (Evreiskie seksii Kommunisticheskoi Partii KP(b)B), established in Minsk in 1920 to Sovietize the Jewish population through Yiddish, the language accessible to most Jews, and “vanquish” all pre-revolutionary Jewish parties and communal organizations.<sup>29</sup> Besides destroying the foundations of pre-revolutionary Jewish life, the Evseksiia also strove to create new educational, political and cultural institutions that would – so it hoped - replace the role that Judaism, Hebrew culture and Zionism had played for Minsk Jews. The second Communist agency in the city that dealt with Jewish (as well as non-Jewish) women was the Zhenotdel CPB, or the Women’s Department of the Communist Party of Belorussia.<sup>30</sup> Besides the pre-revolutionary Bund’s meetings, most of

<sup>26</sup> Quoted Shepherd, *A Price Below Rubies*, 146-147

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Boxer, Quataert, *Socialist Women, European Socialist Feminism*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> On the birth of the women’s movement in Russia, see Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978). On gender politics in Soviet Russia, see Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> On the establishment and goals of the Evseksiia, see Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*; and Mordechai Altshuler, *Ha-yensektsyah bi-vrit ha-mo’atsot*. The first Evseksiia in Minsk was organized in 1919, but as the Polish army neared the border with Soviet Russia all its members were drafted into the Red Army and the section collapsed.

<sup>30</sup> The Central Bureau of the Zhenotdel was located in Moscow; each Soviet Republic

which took place underground, this was the first time that Jewish women participated in a political forum, publicly debating questions related to the status of women. With the creation in Minsk of the Evseksiia and the Zhenotdel, the “women’s question” made its appearance in what had traditionally been a male-dominated and oriented world.

Established in the second half of August 1920, the Zhenotdel CPB intended to eradicate women’s illiteracy, attract them to the social and political life of the new Soviet system, and provide them with a firm knowledge of Communism. Equating their “ignorance” with danger to the cause, the Zhenotdel contended that only by virtue of their Communist education could they fulfill the important role of caretakers of the younger generation, and ensure “a Communist... imprint on the children.”<sup>31</sup> In standard bourgeois spirit women’s education was justified by reference to their maternity. On the eve of March 8, 1922, on International Women’s Day, the Women’s Department As the Women’s Department of the CPB stated on the eve of March 8, 1922, on Women’s International Day,

One of the crucial tasks of the Communist Party is to increase the level of consciousness of the whole working class, develop its class consciousness and turn [the working class] into an active combatant for Communism...But... the level of consciousness of the working masses is not identical. Because of the conditions in which she lived under the bourgeois system, because of centuries without equal rights, ...the female worker is more backward, ignorant, downtrodden, both at home and at work. Apathetic, backward women workers represent a great danger for the Revolution [emphasis added], it is necessary... to raise the level of their consciousness, draw them into the ranks of the struggling proletariat and turn them into active participants in the building of the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup>

In accord with Party guidelines, the Evseksiia approached the “women’s question” as a political priority, organizing propaganda work, meetings and concerts in Yiddish for Jewish women workers and wives of Jewish Red Army soldiers.<sup>33</sup> Women made their appearance in the protocols of

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had its own branch of the Women’s Department of the Communist Party.

<sup>31</sup> In February 1921, the Zhenotdel organized pedagogical courses for women instructors in pre-school and kindergarten institutions. The courses were intended to provide young Belorussian and Jewish women with the necessary “proletarian consciousness.” See Natsional’niy Arkhiv Respubliki Belarusi (Hereafter NARB), f. 4 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia), op. 1, d. 569, l. 3.

<sup>32</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 570, l. 43.

<sup>33</sup> On different strategies to attract Jewish women to political life, see Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-politicheskoi Istorii (Hereafter RGASPI), f. 445 (Central Bureau of the Jewish Section of the Communist Party), op. 1, d. 9, l. 96 and

the Jewish Section of the Communist Party of Belorussia immediately after its creation, following the defeat of the Polish military and the consolidation of Soviet power in the city. On August 15, 1920, a Jewish woman by the name of Zlata (her last name is not mentioned) was appointed responsible for carrying out propaganda work among Jewish and non-Jewish women alike. More specifically, her work involved coordinating the so-called *zbenskie stranichki*, or women's pages, in the two early Communist periodicals published in the city, the Yiddish *Shtern* (The Star) and the Russian *Kommuna* (Commune), and in organizing performances and political meetings specifically for women.<sup>34</sup>

On September 13, 1920, the Jewish Section called for the organization of four large concert-meetings in the city. While three would be devoted, respectively, to the Red Army, elections in the Minsk City Soviet and Jewish parties, a fourth one would deal with the role of women in building the Soviet system.<sup>35</sup> Less than a year later, on July 30, 1921, the Evseksiia passed a proposal to publish in the Yiddish daily *Der veker* (The Alarm) a weekly one-page column entitled *The Woman-Worker*.<sup>36</sup> The name of the column was changed to *Froyen zaytl* (Women's Page) and later to *Froyen vinkel* (Women's Corner). At the end of 1924, the Minsk Sewing Industry Workers Party-cell decided to address women in the Yiddish wall-newspapers of the city's sewing factories and in the union's organ, *Royte Nodl* (The Red Needle). Party-cell publications also expected women to contribute as correspondents.<sup>37</sup>

The Evseksiia collaborated closely with the Zhenotdel. In a circular letter dated June 15, 1921, the Minsk Bureau of the Evseksiia addressed the Jewish Sections of the district Party committees and included women as part of the agency's political priorities:

The Jewish section must concentrate its efforts on: 1. Communist education for party members who speak primarily Yiddish; 2. Recruitment of new party members from *peredovik* workers (politically educated factory workers); 3. Communist propaganda among non-Party Jewish workers...; 4. Work among youth and women-workers; 5. Systematic control over the activity of Soviet agencies that attend the special needs of Jewish workers, such as the Jewish Section of the People's Commissariat for Education... In conducting systematic work

NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 225, l. 22.

