

## 8 WAS LEV SHTERNBERG JUST ANOTHER CLASSICAL EVOLUTIONIST?

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The majority of scholars, both Russian and Western, have long regarded Lev Iakovlevich Shternberg (1861–1927) as a leading representative of the classic evolutionist school who, like the rest of them, was only interested in studying the present-day culture of the non-Western peoples or the past culture of the Western ones.<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that most of Shternberg's published works on social organization and religion were heavily influenced by Lewis H. Morgan and E.B. Tylor (whom his friend and colleague Waldemar Bogoras [Vladimir Bogoraz] called the heroes of Shternberg's youth), such viewpoint is quite natural. In my view, however, a more careful reading not only of his scholarly publications but also his academic manuscripts, lectures, letters and other archival materials as well a careful analysis of his complex and rather contradictory scholarly views in the context of world ethnology demonstrates that in his worldview (*Weltanschauung*) classical evolutionism coexisted with ideas that resembled those of Durkheim, Mauss, Boas and even Radcliffe-Brown.

It seems particularly important to include Shternberg's numerous articles and essays published in various Russian periodicals of both liberal and more left-wing socialist leaning between the mid-1890s and the early 1920s. Some of these writings appeared in publications aimed at a Russian audience; others addressed the Russian-speaking Jewish *intelligentsia*, which Shternberg himself belonged to.

In addition one should take into consideration the fact that between the 1890s and the 1920s, Shternberg's scholarly views underwent some modifications. Lev Iakovlevich corresponded and interacted with quite a few foreign colleagues, many of them prominent scholars, and carefully monitored new developments in ethnology and such related disciplines as linguistics, psychology, etc. While never abandoning his evolutionism, Shternberg was open to modifying it to a significant extent, both in response to some major new developments in Western anthropology and especially in the wake of the dramatic economic, social and ideological upheavals and changes caused by the First World War, the Russian Revolutions, and the Civil War. The aim of this brief essay is to present several key examples of Shternberg's theoretical views that either contradicted or went far beyond what has usually been described as his "classical" evolutionism.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See Gagen-Torn (1975); Grant (1999); Roon and Sirina (2004, see also *this volume*).

2 Much of the data and some of the arguments presented in this paper can be found in my earlier publications. See Kan (2009a; 2009b; 2012a; 2012b; 2016).

### The Nivkh Clan as Seen by Shternberg the *Narodnik*

Beginning with his very first scholarly publication “The Gilyak of Sakhalin,” Shternberg demonstrated his special interest in *both* the evolution of social organization (and especially of kinship and the marriage system) as well as the role of certain social institutions in the everyday as well as the religious life of this indigenous people of the Far East. So far most anthropologists have focused on the first but not the second aspect of his scholarly agenda, which, in my view, is just as significant.

Shternberg first describes the Gilyak (Nivkh) clan (*rod*) (*khal*) as an institution that regulates marriage, the laws and customs related to blood revenge, the structures and principles of conducting the bear festival, as well the basic social identification of each person, and then offers a virtual hymn to that positive influence, which in his opinion, the primitive (*pervobytnyi*) clan had and continues to have on the character (or what later anthropologists would call “ethnic” or “national psychology” of the Nivkh person. In his own words,

The fact that each Gilyak must belong to large clan left a major imprint on his entire spiritual tone (*sklad*), his personality, customs and mental development. This habit of discussing everything collectively, this necessity to take the interests of one’s kin into consideration, this custom of collective responsibility in matters of blood revenge, these communal festivals and sacrifices, this brotherly union of numerous fathers, brothers and children, and, finally, this necessity and custom to dwell in large yurts along with dozens of people just like oneself – a necessity, which makes every Gilyak to live while always being seen by others – all of this must have contributed to the development a personality that is sociable, inclined to conversation, serious and sensitive as far as issues of honor as concerned (1893:17–18).

