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## I

## The Jews of Russia: historical background

FROM THE EARLIEST JEWISH SETTLEMENT TO THE FIRST  
PARTITION OF POLAND

The remote past of the Russian Jews, like that of the Russians themselves and of other people of that land, is uncertain.<sup>1</sup> Because of the scarcity of historical material, serious researchers as well as publicists echo old legends and traditions and lose themselves in conjecture.<sup>2</sup> The main issues are: when did the Jews first arrive in Russia, whence and how did they come, where did they settle, and how were they received by the rulers and the local population? There is also the issue of whether Russian Jewry can be treated as a historical continuity.

This first period can be sub-divided as follows: the Crimea and the Caucasus; the Khazars; Kiev; Tatars, Genoese, Turks; and the Moscow period.

*The Crimea and the Caucasus*

In the legends of the Georgian Jews, the Mountain Jews of Caucasus and the Bukharan Jews, the arrival of Jews on Russian soil in the Caucasus and Central Asia is linked with the exile of the 'Ten Tribes' (720 BCE) or with the Destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE).<sup>3</sup> According to the 'Scythian' theory, the Jews arrived in Scythia as prisoners straight from the Land of Israel and from there they reached Russia and settled in the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the years 635 to 610 BCE.<sup>4</sup> The 'Caucasian' theory also links the arrival of Jews in Russia with the defeat of the Kingdom of Israel and the exile of its population.<sup>5</sup> The 'Bosphorus' theory, however, appears to be on firmer ground: according to this view, Jewish communities began growing up in the Greek colonies

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along the north shore of the Black Sea from the fourth to the first centuries BCE, arriving there from the various Diasporas that already existed in Asia Minor in this period.<sup>6</sup>

The Jews lived under three successive political regimes: Greek (fourth to first centuries BCE); Roman (first to fourth centuries CE); and Byzantine (fourth to seventh centuries CE). However, from the point of view of the legal–political status of the Jews and the attitude of the rulers and the local population towards them, an equally important division is that between the pagan period, which was conducive to economic consolidation, and the Christian period, which saw intensifying pressures. Yet it appears that precisely at this time there was an increase in the Jewish settlements in the Black Sea region, as a result of persecution of the Jews in Byzantium and the flight from there, especially at the beginning of the fifth century. Such emigration led, over a long period of time, to an intermingling of people of diverse geographical and cultural origins.<sup>7</sup>

The few fragments of evidence that we have – mainly a small number of inscriptions on tombstones – indicate that in this period the Crimean Jews were steeped in Hellenistic culture, speaking and reading Greek and even praying in Greek in the synagogue. Their children bore Greek names. All the same, the Jews conserved the framework of their community life, which had attained a degree of autonomy, and were in contact with the two main Jewish spiritual centres of the time, Babylon and the Land of Israel. The widespread activity of the Jews in international trade, together with the development of relations with the local population, seems to have given rise to conversions and the birth of Jewish–Christian sects, a state of affairs which aroused the wrath of the Church authorities and of the militant zealot administration in Byzantium.<sup>8</sup>

In the fifth to seventh centuries CE, Jewish population centres in the Caucasus were strengthened by emigration from Asia, via Persia. The data we have from inscriptions and from Armenian–Georgian chronicles do not permit us to speak with any certainty about the numbers, livelihood, way of life, or community structure of the Caucasian Jews.<sup>9</sup>

#### *The Khazars*

From the days of the great Khazar Empire to our own time, the empire itself and its connection with Judaism have aroused curiosity,

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sparked innumerable controversies and produced numerous commentaries, some of them by scholars of archaeology, history and linguistics, others by publicists and writers with well-developed imaginations and a variety of apologetic aims.<sup>10</sup>

