

Inna Shtakser, *The Making of Jewish Revolutionaries in the Pale of Settlement: Community and Identity during the Russian Revolution and its Immediate Aftermath, 1905-07* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 205.

by Polly Zavadvker

In this first brief monograph, Inna Shtakser explores how young, working-class Jews subjectively experienced the 1905 Russian Revolution. The study's innovative approach and topic contribute to the historiography of Russia's working class and its Jewish minority in particular, and the sociology of social movements more broadly. Its reflections on the internal dynamics of radicalization are also particularly timely. It raises the questions: how did those young, working-class Jews in late imperial Russia feel about revolution? What compelled them, as workers, to adopt revolutionary identities, sometimes at the expense of becoming isolated from their families and communities? And how did their feelings about revolutionary socialism lead them to undertake actions in collective groups, such as strikes, protests and self-defense of fellow Jews during pogroms in 1905-06?

The protagonists of this study are poor and largely uneducated Jews born in the Pale of Settlement during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. During those years, the processes of economic industrialization in Russia and increasingly severe legal restrictions on Jews' residential and educational options produced a mass of impoverished Jewish workers. They bore grievances on two counts. As Jews, they faced discrimination as a national minority within the Russian Empire; and as poor and working-class Jews, they occupied the lowest rungs of the social ladder in the Jewish community. While scholars such as Jonathan Frankel, Yoav Peled, and Ezra Mendelsohn have focused on educated revolutionary leaders among Russian Jews, Shtakser is interested in uneducated Jewish workers. She discusses both those who joined Jewish revolutionary parties, including the Bund and Poalei Zion, as well as those who joined non-Jewish Social Democratic and Socialist Revolutionary parties.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe the backgrounds of young, poor Jews who adopted revolutionary identities. Because they lacked the financial means and social connections that wealthier Jews possessed and were necessary to obtain higher education, they often resorted to taking apprenticeships to learn crafts. In autobiographies and letters, young Jewish apprentices recounted experiences of physical abuse and exploitation at the hands of older co-

workers or employers. Then came a moment—perhaps a revolutionary idea gathered from reading, conversations, or observing others—when it was no longer possible or necessary to accept one’s lot. They realized they could run away, or fight back, pursue education on their own, and take steps to acquire dignity, security and legitimacy as workers. From that point, individual youth transformed their erstwhile passive feelings of despair and humiliation into active expressions of struggle and rebellion. They rebelled not only against their employers, but also against religion and community, including the social structure of their communities and the notion of what it meant to be Jewish. Their adoption of anarchist or socialist values compelled them to adopt a self-image as active, militant people.

A crucial point for Shtakser is that young Jewish workers did not aspire to earn a higher wage or obtain education as ends in themselves. Rather, they sought an entirely new status and image as respected and self-reliant individuals. Socialism appealed not only, and perhaps for them, not primarily to the intellect, but to the emotions. Related to this key idea, Shtakser discusses how poor young Jews’ emotional attachments to revolutionary ideals led them to create social circles where they found “an ideological and social framework that could provide them with emotional support”(5). Forming groups with like-minded youth buffered the isolation they might have otherwise experienced as they challenged traditional norms of behavior in their respective communities, such as early marriage, observing the Sabbath, and kashrut.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine how Jewish revolutionary youth acted on their feelings: they instigated strikes in the workplaces, organized self-defense units in their neighborhoods, produced revolutionary literature in Yiddish, and formed study circles. Shtakser argues that the impact of young Jewish workers’ radicalization can be gauged in their reaction to outbreak of pogroms following the 1905 Revolution. Compelled by feelings of moral outrage and pride, and the desire to demonstrate their identities as militant people and as Jews, the young revolutionaries raised money for weapons, learned to shoot, and went into the streets to fight pogromists. They did this despite having previously rejected and become estranged from the Jewish community’s established norms and authorities. Yet they achieved a modicum of respect from the community, for the pogroms of 1905-06 caught Jewish leaders unprepared. Young Jewish radicals earned reputations as protectors of Jews, and Shtakser suggests this is because as revolutionaries, they understood the language of violence. Self-defense units varied in their effectiveness: in Odessa, 5 of 13 members of a group were killed, the rest

wounded. In Bialystok, a self-defense group successfully stopped violence in one neighborhood. Regardless of the outcomes, self-defense members earned respect for their activism, and in this manner, fulfilled their goals of acquiring legitimacy in the Jewish community as workers and revolutionaries.

One of the most interesting aspects of this study is its sources. Shtakser closely read and cited from 105 autobiographies and 165 letters from two collections at the State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow. The autobiographies were written between 1924 and 1934, and submitted as part of membership applications to the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles. From 1921 to 1935 this organization provided health and employment benefits to aging revolutionaries who could prove they had spent time in exile or prison for their revolutionary activities, and demonstrated loyalty to the Soviet regime. Although the autobiographies were written with the intent to provide evidence of the applicants' revolutionary credentials, Shtakser insists they are reliable, not necessarily with regard to facts, but because the descriptions of subjective experience would have been authentic: "the autobiography writers knew that the readers and evaluators were their contemporaries who were also activists...[and] would be quick to sense a false note in self-presentation and point it out" (154).

Despite this study's original approach and subject matter, a number of weaknesses might be noted. The most problematic aspect of the book is the lack of basic demographic information, such as numbers of working-class young Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, how many of them became revolutionaries, and how many joined self-defense units in 1905. Although these data may not have been available in the autobiographies and letters, a more systematic or quantitative approach to the source base might have yielded tentative estimates or other significant categories. Stories drawn from autobiographies and letters are anecdotally strong, but they are frequently generalized to otherwise unsupported statements about significant social trends, such as the following: "most Jewish radicals married relatively late in life. Some, particularly women, did not marry at all" (50). In another instance, a very interesting table is given listing numbers and sizes of self-defense units in 1905. This is a valuable source of data and could have been explored in detail, but it receives little attention in the text. Similarly, I read the book eagerly anticipating to learn more about the history of the self-defense units, but the story is confined to the last 18 pages of the book. Given the centrality of self-defense for the author's argument about radicalization, one would have expected greater attention to this topic. These shortcomings, together with the rich source base that informs this study, suggest the need

Polly Zavadvker

for, and possibility of, additional research into this important, and timely subject.

Polly Zavadvker, University of Delaware

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