In his positive characterization of the Nivkh people’s personality, the Russian ethnographer also mentions their hospitality, their system of primitive equality and other “good qualities of primitive tribes” (*dobrodeteliakh pervobytnykh plemen*), which in his view had still survived into the 1890s among the Nivkh of both Sakhalin and the lower Amur, despite a negative influence of the Russians and the Manchu who had been exploiting them. Shternberg’s admiration for the “traditional” Nivkh clan as well as his concluding comments on the future of Nivkh society clearly reflect both his evolutionist as well as his Russian Populist (*narodnicheskii*) ideology, “The fate of their society is undoubtedly doomed. Within one or two generations, the mainland [Amur] Gilyak will become completely Russified and along with the benefits of [higher—S.K.] culture he will acquire all of its bad habits” (ibid.:19).

Whereas his reconstruction of the evolution of the Nivkh system of marriage was clearly a product of the work of Shternberg an *evolutionist theorizer*, this description of the clan’s key role in Nivkh life was undertaken by a *field ethnographer* and is

more reminiscent of the work of Durkheim, Mauss, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski than that of Morgan and Tylor. Thus one could definitely argue that already in this early works on social organization of the peoples of the Russian Far East, classical evolutionist coexisted somehow with a (kind of) structural-functionalist. Moreover, Shternberg's enthusiastic description of the major role played by the clan in the social and spiritual life of the Nivkh as well as in the development of their distinct ethnic character and identity (or may be even what Geertz called "ethos") is clearly reminiscent of Durkheim's concept of "mechanical solidarity." This should not come as a surprise: after all both of them (as well as Marcel Mauss) were late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century socialists who saw in the so-called "primitive" societies some very important forms of social relations and institutions, which in their view, had disappeared from the modern capitalist/industrial ones.<sup>3</sup>

### Shternberg and Boas

Considering Boas's rejection of Shternberg's evolutionist theorizing, it seems difficult to argue that their anthropological ideas had much in common. Thus, in his memorializing of Shternberg at the 1930 International Congress of Americanist in Berlin "the father of American anthropology" called him the "Russian Bastian" and evaluated very highly his "fundamental studies of the ethnology of the Amur peoples" as well as his work at the MAE. However, he also characterized his friend and colleague as "one of the brightest modern-day defenders of the Morgan's and the entire evolutionist theory" (Boas 1934:XL–XVI). In conclusion Boas made it clear that while he viewed Shternberg's ethnographic work very highly, he was not impressed with his evolutionist theorizing. In his words, "No matter what our attitude towards these [evolutionist] theories might be, the important ethnographic data he had collected must be taken into very serious consideration" (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, aside from this major disagreement, the two scholars had quite a bit in common. For example, just like Boas, Shternberg were convinced that an ethnographer could not understand "the true life of a people" he was studying and especially "its psychological aspects" without a solid knowledge of its language (Bogoras 1928:5). It is this conviction that explains why, despite his special interest in "primitive" social organization, the Russian ethnologist had collected such a large body of linguistic and folklore materials on the Nivkh. Thus, despite the fact that Boas had entered ethnology from the hard sciences and Shternberg from the social ones, both eventually arrived at the same conclusion about the centrality of language in culture and the need for the ethnographer to master it and collect a variety of texts in it.<sup>4</sup>

3 See, for example, Gane (2014), Fournier (2006).

4 I might add that while the Western canon of the history of anthropology usually credits Malinowski with the "discovery" fieldwork as the #1 method for collecting ethnographic

There are also similarities in these two scholars' views on what constitutes a single *culture*. Thus Boas saw culture as a historical phenomenon or as a total of all of the patterns of and for behavior that a member of a society acquired in the process of growing up and acquiring that culture. And here is how Shternberg defined the meaning of "culture" in his lecture course "The Introduction to Ethnography" delivered at the Leningrad State University in 1926–1927: "Culture is a group of people, whose unity rests on their common historical experience, which in turn creates a combination of such powerful memories and emotions that they unite millions of people into a single psychological and historical body" (SPF ARAN/F. 282, op. 1, d. 21, l. 26). Such historical/psychological and idealistic understanding of culture seems much more akin to Boas's than that of Morgan or even Tylor, let alone Marx and Engels.