This empire of semi-nomadic Finno-Turkish tribes flourished over extensive regions of southern Russia in the seventh to tenth centuries CE – from the lower Volga to the Crimea and the Dnieper area.<sup>11</sup> In 740, King Bulan selected the Jewish religion for his empire from the three monotheistic faiths that competed for hegemony at his court. This was obviously very important for the older Jewish communities in the region and for those soon to be established, but the Khazars had been well-disposed towards the Jews even before this. During the period of the rise of the Khazars, the major Jewish communities appear to have been: Feodosia, Khersonos, Taman, Sarkl and Choput-Kaleh. These communities offered a refuge for persecuted Jews and were also a magnet to Jews seeking to improve their social and economic situation.<sup>12</sup> Most waves of immigrants came from Byzantium and the Muslim Empire in the eighth to tenth centuries CE, and apparently from the countries of the West as well, but in smaller numbers. Commerce developed greatly in the Khazar Empire because of its central geographical location, while agriculture and the arts lagged behind, and the Jews became the international traders of Europe in that period. Among other things, the Jewish merchants engaged in the slave trade; virtually all the slaves were pagans from Slavic tribes, who were captured by Christians and sold to Jews, who in turn sold them to the lands of Islam. It may well be that the cooperation which grew up between the Jewish merchants and the Khazar military and economic leaders was the basis for the latter's adoption of Judaism when they sought a monotheistic religion.<sup>13</sup>

Arabic and Hebrew sources indicate that the legal-political status of the Jews was secure and that they were able to maintain their religion and culture without interference.<sup>14</sup> In disputes that sometimes occurred between the local Muslim or Christian populations and the Jews, the latter would be protected by the king and the ruling stratum that had adopted Judaism. Influence was brought to bear not only by the local Jewish population but also by rabbis and scholars invited from Babylon. The converts probably had some knowledge of Hebrew; the Jews certainly did.

The expansion of the Princedom of Kiev into the Khazar regions in the years 966 to 969 reduced the Empire to no more than half the

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Crimean Peninsula, and Jews from other regions of Russia began to concentrate there. This was the genesis of 'mixed' Jewish–Crimean communities.

### *Kiev*

It is reasonable to assume that Jews from the Khazar Empire were brought to Kiev by Sviatopolk, though a few Jews may have been there even earlier. We do not know how much truth there is in the popular legend, recorded in an ancient Russian chronicle, concerning the debate arranged in the year 986 by Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, between representatives of the three great religions, as a result of which Vladimir decided to adopt Christianity. What is clear is that the introduction of Byzantine Christianity had far-reaching consequences for the Jews: it strengthened the ties between the Jews of Byzantium and those of Kiev, while it exacerbated relations between the Jews on the one hand and the Church and the local population on the other.

The first clear, historically documented report of a Jewish settlement in Kiev dates only from 1018, when Jewish homes were raided by soldiers. In the early period, apparently, Khazari Jews did not live together in one quarter with Byzantine and Western Jews. The local population gave the different quarters separate names: 'Khazaria' and 'Zhidovia'. We hear later of 'the fortress of the Jews'.

As far as can be ascertained from the scanty material at our disposal, the legal–political status of the Jews of Kiev was different from what was customary in Western Europe at that time. They were not the property, protégés or vassals of the prince, but free men. They belonged to the urban commercial stratum, though they were apparently at the same time in the prince's service. Thus they were protected from oppression by hostile groups (mainly the Church) but were also bound to suffer during disorders, disturbances and changes of rulers, as in the period of Vladimir Monomakh.

From the outset the new Church, with its anti-Jewish heritage, gave a central place to polemics and accusations directed against the Jews. This was not necessarily part of a sustained indoctrination, but may have originated in an actual Jewish–Christian disputation conducted in Kiev at that time. The Jews may also have attempted to proselytize. There was, at all events, Jewish influence behind the formation of the Judaizing sects, something which would later affect

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the attitude of Moscow towards the Jews. What is clear is that anti-Jewish preaching and writings by Church leaders troubled the atmosphere and disturbed relations between the Jews and the local population.

