JEWISH HISTORY IN EASTERN EUROPE: THE 19TH CENTURY

by Anke Hilbrenner

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MAP OF WESTERN RUSSIA SHOWING THE JEWISH PALE OF SETTLEMENT.
[The Jewish Encyclopedia, ed. Singer, Funk and Wagner, New York & London, 1901 vol. 10, art. Russia, p. 531]

Photo credit: Map showing the percentage of Jews in the Pale of Settlement and Congress Poland, 1901. The Jewish Encyclopedia, CC0 1.0

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In Jewish history, the 19th century stands for a time of comprehensive change in all areas of life. Jews, who had previously seen themselves primarily as a religious group, now became supporters of various political or national movements. This gave rise to a range of new, constantly contested Jewish affiliations.

Introduction

The 19th century saw numerous religious communities undergo phases of secularization. Religious meaning and affiliation were replaced by new and sometimes alternative offers of „imagined communities“[1]. Such „imagined communities“

imagined communities

Imagined Communities oder vorgestellte Gemeinschaften hat Benedict Anderson für die Erforschung nationaler Bewegungen geprägt. Der Begriff drückt aus, dass die Nation kein essentielles Konzept ist und dass es Nationen nicht schon immer gibt, sondern er verweist auf ihren Konstruktionscharakter, weil er verdeutlicht, dass die nationale Gemeinschaft eben vorgestellt oder imaginiert ist. Der Begriff bezieht sich auf die Moderne, in der Gemeinschaften, die über die Gruppe von persönlich bekannten Menschen hinausgehen, eine wichtige Rolle spielen.

could be national communities, for example, but also social classes such as the working or middle classes. Sports clubs and student fraternities also offered a sense of belonging.[2] Social change sometimes occurred with astonishing speed, which was also promoted by technological developments. In the 19th century, „acceleration“ became an everyday experience.[3]

Jewish history in this exciting century reflects these phenomena and sharpens our sense of the depth of change, as the Jewish community had long seen itself primarily as a religious group without this question even being asked. As the period of secularization continued, religious affiliation became more fragile, and was often replaced by cultural or linguistic concepts of belonging and the associated feelings of community and imagination based on a sense of national identity. This also happened within the Jewish communities, but these affiliations never took the place of religion „automatically“ or „without any alternative“, partly due to the diaspora situation; instead, they were always controversial, both within the Jewish communities and in dialog with other communities, where resistance to the Jewish search for affiliation arose. Parallel to the traditionally religiously motivated hatred of Jews, which is often referred to as anti-Judaism

Anti-Judaism
also: Anti-Jewish attitude

„Anti-Judaism“ is often used to describe religiously motivated hostility towards Jews. There were a number of anti-Jewish theories and practices, particularly in the Christian faith. The term is also used for non-Christian forms of pre-modern anti-Jewish attitudes, for example in antiquity or in Islam. A strict separation from modern „anti-Semitism“, as is often suggested, is not meaningful, as both forms of group-based discrimination work together. However, there are also differences that make it useful to differentiate between the two terms.

, the 19th century also saw the rise of modern anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism
also: Antisemitism, Anti-semitism

The term „anti-Semitism“ was initially used as a self-designation by anti-Jewish followers of Wilhelm Marr in 1879. At that time, it was used to distinguish itself from religious anti-Jewish attitudes. Today, it is often used as a collective term for various forms of anti-Jewish ideas, symbols and attitudes. This is logical because modern anti-Semitism did not replace traditional hostility towards Jews, but traditional and modern forms often occur together and reinforce each other.

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The Jewish population in Eastern Europe after the partitions of Poland

Even prior to the 19th century ↗, Eastern Europe was the main settlement area for the world’s Jewish population. After the three partitions of Poland

Partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth
also: Partitions of Poland, Partitions of Poland-Lithuania, Polish Partitions

In the course of three partitions in 1772, 1793 and 1795, the aristocratic Republic of Poland-Lithuania was divided between the Russian Empire, Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy and disappeared from the political map of Europe as a sovereign state until 1918.

