

**Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 276**

by *Jörg Baberowski*

Until it was conquered and destroyed by German troops in 1941, Minsk was a Jewish city. Minsk was, moreover, the only Jewish city to become capital of a Soviet Socialist Republic. Under the Tsarist regime, Jews had been a discriminated and victimized minority. They had to live within the confines of the Pale of Settlement and were largely prevented from studying in Russia's state-run universities. Whether religious or secular, traditional or assimilated in their outlook, Jews were categorically banned from state and civil service in the Russian empire. All this changed with the rise to power of the Bolsheviks. Bans were lifted and discrimination vanished. Minsk, formerly a town inhabited by Jews, turned into a Jewish city. Elissa Bemporad's study of Jewish Minsk traces this development in remarkable depth and asks: How did the Jews become a Soviet people?

Despite the fact that only a few number of Minsk's Jews were true sympathizers of the Bolsheviks, the city's Jewish population closely tied their fate to the Communist revolution. Threatened by antisemitism and pogroms all around, the Jews had few choices but to opt for the Bolshevik cause: a victory of their Polish, Ukrainian, and "White" enemies would have equaled the continuation of pogrom violence and the prolongation of ethnic discrimination. Hence, the Jewish revolutionaries sided with the Bolsheviks. They made Lenin's revolution into their own revolution. The actual experience of Minsk's Jews with Bolshevik power, however, was quite ambivalent. Lenin's comrades held neither religion nor trade in very high esteem. Thus, Jewish tradespeople were persecuted and disenfranchised. Synagogues, schools, and other religious institutions were forced to close their gates. While almost half of Minsk's Jews worked as petty traders and craftsmen, the Bolshevik regime came to view Jewish entrepreneurship an adversary activity of "enemies" of their non-capitalist state. As a consequence, thousands of Jews left the Soviet Union for good or tried to begin a different life with a different identity in a different Soviet city. Statistics provide the evidence: By 1928, Jews made up only 41 per cent of the overall population of Minsk. Under these circumstances, Jewish political and social activism significantly declined. The organizations of the Bund and various Zionist groups had been merged with the Communist Party as early as 1921.

According to Bemporad, Jews nevertheless gained more than they lost under the Bolshevik regime. In 1927, more than a third of Minsk University's student body was of Jewish origin. Soviet state agencies hired rising numbers of Jews to work as administrators and functionaries. Controlled by former Bundists until the early 1930s (who also ran the city's leading newspapers), Minsk's Communist Party organizations

became the homeland of politically active Jews. For the first time in Russian history, the Jews were not only equal but privileged citizens of the state. Among others, this cultural change manifested itself in the symbolic landscape of Minsk: In the city center a statue was erected to honor Hirsh Lekert, the unfortunate assassin of Vilno's Governor, Victor von Wahl, in 1902. The memorial to the Jewish hero was placed on the very same pedestal that had previously carried a statue of Alexander II.

The Bolshevik revolution was also a revolution in political communication. Thus, one of the main objectives of the Bolsheviks was to adapt public administration and school education to the local languages. All over the Soviet Union, the revolution was to speak in the native language of the local people. In 1919, Yiddish became the official language in Belorussia: it was to be used in courts, in schools and in the Party. While Belorussian was not viewed as an equal alternative, the decision for Yiddish had numerous foes. Both, peasants and non-Jewish intellectuals despised this decision because only few people in their environment spoke or wrote Yiddish. Even within the Communist Party, Yiddish was gradually replaced by Russian, the language of Soviet social climbers and careerists.

In her book, Bemporad devotes two chapters to the Bolshevik Cultural Revolution. She meticulously describes how Jewish life in Minsk was changed by this chain of events in the late 1920s. More synagogues were closed, shochets were persecuted, and Jewish communists were put on show trials for "inappropriate demeanor." In many ways comparable to the behavior of Soviet Muslim Communists, Jewish party members tried to walk the tight rope when "speaking Bolshevik" on the one hand while on the other hand retaining their Jewish culture. They continued to eat kosher, had their sons circumcised, and married according to tradition. When a campaign was organized in Minsk for the emancipation of women from male patriarchic oppression, some women acted as defenders of tradition and culture. The half-hearted campaign could not change rigid gender and family relations within the Jewish community. Here, Bemporad observes an intriguing Soviet paradox when she writes that "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" (p 154).

At first glance, the 1937-38 state terror campaigns in Minsk resembled the pattern that the Moscow party leadership and secret police deployed in other parts of the Soviet Union. Former Bundists and Zionists were accused of spying on behalf of foreign powers, swiftly arrested and briskly executed. Belorussia is likely to be the Soviet republic where more Communists were executed than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. In the borderland republic, Jews and Poles could easily be stigmatized and killed as "agents" of the Lithuanian and Polish state, respectively.

Bemporad spares only a few pages to describe the events of the Great Terror. The emphasis of her argument lays somewhere else: According to her, Jews remained loyal

towards the Soviet cause despite state terror and mass executions. Moreover, in the course of the 1930s Jews had made the Soviet Union their homeland. Backed by the official propaganda, it was possible to fight antisemitism and to battle anti-Fascism. The Soviet way of life proved to be a true alternative. No one did feel any contradiction in being, at the same time, Jewish and Communist because the Soviet Union was the country that protected Jews from antisemitism. Supposedly, this fact outweighed the amount of oppression that the Soviet Jews experienced throughout the 1930s. 1937, Bemporad asserts, was not 1947.

The public display of loyalty by Jews towards the Soviet state did not escape the Polish and Belorussian inhabitants of Minsk. From their point of view, by the late 1930s Jews had turned into ardent supporters of a bloodthirsty dictatorship. Bemporad describes this tragic truth but shies away from thorough analysis. In her study, “real people” are mentioned rarely and named or described only now and then. When she cites examples of commitment and loyalty towards the Soviet state, she solely relies on materials from the Soviet official press. Above all, Bemporad does not provide a convincing interpretation of the interplay between Jewish loyalty and antisemitism within the Soviet Union. The annihilation of the Jews in 1941 and 1942, however, was not only a consequence of Nazi obsessions with radical extermination but also a product of Bolshevik minority policies. Regrettably, Bemporad does not treat this crucial nexus with due attention.

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