The Jews were important to the economic life of Kiev and in the trade relations of the principedom with Central and Western Europe. The main 'trade route' led from Regensburg or Prague across Poland to Kiev. The Jewish merchants, the Radhanites, were known in the Hebrew sources as 'those who go about in Russia'. They took industrial goods from Regensburg to Russia, and brought back slaves, furs, wax and honey. These visits established social and cultural relations. First, scholars from 'Ashkenaz' (Germany) would sometimes arrive in the principedom with the traders' caravans, while pupils from Russia would travel to Central or Western Europe to study at rabbinical seminaries (*yeshivot*) there. Second, the Jews of Kiev also maintained relations with those in Babylon; for example, in the twelfth century, Rabbi Moshe of Kiev was in contact with both sages of 'Ashkenaz' and with Rabbi Shmuel ben Ali, head of the Babylonian *yeshivah*, on matters of *halakhah* (practical applications of Jewish law). Third, despite the generally low level of Jewish culture in that period in Kiev, the Jews there succeeded in producing several publications, including a commentary on the Torah (Pentateuch) composed in 1124, in which the influence of the German Jews is evident, and a translation into Russian of passages from the Hebrew-language *Book of Yossipon*, which meant that at least some of them were fluent in Slavic. Finally, an organized, close-knit Jewish community life was maintained.<sup>15</sup>

*Tatars, Genoese, Turks*

The Jewish settlement in the Crimea did not, apparently, cease to exist. The conquest of the Crimea by the Tatar Khans and the extension of their rule over the Russian principedoms led to renewed links between the Jews of the Crimea and of Kiev.<sup>16</sup>

A change came, however, with the establishment by charter of an autonomous Genoese colony in the Kaffa region (Feodosia) of the Crimea, which extended its influence to neighbouring regions during the years 1260 to 1475.<sup>17</sup> Thus, an important commercial centre arose, which fitted itself into the international trade of the period. The Genoese authorities wanted to see the region prosper and in-

structed their official representatives in the colony to exercise caution *vis-à-vis* the heterogeneous local population and to observe religious tolerance.

According to Schiltberger, who toured the Crimea between 1396 and 1427, there were in Kaffa two sorts of Jews with two synagogues (apparently Jews and Karaites), residing in 4,000 houses.<sup>18</sup> Even if this figure is exaggerated, there was clearly a large Jewish community at Kaffa. However, the situation seems to have deteriorated when the Genoese colony declined in the fifteenth century, and many Jews left, most of them going to Lithuania.

In the three centuries from 1475 to 1783, when the Turks ruled the Crimea, there was constant commerce between that region and the Principality of Moscow. The Crimean Jews played a part in developing this trade. One of them, Khoza Kokos, even became a representative of Ivan III, Prince of Moscow, in the negotiations with the Tatars between 1471 and 1475. It is not certain whether Zekharia Guizolfi ('Prince of Taman'), who also played an important role in diplomatic relations between the two states between 1484 and 1500, was Jewish.<sup>19</sup>

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a new Jewish sect appeared in the Crimea, the Krimchaks. Their separation was apparently a matter of religious observance and a new 'Kaffa ritual' began to be customary among some Crimean Jews. However, there could not have been any considerable differences initially between the Krimchaks and other local Jews, since the rabbi of the Kaffa community, Moshe Hagoleh, put out a common prayer book for his congregation and for the Krimchaks and the Babylonian and Ashkenazi Jews as well. The Krimchak language has not yet been properly studied but it appears to belong to the Igtaic dialect of the Tatar tongue, with many pre-Tatar archaisms. The Krimchaks knew very little Hebrew and the prayers had to be translated into their language, though they used the Aramaic-Hebrew alphabet.<sup>20</sup>

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the situation of the Krimchaks, the Mountain Jews and the Georgian Jews, worsened, because of the incessant wars in which they were involved, together with the other local peoples, against the Persians, the Turks and the Russians.

#### *The Moscow period*

During the two centuries that the Principality of Moscow was under Mongol rule, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth, only individual

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Jews seem to have arrived there. They are first mentioned in 1445, at the time of the connection between Ivan III and the Crimean Jews.<sup>21</sup>

