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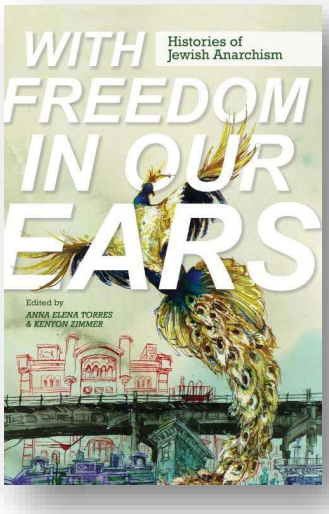

With Freedom in Our Ears: Histories of Jewish Anarchism

Anna Elena Torres & Kenyon Zimmer (eds.)

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Review by Shelby Shapiro, first published online 24 July 2023.

Anna Elena Torres and Kenyon Zimmer have, in the short space of 260 pages, filled in many empty spaces in the historiography of Jewish anarchism. In a sense, they are picking up where the late Paul Avrich left off. He authored ten books plus many papers before his death in 2006 at age 74. At roughly the same time, new books on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were appearing, among them Robert L. Tyler's *Rebels in the Woods* (1967) and Melvyn Dubofsky's *We Shall Be All* (1969)..

Right now, with books by Anna Elena Torres, Kenyon Zimmer, Peter Cole, and South African sociologist Lucien van der Walt, we are witnessing a resurgence of academic interest in anarchism and the history of the IWW. *With Freedom in Our Ears: Histories of Jewish Anarchism* is a welcome addition to this gathering. The editors bookend these papers with introductory and conclusory essays. The first – "Freedom's Fullness: An Introduction to Jewish Anarchism" – notes how, especially with the popularity of Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976), the history of Jewish Anarchism was at best ignored, at worst erased. This reviewer's only quibble with this essay concerns the accuracy of the "self-identified" Anarchist status of Noam Chomsky (considering his defense of Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson and his downplaying of genocide in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge). Samuel Hayim Brody's "Jewish Anarchist Temporalities" deals with different senses of time as represented by three German-Jewish intellectual-activists, Erich Mühsam, Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber; this is the most abstract essay in the book.

Two papers deal with Tsarist Russia. In "The Debate on Expropriations in Early Twentieth-Century Russian Anarchism," Inna Shtakser examines how Anarchists approached the practice of expropriations for the Cause in Tsarist Russia, an issue of major interest along with questions about the role of violence. When were such actions justified, if at all? Ania Aizman's fascinating "In the Jewish Tower: Prison Stories by a Forgotten Anarchist" concerns the writings of an anarchist in Tsarist Russia, Srul-Moishe Gershevich Braverman (1888-1937), who as Soviet memoir writer Semyon Sibiriakov ("Semyon the Siberian") wrote about pre-Revolutionary Russian Jewish life and as the survivor of Tsarist repression. His work discussed both political and non-political prisoners. His work appeared with

other Russian writers who were experimenting with new forms of writing. One experiment, "factography" bears a remarkable resemblance to what John Dos Passos did with his *USA* trilogy (1930-1936), inserting what Dos Passos called "newsreels" in the midst of fictional text. In 1937, this survivor of the white Tsarist Terror perished during the red Stalinist Terror.

Russian revolutionary outbreaks predating that of the Bolsheviks are the subject of Renny Hahamovitch's "The Storm of Revolution: The *Fraye arbeter shtime* Reports on the Russian Revolution of 1905." Hahamovitch discusses the intersections of Russian revolutionary activities with internationalism and senses of Jewish ethnicity in a highly nuanced manner.

Tom Goyen's "Johann Most and Yiddish Anarchism, 1897-1906" discusses the German Anarchist as an early inspiration for the immigrant anarchist movement, especially among German and Jewish activists. Elaine Ledeer's "Jewish American Anarchist Women, 1920-1950: The Politics of Sexuality," breaks new ground by looking at the topic in terms of gender, based on interviews with eight women, plus materials concerning the ILGWU activist (and later officer) Rose Pesotta. Ledeer points out the diversity of opinions, origins and activities. Unfortunately, from the historian's viewpoint, she chose the option of using pseudonyms for her interview subjects. There is thus no way of assessing the accuracy of memory, not that any of their statements were inherently improbable.

Mark Greuter authored one of the strongest and most interesting chapters, "Jews and North American Anarcho-Syndicalism: The Jewish Leadership of the Union of Russian Workers." The URW consisted of workers from the Tsarist Empire – Russians, Slavs, Jews – employed in the garment trades, on the docks, in construction, meatpacking and coal mines, to name but a few industries. They, along with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or "Wobblies") and the Socialist Party were targets of the Palmer Raids after World War I. Greuter discusses Jewish immigrants who were among the URW's leaders. Bill Shatov, also extremely active in the IWW, would later disappear in Stalin's purges after being deported. Another leading Jewish intellectual, Vsevelod Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum, better known as Voline, would later lead the Nabat ("Alarm") Federation in the Ukraine, connected with the Anarchist groups led by Nestor Makhno. During the Civil War in the Ukraine following the Russian Revolution, Makhno's armed anarchist detachments fought alongside the Red Army, then led by Leon Trotsky. Greuter provides a fascinating sidelight on Voline and Trotsky:

