

The project investigates the cultural history of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement in interwar Poland (1918–1939). Hasidism, a popular Jewish mystical movement, emerged in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. The Chabad faction of Hasidism flourished for over a century in tsarist Russia, spreading its unique version of Hasidism from its centre in the Belarussian town of Lubavitch. The First World War, October Revolution and the new Soviet regime forced crushed the Chabad community and forced its erstwhile, the Rebbe Yosef Yitshak Schneersohn (1880–1950), to emigrate, first to Latvia and then to Poland. The Second Polish Republic – home to the largest Jewish community in Europe – seemed to offer the best and most permanent prospects for Chabad’s newly established headquarters, but internal Jewish communal dynamics, as well as the contemporary social and political circumstances of Poland, proved to be particularly challenging for the transplanted movement.

My project presents an interdisciplinary approach to the cultural history of the Chabad movement. Using diverse Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and Russian sources, my project examines the patterns of modernisation in the Chabad movement in interwar Poland. It investigates the movement’s mystical concepts, literary output, institutional developments, and changes in rituals and practices. It offers a well rounded image of an interwar Jewish orthodox culture. Contrary to a prevalent misconception, it delineates the deep involvement of Jewish orthodoxy in modernity. Finally, the project argues that Chabad’s interwar modernisation strategies prepared the ground for the movement’s post-Holocaust messianic and missionary developments, and for the fundamentalisation of Jewish orthodoxy.

The project aims at uncovering the richness and diversity of Hasidic culture in the interwar years, a period hitherto overshadowed by the destruction of the Eastern European Jewry in the Holocaust and its subsequent revival in America and Israel. It proposes a novel understanding of the development of Chabad by focusing on the processes of modernisation that took place in the Second Polish Republic as an outcome of Chabad’s clash with other, often hostile local streams of Jewish orthodoxy, and of its exposure in Poland to greater freedom of religious expression and activity than was possible in the Soviet Union. Effectively, the project constitutes a unique approach to interwar Hasidism that will consider it as a transnational group, a hierarchical institution, an ideology in which one can believe and be educated, and a literary enterprise, which scope transcends the boundaries of strict orthodoxy.