

1 Introduction: The beginnings of Russian–Jewish radicalism, 1790–1868

In his autobiography, the Yiddish poet and song-writer Eliakum Zunsner relates the story of the arrest of Arkadii Finkelshtein and members of his Vilna socialist circle in 1872. This being the first organized expression of socialist radicalism among Russian Jews, the Governor-General of Vilna chastised Jewish community leaders: ‘To all the other good qualities which you Jews possess, about the only thing you need is to become Nihilists too!’ Adding insult to injury, the general blamed this state of affairs on the ‘bad education’ they were giving their children. Rejecting this accusation, the spokesman of the Jewish notables replied: ‘Pardon me General, this is not quite right! As long as we educated our children there were no Nihilists among us; but as soon as you took the education of our children into your hands they became so.’¹

Such a response was fair enough, but what the notables failed to recognize – or were reluctant to admit – was that the arrested Vilna radicals, and those who continued their socialist propaganda later on, were as much a product of internal Jewish circumstances and conflict as they were a phenomenon fostered by external non-Jewish influences and tsarist educational policy. More specifically, the origins of the Finkelstein circle, and of Jewish radicalism in general, were rooted in the volatile social and cultural transformation of the Jewish community under the impact of modernity. The beginnings of this momentous transformation of Jewish life in Russia predated the Finkelshtein circle by almost a century. What the Vilna Governor-General perceived as a new development was, in fact, the culmination of a process which commenced in the late eighteenth century and found its first revolutionary manifestation in the Decembrist Grigorii Peretts. The Jewish notables and the Russian authorities reacted to a phenomenon, therefore, that had been in the making for a long time. Neither realized that the Vilna ‘nihilist’ conspiracy was not the beginning, but the latest indication of Jewish participation in the Russian revolutionary movement – nor did they realize that this participation was the expression of social and ideological forces which were at work in each of their

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Jews and revolution

respective communities and which merged politically in the Russian revolution.

The Peretts beginning in this process coincided with the very onset of Russian revolutionary activity in the early nineteenth century – the Decembrist movement. The Decembrists were Russian military men of noble lineage who rejected Russia's age-old tradition of autocratic government. These men signified a new phenomenon in the history of Russia. Unlike their predecessors in the eighteenth century, who staged military *coup d'états* to dispose of one tsar in favour of another without actually changing the despotic nature of tsarist rule, they were genuine revolutionaries in the sense that they had definite socio-political objectives in mind which aimed at the transformation of government and society. They believed in the rule of law, constitutional government, freedom of expression, and the abolition of serfdom. Although they happened to be noblemen in uniform, they were in fact a new breed of people and, as such, constituted 'the first active representatives of a new social group that was to play a part of immense importance in Russian history – the modern secularized intellectual *elite*, or intelligentsia'.² In staging the December rising of 1825, which gave them their name, they not only brought about what has been called the 'First Russian Revolution', but also left behind a revolutionary legacy that inspired subsequent generations of Russian – and Jewish – *intelligently* to liberate Russia from political oppression and social injustice.³ Thus, the Decembrists gave birth and purpose to a Russian revolutionary intelligentsia whose first Jewish representative, Grigorii Peretts, was himself a participant in the Decembrist movement.

Grigorii (Grish) Abramovich Peretts (1788–1855) was unique among the Decembrists in that he was one of the few civilians and the only Jew who joined their ranks.⁴ While exceptional in this respect, he did not however play a major role in Decembrist affairs. Still, minor as Peretts' contribution may have been in the overall development of the conspiracy, he was active in one of its lesser known episodes between 1819 and 1821: the creation of a secret society of 'pure constitutionalists'. The initiative for this venture came from the prominent St Petersburg poet and Decembrist Fedor Glinka, but its actual realization belonged to his Jewish friend Grigorii Peretts.

The two men had met repeatedly at the office of the St Petersburg Governor-General where Peretts was employed as a civil servant, holding the rank of a titular counsellor. In the course of these meetings Glinka persuaded Peretts to assist him in creating an organization that would oppose the republican radicalization of the Decembrist movement which

he himself had helped to originate in 1818 with the founding of the Union of Welfare. Known as a man of strong liberal convictions to begin with, Peretts also proved to be an energetic activist whose work, in the words of one associate, ensured that the new society of conspirators ‘actually began to function’.⁵

Operating on his own, since Glinka was preoccupied with other affairs, Peretts recruited a small following and supervised the group’s highly secretive activity. Known to the initiated as the ‘Society of Peretts’, this was the first organization in the Russian revolutionary movement to bear the name of a Jew. Moreover, in devising stringent rules of conspiracy, Peretts stamped his Jewish imprint on the group by adopting as its password the Hebrew word for liberty – *Heruth*.⁶

