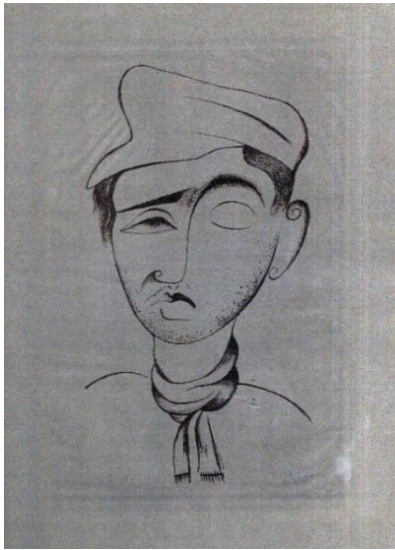


A Call for Papers

Per Aspera ad Astra: The Making of Soviet Jewish Selves

October 5th, 2023



Issachar Ber Ryback, Jünglingsporträt,

Jüdische Typen Aus Der Ukraine: Zwölf Original-Lithographien. Berlin: Essem, 1924
Courtesy of Klau Library, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

The beginnings of the Soviet Union saw a dramatic shift in rights, policy, and rhetoric toward non-Russian peoples. Many ethnic minorities that had been considered “aliens,” were newly recognized as equal citizens. The early years of fledgling Soviet rule were characterized by national-territorial questions and state subsidization of regional languages. Jews were one of the officially recognized minority groups, and Yiddish, the common tongue of Eastern European Jewry, became an official language of the Soviet Union. While language was standardized, the question of identity remained open ended, multifaceted, and polemic. Geographically, socially, and ideologically scattered, Soviet-Jewish identity was anything but uniform. Zionists, Yiddishists, territorialists, Bundists, socialists, and communists were equally invested in the question of national determination, with each group constructing



their own sense of self. Under nascent ideology and infrastructure, the Soviet Jew quickly assumed leading roles in the production and administration of power and culture. These early years, though marked by adversity, held the potential and promise for astronomical success. Following this brief cultural renaissance, Jewish culture—namely Yiddish language culture—was stifled by the arrival of high Stalinism, whose imperative of russification was ruthlessly enforced. To stay afloat amidst the perilously shifting political currents, the Soviet Jew had to navigate the between the utopianism of the Soviet idea and the brutal conditions of its pursuit. Gabriella Safran has noted that “War, revolution, and the first years of Soviet power made it possible to construct a Jewish figure and assign it competing ideological meanings. In that way, Jews were like the Soviet Union itself.” Against this dynamic backdrop of success and adversity, persecution and perseverance, how could the Soviet Jew construct a stable sense of self? What were these competing ideological meanings, and how could (did) they coexist?

In his new book *How the Soviet Jew Was Made*, Prof. Sasha Senderovich (University of Washington) examines Soviet Jewishness through a series of literary and artistic representations that ultimately position the Soviet Jewish person as a liminal figure. On October 5th, 2023, the Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, the Harriman Institute, and the Department of Germanic Languages at Columbia University will hold a one-day graduate conference that is inspired and informed by Senderovich’s rich study, and will examine, from a range of disciplinary perspectives, the implicit question of the title: How, indeed, *was* the Soviet Jew made?

The program includes a keynote lecture by Prof. Senderovich, as well as talks by Prof. Gennady Estraiikh (New York University) and Prof. Elissa Bemporad (Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center).

We encourage interested participants to address the notion of the making of Soviet Jewishness from a variety of scholarly perspectives, including but not limited to literary studies, history, anthropology, film studies, social studies, and visual and plastic arts. The conference does not seek to replicate a traditional panel of research papers, but rather aims to interrogate, collaboratively, topics as they relate to the construction of the Soviet Jewish self, that include, but are not limited to:



- Transnationalism
- Multilingualism and Translation
- Marginality / /Liminality
- Ambivalence
- Transit, Mobility, and Borders
- Adversity

These will then be interrogated with the group to see how it establishes, reinforces, or complicates particular elements of Jewishness, Sovietness, or some semblance (or absence) of that duality. This conference thus aspires to enrich and perhaps even more intricately entangle, the various branches of Soviet Jewish scholarship through an interdisciplinary roundtable.

Researchers are invited to send an abstract of their proposed papers (up to 200 words), and their details (names, academic affiliation, contact information) until August 15th, 2023, to: aspera.ad.astra.CU@gmail.com

Conference organizers:

Noa Tsaushu, Department of Germanic Languages, Columbia University

Elaine Wilson, Department of Slavic Languages, Columbia University
