

## Against the Apocalypse

Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture

David G. Roskies

**The Holocaust, in its enormity, has been viewed as an apocalyptic event that stands outside history, without analogy or precedent. Challenging this view, David Roskies places the Holocaust, and the literary responses of victims and survivors, in the context of generations of Jewish response to persecutions, pogroms, and communal catastrophes.**

His book, grounded in personal experience and a thorough knowledge of classical sources, takes as its focus the modern Jewish experience in eastern Europe. In the late nineteenth century and the decades that followed, Jewish writers and intellectuals, confronted by ever-growing cycles of violence, rejected the traditional modes of response and instead resorted to satire, irony, parody, rage, and blasphemy. Yet within this antitraditionalist mode there were hidden continuities with the past: in particular, a return to the rabbinic practice of cutting the great events of history down to manageable size. After the pogroms of 1881-82, Abramovitsh resurrected Mendele the Bookpeddler as prophet and profaner; Sholem Aleichem's ordinary Jews continued to talk their way out of danger; writers found ingenious ways to refract the Great War and the Russian revolution through the prism of the shtetl. In contrast, such apocalyptic writers as Halpern, Markish, Shapiro, and Babel used modernist techniques to draw a landscape of destruction over the entire globe.

The two modes of response came together, Roskies shows, in the Nazi ghettos. There a new archetype of catastrophe was born, a disciplined effort to retrieve and transform the ancient and modern traditions. After the war, with the culture of Jewish eastern Europe destroyed, Roskies sees in the poetry of Sutzkever and in the painting of Bak and Bergner testimonials to the triumph of group memory over apocalyptic despair.

"The subject of David Roskies' stirringly instructive book is continuity and retrieval; literature and culture as a bridge over catastrophe; or, as Roskies puts it, 'the attempt to make Torah out of history.' While *Against the Apocalypse* is first-rate scholarship meticulously attentive to texts, it is also a record of memory as poetry, and poetry as liturgy, and liturgy as an expression of an eternal covenantal stream."

— Cynthia Ozick

"*Against the Apocalypse* is a brilliant study of the theodicy of liturgical consolation, at once factual, evocative, and heart-rending. Part document, part lamentation, this book could have been written only by a scholar who was also, like David Roskies, a poet-elegist."

— John Murray Cuddihy



Warsaw Ghetto Monument  
Photo: Nathan Rapoport

"Lucid, telling, engaged at every moment, this book finds—in the varied matter of Jewish responses to catastrophe—a vital argument for persistence. David Roskies' spirited story becomes part of the story it tells."

— John Felstiner

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