That Peretts was the actual leader of Glinka’s secret society emerges from the testimonies of its members before the Investigation Commission set up by Nicholas I (1825–55) to prosecute the Decembrists. Besides identifying Peretts as the ‘leading person of the secret society’, some of these testimonies also detail his political views and recruiting activity.⁷ He would approach prospective candidates by telling them about the ideas and benefits of constitutional government. Drawing their attention to progressive ‘political science’ as practised in various European countries, he buttressed his arguments for constitutionalism with citations from the Old Testament. This gave his reasoning a succinctly personal note that was as revealing in its Jewishness as his choice of *Heruth* for communicating with his fellow conspirators. Thus, in one typical instance, he persuaded a certain D. A. Iskritskii to join his group by arguing that its political goal was divinely ordained since, according to the laws of Moses, ‘God favours constitutional government’.⁸

However, the constitutionalism preached by Peretts was extremely moderate by Decembrist standards. As he told Iskritskii, he and his comrades stood upon a purely constitutional–monarchist platform and completely rejected republican aspirations for Russia. Peretts’ society was equally moderate in the means by which it sought to realize its political objectives. Less concerned about the immediate prospects of introducing, in Peretts’ words, ‘a monarchist–representative government’, its members planned on nothing more than to foster an enlightened public opinion that would further constitutional developments.⁹

In practice, however, this goal proved to be unattainable because Peretts failed to attract a sufficiently large membership capable of propagandising the society’s programme. His efforts led to the formation of only a small circle consisting of some ten individuals. The fact of the matter was that its moderate programme of constitutional reform was out

4 Jews and revolution

of tune with the more radical inclination of Russia's 'military intelligentsia' whose republican sentiments were much better served by mainstream Decembrist societies.

Disappointed by his group's inability to attract a large following and perhaps also disillusioned by Glinka's apparent lack of commitment, Peretts withdrew from the society at the end of 1821. Though he still kept in touch with Decembrist affairs, personal concerns of marriage, family, and career, completely absorbed his life thereafter. Deprived of its leading activist, the group quickly disintegrated. It probably would have left no traces of historical record had it not been for Nicholas I's determination in the aftermath of the Decembrist uprising to bring to light every facet of its history and to prosecute everyone however remotely connected with this event.

Peretts' turn in the drama of the Decembrists came on 21 February 1826 when he was imprisoned in St Petersburg's Peter and Paul Fortress. Peretts faced his prosecutors courageously. Admitting to his 'crime' in organizing a secret society, he made no attempt to downplay his involvement or give the impression that he had been misled in believing that 'a representative monarchy is the most beneficent form of government for Russia'; nor did he negate his 'innermost conviction' that legal, social, and economic reforms were absolutely necessary for improving the plight of the Russian people.¹⁰ Needless to say, such a forthright confession did not endear him to Nicholas I who confirmed the punitive recommendation of his Investigation Commission to banish Peretts to the city of Perm on the Siberian edge of European Russia. Peretts, thus, earned the distinction of being 'officially recognized' as Russia's first revolutionary Jew. By the same token, he was also the first Jew in Russia to pay for his political digression with long years of exile – foreshadowing, as it were, the fate of many Jewish radicals who later followed in the footsteps of this early pioneer of Jewish involvement in the Russian revolution.

That Grigorii Peretts was 'first' in these respects does not, however, exhaust the historical significance of his Decembrist story. More important for tracing the roots of Russian–Jewish radicalism is the fact that Peretts stood at the beginning of a profound socio-cultural process which gave rise to a secularized Jewish intelligentsia. The process was initiated and largely characterized by the Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah, which originated with Moses Mendelssohn in mid-eighteenth-century Berlin and then was carried to Eastern Europe by its followers – the *maskilim*. Born into a family of first generation Russian *maskilim*, Peretts was a child of the Haskalah and a prototype of its most radical expression: the secular educated Jewish intellectual, who, alienated from

traditional Judaism and isolated from Russian society, sought salvation in revolution.