<sup>34</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 9, l. 1.

<sup>35</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 9, l. 3. One of the earlier activities coordinated by the Evseksiia was the organization of courses related to the history of the Party, in Yiddish. Within this context, comrade Zlata taught the course "The History of the Worker's Movement."

<sup>36</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 64, l. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Minskoi Oblasti (Hereafter GAMO), f. 1260 (Primary Organizations of the CP(b)B), op. 1, d. 2, ll. 49-50.

among Jewish women workers and workers' wives, the bureau of the Evseksiia must appoint an experienced secretary to work in the Zhenotdel. [emphasis added.]<sup>38</sup>

Usually a former Bundist, the Jewish secretary of the local Zhenotdel was in charge of organizing Jewish women workers and holding speeches in Yiddish at women's meetings. She worked primarily in the Minsk professional unions with a large percentage of Jewish workers, including the unions of Industry Sewing Workers, Food Industry Workers, and Construction Workers.<sup>39</sup> In June 1921, the Minsk Bureau of the Evseksiia nominated R. Meliakhovitskaia as Jewish secretary to the Zhenotdel. A former Bundist and member of the Communist Party, she gave speeches in the Union of Tobacco Workers and the city garment workshops. Meliakhovitskaia also helped organize the so-called *ustnye gazety* (or readings of newspapers for illiterate women) and Yiddish concerts.<sup>40</sup>

### **Gender Tensions on the Jewish Street**

While acknowledging the theoretical importance of drawing Jewish women to the Party, the Evseksiia encountered difficulties on the practical level. In July 1921, the Minsk Bureau of the Evseksiia pointed out that the District Jewish Sections did not give sufficient consideration to the "women's question." "Since conducting political educational work among women is one of the priorities of each Communist agency," the Minsk Bureau invited the District sections to appoint an instructor to the Zhenotdel responsible for coordinating propaganda work in Yiddish in each factory and workshop with a significant proportion of Jewish women.<sup>41</sup> The invitation fell on deaf ears and the Evseksiia had to reiterate the order to nominate comrades suitable for the position.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the publication of the women's column in the Yiddish daily had been discontinued.<sup>43</sup> In May 1922, it was the turn of the Central Committee of the Minsk Zhenotdel to complain about the lack of continuity in the publication of women's pages in *Veker* as well as in the Russian-language *Zvezda* (The Star), the organ of the CPB. Not satisfied

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<sup>38</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 225, l. 9.

<sup>39</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 103, l. 88. See, also, GAMO, f. 12 (Minsk District Committee of the CP(b)B), op. 1, d. 164, ll. 36-39.

<sup>40</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 64, l. 161. For examples on how the Zhenotdel and the Evseksiia collaborated in organizing both Jewish and general women's conferences, see GAMO, f. 591 (Records of the Local Offices of the Communist Party of Belorussia, Minsk Province and City, 1922-1925), op. 1, d. 22, ll. 3-5, 12.

<sup>41</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 64, ll. 38, 139.

<sup>42</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 64, l. 9.

<sup>43</sup> RGASPI, f. 445, op. 1, d. 64, ll. 38, 139.

with the attention given to the “women’s question,” the Zhenotdel accused the editors of both newspapers (most likely men) of disregarding Party instructions.<sup>44</sup>

The tension between theory and practice (so inherent in the Bolshevik experiment) plays out in a particularly vibrant way in the history of Jewish women under the Soviets. Many men viewed with resentment, or at least with indifference, the work of the Zhenotdel and in fact believed that women should carry on raising children, cooking and housekeeping. Therefore, the attempt to transform women into “agents of Revolution” and channels of Sovietization often jarred with the way in which men imagined Jewish women. Party men in particular pictured women-wives-mothers as home-actors rather than participants in the public arena.

On March 8, 1923, for example, the Minsk Party agencies organized lectures, meetings and concerts throughout the city to celebrate International Women’s Day. During the program held in the Minsk Club Profintern (Internatsional Profsoiuzov, or International of Labor Unions), the Food Industry Workers’ Union nominated Fruma Shteiman “hero of labor” (*geroina truda*). The congratulatory speech described her as a “devoted and productive worker.” Employed in the tobacco industry for over 35 years, Fruma had been arrested twice by the Tsarist police because of her political activities and had served on the Executive Committee of the tobacco workers union from 1905 to 1918.<sup>45</sup> Her work experience, her devotion to the trade union and the revolutionary cause, and the degree of her political awareness prompted this laudatory tribute. And while the speech gave absolute priority to Fruma’s accomplishment as a worker and committed revolutionary, it made no mention of the private sphere of the home, more specifically her marital status and possible role of mother.

This idealization of Fruma’s behavior was part of the attempt to create role models for Jewish women, expand their contribution to the building of socialism and boost their commitment to Communism. This ideal image, however, strongly clashed with the widespread attitude that Communist men showed vis-à-vis the “women’s question.” Party-men, Jews and non-Jews alike, viewed the existence of the Zhenotdel with scorn. Communists often referred to the Zhenotdel as the “*bab-kom*” or “*tsentro-baba*,”<sup>46</sup> baba being a derogatory Russian term for woman. In 1926, at a meeting of Jewish women in Minsk, Shmuel Agursky, member of the Minsk Jewish Communist elite, praised the Women’s Department and snidely concluded, “You see how much we Communist men have

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<sup>44</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 569, ll. 9-10.

<sup>45</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 799, l. 2.