> "In 1940, looking back on his time in the United States, Voline recalled a remarkable conversation he had had with fellow Russian Jewish radical Leon Trotsky in New York, in the immediate aftermath of the February Revolution. (Trotsky had moved to New York City in early January 1917 expecting to lead the Russian socialist movement in the United States.) At the printer's shop where they both awaited their respective newspapers to come off the press, Voline told Trotsky that he expected the Bolsheviks would take power in Russia and persecute the anarchists. 'You will begin to persecute us just as soon as your power has been consolidated,' said Voline. 'And you will end by having us shot down like partridges.'
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> "'Nonsense,' replied Trotsky. It was nonsense to think Marxists would resolve their differences 'by turning their guns on the anarchists.'
>
> "'What do you take us for?' cried Trotsky. He tried to alleviate Voline's concern by stating that Marxists were, after all, 'anarchists, in the final analysis. The only thing is that you want to introduce your anarchism straight away, without transition or preparation.' Trotsky dismissed this distinction as 'a little question of methodology, quite secondary.' Two and a half years later, after Voline was arrested by the Red Army in December 1919, his captors asked Trotsky, by telegram, what should be done with the anarchist, and Trotsky wrote back: 'Shoot out of hand.'" (pp. 124-135).

It was only through the intervention of novelist-activist Victor Serge that Voline's life was spared.This reviewer considers the only significant difference between Trotsky and Stalin – both falsifiers of history – to be that Trotsky was a much better writer. Voline went on to

write *The Unknown Revolution* (1947), chronicling the Makhnovist movement, its alliance with, and betrayal by, the Red Army under the command of Leon Trotsky. This chapter of *With Freedom in Our Ears* fills a huge historical void since precious little has been written about the URW, including the fact that its members were multiethnic, "Russian" only by virtue of the country from whence they emigrated. The URW had thousands of adherents. This paper fills voids in Anarchist, ethnic and labor history. This single chapter alone would justify buying the book.

Yiddish press historian Ayelet Brinn contributed a very interesting paper, "Translation, Politics, Pragmatism, and the American Yiddish Press." She examined the reasons for, and strategies around, translations appearing in Yiddish periodicals. The role of the Yiddish press in general, and the Anarchist press in particular, in the project of educating immigrants about world literature. She begins her piece with the controversy around William McKinley's assassination in 1901 and its coverage in the Yiddish anarchist paper*, Fraye arbeter shtime* (Free Voice of Labor). The *Fraye arbeter shtime*, published from 1890 to 1977, makes multiple appearances in this volume.

Binyamin Hunyadi's paper, "Political Satire in the Yiddish Anarchist Press, 1890-1918," looked at the work of three writers: Morris Winchevsky, Dovid Edelshtat and Dovid Apotheker. Best-known as the "sweatshop poet," Winchevsky, a socialist, penned political satire as *"Der meshugener filosof"* [The Crazy Philosopher]. Dovid Apotheker wrote as "*Der hinkediker shlimazl*" [the Limping Good-for-Nothing], making fun of all radicals, socialists and anarchists as well. In between Wiunchevsky and Apotheker was Dovid Edelshtadt. Edelshtadt, who edited the *Fraye arbeter shtime*, died of tuberculosis in Denver, where he sought treatment, at age 26. Best known as a revolutionary poet, Hunyadi discusses Edelstadt's attempts at political satire. The the other two writers were more successful in the genre.

Allan Antliff breaks new ground with "Divine Fire: Alfred Stieglitz's Anarchism." Stieglitz is best-known for his photography, his role in establishing photography as an art form, his publications and galleries. His paper takes issue with fellow art historian Tara Kohn who sought to cram Stieglitz into a fashionable "whiteness" frame, making of this internationalist a spokesman for nationalism. For those of us aware of Stieglitz in relation to photography, much of this will come as totally new. Antliff points out that among those in Stieglitz's milieu were Emma Goldman and Hippolyte Havel. Antliff likewise notes that 291 – the famous Stieglitz gallery – was less a marketplace for art than for ideas: here artists could be themselves, expressing themselves in whatever creative directions they chose. Just as Stieglitz's anarchist sympathies will surprise those who know him for his photography and his efforts to establish it as an art form, we learn in the editors' Conclusion that "(o)ne of the most notable Jewish anarchist painters was Camille Pissarro, whose curator calls him 'the only impressionist with a big police file.'" (p. 234). For those of us who identified him with Impressionism and its progeny, or as a mentor to Mary Cassat and Gaughin, this too comes as a surprise.

This book is an intellectual buffet, a smorgasbord of different dishes. This review has only hinted at the pleasures awaiting the reader. Feast and enjoy!

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies) served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsum punkt/To the Point,* the magazine of Yiddish of Greater Washington, as well as for its predecessor publication, and was Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut* 2012-2021. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the Yiddish press; he is a Yiddish-English translator, and his research interests include Jazz and Blues (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.