Fig. 1 Shternberg, Boas, and Bogoras at the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Americanists, 1924, in the Hague. Franz Boas Papers (Ms.B.B61), # U5-1-34. American Philosophical Society.

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data, one could definitely argue that the Russian political exiles, like Shternberg, Bogoras and Jochelson, "discovered" it as well and did so a couple of decades earlier. Eventually Shternberg and Bogoras began referring to it as the "stationary method" (*statsionarnyi metod*) of research and made it a key part of their students' education (Kan 2009:101–111; Arziutov and Kan 2017: 39–50).

## Judaism as the Highest Stage of the Evolution of Religion

Over the years Shternberg developed a theory that Judaism's most important contribution to the world's "cultural capital" was the "discovery of monotheism". He articulated it in his articles published in the 1910s in *Novyi Voskhod* and *Evreiskaia Nedelia*, the main Russian language Jewish newspapers, as well as in a lecture course entitled "Evolution of Religion" offered on a regular basis at the Ethnography Division of the Geography Institute and the Ethnography Division of the Geography Faculty of the Leningrad University throughout most of the 1920s. These ideas were most clearly articulated in his presentation "Aspects of Jewish Ethnic Psychology" delivered at the Jewish Historic and Ethnographic Society (JHES) in the early 1920s and then published in its journal *Evreiskaia Starina* in 1924 (Shternberg 1924a).

In his lectures on the evolution of religion, Lev Iakovlevich outlined a more or less traditional scheme of the evolution of religious ideas from primitive animatism to complex polytheism (Shternberg 1936:519). Like his predecessors from the classical evolutionist school, Shternberg argued that monotheism was the next stage in the evolution of world religion. However, in his own scheme, monotheism was divided into two types: a more primitive one (called "animistic"), typical for such peoples as the ancient Egyptians, and the "ethical" one, which, in his view, had been created, by the "Semitic peoples" (*ibid.*). While in the former type, the deity still retained some anthropomorphic features, in the latter one, it lost them and became a "special ethical being" (*ibid.*). In the concluding lecture of the course, Shternberg did not focus specifically on Judaism. However, even his brief comments on the subject made it perfectly clear that he favored this ethical monotheism over the other one. Thus he insisted that the former included a strong emphasis on social justice, e.g., in contrast to the more primitive one, the former could not reconcile itself with the existence of socioeconomic inequality typical for the Ancient Near East and openly advocated a struggle for "the kingdom of God" on Earth rather than in Heaven.

One can imagine Shternberg being reluctant to openly extoll Judaism in front of an audience of Soviet students; however in 1924, he could still do so openly among his colleagues and friends—members of the JHES. So let us return to the presentation on the subject of the Jewish national psychology he gave to that audience. He began by drawing its attention to a particular fact, which was supposed to completely confuse an evolutionist ethnologist. As he put it, why was it that, if each type of sociopolitical system usually had a corresponding religious one, the pure monotheism did not develop among such advanced peoples as the Babylonians, the Egyptians, or the Persians, who "created enormous empires with their despotic monarch, supreme deities, and highly elaborate astral cults [...] while, on the contrary, it did develop among a small people, which had barely advanced from the stage of a tribal organization and which did not know such monarchs or such astral cults" (Shternberg 1924a:19).