(1772 - 1795), more than half of the Jewish diaspora had become subjects of the Russian Empire (without changing their place of residence). The following passages relate to this group. Just over a tenth of the Jewish population lived in Galicia, which belonged to the Habsburg Monarchy, and around 8% of Jews lived in various German territories, most of them in Prussia.

Habsburg Monarchy

In Galicia, the various directions of Jewish religious practice coexisted. Alongside traditional Orthodoxy, Reform Judaism became stronger in the 19th century. The Orthodox and the Reformers were bound together by their mutual aversion towards each other. Another powerful competitor to Orthodoxy was the Hasidic movement, to which many Jews in Galicia belonged. While the Reform movement was recognized by the Habsburg administration, who were striving to modernize the Jewish communities, Hasidism was considered a dangerous superstition and was opposed by the authorities. One means of reforming Jewish life was the formation of state control mechanisms through the adoption of German names. At the end of the 18th century, hundreds of thousands of Jewish families in the Austrian provinces of Galicia and Bukovina took German surnames, as Johannes Czakai illustrates in his book „Nochem's New Names“[4]. Other means of Germanization included the settlement of German colonists in these regions. The authorities considered the excessively young marriage age among the Jews, which was blamed for a lack of secular education and a proliferation of children, to be particularly harmful.
For this reason, „marriage certificates“ were introduced, with which young people wishing to marry had to prove that they had a school-leaving certificate, as well as the ability to speak German. While many Jewish subjects took advantage of the various modernization measures, others resisted the pressures that resulted from them. Jewish family networks and, above all, religious communities were transnational and trans-imperial, and the new borders played no binding role in the reality of the lives of believers who made pilgrimages to the court of a tsaddik, for example. In order to regulate these practices, the state tried to control internal Jewish migration with the help of a passport system and to expel so-called „beggar Jews“.
In addition to these coercive measures, economic conditions and the urbanization typical of the 19th century were all reasons for migration to the Hungarian parts of the empire, to the big cities, especially Vienna, to Western Europe, and the USA. Jews in Austria were emancipated in 1867.

Prussia

Likewise, in Prussia, the cities and especially Berlin began to attract socially mobile Jews. In addition to trade and other economic activities, Jewish immigrants associated Berlin with the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskala). As well as religious scholarship, it was particularly the university and the promise of a secular education that attracted many Jewish immigrants to the city. But other cities and their educational institutions also attracted young Jews. One example is the famous Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, who was born in the Prussian province of Posen in 1817. After working in Berlin and Jena, among other places, he eventually became a professor in Breslau. He was one of the most important representatives of the German-language science of Judaism, which distinguished itself from Eastern European

Jewish traditions such as Yiddish or Hasidism.[5]
From 1812, Jews in Prussia and other German territories were granted equal legal status. Many of the migrants quickly shed their Eastern European roots and, only a generation later, their communities were already starting to view immigrants from Eastern Europe skeptically and considering them „backward". From the end of the 19th century, in addition to the alienation from Eastern European Jews, there was also a nostalgic glorification of the Eastern European Jewish past, a longing for the supposedly „authentic" Jewish life in the shtetl. Jewish migration contributed greatly to the rapid growth of cities in the 19th century; in Berlin, the Jewish population rose from 6,400 at the beginning to 150,000 at the end of the century.