Spreading outward from Berlin to the German and Austrian principalities, the Haskalah reached Russia via East Prussia and Galicia. One of the first places of Mendelssohnian influence in Russia was the estate of Joshua Tseitlin (1742–1822) in Uste, the erstwhile home of Grigorii Peretts in the Belorussian province of Mogilev. Representing the commercial aristocracy of Lithuanian-Belorussian Jewry, Tseitlin had made a fortune in managing the financial affairs of such luminaries of Catherinian Russia as Prince Potemkin. In the best of Jewish tradition, Tseitlin used his enormous wealth to support Jewish learning. Yet, he was distinctly modern in his patronage of culture and scholarship. Although himself an accomplished and deeply religious scholar, Tseitlin shared the typical enlightenment predilection for natural science, secular education, and ‘useful’ work. His estate in Uste resembled a ‘free academy’ where Jews – learned rabbis, talented talmudists, and maskilic writers – conducted scientific experiments and generally met for study and dialogue in the spirit of Mendelssohn.¹¹ It was from among these people that the Haskalah recruited its early, albeit sparse, following in Russia which also included the friends and tutors of the Tseitlin family: Mendel Satanover, Lev Nevakhovich, Nota Notkin and, last but not least, Abram Izrailovich Peretts – the father of the Decembrist Grigorii Peretts.

Abram Peretts (1771–1833) had come to Tseitlin’s attention because of his intelligence and learning. Convinced that Abram Izrailovich was ‘destined to become an outstanding rabbi’, Tseitlin provided for him to study at his ‘academy’ and later arranged to have him marry his daughter. The first and only child of this marriage was Grigorii.¹² But the enlightened atmosphere of Uste and Tseitlin’s own desire to promote the material well-being of his son-in-law, completely transformed the erstwhile talmudist into a *maskil* dedicated to worldly pursuits of happiness. Introducing Abram to Prince Potemkin as his successor in their business dealings, Tseitlin paved the way for Abram’s brilliant career as an eminently successful financier at the imperial court in St Petersburg. In the mid-1790s, Empress Catherine II (1762–96), appreciative of his commercial expertise in serving the crown, permitted Abram Peretts to reside permanently in the capital. She also granted the privilege to his close friends Nota Notkin and Judah Nevakhovich. As notables of the St Petersburg Jewish community, they became the leading spokesmen of Jewish Enlightenment and emancipation in Russia.

Pioneering the Russian Haskalah the Peretts–Nevakhovich–Notkin

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Jews and revolution

troika lobbied tsarist officials to improve the civil status of Jews while simultaneously calling on their fellow Jews to prove themselves worthy of citizenship through the acquisition of European culture and productive occupations. Between 1802 and 1804, they were able to articulate their views before Alexander I's 'Committee for the Organization of Jewish Life'. In the course of the committee's deliberations, the Peretts residence assumed the appearance of an unofficial agency of Russian–Jewish relations that was 'staffed' by the above triumvirate and frequented by Jewish delegates and Russian officials. Mediating between Jewish interests and tsarist designs to reform Jewish life, they put forth their own German vision of Jewish emancipation, which, like the Mendelssohnians elsewhere, they viewed as a two-fold process of internal cultural and external political reform. To promote the former, they requested that the government sponsor projects for encouraging agriculture, manufacture, and education among the Jews; to obtain the latter, they sought to convince tsarist officials and society at large that Jews deserve to be treated as fellow Russian citizens.¹³

In the meantime, while Abram Peretts and his friends ascended the ladder of social prestige and political influence, Grigorii – or Grisha, as he was affectionately called – grew up on his grandfather's estate in Uste. His education, determined by the old Tseitlin, was moderately Mendelssohnian in its combination of religious and secular learning. Grisha's principal tutor was Mendel Satanover (Levin), the most outstanding pioneer of the early Russian Haskalah.

Satanover, as Semen Dubnow noted sarcastically, 'had been privileged to behold in the flesh the Father of Enlightenment in Berlin'.¹⁴ Thoroughly saturated with the philosophy of Mendelssohn, Satanover had made it his mission to bring enlightenment to the Jews of Russia. Writing both in Hebrew and Yiddish, he promoted secular learning and popularized scientific knowledge in such diverse fields as medicine and geography. Evidently, his pupil Grisha was the direct beneficiary of his teachings.

Under Satanover's guidance, Grigorii was educated in a modern secular fashion which put a premium on critical thinking and subjected all phenomena, even religion, to the test of reason and its measurements of civic virtue, rationality, and social usefulness. This education, rooted in the German–Jewish Enlightenment as it blossomed forth on the Belorussian oasis of Tseitlin's 'free academy', set the tone for Grigorii's moral and intellectual development along the path of serving humanity in the name of truth, justice, and liberty. Still, the making of the Decembrist Peretts was a specifically Russian–Jewish phenomenon which unfolded in St Petersburg.

