History 416: Eastern European Jews in the United States, 1880s-1930s

University of Wisconsin, Madison
Spring 2009
Lectures: Tuesday and Thursday, 1:00-2:15
1131 Humanities

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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 the previously marginal American 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 will also be a course packet for sale from the Copy Center in the basement of the Humanities Bldg. It should be available by early next week.


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

# = scholarly literature in course packet
* = primary documents in course packet

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. 24): 25%
Take-home assignment (April 9): 25%
Final exam (May 10@2:45 p.m.): 30%

NOTE: Class will be cancelled on March 26 so you can attend a lecture by Professor David Myers entitled “The Palestinian Refugees as a Jewish Question: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz.” (4:00 p.m. @ Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St.) Class will also be cancelled on April 14 so you can attend one of two lectures by Professor David Hollinger: “Jews, Multi-Culturalism, and American Ethnoracial and Religious History (April 13) and “American Jewish History in a Post-Jewish Domain” (April 14). You may attend either lecture. Both will take place at the Pyle Center. If you have a scheduling conflict, you must notify me during the first two weeks of the semester to make alternative arrangements.

Lectures and Reading

UNIT 1: Eastern Europe: From Tradition to Revolution

Week 1 (Jan. 20-22): on the eve of modernity


Week 2 (Jan. 27-29): the modernization of Russian Jewry


Week 3 (Feb. 3-5): in crisis: pogroms and their aftermath


*Pavel Axelrod, “Socialist Jews Confront the Pogroms” (1924).

UNIT 2: Immigration and Settlement

Week 4 (Feb. 10-12): to the "golden land" and other places


Susan Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl, pp. 1-49.


Week 5 (Feb. 17-19): earning a living, making a home

Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl, pp. 50-131


Week 6 (Feb. 24-26): the Jewish “ghetto”
(Note: in-class midterm on Feb. 24)

*Jacob Riis, How the Other Half Lives (1890), pp. ix-xxii, 5-40, 82-102.

Unit 3: Judaism and Radicalism

Week 7 (March 3-5): the “unkosher land”: Judaism in crisis

Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky, pp. 244-372.


**Week 8 (March 10-12): the radical upsurge**


**Week 9 (March 17-19): spring break**

**Unit 4: Jewish Culture/American Culture**

**Week 10 (March 24-26): Yidishe Kultur**

(Note: class is cancelled on March 26 for David Myers’ lecture. See second page of the syllabus).


**Week 11 (March 31-April 2): popular Yiddish culture**


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

**Week 12 (April 7-9): immigrant Jews and American popular culture**

(Note: take home assignment due on April 9.)


**Week 13 (April 14-16): the “Melting Pot” and its critics**

(Note: class is cancelled on April 14 for David Hollinger’s lectures. See second page of syllabus.)


Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (1909), pages to be determined.
UNIT 6: The Post-Immigration Period

Week 14 (April 21-23): World War I and its aftermath


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

Week 15 (April 28-30): Communism and the Jews

Michels, A Fire in Their Hearts, pp. 216-259.


Week 16 (May 5-7): looking backward: the immigrant experience remembered


FINAL EXAM: Sunday, May 10 (2:45-4:45)