According to him, the solution to such a paradox had to be searched for in that unique Jewish monotheism, which “stood alone in world history [italics—S.K.] and could not fit into the common evolutionary boundaries” [*ramki*] (ibid.: 21). His own interpretation of the origin of such monotheism was to attribute it to the type of phenomena that developed thanks to a kind of “leap” [*skachok*] and represented “individual discoveries of geniuses” (ibid.). Shternberg did allow for a possibility of such monotheism having been discovered in a different sociocultural environment; however, in his words, “in order for it to become the shared by an entire ethnic group it is necessary for that group to possess certain inherited psychological attributes facilitating an understanding and acceptance of such purely intellectual concept” (ibid.). Thus he attributed a major evolutionary development in the realm of religion not to economic or social factors but psychological ones.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting that in the rest of his presentation and article Shternberg focused specifically on what he called the “intellectual-rationalist character of Jewish monotheism”, while also arguing that its ritual dimension represented a later and externally introduced phenomenon (ibid.). An intellectual, who from his childhood days, had absorbed both the traditional Jewish religious learning as well as the secular European late 19<sup>th</sup> century education and high culture, Lev Iakovlevich favorite aspect of Judaism was precisely its humanistic-philosophical and cultural-historical aspects rather than the mystical and rituals ones. Thus while appealing to the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia of Russia in his 1907–1916 newspaper articles to “return to its people,” he also instructed it that while it was important to observe such holy days as Passover and Chanukah, it was not necessary to follow every letter of the ancient religious law. Instead such observance represented a wonderful opportunity to acquaint one’s children with the heroic history of the Jewish people (Kan 2009a:218–223).

Not surprising, this old *narodnik* was particularly fond of the Biblical prophets who preached universal social justice and combined rationalism with what he referred to as “social emotionalism” (a quality he himself possessed) (ibid.:36). Shternberg viewed the prophets as the precursors of Socialists, while in light of his hypothesis, the Jewish national psychology explained high political engagement of the Jews and the presence of so many Jews in the internationalist socialist movement (Shternberg 1924a:37).

Without going into a detailed discussion of Shternberg’s hypothesis of the development of Jewish national psychology and Jewish ethical monotheism, which undoubtedly contains a good deal of errors, I would like to point out that it does represent a good example of how this Jewish patriot’s views influenced his social evolutionism. At the very least these views obviously made him modify such key postulate of classical evolutionism as the idea that all of world’s people had to pass inevitable through the same stages of evolution, including in the realm of spiritual culture.

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5 This view is also reminiscent of some of Boas’s ideas on the relationship between psychology and culture.

## The Dramatic Upheavals Caused by World War I and the Russian Revolutions

The most serious challenge to Shternberg's evolutionist theorizing was posed by the radical economic and sociopolitical upheavals that took place in much of Europe and especially in his own country between 1914 and the early 1920s, i.e., the beginning of World War I and the end of the Russian Civil War. Although as a former Narodnik-turned-Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) he welcomed the February Revolution, Lev Iakovlevich opposed the Bolshevik coup and for a few months contributed to a newspaper run by the right wing of the SR party. In 1918 he abandoned politics in order to concentrate on museum work (Kan 2009a:237–258). While he chose to remain in Soviet Russia and cooperate with the new regime, he never fully embraced it, remaining loyal to the democratic socialist ideology of his youth (Kan 2009a:267–302, 2012b). From Shternberg's correspondence we know that between from the mid-1910s through the early 1920s he was deeply troubled not only by the drastic loss of lives but also such catastrophic disruptions of normal daily life as lack of food, fuel, transportation, and other basic necessity. As an intellectual and a scholar he was equally troubled by the breakdown of communication between scholars across international borders and the total interruption of the flow of scholarly literature and correspondence between them.

These new developments in the world he was living in forced the Russian ethnologist to turn his ethnographer's gaze to the present, and not just the past, and to rethink some of the postulates of his evolutionist theorizing. Although the only evidence of these new developments in Shternberg's thinking is an unfinished or only partially preserved typescript of a lecture, it is nonetheless a very important document for understanding his overall scholarly worldview.

