Course Description

Between the early 1880s and early 1920s, roughly two million Jews immigrated to the United States from eastern Europe. They and their descendents created much of what has come to be known as American Jewish culture and community. We will examine this formative period in Jewish history, a period in which a previously marginal Jewish community became the largest in the world. Why did so many Jews leave eastern Europe and settle in the United States? What were the social, political and cultural forces that shaped immigrant Jewish life? How did the immigrants respond to these conditions? And, finally, how did immigrants influence American society and vice versa? In investigating these and other related questions, the course aims to explore broad questions about the history of immigration and ethnicity in the U.S. What did "Americanization" mean? Was Americanization (however that term might be understood) coerced, something forced on immigrants by external elites and institutions? Was it voluntary: something willingly embraced by immigrants themselves? Or was Americanization some combination of the two? By exploring the history of immigrant Jews, this course aims to illuminate the broader history of immigrants in the United States.

Reading

The following books will be available for purchase at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative (located at 426 W. Gilman) and on reserve at the College Library.


There is also a course packet, which you can buy from the Humanities Copy Center, 1650 Humanities.
Course Requirements

Attendance in lectures and discussion sections is required. The assigned readings should be completed during the week in which they are assigned.

An in-class midterm exam, a take-home assignment, and a final exam are required.

Class participation: 20%
Midterm exam (Feb. 20): 25%
Take-home assignment (due March 29): 25%
Final exam (May 14@5:05 p.m.): 30%

Lectures and Reading

Week 1 (Jan. 23-25): Eastern European Jews on the eve of modernity

#Gershon David Hundert, Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century (Univ. of California Press, 2004), pp. 21-56.

Week 2 (Jan. 30-Feb.-1): the modernization of Russian Jewry


*Tsar Nicholas I, "Delineation of the Pale of Settlement," (April, 1835).

Week 3 (Feb. 6-8): Russian Jewry in crisis: pogroms and their aftermath


Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer, eds., My Future is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants, pp. 189-203 (Rose Silverman)

*Pavel Axelrod, “Socialist Jews Confront the Pogroms” (1924).
*"The Massacre of Jews at Kishinev" (1903).

**Week 4 (Feb. 13-15): to the "golden land" and other places**

Gerald Sorin, A Time for Building, pp. 1-68


Cohen and Soyer, eds., My Future Is in America, pp. 18-33 (Minnie Goldstein), 160-187 (Rose Schoenfeld), 204-230 (Bertha Fox).

Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky, pp. v-xii, 3-111.

**Week 5 (Feb. 20-22): earning a living, making a home**  
(Note: in-class midterm on Feb. 20)

#Jacob Riis, How the Other Half Lives (1890), pp. ix-xxii, 5-40, 92-102.

Cohen and Soyer, My Future is in America, pp. 288-310 (Minnie Kusnetz)


**Week 6 (Feb. 27-March 1): out in the streets**

*Riis, How the Other Half Lives (1890), pp. 82-91.

**Week 7 (March 6-8): the “unkosher land”: Judaism in crisis**

Sorin, A Time for Planting, pp. 170-190.

Cohen and Soyer, My Future is in America, pp. 106-122 (Shmuel Krone), 233-283 (Chaim Kusnetz)


**Week 8 (March 13-15): the radical upsurge**


Cohen and Soyer, My Future Is in America, pp. 35-102 (Ben Reisman).

Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky, pp. 311-530.

**Week 9 (March 20-22): the Melting Pot and its critics**

Sorin, A Time for Planting, pp. 219-235.


**Week 10 (March 27-29): Yiddish high culture**

(Note: take home assignment due on March 29)

Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 179-216.

#Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers, pp. 417-459.

Cohen and Soyer, My Future Is in America, pp. 124-156 (Aaron Domnitz).

**Week 11 (April 3-5): spring break**

**Week 12 (April 10-12): popular Yiddish culture**

#Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers, pp. 460-496, 518-551.


*“Bintl Briv” (letters to the Forverts, 1910-1914), pp. 110-129.

**Week 13 (April 17-19): immigrant Jews and American popular culture**


**Week 14 (April 24-26): World War I and its aftermath**
(Note: class is cancelled on April 24 for a visiting lecturer by Prof. Mitchell Hart. The title of his lecture is “From Shtetl to Jungle: Darwinism, Eugenics, and the Reinterpretation of Jewish History.” Attendance at that lecture, which takes place elsewhere in the building at 4:00, is mandatory.)


Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 216-250.

*Resolutions of the American Jewish Congress, Philadelphia (Dec. 1918).*

**Week 15 (May 1-3): looking backward: remembering the immigrant experience**


**Week 16 (May 8-10): wrap-up**

**FINAL EXAM:** Monday, May 14 @ 5:05 p.m.