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The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Disapora Nationalism and Jewish History

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Reviewed by Ken Frieden

Biography is not a salient Jewish literary genre. Outside of Hasidic circles, which have produced memoirs in praise of their leaders ever since the Baal Shem Tov, individual personality has seldom been a primary concern. The Judaic tradition has emphasized texts, commentaries, halakhic discourses and aggadic tales, often leaving their authors’ lives in relative obscurity. Yet, the biographical form, like cultural studies and social history in general, has attracted attention in recent years.

This biography, first published in Russian (1950) and only now translated into English, should help to revive popular and scholarly interest in one of the outstanding modern Jewish intellectuals. Simon Dubnov (1860-1941), author of a comprehensive History of the Jews and numerous other seminal works, made his mark as the preeminent Jewish historian since Heinrich Graetz. He set an exemplary precedent, moreover, by striving to effect social change in accordance with the conclusions of his research. His most original contribution to Jewish political thought may be summed up in the notion of “Diaspora nationalism,” also known as “Jewish national autonomism,” which focuses on the cultural dimension of collective Jewish identity. A biography of Dubnov is pertinent to twentieth-century history, because his personal identity influenced his conception of a national Jewish identity distinct from territorial, Zionist goals.

Simon Dubnov was born in Mstislavl, Belorussia. Unable to enter the university system in Tsarist Russia, he pursued his education as an autodidact and devoted himself to the study of Jewish history. He engaged in journalistic writing to disseminate his ideas, providing a counterweight to the ever more popular Zionism, but he most valued his systematic scholarship on social and cultural aspects of Jewish history. While he penned his major works in Russian, he also wrote in Yiddish and Hebrew.

First printed in 1950, The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov now appears in translation posthumously, five years after the death of Sophie Dubnov-Erlitch. The work is astutely introduced by Jonathan Frankel, readably translated by Judith Vowles, knowledgeably edited by Jeffrey Shandler, and rounded out with an afterword by Victor Erlich. This biography, by Dubnov’s eldest child, has a privileged status, although it draws heavily from Dubnov’s autobiography (published in Russian). For the most part excluding personal recollections and shunning sentimentality, the author emphasizes Dubnov’s philosophical commitments in the broader context of intellectual history.

Dubnov-Erlitch argues that her father’s life had “intrinsic unity” and endeavors to illustrate its inner logic — albeit “indissolubly linked to decades of Russian-Jewish history” (37). His was, according to the author, a “typical” life, though it may be more accurate to say that his path had typical beginnings in the Eastern European heder, and that he rebelled against traditional education in a way that was increasingly typical. Following his bar mitzvah,
Simon Dubnov went to live at a yeshiva run by his grandfather, Rabbi Bentsion Dubnov. In spite of his grandfather's proximity, Simon began to read forbidden books of modern European literature.

Jonathan Frankel provides a concise definition of Dubnov's influential yet now largely forgotten theory of Diaspora nationalism: "[T]his theory states that even with the destruction of their state in 70 C.E. and their dispersal across the world, the Jews have remained a nation (albeit "nonterritorial" in character); that until the French Revolution and emancipation, the Jews had always been granted a large measure of internal self-government in the host states; that in the modern era, they should therefore lay claim in the various countries of the Diaspora not only to civil but also to national (that is, national minority) rights; and that national autonomy would enable them not only to run their own internal (above all, educational) affairs but also to defend their political interests more effectively both at home and abroad" (p. 1).

Dubnov began to develop the lineaments of this theory in the 1890s and expressed it forcefully in contrast to the "spiritual Zionism" of Ahad Ha-Am. Dubnov was even more skeptical of Herzl's "political Zionism" because he placed his primary emphasis on Jewish cultural and national autonomy in the Diaspora.

Taken to its logical conclusion, Diaspora nationalism might inspire radical changes in Jewish life as well as in Judaic studies. It would encourage respect for the value of Jewish culture as it has evolved around the world, challenging the presumed superiority of recent Israeli experiences. From a scholarly standpoint, it would call for greater attention to worldwide Jewish cultural traditions in the diverse realms of literature, philosophy, music art, and science. Judaic literature (in several languages not limited to Hebrew and Yiddish), for example, would be placed on a par with other European national literatures. Jewish music and art would be recognized for their coherence and particularity. A century after Dubnov developed his views, such repercussions are only slowly gaining acceptance.

