

The Holocaust & the Exile of Yiddish: A History of the *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye*

By Barry Trachtenberg. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022. Pp. 336. Hardcover \$37.50. ISBN: 978-1978825451.

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“Moses Mendelssohn gave us the bible in German,” famed Jewish historian and politician Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) reminded a select group of the Yiddish intellectual and cultural avant-garde in Berlin in February 1931. The Yiddish congregation knew of the importance of bible translations in shaping Jewish history and reinventing “the Jew,” be it in the third century BCE or, for that matter, *maskilic* Berlin. But they had a more radical project in mind. Dubnow spoke to a group of people who had come in support of a project launched in 1930 by the Central Committee of the *Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut* (Jewish Scientific Institute, YIVO) in honor of the speaker’s very own 70th birthday. Rather than a mere translation, “an encyclopedia” was to be the “bible for the new age, in Yiddish” (21) – a vision many of the attendees had for at least a decade. The creation of this new founding text to inaugurate an all-new era of a unified modern “Jewishness” was managed conceptually and financially by YIVO’s Dubnow Fund which was based in Weimar Berlin – at least initially.

Like all good studies of material culture should, Barry Trachtenberg’s outstanding new monograph demonstrates convincingly that books can speak volumes about the structural and historical conditions of their creation. With great ambitions such as Dubnow’s, failure was perhaps a foregone conclusion: the *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* never became the new Torah for a new Jewish age. But the creation, preservation, and reception of this Yiddish reference work, Trachtenberg shows, is a fruitful gateway into understanding the fate of global modern Yiddish culture and its sustaining ideologies as intertwined with “the much larger historical forces of geopolitical realignment, the rise of communism and fascism, world war, displacement, and genocide” (19).

Trachtenberg has given us a first biography of the tumultuous life of the woefully forgotten multivolume *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* (*General Encyclopedia*) that notably bridges the pre- and post-Holocaust eras through “very rare and frayed threads of continuity” (19). The brainchild of Yiddish socialists and diaspora nationalists of various stripes, united under the umbrella of the Dubnow Fund, it debuted with a *probeheft* (sample issue) in 1932 with great internationalist ambitions (chapter 1). The *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* came of age stateless in the *capital de refuge* and European center of Yiddish – Paris – in increasing precarity and under the menacing threat of Nazi fascism. Six volumes were published there, four in the more universal series and two in a Jewish-focused format, with a lifeline of the European-wide Yiddish-speaking audience and still twenty-five years away from completion (chapter 2). The encyclopedia and most of its creators escaped the invading *Wehrmacht* and arrived in the United States in 1940. By the mid-1960s, as new volumes were produced, they gradually took on a much more conservative outlook (as did their creators) suitable to the new Cold War American environment. Though now (relatively) economically stable, this increasingly unmarketable commodity lived out its life in obscurity, unread, in a more and more non-Yiddish-speaking milieu of New York City, with the majority of the world’s Yiddish-speakers killed (chapter 3).

When the project was launched in the early 1930s in Berlin, Dubnow and his comrades considered an encyclopedia the very means to manifest a secular diaspora nation constituted and delimited by a finally standardized Yiddish. As with all storehouses of carefully curated and highly selective knowledge, the making of the *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* was rife with contradictions that could never truly be resolved: how to balance universal and particular Jewish contents? Where to draw the line between them? What are the “Jewish topics” that are of

relevance to the encyclopedia's audience, when this Eastern European Jewish audience itself is both geographically and ideologically in constant flux and turmoil? And, finally, how to square the im/explicit biases of the producers – all socialists and diaspora nationalists fighting for Jewish self-determination primarily through citizenship in Yiddishland, when, for many, other Jewish national movements had increasingly more convincing agendas?

Trachtenberg expertly ties the encyclopedia's shifting formats, aesthetics, and multiple thematic trajectories to the historical and social conditions and conflicting ideologies of which they were a product. He situates the Dubnow Fund's "encyclopedic impulse" firmly within the encyclopedic "arms race" (7) and following American-, Russian-, and German-Jewish successful ventures in "foreign [meaning non-Jewish] language[s]" (14), early Zionist quasi-encyclopedias in Hebrew, and failed Yiddish ones. Since the Enlightenment, encyclopedias have been a vehicle of nation-building for imperial powers, national minorities, and colonized people alike, often tailored to readers as condensed educational tools for the sake of class mobility and/or assimilation into new societies in the globalizing capitalist world. Trachtenberg thereby opens new avenues for future comparative research into both the modern Eastern European Jewish historiographical *zeitgeist* and the interrelated Yiddish scholarship of the Holocaust (*khurbn-forschung*), often portrayed as insular Jewish phenomena. Both might be connected in complex ways to the efforts of the oppressed and colonized everywhere to undertake documentary resistance in projects of self-determination and self-empowerment.

Three-time Nobel Prize nominee for literature Karl Kraus once had a terrible vision: he saw an encyclopedia walk up to a polymath and open him up. In the case of Barry Trachtenberg, this vision loses its terror. In *The Holocaust & the Exile of Yiddish: A History of the Algemeyne Entsiklopedye*, he looks the encyclopedia straight in the eyes. His book is recommended reading for both an educated lay and an academic audience interested in Jewish, Yiddish, and Holocaust studies, material culture, nationalism, racism, and antisemitism, as well as the enduring legacies of the Enlightenment. Trachtenberg introduces the *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* itself as a valuable resource for future studies of the Jewish workers' movements, radical socialist and anarchist traditions, early Holocaust scholarship, and more. This text calls for further investigation of how Jewish understandings of, for instance, "race" and antisemitism truly are historically contingent, and how exactly, apart from the Holocaust, the Cold War shaped Yiddish culture in the U.S.

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Ein Drama in Akten. Die Restitution der Sammlungen des Wilnaer YIVO

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The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research made news in early 2022 with the digital reunification of its pre-World War II collections that were divided for some eighty years between New York City and Vilnius. Thanks to a multiyear project, millions of scanned documents