The Roads Not Taken, the People Not Studied

In *Empire Jews*, Brian Horowitz assembles fifteen essays, thirteen of which have been published over the past decade in English or Russian, about a Russian-Jewish modernist culture that was alive and well in the late imperial period, though it was not as successful in the long run as were the cultural-political projects of socialism and Zionism. Horowitz casts his gaze on a number of Jewish culture makers, liberals, and thinkers who, though secular, rejected conversion (in the memorable words of Jacob Teitel, “My Judaism is not for sale!” [188]) and sought some “synthetic identity” or “modern Russian Jewish identity.” By bringing these minibiographies together in one volume, Horowitz helps readers get back to a historical moment prior to the Bolshevik revolution when Jewish culture was not destined to reject Russia or to reject Jewishness and when politics was not an all-or-nothing option between pursuing individual and national Jewish rights. The key to these acculturated Jewish nationalist (or protonationalist) stances is found precisely in this volume’s title—“Empire”—though Horowitz does not theorize empire or attempt to discard the central claim of Russian-Jewish mutual exclusivity. The subjects of his research, however, prove this to be a false construct.

The volume is divided into three parts: “Jewish Writers between Two Worlds”; “Conceptualizing a Nation Apart: Politics and Historiography”; and “Jews in the Russian Elite.” In part 1, Horowitz brings together minor and major figures of the Jewish intelligentsia and tries to flesh out their complicated stances between acculturation and Jewish nationalism. He charts how these conflicting stances were not successive stages, but ongoing ideological commitments that were at times challenged, tweaked, and rearticulated. We learn about the Russian- and Yiddish-language poet Shimon Frug, a “cult figure” in tsarist Russia, whose 1916 death brought the spectacle of some 100,000 people trailing his casket in Odessa. Admired by both the noted
historian Simon Dubnow and the Hebrew poet laureate Haim Nachman Bialik, Frug was an exemplar of enlightenment literature in Russia and raised awareness about the need for Jewish rights. In contrast to Frug’s contemporaneous fame but historiographical erasure, Vladimir Jabotinsky is a legend in Zionist history, but his deep commitment throughout his life to Russian literature and his ambivalence about the assimilatory project are often forgotten. Horowitz highlights Jabotinsky’s 1936 Russian play Piatero (The five), published shortly before his death, about the tragic fate of an assimilated Jewish family in fin de siècle Odessa. Notably, the narrator of the tale does not condemn assimilation but rather sees it as “wonderful, dangerous, ideal, and unattainable” (92). Moving on to reclaim a “minor” character of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, Horowitz features the Russian Zionist Leib Jaffe, who was also committed to Jewish culture and aesthetics and, for a brief moment, collaborated with other Jewish intellectuals, non-Zionists, on projects of Russian-Jewish culture. Horowitz is captivated by the cultural program of Zionism in the last days of tsarism that brought Jews into the artistic avant-garde and inspired national awakenings in committed Jewish intellectuals who had long sought to squelch their Jewish origins.

In part 2, Horowitz adds some snapshots to what Benjamin Nathans has rehabilitated as “the other modern Jewish politics”—namely, Jewish liberalism in the late imperial period, which was not fully extinguished by the reactionary politics of the post 1881–82 era (“The Other Modern Jewish Politics,” in The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe, ed. Zvi Gitelman [Pittsburgh, PA, 2003], 23–53). For the most part, Horowitz’s cast of characters includes ideological “disciples” of the more famous Simon Dubnow (though one of them, Avram Harkavy, was Dubnow’s contemporary, with residency rights in St. Petersburg and unlimited imperial library access that made Dubnow exceedingly jealous and bitter). Dubnow, Harkavy, Sliozberg, and Margolis were all staunch integrationists who embraced Jewish nationhood. Rather than following the teleology of Russian Jewish politics from enlightened integration to nationalism, Horowitz slows down the evolution and pauses to consider the ways in which the two often coexisted in the lives of key players on the fin de siècle Jewish political scene. He also reminds us, following Noam Pianko’s work on nonstatist Zionism (Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn [Bloomington, IN, 2010]), that Jewish nationalism in late Imperial Russia was not destined to be directed by “there-ist” political Zionism but had strong competition from Diaspora nationalists, of whom Dubnow was the most famous.

In part 3, Horowitz takes up the identities of Jewish intellectuals and philosophers who were arguably part of the innermost sanctum of Russian culture, who contributed to Russian philosophical and political thought, and