

Brendan McGeever. Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution

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Brendan McGeever. *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*. Cambridge UP, 2019. xii, 248 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$33.95, paper.

The year 1917 set in motion an intense period of emancipation for the Jews of the former Russian Empire. However, the lifting of many legal restrictions on the Russian Jewry did not translate into the disappearance of anti-Semitism. Indeed, the years 1918–19 saw the most brutal assaults on Jewish lives in pre-Holocaust modern history. This violence, which was particularly noticeable in Ukraine, involved at least two thousand pogroms and resulted in the deaths of over one hundred thousand Jews—a very significant number for a community that totalled less than five percent of the population. In this meticulously researched and well-written book, sociologist Brendan McGeever (Birkbeck College, University of London) examines the complex and explosive overlap between anti-Semitism and the revolutionary process. He also explores attempts on the part of the Bolshevik leadership to confront the pogromist violence perpetrated by members of its own support base.

Following an introductory chapter that identifies the Soviets as the principal source of opposition to anti-Semitism in 1917, McGeever then gives centre stage to the small number of Red Army pogroms (in Hlukhiv in 1918 and the Grigor'evshchina [the Grigor'ev Incident]¹ in 1919) that raised key questions for the Soviet government, specifically with regard to its commitment to anti-racism and internationalism. Bolshevik leaders opposed anti-Semitism and viewed the pogroms as a threat to the survival of both Jews and the revolution. However, as McGeever argues quite convincingly, this Soviet response to anti-Semitism was not Bolshevik in origin; rather, a small group of non-Bolshevik Jewish radicals driven by a distinctly ethical imperative played a key role in actualizing and often sustaining it at the level of practice. For example, they consistently advocated public education campaigns as a way of confronting anti-Semitism. Such a scenario should not be surprising. The two most important deciders in the early years of the Soviet experiment—Vladimir Lenin, as chairman of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) and leader of the Bolshevik Party, and Leon Trotsky, who in his youth had renounced his Jewish identity and who was responsible for creating and commanding a Red Army that included many peasants and workers with strong anti-Jewish attitudes—quickly concluded that the survival of their regime against the White Army in the Civil War should be their top priority. As McGeever notes, "Bolshevik opposition to antisemitism was certainly a matter of principle, but the overriding principle

¹ A term used by the Bolsheviks to describe one part of the Ukrainian peasant partisan movement that was led by Nykyfor Hryhoriv (Nikifor Grigor'ev), who for some time allied himself with the Bolsheviks.

was to defend the revolution” (138). Incidentally, this lukewarm attitude toward the Jews was also reflected in the Party press, which failed to decisively address the question of anti-Semitic violence within the Red Army over the course of the Civil War—a far from accidental omission, McGeever adds, whenever pragmatism is allowed to trump moralism.

Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution started its life as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Glasgow. Not unexpectedly, the monograph bears the hallmark of its birth: an excellent command of the literature; a contextualization appropriately including the pogroms of 1881–83 and 1903–06 as well as the responses of Russian populists and Social Democrats; a granular analysis of the evidence; a recurrent tendency to burden the narrative with unnecessary repetitions; and, most importantly, a well-argued thesis showing the many ways in which anti-Semitism—still a dominant form of consciousness in those troubled times—found traction within revolutionary politics. This slim, though important, book is somewhat mistitled (a heading like *Antisemitism and the Russian Civil War* would better reflect its contents), but it deserves a broad readership.

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