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the affair of 'the heresy of the Judaizers' took place, which was to have major repercussions for Russian Jews for many years.<sup>22</sup> At this time, Russia was swept by a powerful religio-political movement, which influenced much of the nobility. The agitation against the Jews originated in Novgorod in the 1470s, triggered by serious rivalry between the camps of supporters of Poland and of Moscow. Some say that a Jew named Zekharia, who had arrived from Kiev in the entourage of the Polish Prince Mikhail Olalkovich, had a share in provoking religious unrest in the city of Novgorod. The spread of the Judaizing movement to Moscow after 1479, where prominent personalities of the Royal Court – Helena, daughter-in-law of the duke, and Feodor Kuritsyn, one of the duke's chief advisers – joined it, led the heads of the Church to embark on energetic counter measures. Political and economic issues were no less important than the supposed danger of the heresy itself: there was a battle over the succession: there was the question of foreign-policy orientation; and there was the issue of monastic estates. In 1504, the leaders of the sect were executed and their followers went 'underground'.

These events had a traumatic impact and the memory of them remained alive for a long time. Where the Jewish question in Russia was concerned – and the general attitude to foreigners in the Principality of Moscow – the 'Judaizing heresy' produced intensified religious zeal, introverted social conservatism, patriarchalism, and the adoption of the aim of economic autarchy.

Ivan III's successors, Vassilii Ivanovich (1505–33) and more particularly Ivan IV – Ivan the Terrible – (1533–84) bore down harder still on the Jews. Thus, in 1550 when a Polish diplomatic mission to Moscow requested Ivan the Terrible to give permission for Polish Jews to visit Russia to trade there, he replied: 'We have more than once written and noted the evil deeds of the Jews, who have led our people astray from Christianity, who have brought poisonous weeds into our land and also wrought much wickedness among our people'.<sup>23</sup> Hatred became murder during the taking of the city of Polotsk in 1563, when Ivan ordered every Jew who refused to adopt Christianity to be thrown into the river and drowned, together with his whole family. This apparently also took place in other conquered places; it was not just an example of the tsar's cruelty: it was also the expression of an agreed attitude on the part of the rulers in Moscow.

In the struggles for the succession to the throne after the death of Ivan the Terrible, the fact that Jewish merchants had accompanied the army of Dimitrii the Pretender (1605–6) was held against the Jews as a whole; during negotiations between the Polish King Sigismund III, and the nobles of Moscow in 1610, concerning the election of the Polish king's son, Wladislaw, to the Russian throne, one Moscow noble demanded that Jews be forbidden to enter Moscow.

Though the accession of Feodor Mikhailovich of the House of Romanov in 1613 brought an easing of the traditional xenophobia in Moscow ruling circles, this was not perceptible to the Jews. When the Tsar issued a decree (October 1634) permitting prisoners-of-war to return to their homeland, he did not forget to include the customary anti-Jewish clause forbidding Jews to enter Russia.

The first encounter with Jews *en masse* following the Khmel'nitsky rising – when Jews organized themselves in communities and lived according to their own lights, oddly dressed and speaking a foreign language – came as a surprise to the Russians. That uprising, and the Russian–Polish war which followed, were accompanied by massacres which virtually annihilated the Ukrainian Jewish community. Enmity towards the Jews was vented when Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich and his military commanders would not allow Jews to leave besieged Polish cities together with the Polish nobles and clergy; instead, the Jews were plundered, their villages sacked, and their children exiled into the interior of Russia, the aim being to convert them to Christianity.

In 1644, a clause was introduced into the codex of laws which fixed the death penalty for any attempt to seduce Russians from their faith and circumcise them. Theoretically, this could apply to all non-Christian faiths, but its target was, of course, the Jews.

This anti-Jewish outlook, based on religious fanaticism and deep-rooted prejudice, continued to prevail in the reign of Peter the Great (1682–1725), who refused to include Jews among the experts whom he invited to settle in Russia. Nonetheless, it is clear that there were changes for the better, *vis-à-vis* not only converted or apostate Jews, but also certain Jews who had not given up their faith. Peter the Great's ambition to modernize his country led to attempts to utilize Jewish capital to develop commerce – as a result, Jewish bankers were granted permits to settle in Moscow, and the settlement of Jews in the border regions was permitted.<sup>24</sup> However, the difficulty of the border Jews' position is evident from the blood-libel charge against two Jews living on the Chernigov estate in Gorodniya.<sup>25</sup>



