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Nadia Malinovich, *French and Jewish: Culture and the Politics of Identity in Early Twentieth-Century France*. Oxford and Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008. xii + 280 pp. Illustrations, index, and bibliography. \$49.50 US (cl). ISBN 978-1-904113-40-9.

Review by Jeffrey Haus, Kalamazoo College.

In the last decade or so, scholars of French Jewish history have focused on internal forces operating within French Jewry and the manner in which those forces interacted with their French surroundings. This pursuit has yielded a more nuanced view of the boundaries of French Jewish self-perception and the connection of that perception to French society. Nadia Malinovich's book makes an important contribution to this body of work, following a specific strand of French Jewish identity that developed during the 1920s. Throughout this period, she argues, different camps of Jewish intellectuals sought to adjust their perceptions of Judaism to a new political and social environment in which Jews could assert a more distinct, ethnic sense of group identity while maintaining allegiance to French universalist ideals. Influenced by the immigration of Eastern European Jews to France and by the growing Zionist movement, their quest for a new synthesis between "French" and "Jewish" stimulated an expansion of Jewish cultural life. By establishing new cultural organizations, publications, and youth groups, Malinovich's intellectuals created vehicles for expressing their vision of Jewish existence consistent with both French citizenship and faithfulness to the Jewish people.

The book's first chapter establishes a useful point of contextual departure for the rest of her study. Charting the foundations of ethnic distinctiveness in the Jewish relationship to French republican ideals, Malinovich identifies "a new kind of nationalism rooted in the idea of group difference." This trend represented part of a "broader shift" toward a more ethnic conception of being French, expressed by anti-Semitic agitators as well as Jewish intellectuals (pp. 21-22). Movement toward a more ethnic definition of Frenchness received additional impetus from the Dreyfus Affair, when questions about the extent of Jewish difference entered prominently into French public discourse. Malinovich wisely looks beyond responses to anti-Semitism, seeing greater significance in the creation of new intellectual and social networks among French Jews. These networks enabled interactions that would later lead to the development and diffusion of the new sense of French Jewish identity.

The second chapter explores literary efforts which brought Jewish identity issues into the open. In brief overviews of the work of André Spire, Henri Franck, Jean-Richard Bloch, and Edmond Fleg, Malinovich supports her claim that French Jewish writers prior to the 1920s struggled to balance French universalism and Jewish particularism, even as the Jewish communal and religious establishment treated the issue of Jewish difference as closed. Both Bloch and Fleg, for example, sought to outline a sense of Jewish mission as a justification for the continuing existence of the Jews as a distinct group. By injecting identity issues into public discourse, Malinovich argues, this group of writers opened the door to broader public manifestations of Jewish identity during the 1920s. Their work also reformulated the relationship between universalism and particularism among French Jews.

Malinovich analyzes these manifestations in the religious and cultural realms prior to World War I. Both traditional and Reform Jews, she demonstrates, adopted more ethnic orientations during the 1920s. Malinovich sees this shift as growing naturally out of the shift in identity. Since French Jews

thought of themselves in ethnic terms, they logically reinterpreted their religious identities in ethnic terms. For Reform Jews, the idea constituted a new understanding of Jewish difference as a positive feature; traditionalists employed terms such as “blood” and “honor” to mark Jewish difference as equivalent to Catholic or Protestant distinctiveness. In the years before World War I, both camps adopted similar strategies for perpetuating their movements. On the pages of new periodicals and in the ranks of youth groups and clubs, French Jewish religious leaders embraced the concept of Jewish distinctiveness while simultaneously asserting fealty to France.

The retooling of the pre-war years bloomed in the post-war period. The war, she argues, stimulated the growth of “new networks of pro-Jewish activism” (p. 95). Growing anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and the desire to support the Zionist enterprise in Palestine connected Jews as Jews *and* as French citizens. Working to help the oppressed fit both Jewish and French ideals of justice; supporting the Zionist cause could be interpreted not as dual loyalty, but as promoting French national interests in the Middle East. Both strands of activity required the acknowledgement of Jewish difference within the broader framework of French citizenship. Instead of the traditional assertion of compatibility between Jewish religious belief and French citizenship, a significant segment of French Jewry began to embrace openly the idea of distinctively Jewish concerns beyond the strictly religious realm.

