

BOOKS

[*The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine, Princeton University Press, 344 pages]

Chosen People

By Albert S. Lindemann

YURI SLEZKINE has composed a remarkable book that does not easily fit into familiar categories—Right or Left, scholarly or popular, apologetic or polemical. Similarly, it is difficult to capture its peculiar style and tone, which draw imaginatively from history, mythology, and literature of diverse varieties. The book is full of provocative *aperçus* and unfamiliar, often disquieting details—calmly sophisticated on the one hand, yet curiously uninhibited, prone to quips that may provoke bouts of hyperventilation on the part of some readers. (Terming Communist Jews “Stalin’s Willing Executioners” will probably not please admirers of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*.) The prose in places has a lyrical quality closer to passages of Nietzsche than to modern works of scholarly history. Any effort to summarize *The Jewish Century* is thus doomed to failure, or at least to providing a false impression of the whole. Still one aspect stands out: so many stale certainties about the Jewish past here encounter a bracing breath of fresh air, especially those having to do with the origin and nature of modern anti-Semitism.

Readers familiar with Jewish history are likely to sense an immediate problem, if not a provocation, in a book entitled *The Jewish Century*. The classic works of anti-Semitism in the 19th century have similar titles: *The Jews*, *Kings of the Epoch* (Alphonse de Toussenel); *The Victory of Jews over Germany* (Wilhelm Marr); *Jewish France* (Edouard Drumont). In them is found the lament that the Jews, through the new power of

money in industrializing Europe, have gradually come to rule the modern world. So too is found the related charge that Jewish values are corrupting that world, a key theme in Karl Marx’s notorious *On the Jewish Question*, in which Jewishness and capitalist greed are equated. “Jewified” subsequently became one of the more toxic of the abusive epithets used by anti-Semites.

On the other hand, a vast celebratory literature has appeared, mostly of a non-scholarly nature, around the theme of “How did we Jews get so wonderful?” That literature parallels in many of its topics the very concerns of the anti-Semites—Jewish millionaires, financiers, journalists, revolutionaries, intellectuals, advisers to the powerful—though obviously giving a radically different twist to them, indeed often addressing them specifically to refute what anti-Semites have written.

The question arises: why would a scholar—and make no mistake, Slezkine, Professor of History at Berkeley, is a scholar of unusual talents—resort to such vague language given its often odious associations? *The Jewish Century* is characterized throughout by soaring generalizations and playfully allusive, ambiguous language of a sort that is fairly common in non-scholarly contexts. When the editors of *Le Monde* proclaimed, after Sept. 11, “We are all Americans now!” most Americans were touched—and not prone to complain about the inflated and imprecise rhetoric. Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* famously declared, “A word means what I want it to mean.” What then does Yuri Slezkine want “Jew” to mean?

Well, to begin with, if you define “Jew” in his way, then there are a heluva lot of Jews out there: the Chinese, the Indians, Greeks, the Yankees, to say nothing of the Armenians, Lebanese, or Ibos. Slezkine alternately uses the term “service nomads” for these many “Jews,” but most often he terms them “Mercurians,” as contrasted with the “Apollonians” of the world. Why not just choose one term, define it carefully, and stick

with it? That is a reasonable question, but it must be admitted that a book entitled *The Century of the Service Nomads* (or *the Mercurians*) might not get all that much attention.

Slezkine’s basic point may seem familiar enough: the values of the most successful modern nations and peoples resemble those that have been cultivated by Europe’s Jews for several thousand years, values that have also been termed “modern.” Related and also familiar is the observation that the Chinese are the Jews of Southeast Asia, the Indians the Jews of East Africa. Slezkine takes such observations and runs with them, noting that Europe’s leading states became Jewish and world powers in modern times, which meant that the Jews of Europe were Jews among Jews—an unusually successful and influential group, perhaps without precedent. (“No group has been better at being Jewish than the Jews themselves.”) Again, the distinctions between mercantile, urban, sophisticated people (Mercurians) and the traditional, boorish people of the land (Apollonians) are also familiar, although perhaps not in all the aspects that Slezkine describes as Jewish and modern: “mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible ... [cultivating] people and symbols, not fields or herds.”