Entitled "Anthropological Suggestions and Perspectives during the Revolutionary Years in Russia" this paper must have been written at the end of the Civil War and prepared for some public presentation.<sup>6</sup> The paper opens with an observation that Russia of that recent era "represents an enormously interesting phenomenon for an anthropologist interested in the general issues of culture" because it allows him to observe culture in its "dynamic" rather than just its "static" state (Shternberg 2009b:271). It is especially rare, according to Shternberg, for a social scientist to be able to observe how a person who shares our own culture acts creatively under such circumstances, when normal conditions of life are disturbed, regular cultural resources disappear, and one can no longer rely on familiar scientific ideas and technical habits, and instead one has to adapt to conditions, under which people occupying lower levels of cultural development normally live (ibid.:271–272). As Shternberg points out, during the period

6 I discovered this manuscript in the Shternberg files in the St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, while conducting research on his biography (PFA RAN. F. 282. op. 1. d. 81. l. 1–9). My English translation of the full text of this manuscript and commentary appear in the journal *Ab Imperio* (Kan 2009b).

under discussion, industrial production in Russian cities came almost entirely to a standstill. In order to survive Russian urban population simply returned to the long abandoned forms of production. As for the peasantry, it had an easier time adjusting to this chaos. In the countryside the old customs had not yet been forgotten. In the absence of matches, for example, the peasants returned to the old practice of preserving the fire under the ashes the way their ancestors did. When commercially made fabrics disappeared, the country folk found in their attics the old looms and turned to some old women who still remembered how to use them. Domestic cloth making began to flourish all over Russia and was still competing with the factory-based one at the time he wrote the paper. When cattle herds began to shrink and leather footwear began to disappear, hand woven *lapti* began to be made and worn not only in the country but the city as well. This demand for new materials affected the choice of crops raised: many peasants began growing hemp and linen instead of other kinds. With the decline of commercial vodka and tobacco coming from the city, an increasing number of peasants turned to growing their own tobacco and brewing their own vodka.

Having examined the peasants' adjustment to industrial crisis, Shternberg turned to the urbanites to argue that they had had a much more difficult time surviving. Many of them simply fled to the countryside. Even the *intelligentsia* tried to learn to be farmers. Those who remained in the cities survived by relying on a few inventions of their own such as, for example, the miniature iron stove (*bourzhuika*). However, by and large, in Shternberg's opinion, the civilized urban dweller returned to a primitive (*pervobytnyi*) condition. As he put it, "When the accumulated material resources are lost, a thousand-year-old culture immediately lowers a civilized person to the level of a primitive (*pervobytnyi*) one. And this is true not only in the sphere of the struggle for survival but in the moral one as well" (ibid.:275). For Shternberg this represented clear evidence that the so-called "primitive" peoples, including the present-day inhabitants of the outlying regions of the USSR were not at all inferior to the more "civilized" (*kul'turnye*) peoples of the European part of the country and in some respects, even superior to them.<sup>7</sup>

This short unpublished article suggests two things about Shternberg's evolving views on the development of human society and culture. Firstly, as a progressive thinker he clearly could not accept the classic evolutionists' notion that the evolution of technology, economy, social institutions and ideology was also inevitably accompanied by the evolution (i.e., progress) in the sphere of morality and intelligence. Secondly, as a witness to an incredible setback in the lives of millions of his contemporaries he could no longer share the optimistic belief in the inevitability of progress and unilineal sociocultural evolution he himself used to share with the previous generation of evolutionists.

7 Thus he pointed out that the indigenous peoples of Siberia had a much easier time adjusting to the scarcity of commercially made objects than the Russian city folk (Shternberg 2009b:275–276).

Not surprisingly in his 1920s lectures, while discussing evolution, Lev Iakovlevich did mention such factors as diffusion, borrowing, and other phenomena that played only a very minor role in his evolutionist theorizing some twenty to thirty years earlier.

### Shternberg's Program for the Study of the Present-Day Culture of Soviet Jews

As someone who had received a traditional religious Jewish education, Shternberg was well acquainted with the Hebrew Bible and throughout his academic career often drew on it as a source of examples for his discussion of the evolution of social organization and religion. Several of his publications addressed this subject directly.<sup>8</sup> This type of scholarly interest was typical for evolutionist anthropologists, beginning with E.B. Tylor. That same interest in the “old ways” and “traditional customs” of the inhabitants of the small *shtetls* of the Pale of Settlement was behind his involvement in helping prepare a detailed research program for the famous An-sky's Jewish Ethnographic Expedition of 1912–1914 (Kan 2009a:216–218; Deutsch 2011, 2016).