Malinovich concludes that all of this activity resulted in an “explosion of Jewish cultural activity” in the decade after the war (p. 90). That explosion takes firmer shape in the fifth chapter, which deals with the expanding sphere of Jewish communal activity in the 1920s. Old models of Franco-Jewish coexistence no longer worked in the post-war context, so French Jews reconfigured their understanding of France and of Judaism to fit their new sense of themselves as ethnic beings. The scouting movement, *Éclaireurs Israélites*, exemplifies this phenomenon. While the scouts began as a religious group, the movement expanded its definition of Judaism beyond religious lines and became a more diverse organization. This shift represented an expanded understanding of French Judaism as a pluralist entity within a more (ideally) pluralist France. This expanded sensibility reflected, in Malinovich’s eyes, a shared notion among French Jews that Jewish survival depended upon a wider definition of Judaism to encourage Jewish sociability.

The resulting communal dynamism in turn spawned new cultural vehicles like *Menorah* and other literary efforts, all of which conveyed this new formulation of French Jewishness. They also opened up a new realm for self-exploration that was not without danger as well. Malinovich tells us, for example, that Jewish writers of the 1920s began to identify “essentialist” Jewish traits that differentiated them from other Frenchmen and women. They emphasized the positive aspects of these differences, especially the Jews’ “Oriental” qualities that linked them to the high moral values of ancient Israel. Some Jews, however, expressed concern that essentializing differences left Jews vulnerable to anti-Semitic attacks, while religious Jews worried that the new associations encouraged secularization rather than religious preservation. Malinovich’s analysis of the new Jewish media also points out the limits of many of these efforts, namely that they seemed to concern personal quests for identity rather than the long-term survival of Franco-Judaism.

Malinovich concludes her analysis by assessing its religious impact. French Jewish religious leaders, she writes, responded to the new situation by spiritualizing Franco-Judaism. Paralleling a broader attempt to reintegrate religion into French society in the decades after the Separation of Church and State in 1905, the French Jewish writer Aimé Pallière echoed Martin Buber’s focus on Jewish mysticism and self-discovery.

One may assess this book on several levels. In terms of research, Malinovich has brought together a large body of material and displays impressive, intimate knowledge of both literary and organizational sources. She also does an admirable job of tying these sources to the larger context of Jewish and French history. Her analysis leads to an intriguing conclusion: that French Jews felt the freedom to

express a communitarian conception of Jewishness during the 1920s. Given the degree to which Malinovich grounds this newfound sense of freedom in the French context, this thesis represents as much of a comment on France as it does on Jews during the period. Consequently, one might probe this idea a little more deeply. In her discussion of French Jewish literature, for example, Malinovich seems to describe an environment that not so much freed Jews to assert difference as one in which asserting the *legitimacy* of difference proved essential. Her literary and film evidence suggests an ongoing struggle between attempts to define a conformist “Frenchness” against a pluralistic one. The French Jews in this study therefore needed to reconfigure their conceptions of being Jewish in order to reconcile it with their developing sense of being French.

And yet, she also concludes that the ethno-cultural definition of Judaism during the 1920s did not have much staying power. Moving away from traditional religious structures, this self-conception failed to construct any means of self-perpetuation. Asserting difference seems to have had more to do with personal quests for Jewish self-understanding than with long-term Jewish survival. The latter, in the end, remained the object of religious practice rather than cultural activity.

This point does not represent a criticism of Malinovich’s work—far from it—but rather a suggestion of where one might take this discussion in the future. The question remains, were there any lingering effects of this movement in the decades after World War II? Maud Mandel’s research on the post-war reconstruction of French Jewish communal life argues that some redefinition of the old identity took place. The new parameters incorporated the Zionist sympathy of the pre-war generation that Malinovich studies. While Mandel attributes this shift to the dual impacts of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, Malinovich’s book suggests that the seeds for this change had been planted during the 1920s.[1] In this manner, Nadia Malinovich has provided vital information to scholars wishing to trace the development and boundaries of Jewish identity in France. By illuminating a period that has escaped recent scholarly attention, she enhances our ability to understand the broader contours of French Jewish history.

NOTES

[1] Maud S. Mandel, *In the Aftermath of Genocide: Armenians and Jews in Twentieth-Century France* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2003), pp. 15, 134–135.

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