In 1803, at the age of fifteen, Grigorii left Uste in the company of Mendel Satanover to live with his father in St Petersburg. For Grigorii this meant growing of age in a household which, as his biographer noted, was ‘dominated by western (Berlin) culture’.¹⁵ The Peretts residence was a novel and disturbing experience for a boy who had been raised in a setting which, although touched by the powerful rays of Mendelssohnian Enlightenment, was still securely embedded in a traditional Jewish milieu. Unlike Tseitlin’s Uste, the secluded abode of erudite talmudists and moderate *maskilim*, the fashionable St Petersburg salon of his father was a lively meeting-place of liberal-minded Russians and enlightened Jews. Embodying ‘Berlinerdom’ at its most extreme, Grigorii’s new home was an artificial and unsettling environment – a place which for all of its bustling activity belonged neither to Jewish nor Russian society.

In a sense, Peretts’ abode stood suspended between two worlds, traditional Jewish and official Russian society, each equally unprepared to accept the outlandish ideas of its maskilic residents. Their isolation was made painfully evident during the deliberations of the Jewish Committee and subsequent developments which, instead of emancipation, petrified Jewish disabilities in Russia until the revolution of 1917. As partisans of reform and enlightenment, more than willing to cooperate with the tsarist government, Peretts and company found no resonance in the Jewish community. While its deputies appreciated their help in dealing with St Petersburg officialdom, as representatives of Jewish conservatism, they rejected the Mendelssohnian heresy of the *Berlinchiki*. Shunned by their coreligionists, the lone disciples of Haskalah put all their hope in the committee’s apparent determination to legislate an end to Jewish separateness by appropriate legal, social, and educational reforms.

Alas, the resultant Jewish Statute of 1804 did not bring solace to its Jewish well-wishers! The statute failed to ameliorate Jewish life and, in practice, retarded rather than advanced Jewish emancipation.¹⁶ It preserved precisely those structures of Jewish life which, in the first place, prevented the integration of Jews into Russian society: the kahal and the Pale. The former, Jewish communal self-government, preserved the power of traditional elites who opposed the secularizing and liberalizing ideology of the Haskalah; the latter, Jewish settlement restrictions, prohibited the departure of Jews from their communities to advance themselves socially in the larger Gentile society. Abolishing both would have opened the floodgates of cultural and political change, leading ultimately to social integration and civic emancipation. As it was, neither was forthcoming. This left Peretts and his friends in the

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0521460093 - Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia

Erich Haberer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Jews and revolution

unenviable position of superfluous men, stranded on Russian shores without hope and purpose.

Estranged from their own community and frustrated by their anomalous status in a society that rejected them as Jews, Peretts and Nevakhovich acquired for themselves and their children the proverbial ‘ticket of admission to European culture’: they embraced Christianity by converting to the Lutheran faith.

Having thus, in Dubnow’s words, ‘carried “Berlinerdom” to that dramatic denouement, which was in fashion in Berlin itself’, the St Petersburg *maskilim* defaulted on their own enlightened aspirations for emancipation.¹⁷ Their denouement for the sake of personal salvation terminated their maskilic mission, now thoroughly discredited in the eyes of pious Jews. But their history of prematurely pioneering the Haskalah in Russia conjures up all the elements which characterized the ideas and behaviour of subsequent, and much more numerous, generations of Russian *maskilim*. Similarly, Grigorii Peretts’ place in this early history of the Russian Haskalah prefigured the rise of a radicalized maskilic intelligentsia that came to view emancipation as a universal task of revolution.

Although a *rara avis* for his time, Peretts was the archetype of nineteenth-century Russian–Jewish radical whose personality and political engagement were shaped by the modernizing ideology of the Jewish Enlightenment and its unsettling sociological consequences. Tseitlin’s Uste laid the foundation for his Decembrist destiny. There, in the care of the *maskil* Satanover, he acquired an education in the spirit of the Mendelssohnian school. Abram Peretts’ St Petersburg, already socially and culturally remote from the *Lebenswelt* of the Russian Jewish community, signified a radical extension of his maskilic upbringing. There, in the company of his father, he experienced the private and public commitment of Russia’s foremost *maskilim* to realize their ideal of enlightenment and concomitant goal of Jewish emancipation. But as he was to learn, there was as yet no place for them and their vision in either Jewish or Russian society. Grigorii’s personality and consciousness remained deeply moulded by the three-fold sequel of his formative years: enlightenment ideology, elusive emancipation, and social marginality. The combination of the three – a recurrent combination, as we shall see, in the radicalization of Jews – was the recipe making Peretts a Decembrist revolutionary.

