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*The Politics of Nonassimilation: The American Jewish Left in the Twentieth Century* by David Verbeeten (review)

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(Review)

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bringing about the ultimate decline of the Jewish Communist movement as a political force globally.

This is an important collection for any historian interested in twentieth-century Jewish politics or social history. The transnational perspective should inspire new avenues for research into the history of the global Jewish left in all its complexity. Hopefully, future intrepid researchers will dive into the declassified (and partially digitized) holdings of the Communist Party and Comintern in Moscow. These materials, overlooked in this volume, constitute a still-untapped gold mine for historians of the global Jewish Left.

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*The Politics of Nonassimilation: The American Jewish Left in the Twentieth Century.* By David Verbeeten. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017. 229 pp.

From approximately 1830–1970 (and particularly between 1890–1950), an informal political alliance existed between Jews and the political Left. This was never an alliance of all Jews and all Left groups. But it was an alliance between key sections of the Left and key sections of politically active Jews at various times and in various places.

Historians typically attribute this Jewish-Left association to a number of key factors, including that Jews were victims of both class and ethnic oppression; an implied association between Jewish religious and cultural values such as *tzedakah* (charity), *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and socialist philosophy; the concentration of Jews in urban communities given that socialism was primarily an urban rather than rural or peasant phenomenon; the strong emphasis on education and intellectual training within the Jewish religious tradition that may have made Jews more receptive to ideas of social and political reform; and the fact that Jews were a global tribe and, as wanderers, had a much less parochial view of the world than other nations who were limited by national boundaries, cultures and traditions.

A new book by Canadian researcher David Verbeeten proposes a new explanation for the ongoing Jewish-Left connection. He argues that Jewish Leftism serves as a means of preserving a secular ethnic Jewish identity in the face of external pressures to assimilate. He demonstrates that Jews in America have enjoyed unprecedented upward mobility since the early twentieth century as reflected in access to higher education and

professional occupations, and equally that antisemitism has significantly declined. Yet paradoxically, despite their growing affluence and acceptance, they have continued to stand up for oppressed groups such as the proletariat, African Americans, and even, ironically, the Palestinians.

Verbeeten attempts to explain this sociological contradiction by exploring previously neglected case studies from three generations of left-wing Jews in America. The first generation, that of the mass wave of early twentieth century Eastern European immigrants, is examined through the memoirs of Alexander Bittelman, a prominent theorist and founder of the American Communist Party (CPUSA). Bittelman was born in the Ukraine in 1892 and moved to New York City in 1912. Like many Jewish radicals, Bittelman was not assimilated. Rather, he seems to have been influenced toward left-wing politics by his Jewish background, and particularly his childhood experiences of both poverty and antisemitism. Jews were disproportionately involved in the CPUSA, and Verbeeten notes that the CPUSA was significantly more middle class than other western Communist parties, precisely because of the presence of so many middle-class Jewish doctors, lawyers and dentists. These Jews appears to have formed a Yiddish-speaking Communist sub-culture comprising a close cultural network of friends, neighbours, work colleagues and family.

The second generation in Verbeeten's study is that of the children of the earlier immigrants who moved into adulthood during the inter-war period. Their experience is constructed through the anti-racist activities of the American Jewish Congress during and after World War Two, including its prominent participation in the civil rights movement. Verbeeten notes that the alignment of Jews (as one of the wealthiest subgroups in America) with African Americans (one of the poorest) in a supposedly common struggle for equality and social justice was increasingly rejected by many African Americans who questioned whether Jewish and black interests were in fact compatible.

The third generation is that of the grandchildren born after World War Two, framed via their involvement in the New Jewish Agenda (NJA) from 1980–92, which supported numerous left-wing causes including gender equality, gay rights, the sanctuary movement for Central American refugees, and Palestinian statehood. This section adds considerably to our understanding of the revival in recent decades of Jewish-identifying groups on the political Left. NJA's early endorsement of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provoked hostility from conservative Jews. But notably its public critique of Israeli government policies such as the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the harsh response to the Palestinian Intifada of 1987–88 did not extend to a rejection of the State of Israel or Zionism *per se*. In contrast, some contemporary American Jewish Left groups are

openly anti-Zionist and supportive of the hardline Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel.

There are parts of this book which would have benefited from greater historical and political context. In particular, there is a tendentious slippage between moderate liberal perspectives as reflected in the overtly anti-Communist American Jewish Congress and the socialist or Communist perspectives as represented by the views of Alexander Bittelman and the NJA. The author should also have emphasized that while most American Jews continue to vote Democrat rather than Republican, only a small minority would endorse the left-wing agendas pursued by NJA or contemporary left-wing groups such as Jewish Voices for Peace. Indeed, relatively few align themselves with the harsh criticisms of Israel and Zionism voiced by JVP.

At times, the author erroneously seems to imply that Jews are themselves to blame for antisemitism, either because they prefer to live in segregated Jewish-populated areas, or because they demand equal access to public institutions. For example, he provocatively suggests that the attempts by Harvard and other Ivy League universities to impose anti-Jewish quotas in higher education were justified given that Jews were already over-represented in this area. I also think the book tends to play down the enormous fissures within the Jewish Left over Stalinist antisemitism from 1948 onward. It was not the belated revelations of Khrushchev in 1956 that alienated most Jews from Communism, but rather the open brutality of Communist antisemitism as revealed by the earlier Slansky Trial of 1952 and the Doctors Plot of early 1953. Despite these limitations, Verbeeten provides an insightful analysis of the ethno-cultural values that continue to influence Jewish connections with the Left irrespective of socio-economic status.

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