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This easing of restrictions was short-lived and ceased after the death of Peter the Great, when Catherine I issued a decree banishing Jews (1727), despite opposition from nobles residing in regions where a Jewish population existed. The objections of these nobles were not humanitarian, but were based on their evaluation of the damage to the economy if the expulsions should be carried out.<sup>26</sup>

A new expulsion decree was issued on 11 July 1740, almost immediately after the signing of the Russo-Turkish peace pact, but it is not clear how far it was put into operation. The policy of exclusion and expulsion reached its peak during the reign of Elizabeth (1741–62), who was a religious fanatic. Another expulsion decree, in 1742, asserted that ‘they [the Jews] shall henceforth not be admitted to Our Empire for any purpose’.<sup>27</sup> An exception was made for those Jews agreeing to adopt the Russian Orthodox faith: such persons would be allowed to live in the empire, but not to leave it. All protests from various groups, and efforts made by members of the Senate to amend the decree on grounds of ‘the good of the state’, were of no avail; Elizabeth noted on the margin of the Senate memorandum: ‘From the enemies of Christ, I desire no profit’.<sup>28</sup> Anti-Jewish policy had become so firmly entrenched that the new queen, Catherine the Great, whose views were more liberal, was obliged to persist in it until the partition of Poland and the subsequent incorporation of Jews into Russia.

To determine the legal–political status of Russian Jews, it is necessary to distinguish more fully between two categories referred to above, of Jews residing in Russia in the century preceding the partition of Poland: those Jews (or, more precisely, former Jews) who had been forced to convert, or were apostates; and true Jews. The former increased slightly during this period (though the number of Jews baptized in the years 1744 and 1745 was only twenty-five), and were mainly in Moscow and St Petersburg; they were recognized as full Russian citizens and could occupy any position, as long as their social and personal status permitted it. Many of them made careers in commerce, medicine and the army, or in the service of the tsar and the nobility. Several former Jews – Haden, Shafirov, Veselovsky, and Devier, for example – rose to high rank, mainly in the foreign service, but at times their Jewish past was used against them in political struggles at court, and they remained suspect; one man, Antonio Sanchez, a well-known doctor and a member of the Academy of Science, was even expelled from Russia in 1749.

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Jews who did not convert were in a very different position. The few who managed to reach Moscow or other cities in the interior, and others in outlying districts (such as Riga, Smolensk, Chernigov, Poltava, and Kiev) who managed to hold on to their places of residence between one expulsion and the next, were never recognized as citizens or permanent residents. They were considered foreigners and even with that status, which afforded certain rights, they were discriminated against. According to a contemporary Russian historian, 35,000 Jews were expelled from Russia in 1753, but this figure appears to be much exaggerated.

The poor economic situation of Russian Jews was aggravated by frequent wars, the attacks of the Haidamaks, and repeated expulsions. The Jews were engaged principally in petty trading, as middlemen, or holding various rights leased to them by the landowners, such as milling, fish ponds, and orchards; most of them, however, earned their livelihood by the sale of liquor. Much of the Jews' social and economic life centred around various fairs, but these were not always open to them.

Jewish religious observance and study of the Torah and rabbinic lore were difficult in Russia during this period. We have already seen that the Jews were widely dispersed, that the environment was hostile, and that the rulers feared Jewish religious influence. An example of this is the death of Baruch Leibov, who tried to establish a synagogue in the village of Sverovich, near Smolensk. He was accused of converting a retired Russian naval officer, Aleksander Voznitsyn; the two were condemned to death by burning and the sentence was carried out on 15 July 1738.

To sum up, this period was marked by deep hostility towards the Jews, originating not only in the general xenophobia prevailing in ruling circles in Moscow, but also in fear and hatred of the Jews, because they were judged 'enemies body and soul of Christianity'.

#### TOWARDS EMANCIPATION, 1772 TO 1881

The years 1772 to 1881 are important in the history of Russian Jewry. In these 110 years, the characteristic traits of Jewish life, both 'external' and 'internal', were formed. Externally, government policy towards the large Jewish minority was determined after many contradictions. This policy was both influenced and was influenced by the relationships that developed between the Jews and the surround-