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Jews in Russia since yr. 1772 : A General historical overview

General historical sketch. The introduction of the Jewish population into the Russian state was the result of the territorial growth of the empire. Russia first accepted Jews as subjects in 1772 when, as a result of the first partition of Poland, Belarus became a Russian province. Then Jews were accepted into citizenship, living in the lands annexed to Russia by the second (1793) and third (1795) partitions of Poland-Lithuania. By this time an isolated group of Jews who lived in the Crimea since antiquity passed under Russian power. Later the new masses of the Jewish population entered the borders of Russia with the accession of Kurland, the Kingdom of Poland and the Caucasus. At first, the former Polish Jews preserved the structures of their external and internal life, which had long existed in Poland supported by the kahal organization. For this reason the Jews, not taking any part in the general civil life of the country and alien to the general state interests, lived as closed groups of religious and communal life. Having preserved the Kahals, or rather sanctioned their existence, the Russian government relieved itself of all concern for collecting taxes from the Jews and for administrative supervision over them, since these functions were assigned to the (local) Kahals. But soon this age-old organization was shattered. Although the Jews lived in the cities and towns, as well as in the villages, they were assigned to the urban estates and were included in the classes for townspeople and merchants. Thanks to this introduction of the Jews to the general urban-estate organizations, the situation of the Jews relative to the state had changed radically. They ceased to compose, as they had in Poland, a kind of estate of their own and were included rather, with the general mass of Russian citizens (subjects). As members of the commercial and industrial class, the Jews were equalized (1783) in rights with other people ie. on a par with Christians and began to take part in the elected bodies of the urban self-government. Under such conditions Kahals, whose external activities coincided with the functions of common state institutions (charging taxes, issuing passports), should have lost their former importance. However, their internal activities had ceased to meet the needs of the time. With entry into the general process of civilian life, some Jews began to work with kahal guardianship. Dissatisfaction

with the Kahal grew. As a result of events in the internal life of Jews, the difference between the Hasidim and their opponents (misnagdim) resulted in a fierce religious struggle. Both sides sought to strengthen themselves in the kahal structure to overcome the other and to take advantage of administrative authority. This confusion, with the complaints of the Jews addressed to the government, resulted in both the power and the authority of Kahal being shaken. However, in the interests of gathering proper tax revenues, the government retained the Kahal as an administrative-fiscal body. Thanks to this the Jews were allocated to a special group of the population. At the same time the Jewish mass remained under the yoke of the ruling class. Introducing the Jews into the general group of the urban commercial and industrial population, Empress Catherine II intended to provide them with general relevant benefits. But the Christian population of the former Polish provinces, accustomed to seeing Jews as powerless aliens began to seek the diminishment of the dignity of the Jews. Indeed, the rights of Jews as members of public self-government bodies began to be curtailed. Along with that, Jews belonging to the merchants and petty bourgeoisie were constrained in the right of movement and in 1791 there was a ban on living outside the Pale of Settlement. In addition, Jews were subjected to evictions from the villages and the countryside to the towns (shtetls) in order to disrupt them from age-old occupations related to living on owner lands and renting distilleries and inns (the leasehold economy). At first these measures had the task, according to Catherine II, to strengthen the market towns. They were taken against all merchants and burghers generally, but eventually took on the character of repression against the Jews alone. The legislation on Jews at that time was a kaleidoscope in which the rights of Russian citizens and the stigma of a pariah people alternated in a varied succession. Questions about Jewish life were legitimated for private reasons. Moreover, due to the multi-temporal accession to Russia of lands with the Jewish population in different provinces, there were various conditions affecting their internal and external life. The first steps to establish general rules about the Jews were made under Paul I, with on the one hand the excesses that accompanied the religious schism¹, and on the other hand complaints that the residence of Jews in villages was harmful for the peasants. This prompted the government to come closer to considering the conditions of Jewish life. It was recognized as necessary to systematically develop legislation on Jews, and Jews were somewhat involved in the discussion of the proposed measures. The time was ripe for legislative work - these were the first years of the reign of Alexander I. In the committee that dealt with this matter were enlightened statesmen. Nevertheless, the Statute on the Organization of the Jews of 1804, the first systematic legislation on Jews giving answers to individual questions of Jewish life, did not direct all Jewish life along the path in which it could develop normally. Undoubtedly, the Statute of 1804 is

