

Schmidt, Christoph: *Die entheiligte Utopie. Jüdische Ideen- und Sozialgeschichte am Dnepr (1750-1900)*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag/Köln 2003. ISBN: 3-412-10803-0; 270 S.

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As is well known, the largest Jewish community in the world throughout the 19th century resided within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. In particular, the so-called „Northwest Territory“ (roughly equivalent to today’s Belarus and Lithuania), was home to some of the highest concentration of Jews anywhere in the world. In this region, with such important Jewish towns as Kovna (now Kaunas), Vilna (Vilnius), Brest (Brzesc), Pinsk, Gornel, Shklov, and many others, Jews made up a very large percentage – often the majority – of urban residents well into the 20th century. In the course of the 19th century this region not only witnessed frictions between the more mystical Chassidism coming from the south and the less emotional and more intellectual misnogdim, but also the development of strong Jewish socialist and Zionist parties. In short, the territory known rather loosely by Jews as „Lite“ (and by Poles as „Litwa“ – not to be confused with ethnographic Lithuania) deserves close study both as an important Jewish region and for its uniquely diverse population.

Adding to such important works as David E. Fishman’s *Russia’s First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov*¹, Christoph Schmidt has written an interesting and valuable book focusing on the transformation of Jewish social and cultural life on the upper Dnepr, in Mogilev province. Schmidt’s central topic is the process by which a religious world view is challenged and in some cases overcome by a secular one. The „entheiligte Utopie“ of his title refers, it would appear, to the „secular utopias“ of Zionists, Jewish socialists, and Jewish nationalists that play such an important part in Jewish – and world – history in the 20th century.

Schmidt sets down four specific questions which he wishes to address in this book: (1)

the correspondence between ideas and social milieu, (2) mutual influences between Christian and Jewish thought, (3) the question of whether one or many Jewish cultures existed, and (4) questioning the justification of „large theories“ like that of secularization (pp. 22-23). Certainly these are important issues that deserve careful scholarly attention. But one may question whether a small book can truly do them justice. It is this reviewer’s opinion that it cannot.

Schmidt explains that he chose this area for several reasons: its „Mittellage“ between Baltic and Black Seas, its size, and the presence there of both typical Jewish small towns (shtetlekh) as well as larger centers (p. 19). With over 10% of the population Jewish (1897), including just over half of urban residents (52%), Mogilev province provides an excellent test case to examine Jewish everyday and intellectual life. In particular Schmidt compares the provincial capital, Mogilev, a „Handelsstadt“, which he contrasts with the „aufstrebende Industriestadt Gornel“ and the archetypical shtetl, Krasnopol’e. By comparing these three very diverse towns, Schmidt aims not just to contribute to our knowledge of this specific region, but of Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement in general. There are, however, rather serious problems with this methodology. First of all, the „Mittellage“ of Mogilev province is more apparent than real. The province is geographically and culturally far more connected to the north (one may possibly speak of a Vilna-Minsk-Vitebsk axis) than to the south (e.g., Berdichev, Kiev, Odessa, etc.). But an even greater problem is the lack of thorough analysis given even to these three case studies. Schmidt bases his argumentation overwhelmingly on published sources in Russian. To present a truly convincing portrait of Jewish cultural and social life in this region, one would need a close look at archives (both in the region and abroad, most likely in Israel), local newspapers and journals, memoirs, and the like. Without such thorough documentation any conclusions about the fundamental transformations occurring within Jewish society will necessarily remain speculative.

The book begins with a fairly general discussion of fundamental trends in Jewish

¹ Fishman, David E., *Russia’s First Modern Jews. The Jews of Shklov*, New York 1995.

thought during the 19th and early 20th century, from Chassidism and Haskalah to Zionism, socialism, and the Bund. While Schmidt brings in some specific examples from the Mogilev region here, on the whole this section will be very familiar to anyone with a basic background in Jewish history. As this section makes up two thirds of the entire book, it will leave specialists disappointed. On the other hand, these chapters do provide a good introduction and background to major themes in Jewish history in this region.

Only in the last seventy pages of the book does Schmidt attempt a focused analysis of Mogilev province and its cities. After a short introduction describing the geography and economy of Mogilev province, the author presents a sketch of the shtetl Krasnopol'e, its Jewish community (83% of the town's total population), physical aspect, and inhabitants. We learn, for example, that in 1900 some 6% of the town's total population belong to the „upper class,“ earning over 800 rubles per annum, that three times as many inhabitants were luftmentschn earning less than 150 rubles (pp. 165-6). We also learn that some 28% of Krasnopol'e's male Jews and 15% of the women claimed to know Russian (presumably in 1897 but the author's citations do not make this absolutely clear). The lion's share of Schmidt's information on Krasnopol'e, it would appear, comes from a single Russian-language source published in 1908 (L. Rochlin, Mestecko Krasnopol'e). The even less detailed description of the city Mogilev similarly relies heavily on a single source (V. Košelev, *Mediko-topograficeskoe opisanie goroda Mogileva na Dnepre*, St. Petersburg, 1901). There follow a dozen pages on Gomel', here based on several Russian and Belarusian sources – a rather narrow and surprising source base for a book purportedly on Jewish history!

Certainly there is new information here and interesting comparisons between the Jewish experience in Mogilev (city), Gomel, and Krasnopol'e. Unfortunately, however, the analysis does not go very deep. Using almost exclusively secondary sources, Schmidt is unable to offer a satisfying picture of this „microcosm“ of Jewish life. It is also surprising and disappointing that almost no works in Hebrew or Yiddish have been used, with the

exception of such well-known (and valuable) secondary works as Jacob Shatzky's *Geshikhte fun der haskole in lite*, Yehuda Slutsky's book on Jewish journalism in the 19th century, Shaul Shtampfer on yeshivas, and Mordechai Zalkin on the Haskalah. In the end, Schmidt's arguments about the process of secularization, while interesting, collapse under their own weight without adequate supporting documentation.

The idea of analyzing Jewish social and intellectual history through the prism of a geographically-limited „microcosm“ is an intriguing methodological experiment. However, methodology is fundamentally a means of organizing data and arguments. Die entheiligte Utopie certainly makes a contribution both as an overview of Jewish history in the Russian Empire and for focusing on a little-known region, but it falls short of providing us with a true „intellectual and social history“ of Jews in Mogilev province. For a newcomer to main trends in Jewish history in Russia, this book contains much valuable and interesting material. As a monograph wishing to portray a deeper analysis of „how Jews became modern,“ however, it falls short.

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