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Excerpt

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General introduction

CHAPTER I

*Russian Jewry on the eve of the pogroms**John D. Klier*

In the early months of 1881, the Jews of the Russian Empire were poised on the verge of four decades of pogrom violence. Even in the absence of the pogroms, however, this was a significant moment. Russian Jewry had been a target, for just over one hundred years, of a convoluted process of social engineering directed by the Russian state. This process had taken different forms and had been directed towards varying objectives, reflecting the ideology of successive regimes. But by 1881 Russian society displayed a visible disillusionment with past measures, both the apparent successes and the obvious failures. Without the pogroms, dramatic changes in the legal status of Russian Jewry were anticipated. In the face of mass violence, however, the government of Alexander III adopted new policies with uncharacteristic haste. In the end, legal repression was the most visible consequence of the pogroms. The government decided that “Jewish exploitation” was to blame for the “abnormal” relations of Christians and Jews, and moved to deny to the Jews any means to despoil their Gentile neighbors. The pogroms also had a dramatic impact upon the Jewish community itself, calling into question the long-standing commitment of many Jewish intellectuals to forms of integration or assimilation, and providing the impetus for the emergence both of Zionism and distinctly Jewish versions of socialism.¹

From the perspective of 1881, the initial response of the Russian state to the Jewish communities acquired in the first partition of Poland in 1772 may seem highly ironic, for a number of circumstances made their welcome a warm one. Belorussia, which comprised the territory of the first partition, was poor in population and resources. At first it was utilized as a laboratory for political experimentation by the reform-minded Empress Catherine II. Belorussian Jews were few in number and were scattered throughout

the territory.² Most of them lived in the countryside, where they engaged in petty trade and leased the feudal prerogatives of the Polish landlords, in particular the right to distil and sell spirits. They served in a variety of middleman roles as buyers of peasant produce for transport to market and as carters and teamsters. As a legacy of the old Polish state, Belorussian Jews were also found in towns, serving as craftsmen and totally dominating trade. Immediately after the first partition, these latter activities caught the eye of Russian officials. Catherine II actively encouraged the growth of urban mercantile centers in the Empire. In a society where most of her subjects were enserfed peasants, bound to the land, urban elements were in short supply. Therefore, Catherine was pleased to accept the Jews as a potential component of urban growth. Russia was a class society composed, at least in theory, of five estates or *soslovie*: the nobility, the clergy, the peasantry, and two urban estates of merchants and townspeople.³ In 1780, all Jews were ordered to register in one of the two latter estates, with full enjoyment of all corresponding rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Consequently, the status of Russian Jewry was unique for that time anywhere in Europe. This moment did not last, foundering on two obstacles. The first was the resentment of Christian townspeople, accustomed to looking at the Jews as social inferiors, religious pariahs, and commercial rivals who needed no further opportunities. Attempts by Jews to exercise their promised estate rights – chiefly participation in municipal self-government – were greeted with resentment and violence. Russian administrators, faced with the task of maintaining the peace, deferred to the numerically preponderant Christian population. The second obstacle was the growing perception by the same Russian officials that the Jews were not in fact a purely urban mercantile class or the raw material for urban growth. Worse, the Jews were accused of engaging in unproductive, “parasitical,” and “exploitative” activity, living at the expense of the peasantry, and “sucking their vital juices,” especially through control of the trade in distilled spirits.

No longer would the Russian government accept the Jews as they were. The Jews were seen as badly in need of reform, an objective best attained by moving them into “productive” occupations such as handicrafts, manufacturing, and agriculture. The native population, on the other hand, could be protected from the Jews by “rendering them harmless” through the deprivation of certain

rights. Pursuit of these twin objectives mandated special regulations for the Jewish community, which thus became an object for special legislation. Eventually a gigantic corpus of law, supplemented by interpretations of the Senate and administrative rulings by local officials, grew up around the Jews of the Russian Empire. A century-long program of social engineering was now initiated.⁴

The most important restriction on Jewish life in Russia was also one of the first. Under Catherine II the principle evolved that Jews were not permitted to move out of the areas – primarily the lands of partitioned Poland, supplemented by extensive, unsettled frontier areas in the south – where they lived upon first coming under Russian rule. The original intent of this restriction was to protect established mercantile elements in urban centers like Moscow and Smolensk.⁵ Even after the second and third partitions of Poland brought hundreds of thousands of Jews under the Russian scepter, these residence restrictions were not immediately a burden. But over time, these first restrictions were joined by efforts to expel the Jews from the countryside and by a number of occupational restrictions which evolved into the notorious “Pale of Jewish Settlement.” The Pale was the single most destructive legal burden borne by Russian Jewry, and one of the most enduring.

