

How it might have been, and might be yet

Judenstaat

By Simone Zelitch
Tor Books, £15.99

Central Station

By Lavie Tidhar
Tachyon Books, £10.99

Reviewed by Keith Kahn-Harris

A FEW YEARS ago, the Israeli artist Ronen Eidelman developed a “movement” for a Jewish state in the German province of Thuringia, to be known as “Medinat Weimar” (after its proposed capital). Part of the logic behind this provocation was that German and Jewish identity were inseparably connected.

That is also the logic behind *Judenstaat*, the post-war Jewish state described in Simone Zelitch’s novel of the same name. Set in a world in which the Jew-

ish national project in Palestine never bore fruit, a Jewish state was formed in Saxony in 1948.

Unlike its real, Israeli counterpart, *Judenstaat* remains weak and effectively a Soviet client. But, like its Israeli counterpart, *Judenstaat* has great difficulty in coming to term with its “others” — in this case, the marginalised non-Jewish “Saxons.”

Set in the 1980s, as *Judenstaat* is gradually opening itself up to the world alongside the liberalisation of the USSR under Gorbachev, the novel focuses on an introverted historian, Judit Klammer, as she struggles to put together a documentary film for the state’s 40th anniversary. In the process, she uncovers dark secrets about *Judenstaat*’s, and her own, past. It’s never clear to Klammer — or to the reader — whether she is awakening the state from its historical amnesia or simply creating another form of forgetting.

Judenstaat is a sombre book, with a central character who is hard to like and an atmosphere of obscurity that makes it hard to tell what is “really” going on. But there are occasional moments of authorial levity — for example, the Lubavitcher Rebbe lives in Dresden and has two rival sons.



We meet robots speaking ‘Battle Yiddish’

Unlike Zelitch’s counterfactual state, Lavie Tidhar’s futuristic Tel Aviv is, if not a utopia then certainly a place of boundless possibilities. Tel Aviv is still a Jewish city but exists alongside an Arab Jaffa, and in the middle lies Central Station, a giant spaceport beside the ruins of what is today’s central bus station.

Tidhar’s vision of the future Central Station is a giddy, cosmopolitan and bewildering one — rather like its real-life counterpart. The plot of the book is

somewhat inconsequential (it started life as a series of short stories) and it reads better as a kind of tour of the neighbourhood.

We meet decaying robots, bred for now-finished wars and speaking “Battle Yiddish.” We meet collectors of decaying 20th-century pulp fiction, and vampires who feast on the data produced by the “nodes” now embedded in almost every human.

But Tidhar’s future Tel Aviv is still Tel Aviv, complete with the ghost-smell of now-vanished orange groves, and Central Station is still Central Station, with the cooking smells of the diverse minorities that today make this area one of the city’s most interesting. Tidhar’s prognostication is strange, but never less than exhilarating.

Keith Kahn-Harris is the author of ‘Turbulent Times: The Jewish Community Today’

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