Brian Horowitz


Horowitz’s new book is a collection of essays that explore the Russian-Jewish synthesis developed by Jewish intellectuals in Russia from the last two decades of the nineteenth century until just after the Civil War. It covers figures and tendencies which are often under-researched: Jewish liberalism in quest of parliamentary reform (Vinaver, who pursued this path with “revolutionary passion”!); diaspora nationalism (Dubnov); “synthetic Zionism” (Idel’son); “integrationism”, as one might call the Odessa Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment; and finally, the life of Jewish intellectuals whose object of study was Russian history and spirituality, rather than Judaism. The whole second part of the book, in fact, is devoted to this last option, in seven chapters about Mikhail Gershenzon.

As Horowitz makes clear, the reasons these tendencies are under-researched is because history has often been pressed into the service of the present: “Few people have taken an interest in the Rassvet group of activists and writers because their story belongs as much to Russian as Jewish history and does not fit the Zionist narrative in which the dedicated activist makes Aliyah and transforms himself from a Russian, German or American Jew into an Israeli” (p. 54). One might add, too, that for many the “Jewish Presence” in Russia was merely the latest saga in the “lachrymose version” of Jewish history, which ended either in Israel or the USA. On the popular and often academic level, then, Russia has been viewed with distaste or nostalgia. Horowitz does a wonderful job of polishing the misted and/or grimy window and letting us look in on a reality that was every bit as “real”, and in some cases, just as attractive and fruitful as the options which eventually won out. In so doing, he adds texture to the way we can consider the latter options. For example, the Odessa Society strove to build institutions which would allow Jews to have full Jewish and Russian lives in Russia, both individually and communally, to have lives of “double vision” as Dubnov said of Semyon Frug, the Russian-Jewish poet at home in both literatures. Zionists dismissed this integrationism as cowardly assimilationism. But as Horowitz indicates, the Odessans in laying the ground for a “post-Enlightenment Jewish politics” also gave the Zionists a model of how to build real political institutions, which they would have lacked otherwise. In fact, this was the insight of the Synthetic Zionists, who built in Russia with an eye on transferring these structures to Palestine. For historians who have wondered how the Zionists did such a good job of setting up a functioning state so quickly, this neglected leaf of history might be a good place to look.
The chapters on Gershenzon take us more into the realm of Russian intellectual history. Gershenzon was a surprising figure: born into a traditional family in the Pale, he pulled himself up by his bootstraps to become something of a Slavophile, a Jewish presence in the heart of the Russian Idea. He lodged himself at the center of Moscow literary life, becoming – consciously, as Horowitz cleverly shows – an archetypal Russian intellectual leader, whose salon contained Petr Chaadaev's armchair, all abuzz with “metonymic resonance”. Horowitz explores different angles of this flawed but sympathetic figure, and in keeping with the first part of the book, a theme which emerges is the methodology of historical research. Horowitz shows convincingly that Gershenzon's reading of key figures like Chaadaev, Herzen, Pushkin and Kireevsky was often tendentious: the philosopher trumped the historian, so that he turned Christian Slavophiles into representatives of a universal Cosmic religion, which Horowitz finds unconvincing: “My criticism of Gershenzon's philosophical views focuses on his naivety ... what is the role of society, societal institutions, economics or politics ...?” (p. 211). Horowitz himself does a good job of keeping his historical balance in all this: and he shows that Gershenzon's readings cannot be attributed to his Jewishness, as some critics (Struve, Berdyaev, and in a different way the contemporary critic L. Katsis) liked to maintain, but were in many ways a function of tendencies in Russian Silver Age intellectual life itself.

At one point, during a discussion of Russian-Jewish emigrés' backward-looking idealization (rather than the non-Russian tendency to denigration) of the Russian experience Horowitz asks: “Finally, who should care about this history?” (p. 138). It's a welcome question: Gershenzon cared with passionate subjectivity about the past, but often lost the objective edge. Some historians seem to assume that objectivity is an end in itself, begging just this question of why anyone would study a dead past. Horowitz borrows Gershenzon's passion: one feels he shares a sympathy for the Russian idea, as highlighted by Isaiah Berlin, that intellectual history is not just a history of ideas but also “an account of the tradition by which succeeding generations of the intelligentsia defined themselves and which they used as their guide to action” (p. 273, italics mine). So it seems that Horowitz might himself be part of that lineage; his rescuing of a neglected Russian-Jewish past might be intended to give a message to the present. However, unlike Gershenzon, Horowitz is scrupulous about not distorting that past: his account mixes passion with fairness, depth with topicality. But anyone who reads these essays carefully should be equipped to look not just at the past but at the present, Russian and Jewish, in a new and more powerful way.