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**Catherine II** - Russian Empress (1727-1796; reigned in 1762 after the violent death of her husband, Peter III). Already in the first days after accession to the throne, C. faced the question of the Jews. Arriving for the first time in the Senate as she tells in her notes, compiled by a third party, found herself in a difficult situation when the first question was raised about the admission of Jews to Russia expelled in the previous reign, and it was unanimously resolved in a favorable sense. "Not even had a week passed, since Catherine II," read the notes, "ascended the throne; which she assumed to defend the Orthodox faith ...; minds were very excited, as is always the case after such an important event; starting a reign with such a project could not be a means to calm but to recognize the project harmful was impossible." The Empress was faced in the Senate, with the resolution of Elizabeth's hostility to the Jews and C. declared that she wanted the case to be postponed until another time. "And that's how often it is not enough to be enlightened, but to have the best intentions and the power to bring them to fruition." The same considerations guided C. even when in the manifesto of Dec 4. 1762 on the permission of foreigners to settle in Russia, she stipulated "except for the Jews." In fact, C.'s attitude towards Jews was different. Responding to Diderot in 1773 to his question about Jews in Russia, Catherine explained that the question of admitting Jews to the country was raised inappropriately, and added to this that in 1764 Jews were recognized as merchants and residents of New Russia and that three or four Jews have been in Petersburg for several years where "they were tolerated contrary to the law or she pretended not to know that they were in the capital "(they lived in the apartment of the empress's confessor). The recognition of the Jews by the inhabitants of New Russia was in connection with the Senate's proposal to allow Jews to enter Russia. Not daring to openly declare her agreement with the opinion of the Senate, C. resorted to covert actions. On April 29, 1764, she sent a secret letter to Governor Brown in Riga, which (an excerpt) read as follows: "if the guardianship office (a prototype for the Ministry of Agriculture) recommended some merchants of the Novorossiysk province, they should be allowed to live in Riga and trade. If they wish to send clerks or workers to Novorossiya, all without distinction of religion, they should be given a passport and a convoy; and if three or four people come from Mitava to go to Petersburg, they must be provided with passports without indicating their nationality, without asking them about their religion. For identification, they will submit a letter from merchant Levin Wulf in St. Petersburg. C. personally attributed to this letter: "If you do not understand me, then I will not be guilty: this letter was written by the president of the guardianship office. Keep everything secret." By "Novorossiysk merchants", meant the Jews. Major Rtishchev brought seven Jews from Mitava to Petersburg; two of them [David Levi Bamberger](#) (see [Heb. Entsikl., III, 735](#)) and Moses Aaron, as well as Benjamin Ber, who did not go to St. Petersburg, were given the authority to work in Riga under the leadership of Levin Wulf under the auspices of resettlement of Jews to New Russia. This episode indicates that Catherine, conscious of the commercial and industrial significance of the Jews, recognized them as a useful element for the state. By allowing the Greeks, Armenians, and others sent from the army to settle in Russia in 1769, C. granted the same for Jews to enter and live in New Russia. To the same extent, her favorable attitude toward the Jews was discovered when, with the first partition of Poland, she adopted Belarus with numerous Jews in the

