Teter on Bemporad, 'Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets'

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*Legacy of Blood* is an absorbing and meticulously researched and argued study of the continuities and discontinuities of antisemitic ideas and actions in the Soviet Russia and, later, the USSR. The book explores the nexus between Bolshevik and—later—Soviet protection of Jews against pogroms and antisemitism, and the rise of one of the most pernicious, and still active, myths of Judeo-Bolshevism, a myth that was exploited by opponents of the Bolshevik revolution, the Nazis, and now, right-wing nationalist groups in states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, such as Poland and Hungary. Woven into the story Bemporad tells is the motif of blood accusations—a centuries-old lie that Jews killed Christians for their blood. This motif tracks closely the cultural and political changes in Soviet history. The book shows methodically how antisemitism—with all its accoutrements—as well as anti-antisemitism became useful tools in Soviet hands.

The Soviet Union was born in blood. Not just the blood of the October Revolution but the blood of hundreds of thousands of Jews, who were attacked, maimed, and murdered between 1917 and 1921. Over nine hundred towns suffered attacks, which in some cases wiped out the entire Jewish population, such as in Dubovo, where of 1,200 Jews only twenty-six remained by the fall of 1919 (p. 17), or Proskuriv, where in February 1919 “in just a few hours the members of the Ukrainian nationalist forces murdered more than 1,600 Jews” (p. 4). And yet, this violence has almost been forgotten—a “forgotten genocide” (p. 161). The pogroms in 1880-81, the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, and even the pogroms of the 1905 revolution are remembered, even though they were not as bloody or as deadly as those of 1917-21. This forgetting has been explained by the overwhelming memory of the murder of Jews during WWII and the fact that the earlier pogroms were in bigger cities, unlike the sites of the violence following the revolution. But Bemporad’s book also demonstrates that this forgetting is the result of the complex Soviet relationship with antisemitism—the early pogroms “made Jews Soviet” as they helped forge a bond between Jews and the Soviet regime, a bond that frayed after WWII, and after anti-Jewish violence became universalized. Still, perhaps the biggest legacy of these 1917-21 pogroms was the persistent canard of “Judeo-Bolshevism.”

Soviet forces did stop the bloody pogroms and violence against Jews, and they did aggressively pursue antisemites and spurious accusers. They even prosecuted culprits for prerevolution antisemitic violence. They did so in the early years of Soviet history because pogroms and anti-Jewish accusations, including libels that Jews killed Christians for their blood, were useful as propaganda against reactionary forces the Bolsheviks were fighting. Anti-Jewish violence and anti-Jewish libels
were vestiges of the tsarist regime, which needed to be eradicated; they were evidence of a backward, dark past that was about to be replaced by a modern, bright, Soviet future. During those early years, Jews could count on “the Soviet state [to] put an end to the violence” (p. 108). Thus, two mythical narratives emerged: for Jews, the Soviet authorities came to be seen as their protectors; for antisemites, the Soviet regime became a tool in Jews’ hands. A byproduct of these earlier Soviet years was not only the myth of “Judeo-Bolshevism” but also antisemitism as a tool in fight against Bolshevism, an expression of opposition to the Soviet regime. And with time, the Soviet authorities realized the power of antisemitism and the costs of fighting it.

Indeed, neither the pogroms nor blood libels disappeared from Soviet soil—what disappeared was the decisive measures taken by Soviet authorities against them. The word “pogrom” began to have a specific meaning—anti-Jewish violence by anti-Soviet actors (p. 113), and anti-Jewish violence became “universalized.” With time, antisemitism became condoned. As Bemporad notes, “antisemitism and anti-Sovietness met harmoniously under German occupation” (p. 124), and the book perhaps should have explored more the role Nazi propaganda played in reinforcing anti-Soviet and antisemitic attitudes and thus, perhaps, in the subsequent retreat of Soviet authorities from decisive actions against antisemitism, as they realized that fighting antisemitism made them vulnerable.

Though the book focuses on the Soviet Union and addresses non-Soviet states only in passing, it nonetheless helps contextualize antisemitism and antisemitic violence in Polish territory both under the Nazi occupation and right after the war, as Bemporad’s discussion of pogroms in the Soviet Union against Jewish survivors of WWII reveals that antisemitic pogroms were not specific to Poland. Moreover, the massacres of Jews during the postrevolutionary years provide a longer perspective for the antisemitic violence in the Polish town of Jedwabne. Legacy of Blood helps widen the lens that has been, since Tomasz Gross’s 2002 book Neighbors, focused so keenly on Poland. The book also provides historical context for the recent reemergence of ethnonationalist antisemitism in eastern Europe—a byproduct of efforts to erase the legacy of the Soviet era, one of which was the early Soviet rejection of antisemitic violence and libels.

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