<sup>46</sup> See Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 111.

done for you - we even have an organ designed especially for women!"<sup>47</sup> Agursky's sexual remark was a joke at the expense of the Zhenotdel.

### The New Female Political Elite

The Soviet political system created a new category for all women interested in participating in the political arena.<sup>48</sup> The so-called "*delegatka*," or delegate, was a woman who, elected by other women, coordinated propaganda work on behalf of the Zhenotdel among the women of a specific agency or factory in which she worked. Because of the specific demographic profile of Minsk, and the higher level of literacy of the Jewish population compared to the Belorussians and Russians in the city, most delegates were Jewish. Ideally, the *delegatka* participated in the social and political life of the factory and became a member of one of the two Central Workers' Clubs in Minsk, the Jewish Bronislaw Grosser Club<sup>49</sup> or the general Profintern Club. The woman delegate also held a card, or *delegatskaia kartochka*, considered an official Party document, that was supposed to be with her at all times.<sup>50</sup> Delegates met on a regular basis to discuss topics related to women's everyday life: hygiene, children, wedding laws, orphaned children, unemployment, religion, nationality policy and, in the case of Jewish women, the significance of Yiddish schools.<sup>51</sup>

Delegates were also responsible for monitoring the social conditions of other women. In 1925, two delegates investigated the case of a petition submitted to the Zhenotdel against a *melamed*, or religious teacher, accused of mistreating his mother. As it turned out, the *melamed* had never abused the mother. Rather, because of his occupation as a Hebrew teacher (virtually banned by the Soviets in their hounding of religion) he lived with the family, including his mother, in abject poverty. The 63-year-old woman had turned to the delegates asking them to help her get social security.<sup>52</sup> Finally, delegates were expected to collaborate in producing special literature for women, such as political brochures and wall-newspapers, and participate in the literary and political circles organized for women in the city clubs.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 135.

<sup>48</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 578, ll. 13-15; NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 580, l. 1. See also, NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 572, l. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Named Grosser after the legendary Bundist leader from Warsaw, the Central Jewish club in Minsk was renamed Lenin in 1925. It held a library and organized cultural and political activities (primarily in Yiddish). The club was liquidated in the mid-1930s.

<sup>50</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 692, l. 87.

<sup>51</sup> GAMO, f. 162 (Records of the Local Offices of the Communist Party of Belorussia, Minsk Province, Oktiabr' District, 1921-1930), op. 1, d. 201, l. 7.

<sup>52</sup> GAMO, f. 162, op. 1, d. 356, ll. 226, 229.

<sup>53</sup> On wall-newspapers and women delegates, see GAMO, f. 162, op. 1, d. 227, ll. 1, 13.

Born in 1897 to a stove setter and a housewife with a small shop on the outskirts of the city, Dina Rubin had never had the opportunity to study or be politically involved, spending most of her time at home taking care of her younger siblings. As she admitted, “the Revolution of 1917 found me completely ignorant about political life.” During the Polish occupation of Minsk, from mid-1919 to mid-1920, Dina began to attend political meetings.<sup>54</sup> Having joined the communist military organization in Ukraine, and then the Red Army back in Minsk, she eventually became “politically mature” (*politicheski razvita*). In 1924, the wives of the office workers in the Finance Department that employed her husband, elected Dina delegate to the Zhenotdel. As a delegate she became a member of the City Soviet, where she was active in the cooperative and juridical section, the director of a wall-newspaper, and secretary of a local factory’s committee.<sup>55</sup> Dina’s status of delegate spurred her to take on new political and social responsibilities.

Like Dina, many other Jewish women served prominently as delegates in Party cells and agencies throughout the city.<sup>56</sup> In April 1920, four of the five delegates elected in the Food Industry Union were Jewish: they were young - their ages ranging from 19 to 25, - most of them had no party affiliation and two were illiterate.<sup>57</sup> At the meeting of women workers members of the Union of Public Food Provision and Lodging (*Narodnoe pitanie i obshchezhitie*), held on April 20 of the same year, three of the four delegates elected were Jewish: Fonia Perelman (28), a member of the Bund, Chaia Pinkavskaia (30), a member of Poale-Tsion (or the Labor Zionist Party), and Zlata Mladinova (23), a candidate in the Communist Party; all three were semi-literate.<sup>58</sup> In December 1920, at the meeting of women workers in the Printing Industry, at least five of the six delegates elected were Jewish.<sup>59</sup> In December 1920, at the meeting of women workers in the Printing Industry, at least five of the six delegates elected

For a delegate meeting in Minsk, see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 537, ll. 1-5. On initiatives addressing specifically Jewish women, see GAMO, f. 12 (Minsk District Committee of the CP(b)B), op. 1, d. 164, l. 4. On the struggle against illiteracy in Yiddish, see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 361, ll. 49-51.

<sup>54</sup> During the Polish-Soviet war, the Polish Army occupied Minsk from August 1919 to July 1920. In the process of taking over the Northwestern region it carried out anti-Jewish pogroms. On Jewish life in Minsk under Polish occupation, see Arn Rozin, “Ha-yeshuv ha-yehudi be-Minsk, 1917-1941”, in *Minsk, ir va-em*, 15-17.

<sup>55</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 758, l. 238.

<sup>56</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 578, l. 44.

<sup>57</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 103, ll. 69, 70-73. Delegates were often women who had not necessarily received a formal education. At the 1927 Minsk Conference of Jewish Delegates, of the 35 delegates three were illiterate and the rest semi-literate; GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 558, ll. 6-14.

<sup>58</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 103, ll. 83-87.