However, not until after the monumental upheaval in the life of the Jews of the Russian Empire as a result of World War I, the Revolution and the Civil War, which Shternberg referred to as a “catastrophe,” did he develop a strong interest in ethnographic research on their present-day social life and culture. Two sources illustrating this change in the ethnographer's thinking exist: an article entitled “Issues in Jewish Ethnography” based on a talk given at the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society and published posthumously (Shternberg 1928) and an unpublished “Instruction for the Study of the Jewish Population from an Ethnographic and Economic Point of View.” The latter is based on the notes taken by students who attended Shternberg's lectures given at the Leningrad Institute of Jewish History and Literature in 1923–1924.<sup>9</sup>

Echoing the argument presented in his unpublished paper discussed above, Shternberg argued that precisely because “such colossal” changes had been taking place in all aspects of Jewish life in Russia since 1917, “the present moment in the life of the Jewish people is a uniquely interesting one for an ethnographer” (1928:14). To make sure his audience understood why an ethnologist would want to study contemporary life of a relatively ‘advanced’ ethnic group, he explained,

“Ethnography is no longer understood as only a study of the curious phenomena from the life of primitive peoples. Most importantly ethnography is a

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8 See Shternberg's article on the “preservation of names in Jewish levirate” (1924b) or his well known essay “Divine Election in Primitive Religion” (1925).

9 This document was discovered in the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sankt-Peterburga (RGASPB) by Deborah Yalen who kindly shared it with me.

sociological discipline, which studies both the static and the dynamic aspects of a people's life. It studies both the manifestations of the traditional culture and the processes of the creation of a new one such as the present-day social and economic relations" (ibid.:12).

Once again, Lev Iakovlevich saw this type of ethnographic research as a golden opportunity to study the reactions of individual people to change as well as the psychological significance major changes had for an individual. As he put it, "A whole set of psychological shifts have been taking place, which say something about not only human psychology in general but the unique national [Jewish] psychology" (ibid.:15).

As far as the actual aspects of the present-day Jewish life that Shternberg instructed the future ethnographers among his students to concentrate on those ranged from economic activities to the status of women, and from education to social and religious life. He encouraged them to pay particular attention to such new developments as the Jewish collective farms (*kolkhozy*), Jewish sections of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League (*Komsomol*), the impact of the new secular schools and on the traditional religious ones, and so forth. He did not tell them to avoid such sensitive topics as the persistence of anti-Semitism among the Gentile neighbors of the Jews.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 2 Shternberg, before his departure to the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Americanists in the Hague, 1924. SPbF RAN Archive. F282/O1/D194/L22. Copy from the author's personal collection.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the less sensitive and controversial topics of ethnographic research mentioned by Shternberg in his lecture were actually put into practice by the students of Waldemar Bogoras, who conducted fieldwork in 1924 in two small shtetls, a Jewish agricultural colony, and the town of Gomel with its large Jewish population. The results of their research appeared in a collected entitled *Evreiskoe Mestechko v Revoliutsii* (The Jewish Shtetl During the Revolutionary Years) (see Yalen 2007).

## Conclusion

Examples drawn from Lev Shternberg's published and unpublished writing as well as lectures clearly support my argument that the prevailing view of him as a typical late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century evolutionist is not entirely accurate, especially if one considers the changes that occurred in his views in the wake of the dramatic transformations in all of the spheres of Russian (and the broader European) life following World War I, the February Revolution, the Bolshevik Coup, and the Civil War.



Fig. 3 From left to right around the table: Waldemar Bogoras, P.P. Semyenov-Tyan-Shanskiy, wife of A.P. Pinkevich, A.P. Pinkevich, L.B. Panek, O.I. Kolenkina, Sarra Ratner-Shternberg, A.A. Kolenkin, Lev Shternberg, L. Vittenburg, at the Second Soviet Kraevedcheskii (Local Regional Studies) Congress in Batumi (Georgian SSSR), 1925. SPbF RAN Archive. F282/O1/D194/L16.

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