If it strains credulity to see mujahideen drawing inspiration from the Tao and Sufism (as well as Emerson and Richard Burton along the way), that just shows why this book is false at its core. Abraham's fictional terror cell, where the boys learn English from John during the day (“My oom’s name is Barbara. My ahb’s name is William. I have no ahk or ohk. I am from Washington, D.C., . . . and I am visiting Pakistan. My favorite food is pizza.”) and the men read the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz aloud at night, is more plausible as a Baha’i retreat—or even a Boy Scout camp with exceptional marksmanship training—than as a terror cell. Abraham must know that this world is steeped, for instance, in the most retrograde and toxic sexism and anti-Semitism, but when she nods to this at all, she treats this rhetoric more like acne than cancer. John innocently wonders why women are missing from his new world. The book is without mention of Israel or Zionism. Whether it is cowardice, political correctness, fear of risking the reader’s sympathy, or the impenetrability of this world that leads Abraham to such a skewed portrait, is unclear. I don't mean to suggest that smart, idealistic young people have never turned to terrorism: from the café anarchists in the circle around Félix Fénéon, to the Weathermen of recent decades, this is, sadly, not uncharted territory.

If we are to understand what makes someone with a radical ideology turn violent, a novelist’s imagination may be exactly what we need. All three writers have great imaginative gifts, but neither Ahmad, nor Hassan, nor certainly, John is sufficient. The Great Anti-American Novel has yet to be written.

Margot Lurie recently received her MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her work has appeared in Commentary, Tablet, Parnassus: Poetry in Review, and The New Criterion.

The Weaver

BY GABRIELLA SAFRAN

PHOTOGRAPHING THE JEWISH NATION: PICTURES FROM S. AN-SKY’S ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPEDITIONS
Edited by Eugene M. Avrutin, Valerii Dymshits, Alexander Ivanov, Alexander Lvov, Harriet Murav, Alla Sokolova
Brandeis University Press, 228 pp., $39.95

An-sky's true goal was to help modern Russian Jewry create a new secular Jewish culture based on their memory of the structures that governed the lives of shtetl Jews. He therefore sought to collect evidence of Jewish folk culture, to capture it in image, recording, text, and object. Convinced that shtetl craftsmen could inspire their urban brethren to become creators themselves, An-sky directed Iudovin to photograph blacksmiths, cigarette makers, shoemakers and others. There is a particularly striking picture of a slightly built weaver who stands inside the box of his loom, bare feet on a wooden pedal attached by ropes to the center of a mechanism that is taller than he is.

An-sky was certain that, through publication, museum exhibits and public lectures (he drew crowds of thousands), he could bring about a Jewish renaissance. He wanted to combat what he saw as a plague of assimilation and conversion to Christianity, to lure big-city Jews back to their people with art that they could not resist.

The idea was quixotic, as An-sky’s friends were quick to tell him when he gathered them in St. Petersburg to help plan the expedition. But when they insisted that no folktales or songs could compete with the material benefits of assimilation and conversion, he was
undaunted. He was sure that intellectuals could pick and choose their favorite parts of traditional culture, present them attractively, and thereby produce something vital and enduring.

An-sky knew that what shtetl and big-city Jews had in common was a past in which cultural options were fewer. In 1905, he wrote to his childhood friend, the diaspora nationalist Chaim Zhitlowsky, “Until recently the Talmud and messianism have bound Jews together around a single national idea, which prevented disintegration. However, one can’t substitute one steel corset for another, that is to say, Palestinian messianism or territorialism.” Later he would grow more enthusiastic about Zionism, but he retained his suspicion of “steel corsets.” Still, he was certain that even after the rigid structures of tradition disappeared, Jews would find meaning in the traces these shapes had left in their memory.