<sup>59</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 103, ll. 117.

were Jewish.<sup>60</sup> In October 1924, 200 women delegates participated in the Minsk District Committee. Of these, 89 were Jewish, 34 Belorussian, and 63 Russian.<sup>61</sup> At the General City Women Delegates' Meeting, held on February 27, 1926, of the 353 delegates who participated, Jewish women were 170, Belorussian women were 125, Russian women 41, and Polish women 8.<sup>62</sup> These statistics are both a reflection of the Jewish demographics of the city as well as of the higher degree of urbanization, literacy and tradition of political activism among Jewish women compared to Belorussian women. It is therefore not surprising that in the earlier stages of the Zhenotdel in the city of Minsk, Jewish women exceeded the number of Belorussian women who engaged in Party work.<sup>63</sup>

### **Yiddish, Russian or Belorussian?**

In some organizations the only women who participated in Zhenotdel initiatives were Jewish. At the general meeting of the Construction Workers Union Party-cell, held on October 21, 1924, comrade Grebenchik pointed out that, "as far as the work among women goes, there is one problem in our union. And the problem is that work is conducted only among Jewish women..." Comrade Vasserman explained the shortcoming by underlining the absence of women of other nationalities (i.e. non-Jewish) in leadership positions in the Construction Workers' Union. For this reason, most women's meetings were held in Yiddish.<sup>64</sup> In order to attract non-Jewish women to propaganda work, the Party-cell decided to divide the delegates of the Construction Workers' Union into two groups. One would operate in Yiddish and the other in Russian (interestingly, Yiddish is mentioned as the first language.) This plan was not implemented until the following year.

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<sup>60</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 103, ll. 117.

<sup>61</sup> One delegate was Polish and three were of unspecified nationality; see NARB, f. 42 (Narkompros BSSR), op. 1, d. 228, l. 90. According to another document, during that same month Jewish women were 100 out of 200; see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 166, ll. 11-14. At the 1924 conference, of the 275 delegates elected in the City district, 129 were Jewish, 94 Belorussian, 32 Russian, 18 Polish and 2 Ukrainian; see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 334, l. 27. In 1928, at the Delegates' City Assembly, of the 257 delegates elected, 106 were Jewish and 11 were Belorussian (there were also 14 Poles, 17 Russians, two Letts and two Lithuanians); see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1006, l. 82.

<sup>62</sup> Of the Jewish women delegates, 85 were workers and 47 workers' wives; of the Belorussian women delegates, 44 were workers and 25 workers' wives. GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 321, ll. 2-4.

<sup>63</sup> In 1928-1929, Belorussian women constituted the majority of the delegates in the Minsk District, but not in the city. See GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1123, ll. 1, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Jews were a little over 50% of the members of the Construction Workers' Union; GAMO, f. 42, op. 1, d. 228, ll. 90, 95-98.



In October 1925, bi-monthly meetings for women took place in Yiddish and in Russian on rotation. But Jewish women were still more active than Belorussian and Russian women: women's meetings had an average attendance of 200 women; of these, 150 were Jewish. Of the eighteen Zhenotdel delegates elected in the union, fourteen were Jewish women.<sup>65</sup> Six of the eighteen delegates worked in the Russian language group, and twelve in the Yiddish group. In spite of the organization of Russian-language circles to liquidate illiteracy and teach politics to Russian women, and despite the Belorussianization campaign,<sup>66</sup> in December 1926, the Construction Workers' Union conducted propaganda work among women entirely in Yiddish.<sup>67</sup> In February 1927, the Party-cell of the same union still criticized the weak involvement in propaganda work of Belorussian and Russian women, emphasizing that throughout 1926 only Jewish women attended women's yearly meetings.<sup>68</sup> At the Party-cell meeting of September 6, 1927, three delegates for the Zhenotdel read their reports. Two out of three were in Yiddish: comrade Grilman spoke about health issues and comrade Forin about excursions to local factories, activities of women's *kruzhki* (circles) and issues related to children's playgrounds.<sup>69</sup>

The debate on whether Yiddish or Russian and Belorussian should be used to enlighten Jewish women accompanied the Zhenotdel activities from the very beginning. At the Evseksiia meeting of June 10, 1921, the Zhenotdel instructor responsible for work among Jewish women complained about the use of Russian in unions with a large percentage of women who did not understand the Russian language. This had a

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<sup>65</sup> See GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 359, l. 10; GAMO, f. 37 (Minsk Municipal District Committee CP(b)B, 1920-1932), op. 1, d. 229, ll. 3-4, 16.

<sup>66</sup> The Belorussianization campaign, or *Belorusizatsiia*, was part of the general Soviet nationality policy and the *korenizatsiia* – or indigenization – campaign to favour the use of Belorussian and Ukrainian (over Russian) in the political agencies and cultural institutions of the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics. The campaign to neutralize the authority of Russian, which had come to symbolize the oppressive nationalism of the Tsarist Empire, the political foe of the Bolshevik regime, and to gain the support of non-Russian national minorities was launched in the first half of the 1920s. For more on the Soviet nationality policy and the *korenizatsiia* campaign, see Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*, (Westview Press: Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, 1991); and Tedd Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). For an assessment of the achievements and failures of the *Belorusizatsiia* campaign in the 1920s, see Arkady Zeltser, "Belorusizatsiia 1920-kh gg.: dostizheniia i neudachi", in *Evrei Belarusi: istoriia i kul'tura*, III-IV, (Minsk, 1998), 60-92.

<sup>67</sup> According to one document, for every 100 Jewish women active in political life, there were about 5-6 Russian women politically active. GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 229, ll. 50-52, 202, 242-244.

<sup>68</sup> GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 229, l. 289.

