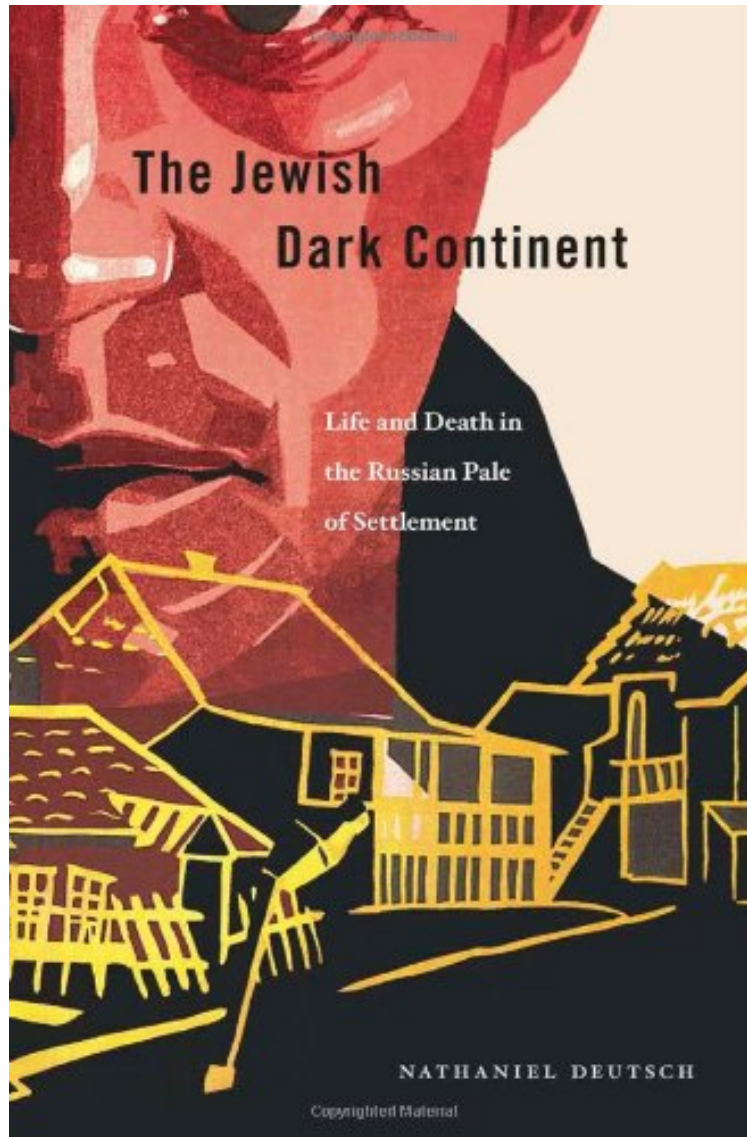


The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement

Nathaniel Deutsch

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Nathaniel Deutsch : The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating historyBy Monique SueAs I'm still early on in the book

