

BOOK REVIEWS

Gershon, David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 305 pp. Hardbound, \$50.00. - *Reviewed by Stephen J. Chernoski,*

The ancestors of about eighty percent of world Jewry lived in the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania in the eighteenth century. It was a pivotal century overall for Europe and near its end, a revolution in France took place and the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, the area that provides the setting for this book, disappeared. But a diverse collection of large and very active communities thrived in the East, despite Europe's political and cultural changes. And according to author Gershon, David Hundert, many scholars have neglected to study these groups.

In *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century*, Gershon focuses on the lively Jewish communities that inhabited this very large area of Eastern Europe and hopes to remedy the neglect. He argues that when looking at Europe's Jews, historians have focused too much on change and ideology. He instead examines, "Who *were* the Jews when they encountered modernity?" (modernity for Gershon is the past two centuries). He also notes that much of the study of Europe's Jews tends to be of the communities in the West. However, the large numbers and cultural importance of Jews of Eastern Europe cannot be ignored, so for Gershon, "it is they who must be placed at the center of any understanding of the Jewish experience." (p. 3). In other words, much of the history on Jews in Europe is not a thorough one.

One of the book's main theses is that Jewish communities in the East differed from each other tremendously: the values each community adopted, their changes and how they lived. In many cities like Warsaw and Vilna, Jews could hardly even be regarded as a minority; many times they made up half the population and in many places they dominated commerce despite the increasing efforts by locals and Sejm legislation trying to lessen their influence. In the rural areas, they followed many different teachings and were the only Jewish community in the world that cultivated the land.

Gershon goes on to explain that the many changes that surrounded Europe in the eighteenth century were unrelated to the changes Jews in Eastern Europe went through. For instance, the rising influence of Kabbalist movements and Hasidism were uniquely Jewish. They happened in spite of the hopes of many gentile neighbors for Jewish assimilation. For most Eastern European Jewry the changes in the west were "an empty void" and their *mentalité* acted as a filter of these views.

It is this mentality that Gershon focuses on and spends most of his time detailing. Despite all the complex changes that engulfed Jews in this century, which carried over, differed and multiplied in the next two centuries, the one common thing that all Jews of this area carried was their Jewishness. This sense of "chosenness" was the central ingredient of Eastern European Jewishness. For many Eastern European Jews, personal redemption was the key driving force in their lives; the communities were in exile and they were to live their lives as setting an example for others. Gershon's main contribution is that he examines how this mentality was formed; he shows the beauty and piety that was involved.

Gershon is trying to capture the *zeitgeist* of the Jews' attitudes on the world at that time, and he does a very convincing job. Polish Jewry was Ashkenazic in every respect and the writings of the *Hassidei Ashkenaz*, or the German Jewish Pietists, became the models of the loftiest spiritual values for most. These teachings were characterized by four distinct attitudes:

- 1) Personal humility
- 2) Negative value of *hana'ah* (the physical world), more emphasis on the increased reward in the next world
- 3) The stressing of *retson haBore* (the desire of the Creator) or *din shamayim* (the law of Heaven) - this would drive them to go beyond the requirements of the halakha
- 4) Attaining a purity of the soul – *yirat shamayim* (fear of God)

For Gershon, this was much of the Jewish *mentalité* of the period and from the ideological to cultural, the vast majority of Eastern European Jews retained this way of thinking despite the many wars and attacks on them by surrounding communities. This allowed Polish-Lithuanian Jews to form a kind of vitality that distinguished them from their brethren scattered across Europe. This vitality expressed itself in the many autonomous institutions, cultural creativity, the feeling of independence and rootedness in values, until it was ultimately destroyed in the twentieth century.

Though brief, Gershon's examination of the relations between Eastern European Jewry and its Christian neighbors is useful, because it shows how Jews did enjoy some degrees of legal equality during the early part of the century in many areas compared to their brethren, though admittedly much of that was on paper. Politically, the Jewish communities of Europe have been depicted as being passive, but the Jews of Poland-Lithuania could even lobby in centers of power of the Sejm. They had representatives who were sent to the Council of Four Lands and smaller governing bodies. They also enjoyed considerable autonomy because of their economic importance to the nobles. However, by the end of the century many previous rights had been limited, mostly because of the nobles' traumas resulting from the weakening of the Commonwealth.

By examining how the nobles, the Catholic Church, burghers and peasants acted toward Jews, one sees good and bad relationships. But for the most part, both sides sought to culturally isolate themselves from each other, when it was not possible physically. Even when living together in the cities, there was tremendous isolation. For Jews in Poland-Lithuania, insulating themselves was part of their mentality of chosenness and the sustainability of an essentially "Jewish universe" during the Diaspora.

Gershon also explains one of the book's apparent contradictions: he stresses the heterogeneous character of Eastern European Jewry, while noting that the central hypothesis of the book lies on a generalization about them: their mentality. For Gershon, doing this is necessary to distinguish Eastern European Jewish experience from other Jewish stories. Noting that generalizations are tough to avoid for a historian, Gershon proceeds with caution and includes exceptions when available to him. The reader should appreciate that he understands the problems involved here. With these exceptions and many other narratives provided, Gershon makes available many personal accounts taken from numerous sources.

Here, many notable intellectual Jewish figures of the time are spoken of in detail. This is the real highlight of the book, by quoting the sources and presenting his interpretation in the context, many faces and names become conceivable and it fosters the enjoyment of the book.

All in all, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century* is not for the casual reader. Students of Jewish studies, eastern European history and even the Holocaust will find this understandable and useful; to others the information provided may just be too obscure. However, anyone of Jewish or even Eastern European background can definitely find valuable information in Gershon's book. It is a fitting work done to correct what the author believed to be misconceptions about these once populous, vibrant communities. With *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century*, Gershon, David Hundert has given a meaningful contribution to the vast history of what was once the epicenter of Jewish life.

