

One of the important chapters in the saga documented by Mickenberg is the pull of the Soviet experiment to African-Americans. Several African-American women had settled in Russia before 1917, but after the Bolsheviks seized power and made critiques of racism, sexism, and colonialism central to their message, the appeal of the revolutionary land grew, especially among intellectuals. In a chapter entitled “Black and White—and Yellow—in Red: Performing Race in Russia” (243), Mickenberg documents and analyzes the voyage of twenty-two African-Americans, including eight women, to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1932. Among the travelers were the Harlem Renaissance writers Dorothy West and Langston Hughes. The group’s destination was Moscow, where they were to take part in an English language film entitled *Black and White*, touted as “the first ‘authentic picture of Negro life in America’” (243). Treated like royalty in Russia, the group’s filmmaking efforts came to naught despite events in the US, especially the Scottsboro Boys trial in Alabama on trumped-up rape charges. The Comintern pulled the plug on the film, but Mickenberg uses the film trip for a larger discussion of complicated Soviet race attitudes and propaganda, not only in relation to African-Americans but Asians, such as the dancer Sylvia Chen. She also includes a brief discussion of Soviet policies in Central Asia, to which some of the group traveled after their aborted film project. Extolling their solidarity with the Central Asians, Louise Thompson exclaimed: “The people looked like many of us. They were brown; a number of them were very dark brown. The only thing they didn’t have that we had was curly hair” (274). Meeting unveiled women now working outside the home, the group praised the liberation of their formerly-colonized sisters. But this was a fraught time in the Soviet Union. While touting the advances made for women in some areas, members of the group dismissed the “manufactured stories about ‘starvation and famine’” (265).

One of the most fascinating cases of black migration to the Soviet Union documented in the book is that of the prominent African-American communist Williana Burroughs. Fired from her New York City teaching job, in 1936 she became the voice of Radio Moscow broadcasting to the United States throughout World War Two using the name “Ooma Perry” (279). Mickenberg’s study goes through the Great Patriotic War and she is strong on discussing and analyzing the role of American women such as Margaret Bourke-White and Lillian Hellman in projecting a positive image of our wartime ally.

Mickenberg has done truly comprehensive research. Although she does not have a formal bibliography, in her acknowledgements she lists an impressive range of archives and special collections from across the US, Europe, and Russia. She has tracked down personal reminiscences and been in touch with relatives of those featured in her book, and she has read widely in Russian and US history, especially the history of the American left. Her important monograph enriches our understanding of the complicated relationship between Russia, women of the American left, and the Soviet revolutionary ideal and its reality.

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When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life Under Stalin. By Anna Shternshis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xii, 247 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. \$35.00, hard bound.
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The issue of bringing anthropology back to Jewish Studies has been an important one for several decades. It gave rise to a growing body of research that questions

the conventional definition of Jewishness centered primarily on religion and explores into how it is differently produced, practiced, and negotiated in different socio-cultural contexts. Soviet/post-Soviet Jews as a very specific configuration of Jewish collectivity pleads for anthropological interventions—not only to discard the label of “thin” culture, but, importantly, to be understood on its own terms, as a particular version of twentieth-century Jewish diasporic identity.

Anna Shternshis’ book does precisely that: it introduces the reader to a broad span of Soviet life as seen through “Jewish eyes,” putting together extensive oral history as one anthropological method with historical inquiry about the recent past. By looking at the narratives produced by the last generation of Soviet Jews who experienced pre-WWII Soviet realities as young adults, the book uncovers political, ideological, and social-cultural forces at work in shaping Jewish professional and family choices over several decades of the socialist regime. A challenging methodological task, this longitudinal perspective carries the substantive message of the book: by discussing how Jewishness affected people’s responses to various governmental policies and seminal moments in the country’s history, it shows that Jewish identity was likewise changing over time—and very substantially so.

In particular, the author discusses the critical historical juncture of 1930s, which for Soviet Jews launched the “great retreat” “from radical communist values into a more conservative, traditional, almost prerevolutionary society . . . [that] went into full swing after the war” (47). What makes this period significant for Soviet Jewish history is that while abandonment of “traditional” practices, especially of a religious nature, was a mass phenomenon of the first decades after the revolution, hardly ethnically specific in itself, this later “retreat” was a distinct Jewish response to the growing antisemitic atmosphere in the country as well as the tacit (and at times not so tacit) governmental policies that curbed Jewish upward mobility and public culture. Hence the 1930s witnessed “the return of the shadkhan” and traditional wedding practices (such as, for instance, matchmaking), even in places like Moscow and Leningrad. A certain paradox does not escape the author’s attention: the regime that first made considerable efforts to deprive Jews of their traditions, now enabled their reappearance, “in a shifted but still recognizable form” (88).