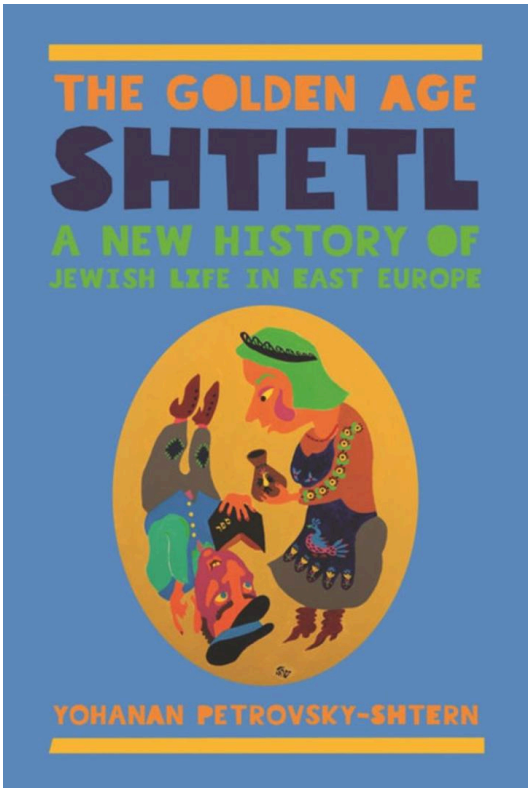
Russian Empire

[Tb]
Before the partitions of Poland, there had hardly been any Jewish subjects in the Russian Empire, but, as a result of the Empire's westward expansion, within 30 years the majority of the world's Jewish population had come under the rule of the Russian tsars and tsarinas. The Russian Empire was a multi-ethnic empire and had experience with the management of otherness. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, which Catherine II

Catherine II

Empress of the Russian Empire from 1762 to 1796 and representative of enlightened absolutism. In addition to her reform efforts and patronage of science and the arts, she also stood for the imperial expansion of the Russian Empire to the south, at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, and to the west. She was instrumental in establishing the partitions of Poland and thus the disappearance of Poland from the European map in the 18th century.

had taken up the cause of, efforts were initially made to integrate the Jewish subjects into the social order of the Empire's western governorates and to promote their usefulness for the good of the state. In the first half of the 19th century, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, for example, observed a new „Golden Age" of shtetl life from 1790 to 1840[6] . And even during the reform efforts of Alexander II (1855-1881), under the paradigm of the usefulness of the Jewish subjects, there was a „fusion" of at least part of the Jewish population with the surrounding population groups under the linguistic and cultural primacy of Russian.



Cover of the book „The Golden Age Shtetl". Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern / Princeton University Press, Free access - no reuse

Settlement area

The „settlement rayon" (Russian „čerta postojannoj evrejskoj osedlosti") was an area in the Russian Empire allocated to the Jews in stages from 1791 onwards, which extended across the western and south-western governorates. These areas were largely identical to the settlement areas of the Jewish population in Poland before the partitions. The „New Russia" conquered under Catherine II, which included, in particular, the southern territories on the Black Sea coast, were opened up for various colonization projects. The colonists included not only Germans, but also Jewish settlers from the former Polish territories. The Kingdom of Poland, which belonged to the Russian Empire, was not nominally part of the settlement area, but Jews were also allowed to live there. In these areas, the Jewish population lived in close quarters together with the other inhabitants of the „Imperial borderlands", in the areas along the Baltic coast (today's Estonia and Latvia), Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Bessarabia (today's Moldova). There was general population growth in these areas, including the Jewish population: 1.6 million Jews lived there in 1820, and by 1910 this number had increased to 5.6 million.

Apart from a few exceptions, Jews in the Russian Empire did not enjoy the right to live outside the settlement area, which had settlement restrictions until 1915. These exceptions were Jews perceived as „useful" by the authorities, including academics, wealthy merchants,

sought-after craftsmen, and those who had completed many years of military service. A small, influential Jewish upper class was recruited from this group, whose members often attempted to act as advocates, in the traditional sense, (shtadtlonim), for the interests of the entire Jewish population in the Russian Empire.[7] Until the abolition of serfdom in 1861, and due to a specific passport system, the vast majority of subjects of the Russian Empire did not enjoy freedom of movement. The Jewish population was therefore no exception. However, this situation changed for many people in the Russian Empire during the second half of the 19th century. Only for the Jewish population did the restriction to the settlement area remain, and it even intensified, especially from 1881 onwards. As a result, over time the settlement area was increasingly perceived as a metaphor for the all-encompassing discrimination against the Jewish population in the Russian Empire and was fought against as such. Numerous influential Jewish intellectuals and politicians, such as the famous historian and Jewish national ideologist Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), were forced to live illegally in the metropolises of the Russian Empire under humiliating circumstances.[8] The fate of a possible expulsion always hovered over the heads of the people who had left the settlement area. In 1891, for example, the Jewish population was expelled from Moscow.

