

Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society. By Glenn Dynner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xii, 384 pp. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Cloth.

This assured first book by Glenn Dynner roots Polish Hasidism in Polish soil. While the stock in trade for historians is historical context, the historiography of the Jews of Poland has been dominated until recently by its insularity. The study of Hasidism, the revolutionary spiritual movement born in eighteenth-century Podolia that swept Jewish society, has been particularly vulnerable to insider-writing because of the difficulty, both linguistic and ideational, of mastering its texts. But the waning of the ideological schools of Jewish historical writing (i.e. assimilationist, Zionist, and Diaspora nationalist), opening of archives in Russia and in the FSU, and training of a new generation of historians comfortable with the linguistic demands requisite for their source material (Russian, Polish, German, Ukrainian, Hebrew, and Yiddish, as well as familiarity with rabbinic and mystical texts) in Europe, Israel, and the United States has transformed the field. Dynner's work represents an excellent example of this new historiography.

A work of social history, Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society directly confronts the older historiographical tradition in three strokes. First, Dynner rejects the emphasis on the ideological power, the charisma, of the zaddikim (Hasidic masters and leaders) as an explanation of their success (22). Instead, he focuses on the ways in which they "conquered" Jewish society through cultivation of mercantile patronage, coöpting communal institutions, disseminating Hasidic teachings in a variety of formats and languages to reach the greatest possible audience, and engaging the Polish Jewish masses in their revolutionary ideal of serving God through corporeality (known as *avodah bagashmiyut*). Second, Dynner challenges the elision of Poland, as opposed to the Russian Pale of Settlement and Austrian Galicia, in the writing of East European Jewish history. Established in 1815 after the Congress of Vienna as a semi-autonomous kingdom under Tsarist rule, the Congress Kingdom was particularly hospitable to the Hasidic conquest because it was the most urbanized and industrialized region in Eastern Europe. The relative "liberalism" of Warsaw's republicans allowed the growth of a Jewish bourgeoisie, many of whom supported the zaddikim, and with them became wealthy entrepreneurs in the lumber and grain trades and through military purveying. Central Poland therefore cultivated a form of Jewish modernization without secularization because Hasidic piety affirmed, even as it transformed, traditional Jewish ritual practices. Finally, Dynner disputes the influential preoccupation of the Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnow with the alleged democratization of Jewish society through Hasidism's appeal to the Jewish masses. Polish Hasidism in Dynner's reading was *populist* not *popular*; its leadership consciously strategized about how best to gain adherents. The zaddikim held no illusions that they were anything but a religious vanguard.

For Dynner, sociology, not only theology, explains the growth of Hasidism in Central Poland. Hasidic zaddikim established their own prayer houses, innovated ritually, including appropriating Polish folk tunes into their Hasidic melodies, took over what had formerly been the elite study house for mystical learning (known as the *kloyz*), "invaded" the main synagogue, and forged marital bonds with the Jewish elite, all of which ensured their temporal power. Dynner does not hesitate to use military language to emphasize his point: the zaddikim were spiritual generals, their Hasidic disciples footsoldiers (89), curious lexical choices given the conscious

even-handedness of his approach, as these terms echo the anti-Hasidic language of Jewish modernizers (the maskilim).

This is not a book for beginning students of Polish Jewish history. It assumes training in Jewish historiography and knowledge of the intricate debates between contemporary historians of Polish Jewry, Hasidism, and Jewish mysticism. Terms are not always explained (i.e. theurgy) and at times Dynner assumes that his readers are as familiar with Polish and Jewish languages as he is, such as in his translation of an 1823 governmental report about Hasidic books that refers to Husydymy, a Polish masculine plural of the word Hasidim pronounced as Husidim as it would have been in Poland (212).

Nonetheless, this most unmystified study of a most mystical religious movement in modern Jewish culture does a major service to English readers by its many translations of Hasidic homilies, folk tales, and exegeses, as well as the indispensable list of Hasidic printed material through 1815 in the third appendix and the translation of an exorcism tale from 1818 Warsaw in the second. Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society marks a significant contribution to the historical literature on Polish Jewish society on the cusp of modernity.

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