In 1881 the Pale of Settlement, where most Russian Jews were obliged to live by law, comprised fifteen provinces in the north-western and southwestern regions of European Russia (Belorussia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Bessarabia and New Russia). The number of Jews in the entire Russian Empire was reckoned at 4,086,650, or 4.2 percent of the population. Of these, 1,010,378 were in the Kingdom of Poland, not covered by the legal regulations of the Pale. Polish Jewry constituted 13.8 percent of the total population. Within the Pale itself, Jews numbered 2,912,165 or 12.5 percent of the population. Of these, 2,331,880, or just over 80 percent, lived in towns or *shtetlekh*, while 580,285 resided in the countryside in peasant villages. Only a minuscule number of Jews, 53,574 or 0.1 percent of the population, lived in the interior provinces of Russia. Most of these were merchants or artisans who resided in St. Petersburg or Moscow. There was always an indeterminate number of Jews living illegally outside the Pale.⁶

Economic conditions in the Pale steadily worsened after the emancipation of the Russian peasantry in 1861 and the construction of a network of railroads throughout the Empire. The Jewish

population was increasing at the very moment that employment opportunities were shrinking. Many functions traditionally performed by the Jews, such as teamster services, petty trade, and peddling in the countryside, were becoming obsolete. In urban areas, competition in trade and handicrafts increased. The Pale became choked by a huge, pauperized mass of unskilled or semi-skilled Jewish laborers, whose economic condition steadily worsened.

Contemporaries often debated the impact of the Pale upon the non-Jewish population. Some argued that the conditions of over-competition acted to drive down prices and to provide a buyer's market which was entirely to the advantage of residents who shared the Pale with the Jews. Moreover, those in the Pale were spared the chronic shortage of craftsmen which bedeviled the Russian interior.⁷

Other observers argued that the advantageous features of the Pale were far outnumbered by its negative characteristics. In the ruthless competitive atmosphere of the Pale, they contended, the need of Jews to compete by selling cheap resulted in the production of shoddy, poor-quality goods, or in price-fixing and collusion. The commercial honesty of Jews was the first casualty of the Pale, and willingly or unwillingly Jews were forced to exploit Christians to the fullest possible extent.⁸ While commentators differed as to the effect of the Pale on Gentiles, they unanimously agreed that it produced undesirable social and economic abnormalities. Prior to 1881 a broad consensus existed in public opinion that the Pale should be abolished or at least significantly modified. Indeed, one of the first victims of the pogroms was a series of governmental actions relaxing the Pale which had been slowly implemented throughout the reign of Alexander II. Reform proposals were eclipsed by the fear that scattering the Jews around the Empire would spread anti-Jewish violence.

As the Pale of Settlement began to take shape and solidify, it was accompanied by various state initiatives designed to make the Jews more "productive." On the positive side were efforts, exemplified by a special law code for the Jews promulgated in 1804, to direct the Jews into manufacturing and agriculture. The prospect of making the Jews into farmers was especially appealing to the regime, and significant sums of money – albeit collected from the Jews in the form of special taxes – were allocated for the purpose of settling the Jews in agricultural colonies. These efforts proved neither successful nor cost-effective and served as general confirmation to the foes of

the Jews that they were incapable of manual labor or of non-exploitative livelihoods. In 1866, the government of Alexander II ended the creation of new state-supported agricultural colonies.⁹ Subsequently the government began to transfer the existing colonization fund to other uses, and Jewish efforts to replace state colonization with private initiatives quickly waned after the pogroms.

Official attempts to limit “Jewish exploitation” took the form of periodic attacks on certain areas of Jewish economic activity. These included petty trade and usury, but the most frequent target was Jewish participation in the manufacture and sale of alcohol. There was irony in these initiatives, because the Jews were merely a part of a state-sanctioned system of alcohol production and sale, one which produced significant revenue for the Russian exchequer.