Jewish refugees from Russia at port of Liverpool, 1882. CC0 1.0

The pogroms of 1881 and their consequences

The year 1881 marked a turning point for the entire Russian Empire. In this year, the reformer and „liberator tsar“ Alexander II

Alexander II

Emperor of the Russian Empire from 1855 to 1881. He was regarded as a reformer and also initiated the liberation of Russian peasants from serfdom (1861). During his reign, the revolutionary movement grew and became more radical, and the last years of his life were overshadowed by terrorist attacks. On March 1, 1881, he was killed in a terrorist bomb attack.

was murdered by terrorists. His son and successor Alexander III

Alexander III

Emperor of the Russian Empire from 1881 to 1894. As the son of Alexander II, he had witnessed the "manhunt" for his father. His first years in power were characterized by a fear of terrorist attacks and a harsh reaction to the revolutionary forces. In contrast to his father, he was considered a reactionary.

turned away from his father's reform-oriented course and consolidated the autocratic structures of the Empire. He also pursued a policy of Russification, which made it difficult for non-Russians to remain loyal to the Empire (almost half of the subjects of the multi-ethnic Russian Empire were not ethnic Russians). From this time onwards, entire ethnic groups were increasingly declared enemies. Poles, for example, were generally regarded as enemies of the Empire and Armenians, who until the 1880s had been an imperial population in a positive sense, were now increasingly perceived collectively as disloyal. The situation was particularly difficult for the Jewish population. In the Easter days of 1881, anti-Jewish pogroms broke out in the southern regions of the settlement area, starting in Elisavetgrad. Localized orgies of violence flared up repeatedly until 1884, during which the Jewish population was tortured and their houses looted. The authorities were slow to put a stop to the violence perpetrated against the Jews by the rural population and the urban lower classes.[9] The elites of the Empire blamed the Jews themselves for this anti-Jewish violence, accusing them of exploiting the non-Jewish population economically. This perpetrator-victim reversal culminated in 1882 in the so-called „May Laws“, with which Alexander III restricted the freedom of movement of the Jewish population as well as their economic and commercial activities.

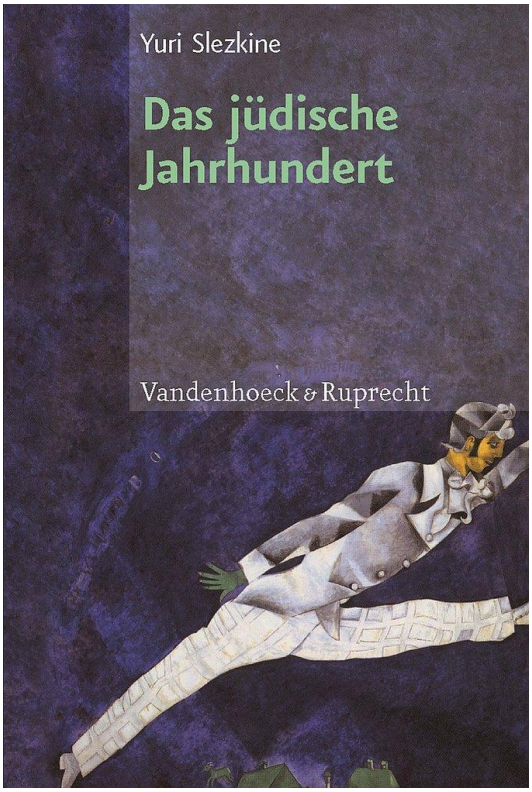
1881 as a turning point in Jewish history