<sup>69</sup> GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 229, ll. 384-385.

negative effect on the participation of Jewish women in the delegates' meetings, argued the instructor. As a solution, she proposed holding meetings of Jewish women separately. While initially rejected, her proposal was reviewed and shortly thereafter accepted.<sup>70</sup> The Zhenotdel winter schedule for 1923 included as its first point the division of general delegates meeting into two groups: one would operate in Yiddish, the other one in Russian.<sup>71</sup>

In some instances, Yiddish received a greater prominence in general women's conferences, as language and ethnicity became closely intertwined. On August 17, 1924, the City District coordinators of women's work debated the "painful" (*bolezenniy*) question of conducting propaganda work in Yiddish only, the implication being that the exclusive use of the Jewish language left out Belorussian and Russian women. The head of the Zhenotdel justified the situation explaining that in the beginning meetings had been held in two languages, Yiddish and Russian. But this turned out to be impractical in so far as each lecture had to be read twice, even when "there were only ten Russian [women present]." As a result, the meetings were now held in Yiddish only.<sup>72</sup>

With the gradual implementation of the Belorussianization campaign, a new language of propaganda emerged in women's activities, Belorussian. In the work plan for September 1927-May 1928, the City District women's meeting resolved to divide the delegates into three distinct groups that would operate in Belorussian, Russian and Yiddish, respectively. General meetings would be held in Russian, with the intention to eventually shift them to Belorussian, once the Jewish and Russian delegates had become more familiar with the Belorussian language. When the City District *zhen-organizatory*, or organizers of women's work, met in December 1927 to debate the status of the bi-weekly *Belorusskaia rabotnitsa i selianka*, or *The Belorussian Woman Worker and Peasant*, one Rivkina argued that the journal should be published in Russian, and not in Belorussian, as a large segment of women (mostly Jewish and Russian) did not understand the Belorussian language.<sup>73</sup> In compliance with the Soviet nationality policy in the BSSR however, the bi-weekly's language eventually shifted to Belorussian, and by the end of the 1920s most general women's conference were no longer held in Yiddish.

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<sup>70</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 430, l. 45. For debates over the use of Yiddish at Jewish women's conferences, see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 166, ll. 24-25. On the use of Yiddish for activities organized by the heavily Jewish Sewing Industry Workers Union, see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 322, ll. 4-5.

<sup>71</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 692, ll. 87, 145-146, 161.

<sup>72</sup> GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 22, ll. 25-26, 34-36. On Yiddish and delegates' meetings, see also NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 799, ll. 37-40.

<sup>73</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 828, ll. 79-81.

## A Soviet Jewish Institution

In many ways, the Women's Department of the Belorussian Communist Party acted as a Jewish institution, especially during the early part of the 1920s. First, most of the women who played a key role in the agency were Jewish. On February 16, 1921, the secretary of the Zhenotdel was Vainer.<sup>74</sup> At the end of that same month, Sonia Kremer took on the chairmanship of the Women's Department. In May 1921, Kremer was replaced by Mariia Reiser; Efroimskaia was appointed secretary, while Meliakhovitskaia, Chaia Kramnik and Sara Braze became instructors, or responsible for educating women workers employed in city factories and Soviet organizations.<sup>75</sup> When looking through the protocols of the 1922 and 1923 meetings of the Central Committee of the Zhenotdel of BSSR, it is difficult to find a non-Jewish name,<sup>76</sup> so much so that from a demographic vantage point, the Minsk Zhenotdel bore a stronger resemblance with the Evseksiia and other Jewish agencies operating in Yiddish in the city than with general Party organizations.

While it is hard to trace the cultural background of the Jewish women who became prominent in the Zhenotdel, it is possible to assume that most of them had been active in the Bund before the Revolution. By attracting hundreds of young Jewish women to its ranks, the Jewish party served as an important venue for the politicization of Jewish women, most of whom would have hardly considered so quickly and eagerly to participate in political and social life without their previous Bundist experience. In other words, the Bund served as a stepping stone into Soviet society and political work for Jewish women, perhaps even more than it did for Jewish men. After all, women active in socialist politics were atypical and stood out from the masses of womankind by virtue of their commitment to socialism, as well as their political and organizational activities. The high percentage of Jewish women active in the Zhenotdel persisted throughout the 1920s and up until 1930 when the Party deemed the women's question solved and liquidated the

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<sup>74</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 219, l. 2.

<sup>75</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 171, ll. 1. In 1922, there were four members in the Central Committee of the Zhenotdel: the chairperson, the agency's secretary, the instructor responsible for the district, and the instructor responsible for propaganda work in Yiddish. About the structure of the Moscow Zhenotdel, see Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*, 334-335.

<sup>76</sup> The women who attended the meeting of the Women's Department Central Committee on September 15, 1922, were Shabashova, Kontorovich, Galperin, Begun, Matses, Kreindel, Jakubovich, Kitaichik and Meliakhovitskaia. The one non-Jewish name was that of comrade Shabashova; see NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 568, ll. 1-3, 10. Jewish women leaders were also in charge of the Women's Section of the District Committee, which had a smaller percentage of Jewish women-workers and workers' wives; see NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 508, ll. 22-23, 51-52.