Despite ample evidence to the contrary, Jews were blamed for the impoverishment and intoxication of the peasantry almost from the first moment that Russian officialdom began to study the Jewish Question.¹⁰ A principal motive for recurrent efforts to resettle village Jews into urban centers – thus exacerbating the living conditions of the Pale – was the desire to eliminate them from the liquor trade. In the decade before the pogroms, the government promulgated a new law (14 May 1874) that sought to restrict the regulations under which village Jews traded in alcohol. After the pogroms, the Minister of the Interior, N. P. Ignatiev, struggled long and hard, albeit unsuccessfully, within the Council of Ministers to impose a total ban on Jewish trade in alcohol in the countryside.¹¹

In the century before the pogroms, legislation which regulated Jews in the economy was accompanied by statutes motivated by social and political considerations. Russian bureaucrats borrowed from Western Europe the belief that it was not circumstances that directed the Jews into unproductive, parasitical, and exploitative commercial activities, but the teachings of Judaism itself, especially as conveyed by the Talmud. According to Western “experts” and their Eastern epigones, the Talmud preached the undying enmity of Jews towards Gentiles, and encouraged Jews to harm them in any way which would not provoke retribution.¹² In a Christian, agrarian nation like Russia, where Jews were a tiny minority, this goal was best accomplished through trade and commerce, which provided endless opportunities for exploitation.

In the light of these beliefs, would-be reformers were convinced

that it was not only necessary to change the occupations of the Jews, as exemplified by the reforms and restrictions noted above, but also to modify the religious ideology which prompted Jewish exploitation in the first place. Judaism itself had to be “purified” through the elimination or modification of the Talmud. If that goal were achieved, Jews would lose their antisocial, separatist characteristics and acquire the virtues of Christians, through a process known as “merging” (*sliianie*) with the native population.

This general objective gave rise to confused and contradictory policies prior to 1881. Virtually all commentators decried, as the foremost cause of Jewish exclusivity and isolation, the system of autonomous local Jewish self-government, the *kahal*, which the Russian state had inherited from Poland. Yet successive Russian governments were reluctant to abolish it. The reason lay in the *kahal*'s utility as an agency to assess and collect taxes and other obligations, and to maintain vital statistics. When the government of Nicholas I abolished the *kahal* system in 1844, supposedly as an integrationist measure, it promptly replaced *kahal* officials with other special Jewish bureaucrats, identical in function if not in name with their predecessors. This state of affairs permitted the rise of the pernicious legend that the *kahal* had not disappeared at all, but continued to exist as an underground institution, reinforcing Jewish social isolation and thwarting the well-intentioned reforms which the Russian government had devised for the Jews.¹³

Another integrationist reform, the imposition of military service upon Jews, had a similarly unfortunate outcome. Implemented in 1827 by Nicholas I, it was designed to make Jewish townsmen – who previously had been able to purchase a collective exemption – serve alongside their Christian counterparts in the army. The rigors of a twenty-five year term of service, the impossibility for observant Jews to practice their faith, and quasi-official efforts to convert Jewish soldiers to Christianity all combined to encourage evasion of military service by Jews. Jewish evasion was met with ever-increasing collective punishment for arrears, including the drafting of communal officials and implementation of the notorious cantonist system, which provided for the draft of under-age children.¹⁴

One of the first acts of Nicholas' successor, Alexander II, was to revoke these special penalties, thus winning the eternal gratitude of the Jewish community. In 1874, Alexander's reformist advisers implemented a military innovation of their own, a system of

universal military service, marked by the elimination of all class exemptions. At first, the Jews were not treated in any special way in the recruitment process. But Alexander, like his father before him, became convinced that the Jews were evading service in disproportionate numbers, and he approved a number of collective punishments for draft evasion. A bitter polemic raged between the friends and the foes of the Jews up to and beyond 1881 on the question of Jewish patriotism and willingness to serve. A state obligation, which had been expected to draw all Russian subjects together, instead became a controversial and divisive element in Jewish–Gentile relations.

The most exotic and variegated attempt at the social reform of the Jews also had its inception in the reign of Nicholas I, and represented another avenue of attack against the isolation of the Jews. It involved the creation of a full-blown educational system, designed to produce teachers and communal religious leaders, as well as to instruct Jewish youth. Young Jews had been offered open admission to all Russian state educational institutions by the Statute of 1804, but few members of the Jewish community displayed any interest in secular education provided by Christian schools. Instead, Jewish youth was educated in a privately run primary school system, the *heder*, before moving on to a more advanced institution, the *yeshiva*. From the government's point of view these schools were breeding-grounds of Jewish isolation and "fanaticism." Instruction was in Yiddish, and study of the Talmud was the central part of the curriculum. After extensive consultation and preparation, Nicholas decreed the creation of an elaborate new state-sponsored Jewish school system, heavily influenced by the German–Jewish model. The system was under the control of the Ministry of Education, and even the principals of individual primary schools were initially Christians. The Jewish community, through a special series of taxes, financed the entire operation.

