Perhaps no “non-Jewish” Jew with the exception of the Nazarene has generated as much consternation as the figure of Karl Marx. Marx’s maternal grandfather was a rabbi. His father, Heschel Mordechai Marx, was descended from a long line of rabbis. Had Karl been born a generation before, he likely would have followed his father’s path into the rabbinate. But Heschel Marx came of age during the French Revolution.

Born in 1777, Heschel Marx was a teenager when the French revolutionary army seized his hometown of Trier. The French army brought with it the Rights of Man and political emancipation. Heschel Marx benefited from the upward mobility made possible by the Revolution. An emancipated Jew who eagerly read the philosophes and French literature, Heschel Marx gained entry into society through the acquisition of a new cultural code inflected with the values of the revolutionary French state. He entered the legal profession as a Jew.

Following Waterloo, the Congress of Vienna returned Trier to the Kingdom of Prussia in 1815 and the liberal universalism legislated by the French state disappeared, replaced by a Prussian state intent on restoring order and hierarchy. Accordingly, the state rescinded the rights extended to the Jews of Trier, including lawyer Marx, who had just passed the bar.

Marx made a choice in the face of political machinations happening far away. The entire structure of the world he inhabited shifted as a result of a shifting border. Within this transformed context, Jewishness meant the loss of status, opportunity, and citizenship. In 1818, Heschel Marx converted to Lutheranism and changed his name to Heinrich. In 1824, he had his six-year-old son, Karl, baptized.

Had Karl been an accommodating type, the story of the Marx family would be a remarkably fascinating illustrative tale in a social history. Speculating about possible psychological motivations for Karl Marx’s lack of...
Fig. 1  Monument to the Third International, 1919
Vladimir Tatlin, above; The Tower of Babel, 1563, Peter Breugel the Elder, left.
accommodation is a tempting exercise, particularly in light of his frequently vindictive writings about Jews and Judaism (articulated even as he defended, unequivocally, Jewish political emancipation). However, we might ask whether it was his individual psychology that made Karl Marx, or whether it was the border: Had Trier remained in France, where emancipation and upward mobility remained the order of the day, Marx might have ended up following his father’s path of upward social mobility as a Jew. Under the Prussian state, he became a converted Jew, a militant atheist, and a revolutionary.

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In October 1917, the Bolsheviks seized control of Petrograd, proclaiming a revolution inspired in large part by the writings of Karl Marx. The revolution took as its goals the overcoming of capitalist society, establishing the rule of the working class and peasantry, the formal equality of individuals regardless of social background, and the establishment of an international order of brotherhood among peoples. Like the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917 brought political emancipation for Jews living in the Soviet republics. Like the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution opened pathways for upward social mobility.

As with the case of Heschel Marx in 1815, a change of government and an accident of the border exerted a profound influence on the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Four years of war, civil war, and pogroms devastated the Jewish communities of the Pale of Settlement, as chronicled by two of modern literature’s most gifted writers, Sh. An-Sky and Isaac Babel. Their tales collected traces of a world scorched in the fires of violence. “Yes! To the Revolution, Yes!” proclaimed Gedali, one of Babel’s iconic ironic voices. “But the Revolution keeps hiding from Gedali and sending gunfire ahead of itself.”

Violence and the pursuit of power unquestionably drove the revolutionary dynamic. Yet a second, powerful impulse toward human redemption was also at work. In the Russian context, the spirit of revolutionary utopianism took the form of a technologized futurism oriented towards the emancipation of humanity through productive labor. Among its most enduring symbols, one stands out: Vladimir Tatlin’s Tower (Fig. 1), a masterful 1919 Constructivist rendition of a familiar form.

Originally intended as a monument to the Communist International, or Comintern, Tatlin’s Tower depicted a Constructivist Tower of Babel cast in steel. It was, at the very least, an odd choice for a determinedly atheistic state. That the full version was never built suggests the uneasiness with which the Soviet state viewed the utopic longing inherent in the masterpiece.

As an idea, however, the power of Tatlin’s Tower was enormous. It suggested a vision of the messianic restoration not of Zion, presumptive site of man’s individual “fall,” but of Babel, site of the collective fall of man. The fury of YHWH razed the tower, dispersed its builders to the corners of the earth, and invented languages to punish and divide them. Tatlin’s tower suggested a vision of human emancipation reclaimed and the overcoming of linguistic and national differences.

In the aftermath of revolution, Belorussia, the westernmost region of Soviet Babel in the heart of the defunct Pale of Settlement, became a living and ongoing experiment in social and cultural reconstitution—one of the most rapid and unprecedented processes of social, cultural, and social restructuring in Jewish history. The border changed. The law changed. Social relations changed. True to the spirit of Babel, the revolutionary state recog-
nized four national languages: Belorussian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish.