This return to traditionalism, even though in its reduced, largely non-religious and probably not “correct” version, is seen by the author as an attempt to obtain understanding and protection “among one’s own” vis-à-vis a largely hostile public environment. In her view, this private, family-based solidarity became an essential foundation of post-war Soviet Jewish collective identity.

A particular merit of the book consists in its “international dimension”: the author not only meticulously analyzes the content of interviews recorded in Russia, Germany, the US, and Canada, but investigates how the narrative strategies of her interviewees are embedded in the particular socio-cultural realities in which they are produced, and how they are shaped by specific Jewish policies in four the respective countries. Like any oral history, the book does not ask how “accurately” oral testimonies present the “actual past,” but rather, how different “pasts” are differently constructed in the present. In the case of Shternshis’ book, this approach provides one more important insight: “Soviet Jews” were anything but a homogenous entity, but an internally diverse population with varying individual and collective subjectivities, specific perceptions, and interpretations of Soviet reality, as well as particular rationalities underlying life choices. This fact becomes particularly conspicuous when Shternshis introduces “Jewish actors” who rarely if at all appeared on the Soviet Jewish “scene”—accountants, salespeople, blue-collar workers, personnel of the Yiddish public culture system, and others.

In spite of the somber conclusion on the progressive three-stage destruction of “Jewish communal settings” in the Soviet Union—“the first . . . on a religious level in the 1920s and 1930s, the second on a physical level in the early 1940s, and the third on a cultural one in the late 1940s” (174)—the book ends with a positive assertion about the emergence of a new Jewish identity as a result of the Soviet experience. This new identity bears a pronouncedly syncretic character and yet is “fully equipped with markers of thick identity, complete with its language (Russian), foods (Russian and Jewish, but not kosher), rituals (which combine Judaism, Christianity, and the Soviet legacy), and notions of a shared past and values” (193).

However paradoxical this assertion may seem, one should recognize that Anna Shternshis’ new book, like her previous monograph, *Soviet and Kosher*, is an important effort at “disambiguating” the Soviet Jewish experience for a western audience. It will be a particular useful teaching tool for courses that focus on the anthropology of Jews, on Soviet/post-Soviet studies, and on the methods of oral history.

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The Soviet Gulag: Evidence, Interpretation, and Comparison. Ed. Michael David-Fox. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. xi, 434 pp. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. Tables. \$49.95, hard bound.

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This book emphasizes that it offers something new in the crowded field of Gulag research. At its heart lies the thorny issue of Soviet specificity in regard to the practice of state repression and its evolution over time. To what extent was the Gulag one disciplinary variant among many in modern state efforts to manage populations, or to what extent—given that the Bolsheviks advertised their penal policies as absolutely unique from those of the bourgeois world—was it something different? And if so, were such differences those that Soviet authorities intended? In seeking to answer such questions, this volume promises an originality of approach, moving from thick description into analysis and placing the ideology, structure, and experience of the Gulag into comparative perspective.

One of the great strengths of the book is that it strives to break down traditional binaries in exploring Gulag practices and purpose. “Free” and “unfree” is the biggest of these oppositions, with many contributors, starting with Oleg Khlevniuk, arguing that not only were the bounds between “labor camp” and “outside world” porous and overlapping, but also that the very realms of “convict” and “citizen” existence were less than distinct. Even the average amount of food consumed among the “free” population “converged in both volume and makeup with that of prisoners” from 1939 onwards (30).

Similarly, authors agree that the experience of work in the Soviet Union cannot be neatly divided between “forced” labor and “free.” Authors such as Asif Siddiqi, writing about special camps for scientists, and Wilson Bell, describing the role of the Gulag in the Second World War, show that camp work often involved interactions, even collaborations, between convicts and citizens. Siddiqi, furthermore, showcases a type of *sharashki* where many inmates experienced recognition and reward in confinement and even came to adopt principles of police-supervised scientific research—“extreme secrecy, strict hierarchies, coercive practices, rigid reporting protocols”—in later careers outside the camps (110).