An idiosyncratic aspect of the reform was the participation of the Russian government in the development of a religious curriculum for the Jewish schools. A confessional element was devised by the reformers who believed that Jews would refuse to educate their children in purely secular institutions. (The government was oblivious to the disquiet which Jews felt towards a religious curriculum developed and overseen by Christians!) In addition to a network of primary and secondary schools, two rabbinical seminaries

were also created, at Vilna and Zhitomir, to train teachers for the lower schools, and to educate “enlightened” rabbis, who were to be forced on the community as agents of state oversight and enlightenment.¹⁵ The state further undermined its own reform by permitting the retention of the traditional Jewish heder and yeshiva.

Many historians have emphasized the low enrollment in the state Jewish schools and dismissed the whole project as a quixotic failure. Recent scholarship indicates that, to the contrary, a significant number of young Jews did attend these schools and that an entire generation of Russian Jewish intellectuals had some connection with the schools as either students or faculty. Michael Stanislawski is correct to assert that “these men constituted the literary, intellectual, and political elite of Russian Jewry from the 1840s through the 1870s and the creators of the new Russian–Jewish culture.”¹⁶

Perhaps the most telling testimonial to the success of the Nicholine school system was the decision of the Minister of Education, D. A. Tolstoi, to disband it in 1873. Tolstoi was not just rationalizing failure when he argued that the schools were no longer necessary because so many Jews, male and female, were attending Russian institutions. The stream of students noted by Tolstoi in 1873 became a flood after 1874, when the new military recruitment statute offered generous reductions in the length of service for recruits with secondary and advanced education.

Close to achieving a long-sought goal, the acceptance by at least some young Jews of Russian language, culture, and social values, the Russian government and public opinion began to have second thoughts. School administrators in the Pale reported the alarming phenomenon of the “Judification” of Russian schools, whereby Christian students found themselves either in a minority, or under the unhealthy moral influence of large Jewish minorities in the schools. Jews, it was argued, were too successful in competing for places in secondary schools, and were driving Christians from the school benches. This increased the possibility that the Jews would soon flood into the universities as well. Proposals for restrictions and quotas appeared, highlighted by the famous editorial “The Yid Is Coming,” which appeared in the 23 March 1880 issue of the Judeophobe organ *Novoe vremia*. As more Jews did indeed acquire higher education and enter the professions, proposals were advanced to restrict them there as well. The notorious quotas which marked

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the reign of Alexander III had their spiritual genesis in the reign of his father, Alexander II.¹⁷

As the above survey suggests, the decade preceding the pogroms of 1881 witnessed a growing atmosphere of crisis surrounding the Jewish Question in Russia. Goaded by an increasingly militant Judeophobe press, Russian statesmen clung to their old prejudiced view of the Jews as a serious economic and social problem, even as the old panaceas of occupational reform, integration, and enlightenment were called into question. The appearance of Jews in the Russian revolutionary movement, and a growing recognition of their economic influence in the western borderlands where Polish and Russian nationalism vied for cultural and political domination, added new elements. Thus, even without the pogroms, new approaches and policies were augured. Some specialists have argued that the government might well have moved towards the complete abolition of the Pale and a general regularization of the abnormal legal status of Russian Jewry.¹⁸ Faced with riot and anarchy in 1881, the regime of Alexander III opted instead for policies of repression and restriction. Subsequent disorders, in the twentieth century, occurred against the background of what had by then become the “politics of despair” concerning the Jewish Question.

NOTES

- 1 For an excellent discussion of these phenomena, see Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* (Cambridge, 1981).
- 2 Kh. Korobkhov, “Perepis’ evreiskogo naseleniia vitebskoi gubernii v 1772 g.,” *Evreiskaia starina*, IV, 4–6 (1912), 164–77.
- 3 For the reality beyond this abstraction see Gregory L. Freeze, “The soslovie (estate) paradigm and Russian social history,” *American Historical Review*, xci, 1 (1986), 11–36.
- 4 For a history of the evolution of post-partition treatment of the Jews in the Russian Empire see my work, *Russia Gathers Her Jews: The Origins of the Jewish Question in Russia, 1772–1825* (DeKalb, 1986).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 75–6.
- 6 *Obshchaia zapiska vysshei kommissii dlia peresmotra deistvuiushchikh o Evreiaikh v imperii zakonov [1883–1888]* (St. Petersburg, 1888), 1–2. Compare these statistics with those from the First All-Russian Census, discussed by Alexander Orbach in chapter 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 281–2.