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The illustration is a reproduction of a painting by Jan Matejko, depicting a scene from the history of the Jews in Poland. It shows a building with a dome and a large structure above it, possibly a gallows or a bridge, set against a blue sky with clouds.

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## Glenn Dynner. *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 272 pp.

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## Book Reviews

Glenn Dynner. *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 272 pp.  
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My only concern about this book is that that people will look at the title and assume that they should read further only if they are interested in the role of the Jews in the alcohol trade in nineteenth-century eastern Europe. Fortunately, the more attentive observer will notice that this is about Jews, liquor, and *life*—and the capaciousness of that last term is in no way an exaggeration. Glenn Dynner has written a history of Jewish tavern keepers that serves as a point of entry into a much broader challenge to a surprisingly diverse swath of conventional wisdom about Jewish life in the Polish lands of the Russian Empire. For this reason, *Yankel's Tavern* should be required reading for anyone interested in Jewish history, Polish history, Russian imperial history, nationalism and national identity, and the economic history of eastern Europe. Without ever adopting an aggressive or polemical tone, Dynner has launched several debates that are sure to continue for years to come.

The core argument of the book is that Jews continued to operate taverns in rural northeastern Europe throughout the entire nineteenth century, despite various half-hearted attempts by Polish and Russian state officials to use legislation to stop them from doing so. In fact, it was almost impossible to find a tavern in the countryside that was *not* run by a Jew prior to the twentieth century. Of the many forces shaping daily life in rural areas at the time, it seems that laws drawn up in distant cities (whether Warsaw or the even more distant Petersburg) were among the easiest to avoid. There were too many cultural pressures and prejudices sustaining the status quo. The Polish nobles were convinced that Jews, and only Jews, could be relied upon to manage the distillation and distribution of liquor. As Dynner demonstrates, the “myth of Jewish sobriety” was indeed a myth. To be sure, serious alcohol abuse may have been a somewhat more pervasive problem among Christian peasants than their Jewish neighbors. But that is a relative statement, and accounts of Jewish drunkenness are plentiful. Whatever the reality, however, the nobles who continued to control the local economy until the very end of the nineteenth century *believed* that Jews could be trusted with the job of tavern keeper because of their legendary sobriety, and that conviction is all that mattered. As long as the nobles enjoyed a monopoly on the manufacture and sale of alcohol (which they did until 1898 in the Polish parts of the Russian Empire), the old custom of leasing those rights to Jews would survive—officially and legally when possible, informally and illegally when not.

That argument alone would make this book worth reading, but Dynner pushes it in a variety of directions to demonstrate the broad relevance of his research. For historians of the Russian Empire, this will fit within the scholarly consensus that has emerged over the past couple of decades that emphasizes the complexities of imperial law and governance, showing yet again how weak and decentralized that supposed autocracy actually was. For economic historians, Dynner has pulled our attention away from the often misleading data that we can glean from official archives, toward the political economy of daily life.

Rarely is the gap between the two greater than in rural nineteenth-century eastern Europe. We are familiar with a story of gradual Jewish dislocation and immiseration beginning shortly after the partitions of Poland, but Dynner shows that in fact this process began much later, and happened much more quickly. Right up until the 1880s, he argues, the occupational breakdown of the Jewish population of the Polish lands had changed only at the margins. Only with the sudden collapse in grain prices that came with the technological breakthroughs in transportation after the 1880s did the nobility lose their control over rural society—and only then did the Jews' symbiotic lease-holding relationship with the nobility truly erode. Under these pressures came the massive shift into trade and handicrafts that would characterize the early twentieth-century Jewish economy. If Dynner is right about this alternative timeline, a great deal of what we thought we knew about nineteenth-century Jewish life will have to be reconsidered.

For Polish historians, it has always been a delicate matter to locate the Jews within the story of the struggle to restore national independence. The general narrative arc has held that Jews were broadly supportive of the Polish national cause throughout most of the era of the partitions, until the rise of antisemitism at the start of the twentieth century poisoned relations between the two communities and eventually rendered the idea of the “Pole of the Faith of Moses” untenable. The weakness of this story has always been its reliance on the experiences of the relatively small urban Jewish communities, particularly in Warsaw. Dynner has long been urging us to look beyond those interesting but atypical individuals, to give more attention to the vastly larger Yiddish-speaking, unacculturated rural communities. Doing so does not merely rework the familiar story line about Polish-Jewish relations—that would be far too simple. Instead, it forces us to readjust the very categories of identity with which we think about these questions. The picture we get is a Jewish world that is neither anti-Polish nor pro-Polish, but a-Polish. In other words, just as historians such as Tara Zahra, Nathan Wood, Pieter Judson, and many others have been arguing in recent years, our old insistence on seeing everything through the prism of national identity has blinded us to the quotidian irrelevance of such political concerns.<sup>1</sup> In this regard the Jews were no different than their Christian peasant neighbors. When seen from the ground level, the uprisings of 1830 and 1863 appear not so much as watershed moments that portend fundamental transformations, but dangerous explosions of violence with doubtful relevance to Jews and peasants alike. Most people just tried to keep their heads down while the Polish nobles and the Russian military settled their disputes. Those who did get involved by smuggling supplies did so without much regard to religion or ethnicity. As Dynner wryly puts it, “Smugglers, spies, and thieves, it turns out, were much less prone to discrimination than the

1. Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Nathan Wood, *Becoming Metropolitan: Urban Selfhood and the Making of Modern Cracow* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

## Book Reviews

enlightened government bureaucrats who pursued them. Antisocial activities may provide the period's most advanced model of interethnic symbiosis" (128).

That last word—symbiosis—appears a lot in this book, linking Dynner's work to that of scholars like Rose Lehmann and Sean Martin, who have long been urging us to break away from old dichotomies that either idealized Polish-Jewish relations or cast the two communities as perpetually poised on the edge of hatred and violence.<sup>2</sup> The picture we get from *Yankel's Tavern* is one in which familiarity, mistrust, friendliness, rivalry, intimacy, and hostility are all equally important, with no single characterization sufficient to capture the nuances of the intertwined lives in these small east European villages. Dynner tells us about peasants using violence against tavern keepers suspected of cheating, as well as stories of tavern keepers who really did engage in some less-than-admirable practices. He relates tales of late nights in the inns, with the songs alternating between Yiddish and Polish, but he also explains how the practice of buying liquor on credit led to simmering tensions on all sides. Above all, he offers a story of nuance and complexity, one that defies any attempt to squeeze it into the simplistic dualities that have long weakened both Polish and Jewish history. This alone should place *Yankel's Tavern* on everyone's must-read list.

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Scott Ury. *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jews*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 448 pp.  
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In his *Barricades and Banners*, Scott Ury takes the reader on a fascinating journey through Warsaw at the beginning of the twentieth century. Here amid three ideologies (socialism, liberalism, and nationalism) and as many different languages and cultures (Polish, Yiddish, and Russian), 750,000 Varsovians including over 270,000 Jews mixed. They formed complex visions of the urban space they shared. Ury follows the history of this modernizing city and its population in the context of the origins, development, climax, and collapse of the Revolution of 1905, showing how Warsaw was transformed from a provincial town in the Russian Empire to an important metropolis.

In this very successful "microstudy of modern Jewish society and politics" (3), focused on one of the largest Jewish urban populations in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ury questions the traditional approach of Jewish

2. Rose Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence: Poles and Jews in a Small Galician Town* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); Sean Martin, *Jewish Life in Cracow, 1918–1939* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004).