



The Jewish Century

Yuri Slezkine

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This masterwork of interpretative history begins with a bold declaration: The Modern Age is the Jewish Age--and we are all, to varying degrees, Jews.

The assertion is, of course, metaphorical. But it underscores Yuri Slezkine's provocative thesis. Not only have Jews adapted better than many other groups to living in the modern world, they have become the premiere symbol and standard of modern life everywhere.

Slezkine argues that the Jews were, in effect, among the world's first free agents. They traditionally belonged to a social and anthropological category known as "service nomads," an outsider group specializing in the delivery of goods and services. Their role, Slezkine argues, was part of a broader division of human labor between what he calls Mercurians--entrepreneurial minorities--and Apollonians--food-producing majorities.

Since the dawning of the Modern Age, Mercurians have taken center stage. In fact, Slezkine argues, modernity is all about Apollonians becoming Mercurians--urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible. Since no group has been more adept at Mercurianism than the Jews, he contends, these exemplary ancients are now model moderns.

The book concentrates on the drama of the Russian Jews, including émigrés and their offspring in America, Palestine, and the Soviet Union. But Slezkine has as much to say about the many faces of modernity--nationalism, socialism, capitalism, and liberalism--as he does about Jewry. Marxism and Freudianism, for example, sprang largely from the Jewish predicament, Slezkine notes, and both Soviet Bolshevism and American liberalism were affected in fundamental ways by the Jewish exodus from the Pale of Settlement.

Rich in its insight, sweeping in its chronology, and fearless in its analysis, this sure-to-be-controversial work is an important contribution not only to Jewish and Russian history but to the history of Europe and America as well.

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