Department.<sup>77</sup>

Second, the Zhenotdel often voiced specifically Jewish concerns and interests. At the General Meeting of the Zhenotdel of the Minsk Tobacco Factory, held on August 15, 1921, to argue in favor of the struggle against clericalism Meliakhovitskaia referred to a trial organized against a Minsk rabbi. In a fusion of feminism and anti-Judaism, she stated that “the Holy Scriptures contain all kinds of... prohibitions for women... But the trial showed that in a proletarian state there will no longer be any limitations for women, as women will also be free... and... equal to men.”<sup>78</sup> Following the General Meeting of the Women Workers of the EPO Bakery, organized by the Zhenotdel and held on September 19, 1921, comrade Gordon, (a woman), read a few chapters from Sholem Aleichem’s work *Fun Yarid* (From the Market).<sup>79</sup> To celebrate March 8, the Zhenotdel organized in 1922, in collaboration with the Central Bureau of the CPB and the Communist Youth League, or Komsomol, a delegates’ meeting devoted to the historical importance of International Women’s Day and an evening with a concert-meeting in Yiddish.<sup>80</sup> On the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Russian Revolution of 1905, at the ceremonial delegates’ meeting held on December 18, 1925, one of the two speakers was comrade Orman, wife of a construction worker. In remembering 1905, she described the dramatic events of a pogrom. She was a worker at the time. As she left the factory and ran into the street, scenes of horror passed before her eyes: she recalled the panic, the destruction, the dead children and the burial of the victims.<sup>81</sup> Together with the above-mentioned examples, the case of Orman is indicative of how prominently Jewish themes loomed in the activities of the Zhenotdel in the 1920s, especially when compared to the absence of a specific Russian or Belorussian focus.

Third, the places in which the agency convened its general meetings were often Jewish or formerly Jewish, as in the case of the Choral Synagogue/House of Culture. On June 8, 1924, which was also the first day of the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, the Second City Conference of Women Workers and Workers’ Wives took place in the former

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<sup>77</sup> For some statistical information about the role of Jewish women in the Minsk Zhenotdel in 1927, see NARB, f. 4, op. 9, d. 93, ll. 1, 4-5. On the reasons that led to the dissolution of the Zhenotdel see Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia. Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism*. See, in particular, 341-345. As Stites points out, the Zhenotdel, which by the end of the decade had lost much of its influence, was weakened by the lack of financial support.

<sup>78</sup> During this meeting, Meliakhovitskaia also spoke about the Heder, the Jewish religious school. NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 417, l. 101.

<sup>79</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 417, ll. 28, 35.

<sup>80</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 570, l. 17. On Jewish concerns in general women meetings see also NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 692, l. 87.

<sup>81</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 321, ll. 45-46.

synagogue. Besides general political questions, debates about the creation of a new Communist life-style and the protection of the health of mothers and children, the organizers read two reports at the conference; one of the reports concerned the activities of the Jewish Section of the City Department of Education (GORONO).<sup>82</sup> To celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the Minsk periodical *Belorusskaia rabotnitsa i selianka*, in September 1925, the Zhenotdel arranged the screening of a propaganda film about the use of chemical weapons in war. The event took place in the former synagogue on October 31.<sup>83</sup> On March 29, 1926, during Passover, Zhenotdel organizers held the Fourth Conference of Women Workers and Workers' Wives in the Jewish Workers' Club.<sup>84</sup> The Zhenotdel leadership convened general women conferences in Jewish places precisely because of their Jewish identity and the Jewishness of a large segment of the audience.

The topics debated at the women conferences and delegates' meetings also reflected the political concerns of the day. Together with the war-scare and the fear of an imminent attack on the USSR, which took hold of Soviet society in 1927 and led to the organization of militarization courses also for women, in the second half of the 1920s the issue of anti-Semitism and chauvinism emerged regularly in women's meetings and conferences. In 1926, the Minsk Zhenotdel warned against the ethnic tensions existing among delegates of the Education Workers' Union and the Food Industry Union. This animosity took the shape of a linguistic strife. During the general city conferences, some Food Industry workers accused all Jews of "being rich and exploiting workers," and when Jewish delegates took the floor in Yiddish some workers hailed them with bellows, demanding that they speak Russian.<sup>85</sup> At a 1928 delegates' meeting eight women spoke, six in Russian and two in Yiddish (the national identity of the women who addressed the meeting in Russian is unknown). As a worker's wife took the floor in Yiddish, part of the audience welcomed her speech with great excitement and enthusiasm. The official Party-line viewed this reaction as the unhealthy expression of anti-Soviet Jewish chauvinism.<sup>86</sup> In late 1928, the Minshvei Party-cell resolved to include debates on anti-Semitism and Jewish chauvinism during its women's meetings. On March 18, 1929, the same Party-cell considered expelling from the Party comrade Zusina because her conduct at the work-plant was unbecoming a Communist. One

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<sup>82</sup> GAMO, f. 591 (Records of the Local Offices of the Communist Party of Belorussia, Minsk Province and City, 1922-1925), op. 1, d. 13, l. 19.

<sup>83</sup> NARB, f. 4, op. 9, d. 14, l. 252.

<sup>84</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 376, ll. 24-25; GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 321, ll. 56-58, 63, 65. About general women meetings held in the Jewish club see, also, GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 62-63.

<sup>85</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 537, ll. 1-5.

<sup>86</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 539, ll. 69; see, also, GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1013, ll. 5-10.

Party-cell member argued that refusing to work together with Osipova, a Russian woman, Zusina had behaved as a Jewish chauvinist. A second Party-cell member justified Zusina's behavior and accused the Russian woman worker of making anti-Semitic remarks. Following a lengthy debate, the Party-cell resolved that Zusina had neglected to renounce her Bundist past, which affected her behavior and misled her from being a good communist.<sup>87</sup> She was expelled from the Party.