But Europe’s Jews were hardly secure in their triumphs. One of the most ominous charges against them in modern times—and one that Jewish apologists, especially in the United States, have passionately combated—has been that they have everywhere fomented unrest and revolution, as one aspect of their status as outsiders, dissenters, and destroyers. Already by the late 19th century it had become almost a truism that Jews played a significant role in the revolutionary movements of the day, one vastly disproportionate to their small numbers (about one percent of the total European population, though very unevenly distributed from country to country). That belief was especially embraced by conservatives, even in Britain, where Jews

faced less hostility than on the Continent. Benjamin Disraeli, himself of Jewish origin, considered the Jews a superior race, historically helping to lift Europe out of barbarism, but he also quipped that virtually all of the leaders of revolutionary movements were Jews. Churchill, also drawing from both philo- and anti-Semitic themes, intoned, “this mystic and mysterious race has been chosen for the supreme manifestation of both the divine and diabolical [Jews have been] the mainspring of every subversive movement during the 19th century. ... [They have now] gripped the Russian people by the hair of their heads and have become practically the undisputed masters of that enormous empire.”

Jewish apologists, especially during the Cold War but also during the interwar period, were intent on combating the notion that Jews were somehow naturally connected to social decay and revolution because those were key themes of the Nazi movement. In an interview with an American reporter, Hitler defended the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws as an act of national self-defense, claiming that “nearly all Bolshevik agitators and agents of Bolshevism” in Germany were Jews; they had “flooded the intellectual professions,” and had a “disintegrating effect” on all aspects of public life. The Nazis similarly asserted that the Soviet Union was in the hands of Jews.

One of the most striking aspects of Slezkine’s book is the evidence it offers that there was far more truth to those assertions than has been generally recognized by respectable opinion in the Western world since World War II. To be sure, a number of scholars have explored the Jewish role in both pre- and post-revolutionary Russia (including this reviewer), but few have presented matters in quite the unblinking way Slezkine does, nor have they assembled such detailed evidence in support of the contention that the ruling class of Soviet Russia was in essence “Jewish”—far more Jewish in terms of real people occupying leading positions in state and society than the rest of Europe or the United States.

It has been close to an article of faith that Stalin’s rise and the purges associated with his rule hit Jewish party leaders with special force and that anti-Semitism became a pervasive reality in Russia after the mid-1930s. Prejudice against Jews was allegedly responsible not only for their being purged but for blocking them from positions of importance or authority. Slezkine presents evidence in impressive variety and detail that Jews were actually under-represented among those arrested and sentenced to death or deportation in the purges, and that, moreover, they prospered under Stalin. Soviet Russia from 1917 until the final years of Stalin’s rule was “good for the Jews,” in Slezkine’s words, “the only real paradise for Jews.” Jews were over-represented, often remarkably so, in such categories as the secret police (“one of the most Jewish of all Soviet institutions”), the press, and the arts. Serving as spies in western Europe and the United States was almost exclusively in the hands of Jews and Jewish contacts in the countries being spied upon (the Rosenbergs were,

Soviet Russia’s first half century, he observes, looked down upon Americans; being sent to America as a diplomat was considered a hardship because of the gross materialism, vulgarity, and spiritual emptiness of the lives of Americans (judgments, it should be noted, that were shared by a considerable proportion of western Europe’s Jewish intelligentsia, left- or right-wing, in the same years).

In these and other ways, Slezkine breaks with what has been termed *Leidensgeschichte* (“suffering history”), the inclination to conceptualize the history of Jews as an interminable tale of suffering and injustice at the hands of the morally corrupt Goyim. In such history Jews attain the stature of tragic victims who are not to be subjected to critical scrutiny. (Any such efforts are likely to be considered mean-spirited.) Slezkine also includes little *Gelehrten-geschichte*, the history of great Jewish intellectuals of the sort that honors rather than critically evaluates. Slezkine seems little interested in the great rabbis and the religious controversies that shook the

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so to speak, mere faces in a Jewish crowd). The Gulag was headed by ethnic Jews from 1930, when it was formed, until November 1938, when the Great Terror was almost over.

Slezkine’s lack of apologetic instincts in regard to Jews and communism shows up in striking ways: “Communism was not an exclusively or even predominantly Jewish religion, but of the Jewish religions of the first half of the 20th century, it was by far the most important: more vibrant than Judaism, much more popular than Zionism, and incomparably more viable, as a faith, than liberalism.” Communist Jews in

Jewish world in modern times, nor does he seem much concerned with the historiographical forays that are considered *de rigueur* in scholarly works. (He obviously knows the historical literature but has decided to devote little space to addressing it explicitly.)