population under her scepter. In the poster of August 11, 1772 about the accession of the region there were lines specifically dedicated to the Jews: "... Through solemn above-mentioned encouragement (the rights of new subjects) to each and every one of the free administration of faith and inviolable integrity of their property. It goes without saying that the Jewish societies living in the cities and lands attached to the Empire of the Russian Federation would be left and preserved for all those freedoms with which they now in the discourse of law and their property are used: for the humanity of Her Imp. Majesty does not allow them to be excluded from common grace and future welfare under Her blessed State, as long as they, for their part, are subject to obedience like loyal subjects, will live in real trading and crafts, according to their titles,". With this manifesto, the Jews were not equal in rights with the other new subjects, but rather retained only the rights of the administration of the faith and the use of property. In relation to other residents, moreover, it was stipulated that each state would enjoy the rights of "ancient" subjects throughout the whole space of the empire. It is possible that in this case Catherine II was guided by caution. In any case, soon the rights of the Jews were thus expanded so that, while they made up a separate group in Poland, distant from common civil and political life, Jews now became citizens in Russia. In 1772, at the suggestion of the Belarusian governor-general Count Chernyshev the kagal organization was introduced that had long existed in Poland, and the Jews were subject to a special fee. But after the Jews got the right to enroll in the merchant estate in 1780, she personally explained to the procurator-general that, with regard to the payment of a percentage of capital from a merchant class, "the confession (religion) of merchants should not be a reason for any difference" and on May 3, 1783, there was a decree that the Jews should be taxed according to the estate in which they were assigned (merchants or petty bourgeois). Along with taxes, Jews were equal in rights with other merchants and petty bourgeoisie in the field of estate and city self-government, which at that time very widely covered the life of the urban commercial and industrial class, and therefore the functions of the kagal were limited to "Jewish Kagals, in county towns and those who are in the provinces must not concern themselves with any other matters besides the rites of the law and their worship". When Christian society began to impede the election of Jews to the positions of urban self-government, [City government, Heb. Enz., VI](#)). Catherine sought the equality of the Jews before the law and upon this principle she tried to hold on all issues of Jewish life. In 1785, Belarusian Jewry, represented by a deputation arrived in St. Petersburg, appealed to the empress with a complaint about the violation of their rights by the local administration. C. sent a complaint to the Senate, and she commissioned her secretary, Count Bezborodko to convey to the Prosecutor General that "when the aforementioned Jewish law was in effect people already entered on the basis of the decrees of Her Majesty in a state equal to others, then it was necessary to observe the rule. At any rate, Her Majesty established that everyone should enjoy the benefits and rights without distinction of law and people. According to this, the Senate issued a decree on May 7, 1786 (incorrectly referred to by some researchers as the "1786 Regulation"), which determined certain rights of the Jews. By the way, the decree abolished the eviction of Jews from the counties to the cities, which was supported by the sovereign, who was striving to create commercial and industrial centers, for which purpose the Jews were a desirable element. The rights granted to Belarusian Jews were extended to the Jewish population of the provinces joined in the second and third partitions of Poland-Lithuania. A new direction was initiated by C. concerning the politics of the Jewish question in 1791, when, according to complaints

from Moscow and Smolensk merchants, she recognized that the Jews did not have the right to join the merchants in the internal gubernias, since this right belonged to the Jews *only* in Belarus. At the same time, the Empress extended the right of "citizenship" to the Ekaterinoslav governorship and to the Tauride region. This law established the so-called "Pale of Settlement", although the name itself did not yet exist. Three years later on June 23, 1794, for unknown reasons, the Jews were levied a double tax compared with the rest of the population (there is an assumption that C. wanted to encourage the Jews in this way to settle in New Russia). An exception was made for the Karaites so that Jews, known by the name of "Rabbins", would not join their society. Then the same was granted by the Taurida Governor-General to provide other Karaites with relief. Somewhat later, C. approved the restriction of Jews in the estate-city self-government imposed in the Minsk province. It should be noted that with the transition of the Jews to Russian citizenship in the acts emanating from the sovereign, the word "Jew" disappears. Archival materials relating to the life of Jews in the era of C. are almost completely undeveloped, and this was due to contradictions, discovered by C. as a sovereign and as a thinker. She did not take the opportunity to fully figure out her personal attitude to the Jews.

Wed: Golitsyn, "Istor. Russian law. about the Jews "; Gradovsky, "Trade and other rights of Jews" (the text of the manifesto on the accession of Belarus is given); Orshansky, "Russian law. about the Jews "; Hesse, "Jews in Russia"; Buchholtz, *Geschichte der Juden in Riga*; "To the history of Western Russian. Heb., Heb. Library."

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## Notes<sup>[edit]</sup>

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- <sup>↑</sup> Prince Golitsyn in his "East. Russian the law. "stated that with the words“ according to their ranks ”, C. would like to say“ as part-time citizens ”. This fabrication is refuted by the fact that the same manifesto on the annexation of Podolia and Volyn clearly defined the meaning of these words: “engaging, as before, in trade and crafts”. Yes, and the local authorities understood these words properly - for the time being, the Jews would turn "in their bidding and trades of their own, as is customary."