cannot give it a complete review. But what I've read so far is not only very well written, but is describing Jewish personalities and life in such a way that I can much better appreciate the vast culture that was destroyed by the Nazis and their willing helpers across Europe. 1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An-sky and Ethnography! By Wendy Bat-Sarah I am so delighted that An-sky's ethnographic questionnaires have been mostly translated. Deutsch's introduction and notes are also quite remarkable. 5 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Jewish Life and Customs in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries in Tsarist Russia By Jan Peczkis Consistent with the premise that the Jew answers every question with another question (p. 1), the bulk of this work consists of a set of 2,087 questions raised by An-sky (Shloyme Zanvil Rappaport). They touch on virtually every imaginable aspect of Jewish life, including childbirth, infancy, child rearing, marriage, education, social status, senescence, death, etc. Deutsch characterizes An-sky's work as a kind of folkloric Talmud for the twentieth century. (p. 15). Religious issues assume only a small part of An-sky's 2,087 questions. There is an interesting section on the afterlife. (pp. 307-313). It contains speculations about reincarnation, but also features concepts of heaven and hell that seem to parallel their Christian counterparts. Of course, arcane details require explanation for the non-specialized reader. Accordingly, the editor comments on An-sky's questions, for the benefit of the reader, and in considerable detail, on almost every page of An-sky's text. Although An-Sky was in no sense what some call a self-hating Jew (to the contrary), he repeatedly voiced support for the premise that the Jewish role in Russian society is an unmistakably exploitative one. This must energetically be corrected. (p. 4). Now consider divorce. Although it was declining among Jews throughout the 19th century, the divorce rate among the Jews of tsarist Russia was higher than that of other religious communities. (p. 248). Let us now focus on prostitution. (pp. 242-243). In the late 19th century, Jews, at 4% of the population of the entire Russian Empire (including the Russian-ruled part of Poland), accounted for 7% of registered prostitutes. Deutsch adds that, "Within the Pale of Settlement as a whole, Jewish women ran a full 70 percent of the brothels." (p. 243). An-Sky elaborated on how Jews sometimes injured themselves in order to avoid military service in the tsarist Russian Army. (pp. 191-192). Interestingly, KHAPPERS (those who forcibly supplied Jewish boys to the Army) were often Jewish themselves. (p. 193). Also interestingly, the cited work of Yohanen Petrovsky-Shtern rejects the premise that Tsar Nicholas I's policy, of drafting Jews, was motivated by converting Jews to Christianity. Rather, it stemmed from an "Enlightenment agenda". (p. 345). If so, then Jewish resistance to the draft owed less to fears of Jews converting to Christianity and more to a desire to avoid integrating into Russian society. The title of this book derives from the attitudes of western Jews towards the OSTJUDEN--deemed a huge and backward community. (p. 29). Deutsch quotes Martin Buber as thinking of the eastern European Jew as one that, notwithstanding the passage of many centuries, "has remained an Oriental". [Ironically, Endeks and other authors among Poles (e. g., Feliks Koneczny), have been condemned for opining that Jewish culture is essentially an Oriental one--moreover one essentially foreign to Poland's Latin culture.] Interestingly, Endeks were not the only one with less than positive attitudes towards the Litvaks (Litwaks). Deutsch points out that Polish Jews often called Lithuanian Jews derogatory terms such as LITVAK KHAZIR ("Lithuanian pig") and LITVAK TSEYLEM KOP ("Lithuanian cross head"). (p. 151). The editor considers An-sky a NARODNIK. This Jew was thus a Russian populist who rejected the Marxist premise that societies necessarily had to go through an industrial capitalist phase before they could enter the revolutionary mode. (p. 2). Deutsch (pp. 180-181) states that Purimspiels were, in his words, "extremely popular" among Jews of the Pale. He cites some works that discuss them, but does not mention Christians as the "bad guy" Haman. The editor touches on the Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment). Interestingly, he cites a work that rejects the common view that the Haskalah originated among German Jews and later spread to eastern European Jews. Instead, it appeared simultaneously at several centers of Jewish life in both central and eastern Europe. (p. 183). Finally, Deutsch (p. 169) mentions, but glosses over, an important scholarly article. I elaborate on it below:

-----"Torah Study on Christmas Eve", by Marc Shapiro. 1999. THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHY 8:319-353. (This entire article, at the time of this review, is freely available online.) The Jewish custom of refraining from Torah study, on Christmas Eve, goes back at least a few centuries, even though it was shrouded in oral tradition in order to try to hide it from the Christians. (p. 346). Many, though not all Jews, observed this custom, both Hasidim and non-Hasidim, including well-known Talmudists. (p. 331). Shapiro rejects the common explanation, for not studying the Torah on Christmas Eve, as merely a stay-indoors policy of self-protection from possible violence from Christians on this night. After all, the prohibition also applied to studying the Torah in private at home! (p. 346). The motive, based in part on Sanhedrin 90b, is described by Shapiro, "It is possible that one may study something which Jesus himself studied. This in turn would be of assistance to his soul, which remains in hell." (p. 331; see also pp. 346-347). This motive refutes the contention that Jews had no concern for Christianity other than a source of persecution. Marc Shapiro also clarifies other Jewish teachings about Jesus Christ, as he writes, "The notion that Jesus is condemned to crawl through the latrines on Christmas eve is quite significant, as will soon be seen. The closest parallel is found in TOLEDOT YESHU...presumably, a passage in GITTIN 57a is relevant in this regard and may even be the origin of the notion that Jesus must crawl through the latrines. According to this passage, it has been decreed in heaven that Jesus is punished with boiling hot excrement." (p. 355). Shapiro puts all this in broader context as he states that, "Of