### **Women Against Tradition**

While the Jewish political establishment scorned the archetypal image of female backwardness, it also celebrated women's leading voices in the Jewish Cultural Revolution of the late 1920s. After all, if the most unenlightened element on the Jewish street managed to reject the old ways and served as a vanguard force in the struggle against the previous order then every Jew still devoted to religious practice could do the same. Dated February 22, 1928 and entitled "Jewish Working Women against the *Yarmulke* [Traditional Jewish male covering]" the first public petition addressed to the Minsk City Soviet to boycott the production of kosher meat in Minsk was read at a women's conference and signed by Jewish women delegates. The petition stated the following:

In the course of many years, rabbis and *shobtim* [ritual slaughterers]... enslaved women workers and lived at the expense of their last earned kopek. The October Revolution...guided women towards a new way of life (*byt*). But remains of the old mold, such as the rabbi and the *shobet*, are still trying to fool the working woman, forcing her to buy kosher meat... We, working women...are appalled by the fact that the Minsk City Soviet has not taken, until today, any measures against this evil. We, working women, declare that we do not need kosher meat and we ask the City Soviet to take the necessary steps and help us liberate our proletarian way of life from the remains of the old mold as quickly as possible.<sup>88</sup>

The women delegates who signed this petition were members of an elite Soviet organization, and one can presume that their anti-religious, anti-kosher sentiments were sincere. A member of the *Evseksiia* may have suggested to the conference that it adopt the resolution, but this group of women would have eagerly agreed to such a suggestion. Indeed, activist Soviet Jewish women were ashamed of the widespread image of Jewish women as bearers of backwardness and superstition, and were eager to dissociate themselves from it. To a certain extent, they may have

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<sup>87</sup> GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 7, ll. 43-44, 80.

<sup>88</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, ll. 43-44.

accepted and internalized the negative image of their own group, and compensated for their “guilt” with Communist zeal.

In a similar petition dated December 1928, women served again as pioneers in the war against the vestiges of Jewish traditional life. At the Oktiaber district women’s meeting, the Zhenotdel delegates appealed to the Minsk City Soviet asking to requisition the synagogue on Liakhovskii Street. This was the first of a long sequence of public appeals by Soviet citizens to confiscate synagogues and houses of prayer in Minsk. The petition stated that, “[we] mothers, women workers and housewives need rooms for the establishment of nurseries ...we ask the City Soviet to...seize the synagogue building from the union of believers and hand it over to the nurseries.” The director of the Zhenotdel CPB, Shnaider, signed the appeal.<sup>89</sup> It is worth mentioning that this petition was embellished by the use of social categories that do not usually appear in Soviet documents of the time. While generally defined as “women workers,” “workers’ wives” or even “artisans’ wives,” here women also identified themselves through the more traditional “bourgeois” categories of “mother” and “housewife,” which described only their marital status and not their socio-economic background. In February 1930, for example, a group of Jewish women addressed the City Soviet soliciting the confiscation of the Nemiga house of prayer and *mikvah* and their conversion into a communal kitchen, a nursery and a reading room. They identified themselves only as “women workers” and “workers’ wives.”<sup>90</sup>

Encouraged to be part of the vanguard of the Cultural Revolution on the Jewish street, women were called on to participate in the campaign to collect gold, silver, iron and copper, thus supporting the industrialization and collectivization campaign and fulfilling the First Five Year Plan.<sup>91</sup> The Soviet Union launched its gold-campaign in 1930, five years before Mussolini urged the female citizens of Fascist Italy to donate their golden wedding bands to the motherland in order to boost the country’s economy.<sup>92</sup> In the early months of that year, the Minsk Jewish daily *Oktiaber* published several articles praising Jewish women who donated their Sabbath silver candle-sticks and goblets to the Revolution. So that in February 1930, the workers’ wives of the Minsk shoemakers’ collective bequeathed their religious objects and samovars to the Industrialization

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<sup>89</sup> GAMO, f. 48 (Administrative Department, Executive Committee of the Minsk Area Council of Workers, Peasants and Red Army Deputies, 1922-1930), op. 1, d. 63, l. 21.

<sup>90</sup> Lisa Eydlberg, “Di mikve makht kalye di luft”, *Oktiaber*, n. 43, 21 February (1930): 3.

<sup>91</sup> The First Five Year Plan was launched by Stalin in 1928 to strengthen the country’s economy. Also known as the Great Turn, or *Velikii perelom*, this economic policy consisted in abandoning the New Economic Policy (NEP) and introducing collectivization in the countryside and industrialization in the cities.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Petra Terhoeven, *Oro alla patria. Donne, guerra e propaganda nella giornata della fede fascista*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

Fund, openly stating that they wished to serve as an example for the workers' wives of other shoe factories in Minsk.<sup>93</sup> During the campaign, brigades of women and school-children would go from house to house and collect religious objects to donate to the socialist cause. The Yiddish poet Sore Kahan celebrated Jewish women who supported the industrialization process by donating their jewelry and ceremonial objects to the Party, and wrote: "Ear-rings and rings, candle-sticks, samovars, the Kiddush-goblet and the fish pan, take them, remove them, comrades, may it be a contribution to brace our country."<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

By the end of the NEP era (the New Economic Policy inaugurated by Lenin in 1921, with somewhat less stifling political and economic restrictions for Soviet citizens) communist work among women lost its momentum and became relegated to the margins of the Party's political initiatives. Questions about women all but disappeared from the protocols of the *Evseksiia* meetings. While articles related to Jewish women continued to appear in the Yiddish press, the number of women's columns declined steadily and appeared only on rare occasions. In June 1928, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the establishment of a women's organization in the Union of the Belorussian Crafts Industry, the *Evseksiia* planned to issue wall-newspapers in women's cooperatives of Minsk and publish a woman's column in *Oktober*, the Yiddish organ of the CPB.<sup>95</sup> This plan was never realized. At the general Party meeting of the heavily Jewish factory *Oktober*, held on February 22-23, 1930, comrade Berchanskaia, a woman, probably Jewish, complained about the absence of political activities among women at a time when the number of women workers and workers' wives, who participated in the life of the factory, was growing. To her disappointment, the conclusions of the Control Committee (*Proverkom*) of the Party-cell included almost no reference to future Party work among women.<sup>96</sup> This might have been an indication of the imminent liquidation of the *Zhenotdel* in Minsk, a process initiated by the Secretariat of the Central Committee in Moscow

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<sup>93</sup> See "Bentsh-laykhter far der industrializatsye", *Oktober*, n. 48, 27 February (1930): 3. See also "Di kustarke: tsuhilf der sotsialistisher boyung", *Oktober*, n. 37, 16 January (1930): 3; "Arbeter un arbetndike zamlen mesh, kuper, tsirung farn industrializatsye-fond", *Oktober*, n. 41, 18 February (1930): 3; *Idltshika*, "A 66-yorike horepashnitse git op ire laykhter, menoyre in industrializatsye-fond", *Oktober*, n. 71, 27 March (1930): 3.