In relation to political Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel added significance to the original publication of this biography two years later. Perhaps Dubnov-Erlich was motivated, in part, by a desire to reaffirm the importance of her father's achievements — at a time that combined euphoria over Israeli statehood and anguish after the Holocaust. A Diaspora nationalist need not deny the centrality of Zion in Jewish thinking, but Dubnov insisted on the continuing validity of Jewish cultural centers in Europe and North America. Had he been alive in 1948, Dubnov might not have been one of the strongest proponents of the State of Israel, though his views could have changed under the influence of the Holocaust. Dubnov-Erlich does not question whether anti-Semitic violence constituted a major challenge to Dubnov's outlook.

Among Russian-Jewish intellectuals, Dubnov was unusually receptive to modern Yiddish literature during its early decades. As a contributor to the Russian language periodical, Voskhod, under the pseudonym Criticus, he wrote important reviews of works by Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz. Subsequently, after exchanging letters with Sholem Aleichem, Dubnov wrote an article for Voskhod on 'zhargon [i.e., Yiddish] literature,' in which he showed that the everyday language of the Jewish masses had an indisputable right to become an instrument of literature because trilingualism was imposed on Jews...
by history” (p. 87). After 1907, he began to write some of his own works in Yiddish. He saw a direct correlation between language and social action when he noted that “the opponents of zhargon disdained a powerful instrument of Jewish autonomy in the Diaspora” (p. 150). Sholem Aleichem’s letters to Dubnov “repeatedly emphasize that Criticus alone in Russian-Jewish journalism championed the rights of the poor zhargon and defended it from attacks” (p. 196).

Dubnov-Erlich devotes an important chapter to Dubnov’s years in the Odessa literary circle (1890-1905). He became closely acquainted with S.Y. Abramovitsch, H.N. Bialik, Ben-Ami, Y.H. Ravbitsky, and Ahad Ha-Am. It was during this period that both modern Hebrew and modern Yiddish literature flourished. Odessa was the center of Hebrew publishing, while Warsaw — led by I.L. Peretz — was becoming the center of Yiddish culture. After the Czernowitz conference of 1908, which declared Yiddish a national language of the Jews, Ahad Ha-Am reproved Dubnov for his support: “I am not surprised at what you write ... about zhargon. After all, it is a direct corollary of the theory of autonomism” (p. 200). By 1910, the author explains, “the disputes were no longer between nationalists and assimilationists but between Hebraists and Yiddishists” (p. 153). Dubnov tried to avoid this dispute, valuing Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish for their separate merits.

Like Bal Makshoves (Isador Eliashev), Dubnov held a pluralistic view of Jewish literature. In a 1913 colloquium, he argued “that the linguistic dualism or pluralism of Jewish literature had existed in virtually every period, and that this ability of the national culture to use any instrument should be seen as one of its strengths” (p. 161). He saw “the unity of a culture expressed in various languages,” corresponding to “the unity of a people scattered in the Diaspora.” Neither the Hebraists nor the Yiddishists were satisfied with this pluralistic approach.

The publication of The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History comes at an appropriate time in the history of Zionism. Dubnov argued against outright critiques of Jewish nationalism, by distinguishing “between aggressive and defensive nationalism, between national egoism and national individualism” (p. 112). On the other hand, his views suggest the complementariness of Jewish culture in Israel and in the Diaspora. Having rejected assimilation, Dubnov nevertheless considered European culture an invaluable part of Jewish life, and he viewed culture as the truest basis for national Jewish identity.


Reviewed by Rebecca T. Alpert

THE MOVEMENT for women’s equality in Judaism has presented an enormous challenge to the Jewish community over the past several decades. This struggle has resulted in changes in status for Jewish women never before contemplated in Jewish history. Women are now communal leaders. We teach Jewish Studies in graduate programs and seminaries. We have created and participated in life cycle ceremonies (baby namings and b’nai mizvah) that never existed before.

We take an active, public role in religious and communal life, and don

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