course, even without a clear halakhic prohibition, Jews were accustomed to use derogatory expressions in speaking of elements of the Christian religion." (p. 320). He also notes that the dog was used as an image, of bad things in store for the Jews at Christmas-time, owing to the popular Kabbalistic identification of Jesus with a dog. (p. 329).

At the turn of the twentieth century, over forty percent of the world's Jews lived within the Russian Empire, almost all in the Pale of Settlement. From the Baltic to the Black Sea, the Jews of the Pale created a distinctive way of life little known beyond its borders. This led the historian Simon Dubnow to label the territory a Jewish "Dark Continent." Just before World War I, a socialist revolutionary and aspiring ethnographer named An-sky pledged to explore the Pale. He dreamed of leading an ethnographic expedition that would produce an archive—what he called an Oral Torah of the common people rather than the rabbinic elite—which would preserve Jewish traditions and transform them into the seeds of a modern Jewish culture. Between 1912 and 1914, An-sky and his team collected jokes, recorded songs, took thousands of photographs, and created a massive ethnographic questionnaire. Consisting of 2,087 questions in Yiddish—exploring the gamut of Jewish folk beliefs and traditions, from everyday activities to spiritual exercises to marital intimacies—the Jewish Ethnographic Program constitutes an invaluable portrait of Eastern European Jewish life on the brink of destruction. Nathaniel Deutsch offers the first complete translation of the questionnaire, as well as the riveting story of An-sky's almost messianic efforts to create a Jewish ethnography in an era of revolutionary change. An-sky's project was halted by World War I, and within a few years the Pale of Settlement would no longer exist. These survey questions revive and reveal shtetl life in all its wonder and complexity.

A century ago, The Jewish Ethnographic Program gave us the culture of the shtetl at such close range and in such extraordinary detail that we can see the blood spot on the conjugal sheet and read the petitionary notes on the Zaddik's grave. Thanks to Nathaniel Deutsch, An-sky's 'dark continent' is revealed to us as a living, luminous place. (David Roskies, author of *Yiddishlands: A Memoir*) The Jewish Dark Continent is much more than the story of an amazing individual and an inspired, if quixotic, project of collaborative research. It is a genuine voyage of exploration, a work of erudition and vision that restores complexity, paradox, and possibility to the Jewish Pale of Settlement. Brilliant and genre-bending. (James Clifford, author of *The Predicament of Culture and Routes*) A highly original work—a superb translation, an erudite, lively annotation, above all an extended conversation with one of late imperial Russian Jewry's most intriguing minds. (Steven J. Zipperstein, author of *Imagining Russian Jewry*) For the first time, a rare and precious document, as lost as the world it was intended to document, comes to light. World War I halted the ethnographic expedition that would have provided the answers to this unique questionnaire about all aspects of the Jewish life cycle in Eastern Europe. Thanks to Nathaniel Deutsch's fine translation and erudite commentary these tantalizing questions—without answers—reveal what those who formulated them expected to find. Truly a treasure. (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, editor of *Writing a Modern Jewish History* and co-author of *They Called Me Mayer July*) [A] perceptive and intriguing work. (David Wolpe *Weekly Standard* 2011-11-21) About the Author Nathaniel Deutsch is Professor of Literature and History at University of California, Santa Cruz.