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Charles R. Shrader, *The Muslim-Croat Civil War in Central Bosnia – A Military History, 1992-1994*.
College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003. - *Reviewed by Tal Tovy*

In this book Shrader examines the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina between the Muslims and the Croats; which was one of the Yugoslavian wars that took place in the first half of the 1990s. Though the conflict between the various former Yugoslavian states has been analyzed, the primary focus has been the matter of war crimes and the world's attitude toward the war. Historians have neglected such matters as the struggle over strategic objectives in Central Bosnia, or the urgent need to care for the many refugees that had fled the fighting in Serbia and in Bosnia. Thus Shrader's book, because it focuses on the military history of one of the central conflicts in the region, provides a different angle of vision on the Bosnian conflict.

Shrader's primary objective is to shed new light on the Bosnian civil war. He proposes to examine the military organization, the strategy, the operative abilities, and the logistical capabilities of both armies. He proposes further to explore the military operations conducted by both sides. By studying these aspects, Schrader wishes to fashion a balanced understanding of the events; one unhampered by myths that have been generated by popularized journalistic writing. To achieve this goal, the author utilizes the official documentation that was presented to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in Hague. The author wishes to present the readers with the facts so that they may reach their own conclusions, unprejudiced.

In addition to the delineation of the military operations, Shrader examines the process by which the two armies were constructed following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The models he uses can help us understand the disintegration process of a multinational state with a multi-ethnic population. Schrader argues that the Muslims were not 'underdogs,' nor were they innocent victims. The media coverage of the

conflict, he argues, was biased; evident, for instance, from the fact that television interviews were held primarily with Bosnian Muslims. Those who reported the conflict chose to follow rumor, propaganda, and speculation. One of the reasons for this bias, Shrader explains, is the historic Croatian alliance with Nazi Germany during WWII; another reason is that various western European countries, especially France, Germany and Holland, have large Muslim communities.

In the opening chapter, Shrader reviews the historic, ethnic and geographical context of the civil war. This geographical review is crucial for the later understanding of the military operations. In chapters two through four, the author discusses the development of the armies, the development of the command and control systems, the training and logistical systems, and the shaping of doctrine. In these chapters we learn that, contrary to popular belief, the opposing armies were indeed modern armies, rather than chaotic mob-like organizations. They were able to establish modern command and control systems, as well as logistical systems capable of transporting and maintaining field units. In chapters six through eleven, the author analyzes the military operations that were conducted during the war. His conclusion is that though we have been led to believe otherwise, the Muslims were the aggressors in this conflict, and that they were defeated once the Croatian army joined the fighting.

Civil wars are horrible; the civil war that took place in Central Bosnia between November 1992 and March 1994 was no exception. In the heat of the battle, war crimes were committed by both sides, international rules of engagement were violated, and both sides committed acts of massacre and rape of noncombatants.

The author explores the war from a different aspect as well. He analyzes the Muslim-Croat civil war as a post Cold-War conflict. We have seen a frightening array of separatist wars stemming from ethnic and religious violence. In this regard, the war in central Bosnia is an important test-case for the formation of international policy. The international community is forced to deal with an increase in low-intensity conflicts and to send forces on peacekeeping operations. These developments necessitate the creation of specially trained military or paramilitary forces. Niche Wars, as defined by Alvin and Heidi Toffler, necessitate the use of military units able to operate in hostile, protected, or remote environments while maintaining cultural sensitivity for such varied situations as coups, border conflicts, civil wars, and terrorist attacks.¹

There is one point about which I disagree with the author. Shrader claims that the Bosnian civil war validates the Clausewitzian maxim stating that “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means” (p. 162), because the war began after the attempts to solve the conflict by political means had proved unsuccessful. However, the bloody conflicts in the former Yugoslavian states, the Muslim-Croat civil war among them, demonstrate that the disintegration of Yugoslavia resulted from clashes between ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. The Muslims had attempted to control a certain territory while

¹ Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, (Boston, 1993), chapter 11.

oppressing or expelling its Croat minority. At a certain point the Croatian army intervened in favor of the Croat minority. Shouldn't we therefore accept John Keegan's thesis, according to which "war is the continuation of culture by other means"?²

The Bosnian civil war also falls under Samuel Huntington's concept of "Fault Line Wars." Huntington's concepts would enable us to broaden the theoretical framework of the research. According to Huntington, fault line conflicts are communal conflicts between states or groups from different civilizations. Various groups may partake in these conflicts, whether from the same or from different geographical areas. In the former, historically strained relations may erupt violently, especially when new states are being formed and the physical borders are being redrawn. The Yugoslavian wars demonstrate the applicability of Huntington's theories to civil wars in the post-Cold War era.

Basic ethnic issues are difficult to resolve through political negotiations, and such agreements, even if they are achieved, do not last long. War is, therefore, a continuation of culture rather than a continuation of policy. Fault Line Wars are usually fought between people from different religions. Those deep rooted differences usually aggravate and intensify the conflict. Huntington believes that the former Yugoslavia was the scene for one of the most complex systems of a Fault Line War. The lines that had been drawn in the world during the war reflect the cultural characteristic of the war. Christian states (Catholic and Protestant alike) intervened in favor of Croatia, Russia and Greece sided with the Serb Orthodox, and various Muslim countries intervened for the Bosnian Muslims (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Libya).

Shrader's intention was to present the reader with an objective perception of the war. Broadening the theoretical framework of the research could have added further points of reference. Regardless, the current research is, indeed, a major contribution to the study of the complex struggle that took place in the Balkans during the 1990s.

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² John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (New York, 1993), pp. 1-60, esp., 57-60.

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