This conviction made sense for the people in his circles, Russia’s Populist (“narodnik”) intelligentsia. The Populists were glad that Alexander II had emancipated the serfs in 1861, but they believed that Russia’s peasants had developed a unique and valuable culture under slavery, and they wanted to help the peasants preserve some of the old, even as they modernized. As a revolutionary, An-sky hoped that the Jews, like the peasants, would find that the memory of the old forms would make their modernity more socialist, less capitalist. To trigger this kind of creativity, he filled his museum with objects to remind people of the past—silver Torah crowns, centuries-old Hebrew letters, women’s holiday dresses—and photographs of these things and the people who used them, the weaver, the blacksmith, the shtetl’s children.

Photographing the Jewish Nation: Pictures from S. An-sky’s Ethnographic Expeditions is a beautifully produced and lovingly edited collection of a cache of Iudovin’s expedition photographs that was discovered in an apartment in St. Petersburg only in 2001, and that subsequently formed the basis of a series of successful exhibits in that city. In six essays, the editors—some of whom also curated the exhibits—locate An-sky, Iudovin, and their colleagues in their cultural contexts.

Iudovin’s work differs from that of other photographers of Eastern European Jews, such as Alter Kacyzne, a writer and photographer born two decades after An-sky, who became his protégé and friend. In the 1920s, Kacyzne took photographs in Poland for the Yiddish Forverts, published in New York; many appear in an elegant 1999 volume, Poyln: Jewish Life in the Old Country, edited by Marek Web. Where Iudovin photographed laborers and avoided traders, Kacyzne took pictures of busy marketplaces and pleading vendors. Where Iudovin’s Jewish boys play in a circle, Kacyzne’s glance up from heavy volumes.

Boy with a cigarette.
Kacyzne’s Jews are photographed, often, from close up: they look at the camera longingly, as if saying to their New York relatives, “Remember me? When will you send money again?” His weaver glances up, worried, from a loom that is only partially shown. Where Kacyzne’s Jewish images, produced for an overseas market, show a world that, having been abandoned, is fully available for nostalgia, Iudovin’s Jews are absorbed in their own world, which still has something to offer its viewer.

Despite their distant origins, An-sky’s project and Iudovin’s photographs speak to current Jewish concerns. In San Francisco—like the tsarist St. Petersburg, a city on the water, named after a saint, home to a sizable, wealthy, assimilated Jewish community without leading it into the unknown past of their New York relatives, “Remember me? When will you send money again?” His weaver glances up, worried, from a loom that is only partially shown. Where Kacyzne’s Jewish images, produced for an overseas market, show a world that, having been abandoned, is fully available for nostalgia, Iudovin’s Jews are absorbed in their own world, which still has something to offer its viewer.

Despite their distant origins, An-sky’s project and Iudovin’s photographs speak to current Jewish concerns. In San Francisco—like the tsarist St. Petersburg, a city on the water, named after a saint, home to a sizable, wealthy, assimilated Jewish population that enjoys the benefits of living at the very edge of an empire—the new Contemporary Jewish Museum was built in 2008. Its exhibits stress the interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures and are housed in a postmodern building by Daniel Libeskind. In a nervous review, The New York Times complained that this museum, with its lack of interest in the rigid structures of text and law, was all periphery, no center. “How can multiple perspectives and open-mindedness and diverse backgrounds be celebrated without a grounding in knowledge, without history, detail, object and belief? Can a museum serve its community without leading it into the unknown past of the Russian empire’s traditional Jews would be of value to a thriving new Jewishness, An-sky has something to offer Jews today in St. Petersburg, San Francisco, and even Jerusalem.

The incident reveals both An-sky’s prescience and his blindness. He was certain that the shifts in the shetl did not have to mean the death of Jewish culture, but he would never have believed that the 21st-century would include Hasidic journals. Nonetheless, with his hope that careful documentation of the Russian empire’s traditional Jews would be of value to a thriving new Jewishness, An-sky has something to offer Jews today in St. Petersburg, San Francisco, and even Jerusalem.

Gabriella Safra is a professor in the Slavic Department at Stanford University. Her new biography, Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk’s Creator, S. An-sky (Harvard University Press), will be published in fall 2010.