1 Hasidim against misnagdim.

among the acts imbued with tolerance and the great merit of its authors lies in the fact that they did not allow coarse anti-Semitism to prevail. But this first legislation served an unkind service by the fact that during its development, Jews were recognized as the perpetrators of certain national disasters that were the result of a number of circumstances (eg. serfdom, national ignorance, etc.) that the government did not want to admit. This anti-state method of solving social and economic issues formed the basis of legislation on the Jews. Thus, the Statute of 1804 demanded that the large Jewish mass, settled on the landlords' lands immediately migrate to the towns (shtetls) that were completely unsuitable for accepting these hungry, unemployed, poor people. The calamity of the peasants, exhausted in the grip of serfdom, was attributed to the activities of the Jews. This measure (eviction to the towns) was not fully implemented, however the government had repeatedly resorted to repression against the Jews when it was met with economic and social phenomena that called for radical state reforms it had refused to implement. During the drafting of the Statutes, the opinions of the Jews were also heard (see Notkin, Notta Haimovich). Their voice was not heard when setting restrictive rules, [as revealed] in the "Cry of the Jewish daughter", which had come out of Nevakhovich's pen and not perceived. But the government heeded them when it came to enlightenment, ie. leading Jews to increased assimilation. By the end of the 18th century, people began to appear who understood the significance of general education, but they were completely lost in the mass of the Jewish population. The Jews were spiritually fed by only one religious-ritual literature and were afraid, even skeptical of secular knowledge as a threat to their very existence. Conscious of their powerlessness over these centuries-old conditions, the Jews who adopted general education pinned their hopes on government power. By criticizing the current situation, the government perceived the Talmud as the main culprit of ignorance and superstition of the Jewish people in Russia and responsible for its alienation from the surrounding population. Enlightened Jews did not dare talk about the powerlessness, social humiliation and poverty that prevailed among their co-religionists. And thus the policy of repression, externally justified by the economic oppression to which the Christians believed they were subjected to by the Jews, now found support in the internal conditions of Jewish life. And this led to the slogan that lawlessness would not be removed from the Jews until they renounced their religious and national [Israelite] exclusivity. Under the banner of the fight against fanaticism among Jewish population the government began to expand and deepen restrictive legislation. And there was a moment when the supreme power was inclined to soften the powerlessness of the Jews: in 1814 after the Patriotic War², which gave the Jews the opportunity to prove their active devotion to their homeland, the government under the influence of a general mood, was ready to pay attention to the needs of the Jews, but the ensuing reaction