<sup>94</sup> Sore Kahan, "Tsum 8tn Mart", *Oktober*, n. 56, 8 March (1930): 4.

<sup>95</sup> GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1010, l. 13.

<sup>96</sup> GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 87-89. See also GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 11, ll. 69-70. During the 1928 Party-cell meeting of *Minsbvei* for the election of women delegates, of the 64 delegates elected 55 were Jewish (six Belorussian and one German); see GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1006, ll. 74-75, 83.



in late 1929, primarily, but not exclusively, for lack of funds. Launched in 1929, Stalin's Great Turn confirmed the Bolshevik' original intention to ban every form of separatism within the Party that could impinge upon the united proletarian cause. At the end of 1930, the Party closed down the Jewish Section of the Communist Party as well as the Women's Department of the Communist Party, deeming both agencies a useless threat to Communist harmony. And in the spirit of grandiose Soviet mythmaking Stalin declared the Jewish question solved and women's liberation achieved. For all intents and purposes, the abolishment of the Zhenotdel marked the end of political and educational work among women conducted by an official body devoted specifically to that goal. The alleged solution to the woman's question led to the virtual disappearance in post-1930 Party documents of the category "woman," which had always been included in statistical data collected during the 1920s.<sup>97</sup>

The most remarkable achievement of the Zhenotdel on the Jewish street of Minsk resulted in the creation of a new elite of Jewish women eager to partake in the building of the socialist system and educate other women in the spirit of Communism and equality with men. Mostly untouched by politics in the past, they now learned the basics of political and cultural organization, monitoring factory conditions, fighting against female unemployment and prostitution, and teaching literacy classes. Moreover, Jewish women who became active in the Zhenotdel could act simultaneously as communists, Jews and women, interweaving these three identities in a new distinctive unity, harmonious and contentious at the same time. Finally, for the first time Jewish women were able to attain social mobility through the Party and not through their fathers or husbands. For many Jewish women, becoming a delegate and joining the Women's Department was the first stage in their rise to high positions of responsibility and power in society. But female empowerment eventually met and collided with male empowerment, as Jewish men who found Bolshevism exhilarating also viewed Jewish women as dangerous competitors for power.

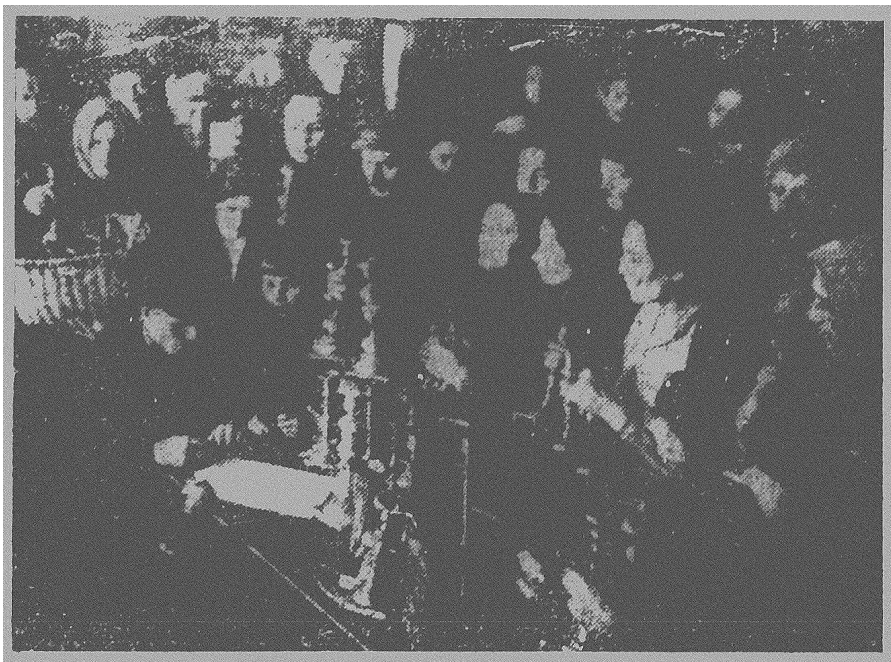
The clash between the theory of idealizing women as selfless warriors for the socialist cause, and the practice of confining – or wishing to confine them - to the realm of the home, considerably affected their lives and experiences. Perhaps in no other Jewish community in the world at the time do we find such a fierce tension between a violent push for women's emancipation espoused by Soviet discourse and the conservative thrust to keep them out of the public sphere as we do in the case of Soviet Jewish women. The tension between theory and practice was exacerbated by the encounter between the Bolshevik experiment, or

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<sup>97</sup> In a similar way, the category "Jewish," always included in the statistical data available for the 1920s, disappeared after the dissolution of the Evseksiia, in 1930.

the most revolutionary and brutal attempt to implement social engineering from above, and Russian Jewry, a traditional and patriarchal Jewry when compared to other Jewish communities in Western and Central Europe at the time. While modernization of Russian Jewish women took place in pre-revolutionary times, the Soviet regime's insistence on equality accelerated changes to a dizzying speed.





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