

Review of: Schmidt, Christoph: *Die entheiligte Utopie. Jüdische Ideen- und Sozialgeschichte am Dnepr (1750-1900)*. Köln et al.: Böhlau 2004, 270 pp.

Christoph Schmidt has written an engaging intellectual, social, and biographical study of Jewish history in central and eastern Europe, which by the 16th century had become home to the largest population of Jews worldwide. The book is comparable to an epic film that catches the audience's attention from the very beginning – its creative and ambitious title (roughly translated into English as »The Profane Utopia«, or better »The Religious Utopia Turned Secular«) – to the very end, a well-selected and near exhaustive 43-page list of literature on Jewish mysticism, enlightenment, nationalism, and socialism. In between, we feel ourselves in the hands of a professional guide taking us on a sweeping, stimulating, and dense journey through the diversity of European Jewish life from the 16th (and not mid 18th, as the subtitle suggests!) through the mid 20th centuries – traversing a range of borders (geographical and mental, the Dnepr being only one of the rivers crossed) from east to west, north to south, and city to *shtetl*.

As his introduction underlines, the book is divided into two parts. Each part – as well as the chapters on each theme – may be read and appreciated independently; taken together, they provide an overview of as well as an onsite encounter with Jewish vitality in Europe, especially within the tsarist Pale of Settlement. Part one, and taking up almost the first two-thirds of the book, is called *Changing Ideas*; it surveys the essential if multifaceted Jewish Hasidic, Has-kalah, Zionist, and Bundist movements. [1] We are offered information as to how Jews themselves were actors in their own Diaspora destinies, and thus provided with details as to these currents' origins and definitions, their various charismatic leaders, and how and where they were disseminated and received, with particular consideration to language and to legal constraints on the Jewish population in tsarist Russia. Much of the narrative may strike the specialist as familiar (and the author makes no particular claim to the opposite, apparent also from the plentiful use of secondary sources). For the non-specialist, however, this succinct and captivating review might well inspire new enthusiasts (though here a map of the Pale and bordering regions would have been helpful).

Moreover, Schmidt contributes a new element to the survey (even for the specialist) by allowing members of these often contradictory and cross-current ideas and movements to partake in a multileveled dialogue – not least through the author's keen attention to specific biographical details. And although one may not be fully convinced here of his methodological approach (more archival documentation and argumentation would be needed to support his hypothesis), the new direction Schmidt takes in his investigation – of 1) the correspondence between ideas and social milieus, 2) Christian-Jewish interrelations, 3) the existence of one or more Jewish cultures, and 4) a more exact rendering of the influence of secularization (pp. 22f.) – is not only rewarding but also refreshing: as is his systematic use of a variety of often overlooked sources, such as correspondence and memoirs, and his ease in handling material in Russian, Polish, German, English, and Yiddish.

Part two, in contrast, entitled *Changing Society*, is a more restrained 60-page regional study (plus four tables) of the little-known Belarusian Mogilev province (*guberniya*), including therein the author's own field research in regional (Mogilev) as well as state (St. Petersburg) archives and libraries. To Schmidt's credit, it is the first survey I know that compares the history of three distinct places in one province – the regional capital (Mogilev), a *shtetl* (Krasno-pol'e), and a middle-sized, partly industrialized, partly agricultural railway junction town (Gomel) – and contextualizes their reception to and engagement in the major Jewish ideas or movements of the period. Less convincing is Schmidt's argumentation that this province serves as a particularly suitable testing ground or microcosm (based on its central position, its size and economic situation, its openness, and its diversity [pp.18-20]). Here too it seems to me the book's strength lies in the coherence of the hypothetical formulation and not in the proof (the comparative evidence Schmidt provides is insufficient for arriving at such a conclusion and, as Schmidt rightly points out, there is a shortage of Belarusian archival material due to damage or loss during World War II [p. 21]). Another testing ground, for instance, could have been around the Zbruch river, in Habsburg Galicia and Bukovina and, across the imperial border, in neighboring Russian Volhynia and Podolia. Schmidt mentions in passing the »enlightened« merchants in Brody, but omits pointing out, for example, the nearby Hasidic Rebbe in

Galician Husiatyn (of the Ruzhin dynasty) and the important railway junction at Volochisk. A closer investigation of the Smolensk province may also prove rewarding. (Smolensk too, situated outside the Pale yet with a significant Jewish population, was an important railroad junction town.) Indeed, a new comparative monograph to complement this cursory section would be most welcome.

In sum, *Die entheiligte Utopie* is a rewarding piece of scholarship, and Schmidt should be congratulated for his concise and learned sweep of Jewish history, especially in what was once the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and for his informed and inquisitive revisiting of its main social and intellectual currents. Notwithstanding a couple of minor shortcomings (i.e., a too limited – geographically and historically – subtitle, and the at times tedious reiteration of certain details, e.g. the conversion of Moses Mendelsohn's children, the key role of Belarus railway workers in the 1903-1906 pogroms) and one less than insignificant omission – the book's under-representation and analysis of women as participants in Jewish social and intellectual history [2] – this work provides a valuable contribution to the history of European Jewish thought. Schmidt not only creatively clarifies the origins and (intellectual as well as geographical) development of these ideas, but he also investigates how they were received by the population at large.

Annotations:

- [1] These »utopias« in brief: Hasidism was founded in Mezhybozh in the early 1700s by a Jewish »healer« named Baal Shem Tov (or Besht), who advocated that purity and ecstatic prayer, rather than Talmudic study, led to God. Haskalah relates to modern Jewish enlightenment and/or emancipation, »the opening of the door of [Diaspora] society,« as it were, and became part of the »reform« Jewish movement in western Europe in the early to mid 19th century. As Schmidt points out, the Russian Haskalah has different roots. Zionism, or Jewish (messianic or defensive) nationalism, was a reaction in part to both the apparent failings of the Haskalah (i.e., »assimilation does not work«) – especially following the pogroms in (southwest and Ukrainian) Russia starting in April 1881 – and to the general rise of nationalism (German, Czech, etc.). Its leaders included Moses Hess, Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am), and Theodor Herzl. Bundism relates to the *Jewish Socialist Bund* (union), founded in Russia in the 1890's. Its proponents promoted a classless society and opposed Jewish nationalism.
- [2] For example, although Schmidt refers to several works by Shaul Stampfer, he curiously omits the one specifically focused on women: *Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Woman in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe*. In: Polin 7 (1992), pp. 63-87; the role of women in the Hasidic court is also not addressed.