


10-2001

Gordiejew's "Voices of Yugoslav Jewry" -Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Mojzes, Paul (2001) "Gordiejew's "Voices of Yugoslav Jewry" -Book Review," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 5 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol21/iss5/4>

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Paul Benjamin Gordiejew, *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. Paperback. 479 pp. \$27.95. Reviewed by Paul Mojzes.

The book is the outgrowth of the author's doctoral dissertation in anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. Three extensive field studies were conducted when Gordiejew lived in Yugoslavia, in 1985/86, 1989, and 1994. The author, who is neither Jewish nor southern Slav, based this ethnographic study of the identity of the Jews of Yugoslavia on a wealth of archival and other written material, extensive personal encounters, and theoretical works in the field of anthropology.

The author points out that the Jews of Yugoslavia themselves had diverse histories amid the mosaic of the peoples of the former federation. There were Sephardic Jews who lived in the former Ottoman Empire who differed significantly from the Ashkenazi Jews of the former Hapsburg Empire. Both groups were predominantly urban; most of them settled in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo (75% of post World War II Jews lived in these three cities). The Ashkenazi Jews (who moved from Yiddish-speaking to the vernacular) were open to liberal influences much earlier than the Sephardic (Ladino-speaking) community. The author first provides a historical sketch of Jewish life in the Balkans. Then he pays attention to the period from the establishment of the Yugoslav state (1919) until the Holocaust describing it as fragmenting but still integrating elements of distinct Jewishness. This was a period when many Jews opted for the political left and became completely secularized. The terrible human losses during the Holocaust shattered the Jewish communities; some Jews joined the national liberation struggle of Tito's *partizans*.

After World War II the integrative symbols that generally unite Jewish communities disappeared. Numerically Jews were literally decimated, dropping from about 80,000 to about 8,000. Both family traditions and synagogue ceased to

be a factor. They tended to support Titoist integrative socialism as they were a people not prone to side with the conflicting south Slavic and other ethnicities. Gordiejew characterizes their stance as "submergence," namely an assimilationist trend which promoted loyalty to Titoist socialism over their own Jewish ethnic identification. Many Jews intermarried and did not consider their Jewishness of great import. It was often non-Jews who were more aware of a person's Jewishness than the one who was Jewish.

The destruction of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which lead to separatism and nationalism by the large ethnic groups, created among the small Jewish communities a perplexed search for their own religious and ethnic identity. On a global scale Jewish ethnicity is closely tied to Judaism, but the vast majority of Jews of Yugoslavia no longer knew what Judaism is. Since there was *de facto* no longer a Jewish community, a process of individuation took place, described in chapter 5, which provides biographies of various individuals. The author considers this part of the book central.

In addition to the exploration of Jewish identity in the former Yugoslavia there are two other important components of the book. One consists of various theoretical discussions about methodology and other issues in ethnography, anthropology, and sociology. These are intervoven with the observations and analysis about Jews, which this reviewer found distracting, leading to a sense of discontinuity of the narrative. The other are observations of wider social developments in the process of creation and disintegration of Yugoslavia, which are quite perceptive and accurate. The author quotes one of his Jewish contacts as saying aptly: "The situation in Yugoslavia is *hara*--Hebrew for shit. Everybody here is alive but in a deep pit of national shit." (Tragically, many did *not* stay alive in the last decade of the 20th century.) Chapter 6, "Forward into the Past" is helpful for understanding the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia and its impact on the small number of Jews, who tended to take sides with the larger communities in which they lived and thus weakening communications between

each other.

On the whole it is great to finally have a scholarly book-length study of the small Jewish communities of Yugoslavia. Its greatest merit is that its findings are dependable, objective, fair, and thorough. There are, regretfully, also some weaknesses. One of them is a great amount of repetitiveness, probably resulting from the fact that the various parts were written over a long period and the author forgot that something was written more than once before. But certainly a good deal of that irritating repetitiveness could have been eliminated by the author and the editorial readers, for often the repetition occurs practically on the next page.

Another annoyance is the author's propensity to use terms from the original language of the interviewee for which there is a perfectly fine word in English. I do understand the need for retaining the original of those words that do not have a simple equivalent. But why use "kontinuitet," "revolucija," "govor [speech]," "neprijatelj [enemy]," "oslobodjenje [liberation], and similar? The author also provides tedious descriptions and comparisons of commemorations and tables of comparisons of speeches on pp. 123-129, which seem to be attempts to make them look artificially empirical.

The book describes relatively few specifically religious features. The reason is not Gordiejew's lack of interest but the distancing of the post-WWII Jews of Yugoslavia from religious observances. What the future will bring is uncertain. In most cities of the former Yugoslavia there is still no rabbi or functioning synagogue (recently a rabbi settled in Zagreb). As a consequence of the siege of Sarajevo, most Jews emigrated. An interesting irony took place during the most recent cycle of wars in Yugoslavia. While in the past Jews were frequently forced to claim non-Jewish identities in order to save their lives, in Sarajevo some non-Jews claimed to be Jews so as to be able to be evacuated. It does appear that Jews living in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia are destined to marginalization.

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