2 The Napoleonic War.

overwhelmed good impulses. Increased repression was supposed to strengthen the power of the kahal. And in this we must see the main reason that the Jews did not use or could not use access to the general educational institutions, to which they were entitled in [the Statute of] 1804. The Enlightenment was threatened by the power of Kahal, who drew its power from the *lack* of rights coupled with the ignorance of the [Jewish] masses. The ruling Jewish circles obstructed as far as possible the penetration of general education in the Jewish environment. Under these conditions the age-old fear that Jewish society had of the secular sciences could not give way to the call for education heard from the mouth of the government. Even taking into account the urgent needs of the Jewish population, soon the government's attitude towards Jews began to a certain extent, to be influenced by a new element - the religious. This impact went in two directions. On the one hand, the idea arose that Jews were inclined to convert Christians to Judaism. In this connection, half-measures taken with nervous haste to protect the Christian population from being too close to Jews who might institute "traits of Jewish life" begin to look like measures to mitigate the religious influence of Jews on the surrounding population. On the other hand the Talmud, unknown to the government, filled the Jewish religious life in the bureaucracy's view with such horrors that crimes usually found among all nations, were attributed to Jewish religious morality if committed by one Jew or another. This misguided view led to a childish fear of alienated Jewry, which seemed to threaten the surrounding population with all sorts of dangers. If in 1817 the highest order was followed not to prosecute crimes suspect of a ritual purpose, then several years later it was forgotten (see Velizh case). And then a whole system of legislative measures was created, which meant to defeat Jewish "fanaticism." This systematic work continued throughout the reign of Nicholas I. It was recognized as necessary to paralyze the "evasion of Jews from uniting with civil society", but in fact this task was reduced to the protection of Christians from the "harmful" activity of the Jews. And this was to be achieved by legislative restrictions and by violent measures. At the same time, the government did not give up its desire to alienate Jews from Christians in public and even in private life. First of all for the Jews, natural recruitment duty was introduced (1827) instead of former monetary obligation. The rules specifically established for Jews in serving recruitment duties were prompted not by the interests of the army, but by the desire to introduce as many Jews as possible into the ranks of the troops who, after leaving the service would already be free from religious-national "prejudices" and optimally convert to Christianity. And later, in order to destroy the Jewish connection and give the government an opportunity to influence their inner life, the institution of the kahal was destroyed and rules were set up about rabbis etc. However, the government itself strengthened the basis of Jewish "society", which so empowered the Hebrew masses by putting them in charge of the care and collection of taxes and delivery of the recruits. At this time

the idea of the so-called "parsing" of Jews was not implemented in the end, but showed how extreme were the limits of repressive plans for the Jewish population. The most important event at this time was the establishment at the expense of Jews, of special state schools where along with specifically Jewish subjects there should be taught general subjects and science. On the question of enlightenment, Jewish society was still divided into two irreconcilable camps. By this time, the number of educated Jews increased significantly in comparison with the end of the 18th century, but surrounded by a thick conservative mass, they were powerless to fulfill their progressive aspirations. Often, even the most independent of them in their personal lives had to obey the social requirements of everyday nature (for example, wearing traditional clothes etc.) fearing being branded as renegades and losing all influence in public life. Under such conditions, the progressives had to rely only on the assistance of the government, which for its part sought the sympathy of the progressives who served to a certain degree as intermediaries between them and the Jewish mass. School reform was carried out thanks to this union (see Lilienthal; Enlightenment). However, the spread of enlightenment was greatly hampered by both the continuing repressive policies of the government and the opposition from conservative circles, both the Hasidim and their opponents the misnagidim, who were equally afraid of the secular sciences. And if in the future, school fear has lost its sharp character, then it was not only thanks to the preaching of the Progressives but the spread of general education facilitated by exemption of military service for persons with educational qualifications. The legal situation that had deteriorated under Nicholas I, and in connection with the growing poverty was aggravated by the eviction of Jews from different localities, often for reasons that did not have any real ground. This forced a lot of Jews to confine themselves to live mainly by religious and ritual interests. The Jewish people were cut off from the rest of the population, not only because they were shackled by laws of reduced residence but in the places of their constant settled life, the Jews were alien to the surrounding life. This contributed in great part to their reduction in general civil status which ousted them from the city and state self-government, that once under Catherine II they entered as equal members.

The first years of the reign of Alexander II were perhaps the best period in the history of Russian Jews. At this time the exceptional conditions for Jews serving recruitment duties were abolished, constraints on residence rights were relaxed, and access to public service was opened, etc. Mainly, these years were blessed with bright hopes by the Jewish population, tormented by the preceding dark years. It seemed that the first legal reliefs, so unexpectedly granted, cleared the path to freedom. In fact, every partial relief was given with great effort and the greatest reluctance. Only a loud cry of reality, pictures of economic disasters that led to the abnormal conditions for the Jews, forced the higher