At any rate, in Slezkine’s account Jews do not emerge primarily as passive victims but as historical actors—indeed as victors (as well, of course, as tragic losers, but the two, in his view, are not unrelated). Similarly, Slezkine seems little impressed with—or at least scarcely addresses—the arguments of those who say that Jews were hated “for

no reason” or that anti-Semitism in the 19th and 20th centuries was a self-generating passion of the twisted non-Jewish psyche that had nothing to do with what Jews really were (the oft-repeated phrase, “anti-Semitism is not a Jewish Problem but a Gentile Problem” comes to mind). Quite the contrary, Slezkine argues that hatred of Jews, as of other Mercurians throughout history, has had everything to do with what they really were and did.

That hatred had to do with the fact that Jews were oppressors, not only oppressed, victimizers, not only victims; Communist Jews in Russia were so intoxicated by Communist ideology, so persuaded that they were on the right side of history, that they actively participated in despotic measures, finally mass murder—and felt morally superior in doing so. (To be sure, they did so not as Jews but as Communists, but nonetheless they were still identified as Jews, both by non-Jews and other Jews.)

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Slezkine devotes many fascinating pages to descriptions of how Communist Jews, especially those in the ranks of the secret police, came to harden their hearts, to reject sympathy for “class enemies” as a fatal weakness. The traditional Jewish virtue of *rachmones* (pity) was replaced by the morality of the Leninist “hard,” the merciless “willing executioner” for whom the goal of protecting the revolution transcended all else.

The belief that behavior of Jews is the main reason for the hostility they have faced was actually widespread long before the Bolshevik Revolution. The corollary that the reform of Jewish behavior, as well as Jewish religion, was necessary to curb anti-Semitism was earnestly embraced by both Jews and non-Jews in the 19th century. But the persistence of Jew-hatred and the seeming irrelevance of Jewish reform gradually broke down the confidence of reformers; some even concluded that reform only stoked anti-Semitism. Again, “blaming the victim” for anti-Semitism came to be ever more rejected—to the extent, especially after the Nazi experience, that a contrary tendency emerged and finally prevailed, an implicit claim that Jewish victims (and finally all victims) should never be held responsible for anything that happens to them. Period.

Such claims cannot withstand serious scrutiny and have emerged more as a popular mood, no doubt encouraged by a few intellectuals or pseudo-intellectuals and associated lobbying agencies of diverse sorts. Zionists have never much embraced these claims, at least not those Zionists who followed Herzl in the belief that the character of “Galut Jews” had been so deeply corrupted over the centuries that they had become “objectively detestable” and would remain so until they abandoned the lands of the Goyim and become masters of their own land. They too, especially the followers of Jabotinsky’s Revisionists, were prone to embracing an ethic of hardness, not Leninist but more in conformity to Goethe’s famous lines, “You must be

master and win, or serve and lose, grieve or triumph, be the anvil or the hammer.”

The magnetic field generated by the establishment of the state of Israel extended well into the Soviet Union, and here also Slezkine offers some unblinking observations. The anti-Semitism that emerged there after World War II had less to do with baseless fantasies about Jews than the quite real issue of their dual loyalty. In the U.S. the notion of Jewish dual loyalty has long been dismissed as an anti-Semitic canard—though the neocons have recently given new life to the charge—but in the case of Soviet citizens of Jewish identity, their growing belief that Israel was their real homeland, not the Soviet Union, fed suspicion, as did their growing admiration for the United States.

The most thought-provoking sections of *The Jewish Century* have to do with Jews as Communists, but what Slezkine has to say about Jews in Israel and America is characterized by a kindred “but-the-king-has-no-clothes” instinct as far as many general beliefs are concerned. It seems almost certain that the so-called “new anti-Semites” of the Islamic world will snatch snippets of this complex and subtle book for less than subtle purposes. The inevitable scholarly qualifications, rectifications, cavils, and complaints—almost certainly a few very angry ones—will be expressed, but this book promises to be seen in future years as a marker of a sea change in historical understanding in the United States and Europe of what used to be termed the Jewish Question. Like many such markers, Slezkine’s book is best described as a culmination rather than a dramatic break, more an imaginative synthesis of what other scholars have been doing than something completely original, but, to repeat the opening line of this review, it is a remarkable book. ■

Albert S. Lindemann is Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara and the author of Anti-Semitism Before the Holocaust and Esau’s Tears.