In the revolutionary society of the Decembrists Grigorii Peretts found companionship that was held together by commonly shared ideas and objectives which largely corresponded to his own lofty ideals of enlightenment and political commitment to emancipation. Last but not

least, it answered his psychological need for social communion in an otherwise alienating environment. But it was a sign of his Jewish background and maskilic education that, in joining his fate with Russia's nascent radical intelligentsia and in sharing its missionary zeal to create a just society, Grigorii identified with its most moderate representatives, whose views coincided closest with his own Haskalah derived German–Jewish *Weltanschauung*.

Indicative as Grigorii Peretts is for our recognition that the Haskalah stood at the cradle of Jewish radicalism, it is important to remember that his Decembrist story was merely a preview of this fact. The necessary conditions for its incomparably more potent 'repetition' later on were created only during the reign of Nicholas I, which commenced with the Decembrist uprising in 1825 and ended with Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in 1855. It was during this period that the Mendelssohnian Enlightenment in Russia came into its own as a vibrant Jewish modernization movement. Characterized by the institutionalization of the Haskalah in the form of a 'self-conscious and self-confident intelligentsia',¹⁸ this development also generated a definite cultural and political rift in Jewish society which steadily deepened with the consolidation of the forces of conservatism on the one side and of modernity on the other. The unending conflict between the two caused the eventual disaffection of maskilic youths from Judaism altogether, and drove them into the arms of revolutionary Russia.

The single most important factor in this volatile transformation of Jewish life was the creation of a new public system of education for the Jews of Russia.¹⁹ Reversing previous tsarist Jewish policy which had been largely repressive in its forced attempt to Russify the Jews through conversionist assimilation, Nicholas I's Minister of Education, Count S. S. Uvarov, relied on positive educational measures to promote their integration into Russian society. Only the reeducation of Jews in *Jewish* schools – schools based on Haskalah principles and operated with the assistance of enlightened Jews – would lead to their 'gradual rapprochement [*sblizhenie*] with the Christian population and the eradication of superstitions and harmful prejudices instilled by the study of Torah'.²⁰ Successful in convincing the government and in gaining the support of the *maskilim*, Uvarov prevailed over hasidic and rabbinic objections to his policy and, in November 1844, implemented his reform project with a new law 'On Establishing Special Schools for the Education of Jewish Youths'.

The law stipulated that in addition to traditional Jewish education in kheders, yeshivas, and talmud torahs Jews would henceforth receive

their own modern public system of primary and secondary education, as well as state rabbinical seminaries for training Jewish teachers and crown rabbis. The actual implementation of this programme began in 1847 with the transfer of previous private maskilic schools to the public domain and the establishment of two Rabbinical Seminaries in Vilna and Zhitomir. Thereafter the number of Jewish primary and the less prevalent secondary schools rose close to 100, with a student population of approximately 3,500 by 1855.²¹ Thus within a decade of the new law on Jewish education, the Pale of Settlement was spun with a network of Haskalah-based schools, irrevocably rooting the Haskalah in Russia's still predominately traditionalist community.

Even though religious traditionalism retained its hold over the majority of Jews in Russia, facilitated by the collusion of antimodernist rabbinic and hasidic elites into an Orthodoxy singularly determined to resist the intrusion of 'goyish norms',²² the *maskilim* emerged as a powerful secular counter-elite in Jewish life. The new schools fortified the staying-power of what had previously been a scattered, persecuted, and ostracized maskilic minority. As teachers and administrators of the newly established schools, the *maskilim* were finally in possession of an institutionalized 'power base' which rivalled the traditional kahal institutions of their Orthodox opponents and made them economically and socially less dependent on Jewish communal authority. Operating from such a position of strength, the *maskilim* proliferated their movement by educating the next generation of maskilic *intelligenty*. In spite of the intense opposition of the Orthodox, a steady stream of Jewish youths passed through the crown schools and state rabbinical seminaries in the 1850s and, in the following decade, reentered these institutions as teachers or went on to graduate in Russian gymnasiums and universities. The end result of this institutionalization of the Haskalah was the formation of a full-fledged Russian–Jewish intelligentsia that was to shape modern Jewish cultural life well into the 1870s.²³

The historical significance of this new intelligentsia for the evolution of Jewish radicalism was enormous. Aside from the fact that the state schools – especially the rabbinical seminaries – furnished the Russian revolutionary movement of the 1860s and 1870s with its first Jewish recruits, it was the intelligentsia nourished by these schools who created the ideological and social atmosphere that enveloped a rising generation of Jews. It imbued them with an activist, maskilic *Weltanschauung* which turned many of them into rebels opposed to anything resembling the life-style, religion, and politics of traditional Jewry. Indeed, the very term 'intelligentsia' conveys, *par excellence*, the character of the maskilic movement as a potent cultural force.