

The book *Imperial Russian Rule in the Kingdom of Poland, 1864–1915* is a superb contribution to the field of history of Russian Poland, the Russian empire, and elites. Yet, it is also proposing a revision of the much-needed historiography of empires and their organization. Rolf brings to the surface the most profound question: what do we mean by imperial rule? The author determines that the heterogeneity of the Russian empire, the complexity of issues and actors, and the efforts of collaboration, integration, and resistance reveal the complexity of any imperial rule. He ascertains that instead of such concepts as “forced colonization” or an “authoritative hierarchy” historians should use “mutual relationships” that were flexible and negotiated. Those relationships not only shaped the social, economic, and political structures of the periphery. They also left a mark on the identity of participants. The identities and the way they were formed by encounters and communications demonstrate a real, not an imaginary constellation of power.

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An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland. By Kenneth B. Moss. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021. xii, 388 pp. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. \$45.00, hard cover.
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Kenneth Moss’s thought-provoking and well-crafted book, *An Unchosen People*, convincingly challenges a range of historiographical truisms regarding the study of modern Jewish history, in general, and Jewish history in interwar Poland, in particular, which all scholars and students of these and related fields will want to contemplate as they pore over this path-breaking study.

Based on a large amount of source material in Hebrew, Polish, and Yiddish, Moss argues that much of the research conducted on modern Jewish politics in English, Hebrew and Polish over the past two generations has overlooked several key points that, together, demonstrate the need to reevaluate and revise prevailing assumptions regarding what many have long thought was a somewhat saturated field of study. Moss’s ability to reconfigure this major chapter in modern Jewish and Polish histories is a testament to the originality of his historical thinking, his mastery over a wide array of historical materials, and his ability to weave them together into a convincing monograph. This is no small feat.

Moss’s first major point is that the time has come to take seriously the increasingly pervasive sense of “futurelessness” among so many Jews in interwar Poland (41–87). Turning to Yiddish memoirs composed by Jewish youth as part of the YIVO Institute’s autobiographical contests from 1932, 1934 and 1939, Hebrew reports penned by emissaries of different Zionist organizations based in British Mandate Palestine, the analyses of Jewish sociologists like Max Weinreich and Jacob Lestschinsky, and other sources, Moss demonstrates that an increasing number of Jews in interwar Poland felt as though they had no future, and argues that scholars need to treat Jewish “futurelessness” just as they would any other historical phenomenon.

As part of his efforts to convince scholars that the time has come to recast their interpretation of Polish and Jewish histories in this period, Moss brings a staggering amount of source material to the table. Similar to other studies like those by Kamil Kijek, (*Dzieci modernizmu*), Rona Yona, (*Nihyeh kulanu halutsim*),

and also my own *Barricades and Banners*, Moss achieves this goal by avoiding well-known sources like the writings of party leaders and statements by central political organizations (Bundist, Communist, and Zionist) and turning to a range of historical materials penned by Jewish journalists, mid-level activists, and, whenever possible, relatively unknown Jewish residents of small towns and medium-sized cities. This diverse source base not only allows Moss to paint a rich account of Jewish life in interwar Poland but also helps substantiate the author's main point regarding the need to reassess prevailing conceptions of Jewish society between the wars.

Moss's efforts to move beyond a history of political ideologies and prominent figures and to paint a composite of Jewish society helps bolster his argument that the looming sense of "crisis" among Jews in Poland between the wars was not only economic and political but also deeply existential. The increasingly difficult political and material conditions not only affected how many of Poland's three-million Jewish citizens imagined their political options but, perhaps even more importantly, their very sense of self as members of a minority community in an increasingly national state and society (127–39). For Moss, the political is, first and foremost, personal.

An additional point in Moss's book is the need to connect the history of Poland's Jewish community to the new Jewish society emerging at the time in Mandate Palestine, the Yishuv. Unlike previous studies—like those by the late Ezra Mendelsohn (*Zionism in Poland*)—Moss demonstrates that as the political, economic and existential situation worsened for many Jews in Poland, more and more of them became interested in, if not obsessed with, the experiences of the approximately 100,000 Jews that had already relocated from Poland to Mandate Palestine (221–53). Travelogues by intellectuals like Max Weinreich, the activity of youth movements like *Hehalutz* (The Pioneer), and personal letters from family members or neighbors who had moved to Tel Aviv or other new centers in British Palestine helped assuage, perhaps, the sense of "futurelessness" that had come to characterize Jewish society.

The desire to leave (or at the very least to imagine leaving) Poland—the politics of Jewish "exitism"—is Moss's last major point in this engaging study, one that argues that increased discussion regarding the Jewish community in Palestine and its potential future was motivated not by a heartfelt conversion of many of Poland's Jewish citizens to Zionism, but, rather, as part of a calculated, rational response to the increasingly difficult material, social, and political conditions among so many Jews in Poland (37–38, 254–60). According to Moss, this newfound interest is best described as "vernacular Zionism."

The turn to and use of concepts like "futurelessness," "exitism," and "vernacular Zionism" are just some of the many ways that Moss's search for a new language of Jewish history and politics helps reconfigure our understanding of this fascinating period in modern Jewish, Polish, and European histories.

This is a masterwork of history that all scholars and students of modern Jewish and Polish histories as well as those interested in related topics like modern Jewish politics, the fate of minority communities in the age of nationalism, Polish-Jewish relations, antisemitism, and the history of east central Europe will want to read. Thanks to its rich source base, creative analysis, and skillful narrative, *An Unchosen People* will also make perfect reading material for graduate and undergraduate seminars dedicated to teaching students how to prepare, research, and write a fantastic work of history.

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