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***When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life under Stalin.* By Anna Shternshis.** Oxford University Press. 2017. xii + 247pp. £ 26.49.

Anna Shternshis's study offers a tantalizing glimpse into the Stalin era as experienced by a generation of Soviet Jews and recalled through their post-Soviet oral testimonies. Shternshis began her project with the aim of taking the lives of her own grandparents as a starting point (though in this book their story eventually gets lost as the bigger picture emerges) and with the intention of focusing on interwar Yiddish popular culture. Her preliminary research, however, soon led her to a much broader exploration of Jewish experience under Stalin.

Over the course of ten years from the late 1990s, she conducted 474 interviews with former Soviet citizens born before 1928 now based in New York, Moscow, Potsdam and Toronto. Even in a book-length study such as this, there is not room to examine each of these lives in detail, of course, but Shternshis nevertheless reveals a number of intriguing trends in the Soviet Jewish experience as well as some of the inner workings of the Stalinist system.

Shternshis outlines what she sees as a three-stage destruction of Jewish life under Stalin, beginning with the outright attacks on religious practice in the immediate post-revolutionary years. This was followed by the physical destruction of Jews in the Great Terror and the Second World War. The final assault came in the 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign against Jewish culture in the post-war period that saw its culmination in the Doctors' Plot in the weeks preceding the death of Stalin in March 1953. She suggests that for those growing up in the 1930s, the Great Terror was a life-defining episode. For those coming of age slightly later, though, it was the trauma of the post-war anti-cosmopolitan campaigns that came to be regarded as the most difficult challenge of their lives rather than the upheavals generated by the Second World War.

The primary focus of the book is on various aspects relating to Soviet Jewish family life and the experiences of Jews in the Soviet workplace. In these examples, there are those who sought actively to find potential marriage partners within the broader Jewish community, which was more of a problem for the young women, who were generally permitted to socialize much less outside their homes and immediate surroundings. Others were not so concerned about the ethnic origins of a potential partner, though they may also have had to face the reactions of their parents. The wedding ceremony, or registration of marriage, appears to have been a rather incidental event for many couples in this period, some not even bothering to inform their parents until after it had taken place.

In the post-war years, Jews were often restricted in their choice of place of study and employment. Some took the opportunities available to them at this time to disguise their Jewish identity, by adopting more Russian-sounding names for example, whilst others decisively refused to do so. By the time of the late 1940s anti-cosmopolitan campaigns, Jews were facing sometimes hostile atmospheres in their place of work, and may have been downgraded in their job and had their salary reduced, though such experiences were far from universal.

Oral history is not without its detractors, but as Shternshis herself notes, 'it is possible to uncover details of the daily life of the past that are simply unavailable in other sources, and it is a professional responsibility to preserve and analyse these sources at a time when it is still possible to verify this information' (p. 190). She has taken care in her research as far as possible to 'fact check' the data revealed in individual testimonies and to highlight errors in remembering and (sometimes collective) imagination, such as mentions of plans for a forcible relocation of Jews to Birobidzhan in the 1950s for which there is no objective evidence. As her study shows, when a researcher cannot always rely on the veracity of the information found in archival files and printed materials to provide the source base for their study, as is sometimes the case in Soviet history, oral testimony can help flesh out the details that may not be found elsewhere in the documentation or even in the collective and public history.

Shternshis attempts some interpretation of her narrative materials. Although some of this appears to be a rather superfluous re-rendering of the interview narrative content, where it works best is in the attempt to frame the memory in the context of the respondents' present-day environment. Shternsis claims, for example, that those living in New York tend to offer a life story that follows the narrative arc of the 'American Dream', whilst those based in Canada offer a tale more of lament, misfortune and injustice. The German narratives are full of twists and turns, but conclude with miraculous happy endings. Those interviewees still based in Russia offer an account of the 'Soviet dream', with stories shaped by modesty, hard work and honest though impoverished lives. These interpretations are inevitably generalizations, but they serve to provide a backdrop to memory.

The study makes a valuable contribution to the growing literature in Soviet oral history on everyday experiences of the Stalinist regime and of Soviet Jewry. It is certainly a very readable book, but I am less sure about where it will find a place in the Soviet history curriculum.

University of Gloucestershire MELANIE ILIC