[*The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*, Thomas E. Woods Jr., Regnery, 256 pages]

Righting History

By Roger D. McGrath

A NONFICTION BESTSELLER during the month of December, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* is a long overdue correction to the historical revisionism that has dominated academe for the last 30 years. Thomas Woods writes with a style and verve that makes the *Guide* come alive and appear anything but a textbook. Nonetheless, the *Guide* is a text that focuses on issues in American history that have been omitted from or insidiously misrepresented in the cultural Marxist version of history that is taught in universities today.

That Woods's book has made such a big splash is both gratifying and disheartening—gratifying because a factual, insightful, and formerly traditional perspective is being widely read by the general public and disheartening because such a perspective has been all but banned from the universities that educate our children. Most of the topics discussed by Woods and his perspective are familiar to readers of *The American Conservative* but are sadly all but unknown to those who have suffered through the politically correct dogma of schooling in today's America. To those who have not had the good fortune to have been subscribers to *TAC* or *Chronicles* or the *National Review* of old, the *Guide* will serve as a primer that will equip them to do battle with the propagators of politically correct nonsense.

From Chapter 1 on the colonial origins of American liberty to Chapter 18 on Bill Clinton, Woods's work will shock the sensibilities and orthodoxies of the leftist rulers of academe. He is careful to provide the reader with a chapter-by-chapter bibliography of books "You're Not Supposed to Read," sources that discuss

the particular chapter issues in far greater depth. Such recommendations remind me of how I was exposed to a number of excellent books as an undergrad. One professor would regularly and vehemently denounce specific works of American history during his lectures. After each lecture I would hurry to the library to check out the book attacked that day. I was stunned at how much I learned from reading those books that no student was supposed to read.

The diversity myth is the first to fall to Woods's sharp pen. The colonies prospered not because the colonists were so diverse but because they were so similar. "Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country," said John Jay, "to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to

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the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs." While the Jay quotation and Woods's chapter theme will cause the politically correct to convulse, it will hardly please the neoconservatives. Same race, same language, same religion does not a "proposition nation" make.

Another assertion fondly embraced by America's Left claims that the Constitution is a "living, breathing document" that means merely what each generation chooses it to mean. Woods demonstrates that the Founding Fathers understood their English history and, as a consequence, insisted upon a written constitution that was amendable but not infinitely malleable. The attempt to twist the original intent and meaning of the Constitution is nowhere more apparent than in the bizarre constructions put on the Second Amendment by those who favor disarmament of the American citizenry. Since they know that it would be impossible to pass an amendment

repealing the Second Amendment, they have tried to have the courts change the meaning of "the right of the people." For reading on the issue Woods recommends a book that has become a minor classic, Stephen Halbrook's *That Every Man Be Armed: The Evolution of a Constitutional Right*.

Woods's discussion of the antebellum era and the "War Between the States" should again bring discomfort not only to the politically correct Left but also to the neocons. His views mirror those of, most recently, Thomas J. DiLorenzo and Joseph Sobran: under the Constitution the states had a right to secede; the war was not launched to free the slaves; slavery, for several reasons, would have collapsed within a generation; and Lincoln was a white supremacist who prosecuted an unjust war that consolidated federal power in Washington to a degree

unimaginable to the Founding Fathers. Woods quotes from a letter written by the British libertarian Lord Acton to Robert E. Lee in the fall of 1866:

I saw in States' rights the only availing check upon the absolutism of the sovereign will, and secession filled me with hope, not as the destruction but as the redemption of Democracy Therefore, I deemed that you were fighting the battles of our liberty, our progress, and our civilization, and I mourn for the stake which was lost at Richmond more deeply than I rejoice over that which was saved at Waterloo.

Woods also provides the reader with a delicious quote from H.L. Mencken. I recall my professors quoting Mencken liberally when he was attacking the American middle class or religion, but I cannot remember any professor quoting Mencken's comments on the Gettysburg