

**COMMENT ON THE PAPER OF BRIAN HOROWITZ:
“S.M. DUBNOV’S INNER CONTRADICTIONS AND THE DANGERS
OF WRITING POLITICIZED HISTORY”**

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Professor Horowitz’s insightful essay arises out of a wider and very special context, and it seems to me that it is worth looking at that context in reviewing his essay. To do this and to assess Semen Dubnov’s role as a historian, we need to look to the long line of historical writing about Dubnov and East European Jewish history that culminated in the work of Jonathan Frankel. What I have in mind here is Frankel’s claim that Semen Dubnov was the founder and inspiration behind what has been labeled “the Russian Jewish school of history.” According to Frankel, Dubnov came to view it as “axiomatic that Jews were primarily a nation,” and that Judaism, the religion, was decidedly secondary, and could even be abandoned, depending on the circumstances.¹ That assessment has hung over virtually all of the recent scholarship on Dubnov, including the modest revisionism seen in Brian’s paper.

According to this view, the mature Dubnov, in sharp contrast with the theological perspective of the German Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, offered a decidedly more secular and anthropocentric history of the Jewish people. Yes, of course, Dubnov writes on Hasidism, but he does so as one primarily concerned about cultural autonomy, or autonomous cultural institutions, and Jewish national self-government within a multi-national, secular state environment. According to this view, what Dubnov ushered in was a new secular treatment of Jewish national history and politics—a treatment that would be welcomed by a wide range of Russian Jewish intelligentsia: Zionists, Bundists, folkists, and others. One can almost anticipate Frankel’s point that it was this Dubnovian view of history that was being expressed most clearly in a secular faith in the triumph and power of modern nationalism. With the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the emigration of most of the figures from this Jewish Russian school of history after the Russian Revolution, this secular Jewish national historiography became imbedded among other places in the YIVO Institute and its various branches. Within this Russian Jewish school of history, and its remarkable record of publication, there was the characteristic tension between the Jewish nation that had survived two millennia of exile and dispersion, on the one hand, and the external forces of change, on the other—changes

¹ Jonathan Frankel, S.M. Dubnov: Historian and Ideologist, in: S. Dubnov-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History*, reprint ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 1-33.

that threatened, either by assimilation or destruction, or both, the identity of the Jewish nation itself.

It is exactly at this point that I think Professor Horowitz's paper takes us into what he calls "the inner contradictions" of Semen Dubnov. Initially, dating from his early career, Dubnov had been an outspoken, loyal member of the *maskilim*, an advocate of enlightenment, of acculturation. As a committed *intelligent*, he wrote in Russian, like so many of his counterparts within the *maskilim*. His articles began to fill the journals of the Russian Jewish enlightenment, including for example his landmark articles in the St. Petersburg Russian Jewish journal *Voskhod* (The Dawn).

But, then, as Horowitz notes, this advocate of acculturation and autonomous communities was forced to confront the dual challenges to his *maskilim* worldview—first, that Russian society, far from offering full civil rights, ended up persecuting Jews, ever more harshly in the wake of the 1882 May Laws. And second, Dubnov was forced to come to grips with his own alienation also from the Jewish community, its occultist kabbalah, its traditionalism. By the close of the twenties, the resulting transition that Dubnov undergoes is reflected in his updated three-volume *History of Hasidism*, penned this time in Hebrew (*Toldot ha-hasidut*), and published in Tel Aviv (1930-1932), with an introduction that acknowledges Hebrew as "our national language."

It seems to me that Professor Horowitz's paper essentially confirms this Frankelian framing of Dubnov as the secular atheist, the *maskil* who was ultimately forced to come to grips with the internal contradictions of his own position—a secularist writing about a deeply religious people, a product of Russian culture forced to recognize Russian society's rejection of his own people.

Within this wider contextual framework, let me pose two questions for considering this so-called Russian Jewish school of history. First, even though we have Semen Dubnov's acknowledgement of his own atheism, don't we perhaps need to move beyond the rather too easy framing of the *maskilim* as secular opponents of tradition and unthinking assimilationists? After all, Semen Dubnov was the one who sought to write about the biblical history of the Jewish people, and was initially kept from doing so only because the Russian Orthodox authorities sought their own hegemony over biblical interpretation, and challenged Dubnov's rather more modern historico-critical biblical text criticism. Is that a case of Dubnov being atheist, or rather a case of Dubnov taking seriously contemporary biblical textology. And why, after all, were the *maskilim* so interested in biblical translation in the first place, as reflected in their own remarkable Jewish editions of scripture translated into Russian and published in Hebrew/Russian diglots by Leon Mandelshtam, Jehuda Leib Gordon, Osip Shteinberg, and others? In short, does this Russian *maskilim* really fit the mold of the secularist agenda ascribed to it within the frames of "the Russian Jewish historical school"?

My other question is prompted by comments in an earlier edition of Brian Horowitz's essay wherein he suggested that Dubnov was anguished, fearful that despite his rejection of Zionism "the national outpost in Palestine was a better embodiment of his ideas than the circumscribed efforts in Poland and North America." Horowitz speculated then whether Dubnov would not have been troubled by an assumed disconnect of his "diaspora nationalism" in a post-Holocaust Jewish world. Leaving aside Dubnov's rejection of Zionism, is it really the case that diaspora nationalism and the concern for cultural

autonomy—a kind of cultural space within a modern secular world—is entirely anachronistic? That question is important, after all, not just for the Jewish world. It is a question also for Kosovar Albanians and Bosniak Muslims in Phoenix, Arizona, or for Polish émigrés in Paris or London. Perhaps we need to pose more open-endedly the question of whether it is possible to maintain cultural, perhaps even confessional, identity or autonomy outside the confines of a privileged state-supported environment? In revisiting Dubnov's "diaspora nationalism," are we not encountering in that sense a very contemporary world in which cultural or subcultural communities of interest seek to perpetuate their autonomy within the framework of the secular state. Indeed, for many, it may be the benign neglect or lack of intrusion of the secular state that best accommodates cultural and religious difference.

