

Kleinmann, Yvonne: *Neue Orte - neue Menschen. Jüdisches Leben in St. Petersburg und Moskau im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2006. ISBN: 3-525-36984-0; 459 S.

Rezensiert von: Theodore R. Weeks, History Department, Southern Illinois University

The burgeoning of research and publication on different aspects of Jewish life in Russia attests to the continued interest in the Russian-Jewish nexus. Indeed, the fervor over Yuri Slezkine's „Jewish Century“ indicates that passions still run deep on this topic.¹ Yvonne Kleinmann's study looks at an understudied aspect of Jewish history in Russia: Jews living outside the Pale, specifically the Jewish communities in the two capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow. To be sure, Benjamin Nathans's pathbreaking *Beyond the Pale* examined Jewish life in central Russia (especially St. Petersburg), but Nathans's emphasis on „the Jewish encounter with late imperial Russia“ is quite different from Kleinmann's focus on the social history of the Moscow and St. Petersburg Jewish communities and their development within the urban fabric of those two cities.

Kleinmann notes that previous historiography has tended to focus too narrowly on government policy, „Pogromforschung,“ and the history of ideas, neglecting the social realities of Jewish communities in the Russian Empire. Many historians, including Nathans, she charges, have spent too much time researching a narrow group of Jewish elite personages and have thereby neglected the larger issues of urbanization, migration, and everyday economic concerns that weighed so heavily on Jews (and others) in this period. She aims to make up this deficit by looking at motivations for Jewish settlement in the two capitals, the heterogeneity of the Jewish populations there (despite efforts by the Jewish elite to bind the community more closely together), as well as changes within each community from the 1860s. Her sources are diverse, ranging from memoirs and government documents from archives in Moscow and Petersburg to Jewish and Russian periodicals (especially the Russian-language *Rassvet*), to the

published findings of official commissions. The study concentrates on the last four decades of the nineteenth century, though she also delves into the historical background back to the sixteenth century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For all practical purposes, Kleinmann's story ends with the 1891 expulsion of 35,000 Jews from Moscow, followed in 1892 by the demotion of the head rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue and his expulsion to a position heading a Talmud-Torah in Vilna.

Why did Jews flock to St. Petersburg and Moscow, despite government restrictions, the lack of an established community, and the difficulty of following Jewish traditions there? Kleinmann details four main motivations for this migration: commerce and business interests, the military, the simple desire to earn a living, and the pursuit of a (secular) education. As Kleinmann notes, the first Jews in the Russian capitals were merchants who by the late 1820s had established their own „ghetto“ in the Glebov-Court in Moscow. Merchants continued to figure among the most prominent members of both communities – in order to reside legally in either city, one had to be a quite wealthy businessman – but Kleinmann does not provide particular details on this group of Moscow and St. Petersburg Jews, perhaps because she feels that this elite has already been researched. Another source of Jewish migration to the capitals was through the military. A Jew who survived the twenty-five years of service (by no means all did) could legally reside in Moscow or Petersburg, even before 1859. Unfortunately, Kleinmann provides little concrete data about these residents and one may question the degree to which these veterans who had been taken at a very young age from Jewish surroundings even considered themselves „Jews“ after twenty-five years in the Russian army. More significant as motivations to migrate to the capitals were economic factors (the difficulty of earning a living in the Pale) and the desire to gain a modern secular education. Both of these motivations would bring

¹ Slezkine, Yuri, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton 2004. Slezkine's book has recently been published in German as: *Paradoxe Moderne. Jüdische Alternativen zum Fin de Siècle*, Göttingen 2005.

thousands of Jews to Moscow and St. Petersburg once the legal possibility of such migration was broadened with the reforms of the late 1850s and early 1860s.

Having set the stage by establishing the motivations for migration in the first quarter of the book, Kleinmann devotes the rest of this volume to the Moscow and St. Petersburg Jewish communities ca. 1860-1891, their demographic character, the efforts by Jewish leaders to create Jewish communities without antagonizing the Russian authorities, reactions of the Moscow and St. Petersburg communities to the pogroms of 1881-1882, the building of Choral Synagogues in both cities, and finally the expulsion of the great majority of Moscow Jews in 1891. Kleinmann convincingly demonstrates that a new kind of Jewish community arose in these cities, attempting to preserve Jewish religious traditions but also trying to create „model communities“ of modern, self-respecting Jews, grouped around the magnificent (and controversial with the Russian authorities) Choral Synagogues in both cities. She also documents the failure of this noble attempt, less due to conversions (she shows that these were unusual events, amounting to several dozen cases yearly in each city, hardly a mass phenomenon) than to progressive religious indifference and the inability of the Jewish elites to persuade poorer Jews to worship at the new Choral Synagogues rather than in their own more modest prayer houses. The Russian government contributed to this problem by refusing official sanction to the smaller prayer houses, combined with mistrust for the more grandiose plans for sumptuous synagogues.

This is a rich work, full of new information and insights into a little-known aspect of Russian Jewish history. But, as in any ambitious historical endeavor, it has its shortcomings and weak spots. In particular, the book seems undecided as to which path it wishes to take: historical sociology that looks at relatively large chunks of time as units (i.e., 1860s to 1890s) or a more traditional historical narrative that proceeds chronologically. Thus we have chapters covering, more or less, the entire period (such as chapter 2 which discusses the demography and identity of Moscow and St. Petersburg Jews, or chapter 3 which

goes into the political-legal complications of establishing a Jewish community in these so-Russian cities) as well as chapters that concentrate on more concrete events such as the efforts to gain permission and construct the Choral Synagogues. The connections between these chapters is not always clear and at times one feels that this is a book of semi-related essays (e.g., on identity as reflected in „Jewish“ vs. „Russian“ names, Jewish ritual being protected by the Moscow authorities, the expulsion of Rabbi Zalman Minor from Moscow) rather than a fully integrated monograph. However, these difficulties may simply reflect this book's pioneering nature: later researchers, perhaps, will fill in some of these gaps. In any case, for anyone interested in Jewish, Russian, or urban history in the nineteenth century, Yvonne Kleinmann's *Neue Orte - neue Menschen* is most warmly recommended.

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