Heinrich Marx had faced the choices of the French revolutionary era precisely on the terms offered by the Revolution, as an emancipated individual in a state of individuals. The Russian Revolution offered full political emancipation to those who earned their citizenship through labor. Insofar as Jews constituted an estimated 75 percent of all artisans and cottage producers in Belorussia, and sizable majorities of the labor forces in a number of key industries, these terms of emancipation proved fortuitous for the many (and disastrous for the few). In a region of woods and fields, the Jewish laboring populations of Belorussia appeared as the closest thing to a proletariat in the region. The Jews of Belorussia entered into post-revolutionary civic life as something they had never been explicitly before: a classed society.

The anti-Semitic myth of the Zydokommuna claims that radical Jews made the Revolution. This flips the causality with conspiratorial intent. In truth, the Revolution made the Jews radicals, just as it had made radicals of the Belorussians, Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians. Few Jews participated in the Revolution or supported the Bolsheviks in 1917. But by 1921, they constituted important and sizable contingents within the trade unions, the commissariats, and throughout the administrative apparatuses of the state and party. To cite but one example, by 1921 three-quarters of all white-collar workers in the Soviet apparatus in the capital of Minsk were Jews. The Jews of Soviet Belorussia as a collective faced the choice that Heschel Marx had faced in 1815. Many went the way of Heinrich Marx and sought accommodation with the new order.

As a youth, Karl Marx had proclaimed the political emancipation of the Jews to be a necessary but insufficient step. The point, he insisted, was to bring about human emancipation. In the context of Belorussia, Marx's call for proletarian revolution and his ambivalence towards the particularities of Jewishness came into direct conflict. The state and party valorized the Jewish working class of Belorussia—mostly shoemakers, tanners, tailors, dressmakers, woodworkers, cigarette-rollers, and furriers—as a bastion of labor, even as they suspected it for being simultaneously too particular.

Multiple motives drew Jews into the orbit of the state and party. Many Jews hoped that human emancipation of the revolutionary state would erase the “stigma” and fact of Jewishness in an emancipated world. Others undoubtedly joined the cause for more utilitarian motives, correctly viewing the state and party institutions as viable avenues for upward social mobility. Overwhelmingly young, bilingual, and literate, they possessed the traits required.

Alongside these practical interpretations, a third and underlying revolutionary impulse played an equally powerful, emotive role. In the Pale of Settlement, the Revolution was charged with the latent power of Jewish Messianism. Gedali’s image of the Revolution as the Divine hiding itself from the people was, of course, bitterly sorrowful and ironic. Yet the sentiment captures the everyday longing for redemption that bubbled up again in the midst of revolution.

The Bolshevik Revolution unleashed a Jewish Revolution on the streets of Belorussia. It restructured social relations, transforming previous social and cultural “outsiders” into insiders. The revolutionary government established Yiddish schools, theaters, lecture halls, and workers’ clubs. Yiddish journals propagated new theories of Jewish history and philosophy. The Jewish Revolution cultivated its own radical intelligentsia where it could, and imported from abroad when necessary.
One prominent writer who immigrated to the Soviet Union was Moshe Kulbak. In 1928, Kulbak went to Minsk, leaving behind Vilna, “Yerushalayim de Lite,” for Soviet Babel. His family lived outside Minsk and personal issues certainly influenced his decision to return. Yet family dramas alone cannot quite explain his choice. Kulbak had emerged as a star of the international Yiddish literary world due to his haunting lyric poems and highly modernist, deeply ironic prose. His major novellas of this period, Meshiekh ben Efraim (1924), and Montag (1926) are shot through with images of messianic longing and failed messiahs. Among his last major works completed in Vilna before emigration was Yakov Frank, a play about the 18th-century messianic pretender. In the revolution, Kulbak detected sparks of messianic potential and the inevitable failure of would-be messiahs.

Unlike Heschel Marx, Kulbak crossed the border between Poland and Soviet Belorussia of his own volition. He became among the most talented and conflicted writers of the Soviet Yiddish cultural renaissance. His novel Zelmenyaners captured the tensions, contradictions, generational conflicts, and guarded hopes of Soviet Jewish life in post-Revolutionary Belorussia better than any contemporary voice.

In 1937, Soviet authorities arrested Moshe Kulbak at the height of the Great Terror. Kulbak stood accused of being a Polish spy and a Trotskyist conspirator, a charge that by the mid-1930s had become a thinly veiled euphemism for Jew. He was tried by the state and shot. Kulbak’s life stands as a central source of inspiration for my work on Soviet Jewish history in post-Revolutionary Belorussia. Ultimately, my work attempts to grapple with two questions presented by Kulbak’s story. Why did Moshe Kulbak go to Minsk? And why did the Soviet state, which emerged out of a promise for human emancipation and the overcoming of national difference, shoot Moshe Kulbak in 1937 as a foreign agitator, a Trotskyist, and, implicitly, a Jew?