The events of 1881 have been perceived within Jewish historiography as a turning point, indeed as a paradigm shift. Jonathan Frankel in particular understood the development of modern Jewish affiliation as a reaction to anti-Jewish violence and the associated crises. This dialectical narrative of crisis and new beginnings assumes that, until 1881, those Jews in the Russian Empire who had broken away from Jewish religious tradition in search of new opportunities to belong were striving to connect with Russian culture and society. It was the experience of anti-Jewish violence on the one hand and the lack of legal protection and even

discrimination in response to the pogroms on the other that made it necessary to look for new and individual ways out of the crisis. One of these ways was flight, emigration via Western Europe to the USA, South America, or Palestine. This not only led to the emergence of a large Jewish community in the United States, but also to the first Aliyah (1882-1903) and thus to the beginning of the numerically significant immigration of Ashkenazi Jews to Israel.
Another important result was the Jewish political search for community. Parallel to emigration, the first circles of the Chibbat Zion (Love of Zion) movement emerged in the Russian Empire, which can be considered an early form of the Zionist movement. Non-Zionist Jewish political community projects also emerged. Jewish socialism and diaspora nationalism were particularly important.

On the eve of a „Jewish century"

These developments laid the foundation for the options that the Jews of Eastern Europe had in the 20th century, which Yuri Slezkine calls the „Jewish century"[10] . The first option that many inhabitants of the settlement area took was emigration to America. For Slezkine, this path stands for liberalism and capitalism. The second option was to emigrate to Palestine, which Slezkine saw as representative of Zionism and nationalism. The third option was communism, which was usually associated with migration to the metropolises of the Soviet Union after 1917. However, the majority of Jews remained in the settlement area, even after the restrictions were lifted in 1915. There they survived pogroms, warlike violence, and the Sovietization of their living environment. Most of them were murdered by the Germans and their helpers during the Shoah, when the settlement area of the 19th century became the „bloodlands" of the 20th century.[11]



Cover of the book „The Jewish Century". Yuri Slezkine / Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Free access - no reuse

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

1. I use the term coined by Benedict Anderson. Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism, London 1991, pp. 6-7. It has already been constructively criticized by Tara Zahra, for example: Tara Zahra: Imagined noncommunities: National indifference as a category of analysis, in: Slavic Review 69 (2010/1), pp. 93-119. This criticism is explicitly incorporated into the use of the term here, which goes beyond nationalism. ↥
2. Cf. for example: Miriam Rürup. Ehrensache. Jüdische Studentenverbindungen an deutschen Universitäten 1886 – 1937. Göttingen 2008. Also, for the 20th century: Anke Hilbrenner. Sport und die jüdische Suche nach Gemeinschaft in den (ost-)europäischen Metropolen der Zwischenkriegszeit, in: Aschkenas 27 (2017/1), pp. 71-92. ↥
3. Cf. also Reinhart Koselleck: Zeitverkürzung und Beschleunigung. A study on secularization. In: Ders. Zeitschichten, pp. 177-202, especially pp. 196f. ↥
4. Johannes Czakai. Nochems neue Namen. Die Juden Galiziens und der Bukowina und die Einführung deutscher Vor- und Familiennamen 1772-1820, Göttingen 2021. ↥
5. Cf. Marcus Pyka: Jüdische Identität bei Heinrich Graetz, Göttingen 2008. ↥
6. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern: The golden age shtetl: A new history of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Princeton University, 2015 (?). ↥
7. Cf. Benjamin Nathans. Beyond the Pale: The Jewish encounter with late Imperial Russia, Berkeley 2002. ↥
8. Cf. also: Anke Hilbrenner. Diaspora-Nationalismus. Zur Geschichtskonstruktion Simon Dubnows, Göttingen 2007, pp. 60-85. ↥
9. Cf. also Stefan Wiese: Pogrome im Zarenreich. Dynamiken kollektiver Gewalt. Hamburg 2016, pp. 35-88. ↥

10. Yuri Slezkine. Das jüdische Jahrhundert. Göttingen 2006. ↥

11. Timothy Snyder. Bloodlands. Europa zwischen Hitler und Stalin. München 2011. ↥

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