authorities and conservative administrators to gradually agree to concessions. Legal reliefs and the general atmosphere of the “era of great reforms” had a beneficial effect on the mental state of the Jewish population, but on the mass of Jewish social and economic life the new conditions were reflected only minimally. Privileged groups within the Jewish population who received the right to move throughout the empire, even carrying along a certain number of co-religionists who did not have an independent right to live outside the Pale, were extremely few compared to the millions of people who remained chained to their place of residence. Equally insignificant by comparison was the number of Jews who, by the nature of their activities and social position, came into close contact with the cultural circles of the surrounding population. The Jewish masses remained in the same isolation due to the specific conditions of their inner and outer life. Meanwhile, at this time social anti-Semitism acquired particular importance, having found its representatives in the echelon of prominent Russians. It was then, when on the threshold of the sixties the government, seeking to merge the Jews with the “indigenous” population, saw itself forced to abandon the system of repression and move to a gradual abolition of legal restrictions. The voice of I. S. Aksakov arose, trying to prove that there is a deep gulf between Jews and Christians, created by the difference of values thus suggested to not allow the Jews to equalize with other people in political rights. Later Dostoevsky joined with Aksakov, first portraying them in his fictional works and then speaking out in published articles against the alleviation of the lower legal status of the Jews. On the other hand, Russian-Jewish bodies were deprived of the opportunity to defend the idea of emancipation with due force. The exceptional conditions to which Jews were subjected in the country due to restrictive legislation created in wide circles of the surrounding population the notion that Jews were outlawed. This should largely explain the fact that on the alarming days that followed Alexander II’s death a wide wave of pogroms swept across the south of Russia. Confidence in the defenselessness of the Jews was to be strengthened when soon after that the Jews were officially recognized not as victims, but as the perpetrators of the pogroms they regarded mob as revenge on the Jews for their harmful economic activities. This was an indication that the economic domination of the Jews over the Christian population should be paralyzed. The Palenque Commission, thoroughly investigating various aspects of Jewish and in particular economic life, came to the conclusion that it was necessary to continue the path of repression and the coming decade was marked by the introduction of a number of arbitrary restrictive measures by the local administration. New residence restrictions were introduced, mass evictions of Jews from their homes took place, followed by the elimination of Jews from the sphere of urban and local government. Difficulties arose for entering the public and state service and pogroms and evictions exacerbated the difficult financial situation of the Jews. Meanwhile, it was decided to take measures to weaken the Jews

spiritually and Jewish youth, previously encouraged to join the general educational institutions now began to encounter significant obstacles in their pursuit of education. This oppression deepened two currents in Jewry - national and socio-political. The pogroms of 1881 and the consequences they caused were especially erratic emigration. Having discovered the unvarnished truth of Jewish life in Russia forced the Jewish intelligentsia to think about the fate of the masses. And if some thought that the work should be aimed at improving the position of Jews in Russia itself, then other public figures were united by the slogan "Exodus!". There was a Palestinian movement, imbued with a burning desire to find a piece of land on which at least a handful of Jews might live an independent, distinctive life and later, a widely spread Zionist movement. National self-consciousness has penetrated into the environment of the working classes. If earlier, individual Jews took part in general political movements working for the good of the country ignoring the special interests of the Jewish people, now the Jewish organization "Bund" and others behind it, focused on the social problems of the Jewish people. Along with this, part of the Jewish population continued to participate in general political organizations. The twentieth century, which did not bring relief to the Jews in their difficult civil and economic situation, filled them with their own blood. The Chisinau pogrom of 1903 erupted in a relatively quiet political era, vividly etched in people's memory, despite the catastrophe that replaced it in October 1905. As soon as the country learned about the manifesto on October 17, 1905, announcing the upcoming new state system, how reactionary circles raised the mob against the friends of freedom and the Jewish population paid in hundreds for the convocation of popular representation (see Pogroms; State Duma). And then came the last years when intolerance and self-interest, using general confusion, ensured that the powerless Jewish population was subjected to new restrictions - movement outside the permitted places and access to educational institutions were constrained to the extreme; legal, pharmaceutical and associated industries have become paralyzed by private administrative orders. There was even talk of a campaign against the trade activities of the Jews in the name of national trade. The dark press does not cease to incite hatred towards Jews. And a tribute to prejudice and anger was the spread of slander that Jews commit crimes with a ritual purpose.

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