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Nathan Hellman  
*Portland State University*

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***Trading Freedom in the Russian Empire: The Extent to Which Russia Attempted to Solve the Jewish Question by Granting Jews Rights Only in Scenarios that Economically Benefited the State***

Nathan Hellman

**Introduction**

Ever since its first known usage during the so-called “Jew Bill” controversy concerning the naturalization process for English Jews in the 1750s, the term Jewish Question has connoted a fairly simple, straightforward idea: How should a state craft policies to “properly” handle its Jewish population.<sup>1</sup> However, its inherent subjectivity and the sheer multitude of possibilities ensured that no correspondingly simple, straightforward answer to the Jewish Question was offered in any country throughout Europe. Mired in centuries-old religious strife, constantly shifting boundaries and mounds of legislation, Russia's encounter with the Jewish Question stands out as one of the most complex—capable of perplexing even its most dedicated and knowledgeable scholars. Given this track record of bewilderment, historian Simon Dubnow questioned Tsar Alexander III's request for the formation of the High Commission for the Study of Existing Laws on the Jews in early 1883, which followed two years of heavy anti-Jewish pogroms centered in southwestern Russia. As a student of history, the quick-witted Dubnow recognized that the group better

<sup>1</sup> Dov Kulka Otto, “The Felix Posen Bibliographic Project on Antisemitism,” *The 'Jewish Question' in German Speaking Countries, 1848-1914, A Bibliography*, last modified 1994, <http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/bibkulka.html>.

known as the Pahlen Commission faced a “Sisyphus task” that previous “bureaucratic creations” in Russia had promptly abandoned due to the perceived impossibility of the task.<sup>2</sup> Despite these well-documented difficulties, one member of the Pahlen Commission singlehandedly drafted an explanation of the Jewish Question that belied its perceptions as an endlessly confusing labyrinth of religion and policy.

In his aptly titled *The Jewish Question in Russia*, member Pavel Pavlovich Demidov chronicles the history of the Russian state's relations with Jews since the Polish Partitions in the late eighteenth century. Spanning about 110 pages, Demidov's 1884 accounting of Russian policy includes a cursory overview of the most significant laws, general trends in legislation affecting Jews and even his own recommendations for resolving this greatly perplexing problem. Demidov argues that the only way to improve Jewish-Russian relations, alleviate Jewish poverty and bolster the empire's economic vitality is to abolish the Pale of Settlement, grant Jews civil and residential status equal to other subjects and provide more elementary school options for Jewish residents.<sup>3</sup> Considering the external circumstances—namely the pogroms—swirling about when Demidov offered these changes, his recommendations are quite remarkable. Surprisingly, other Pahlen Commission members agreed with the general thrust these prescriptions. In fact, as Antony Polonsky explains, the whole commission proposed to “weaken Jewish particularism and exploitation by the gradual removal of exceptional

<sup>2</sup> Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, from the Earliest Times Until the Present Day* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916), 337-338.

<sup>3</sup> Pavel Pavlovich Demidov, *The Jewish Question in Russia* (London: Darling and Son, 1884), 104.

legislation,” affecting the Jews.<sup>4</sup> As might be expected, Alexander III rejected such recommendations, thereby dismissing four years (1883 to 1887) of laborious investigation into this crucial issue.<sup>5</sup>

Demidov hardly seemed to possess the pedigree for such politically radical stances. Part of an established Russian noble family, a long-time Russian official and the prince of San-Donato (a villa in Florence), Demidov figured to come down squarely on the opposite side of the Jewish Question. But in his *The Jewish Question in Russia* Demidov asserts with the utmost frankness a theory about the “main principle” underlying Russian legislation concerning Jews. He claims that Russian policy sought to acquire “material benefits for the State from this race [Jews],” from its policies affecting Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> Deeming this motivating impulse as a “narrow utilitarian spirit,” that explicitly dictates Russia's Jewish policy, Demidov presents a number of instances in his report where the state blatantly admits in the language of its *ukases* to allowing Jews to live in areas outside the Pale of Settlement, enroll their children in schools previously barred to them or gain employment in once-prohibited industries merely because granting “such permission would conduce to the benefit of the natives,” the national economy and the government in general.<sup>7</sup>

Demidov postulates a fairly conclusive theory about the Jewish Question, determining its veracity is—much like the question itself—replete with potential challenges. Due to the sheer number of possible motivations for how and why the Russian government enacted legislation resulting in either the restriction of Jewish rights or the extension of some newfound privileges, no single incentive could

<sup>4</sup> Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia* (Portland, Ore.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

have guided each and every law the state passed involving the Jews from the middle of the eighteenth century to Demidov's publication of *The Jewish Question in Russia* almost 150 years later. Beyond this logistical hurdle lies yet another: The relative inaccessibility of Russian full-text legislation in English translation. Despite the fact that some translated excerpts are available in Demidov's report as well as various histories analyzing the Jewish Question in Russia, a complete accounting of all these laws is impossible to obtain without proficiency in Russian. With that said, this challenge requires the historian to cobble together translations of Russian laws from a wide variety of sources to achieve the highest level of completeness and accuracy.

In spite of the aforementioned difficulties, Demidov raises a fascinating point that is worthy of further historical exploration. For reasons already detailed above, the question of whether the Russian government sought to capitalize on each and every policy regarding the Jews remains out of reach. However, with dogged historical research and a keen eye it is possible for us to investigate the extent to which considerations of economic benefit factored into Russia's legislative decisions involving Jews, especially those instances where a “certain extension of civil rights was made in favor of the Jews,” to secure some sort of advantage for the Russian state.<sup>8</sup> The scope of this exploration should include a few primary sections: First, an examination of Russia's history of pragmatism in policies affecting the Jews before the Polish Partitions; second, the extent to which the enforcement of nineteenth-century laws such as military conscription in Jewish communities and permitting members of certain industries to reside outside the Pale of Settlement helped to define the notion of Jewish “usefulness” in Russia; and, finally, how the state's Jewish legislation impacted relations between Russians and Jews.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 40.

Exploring Demidov's rather simple explanation of the Jewish Question, reminds the historian once again of the subject matter's inherent complexity. While Demidov appears to have provided an accurate prescription of the problem, the sheer simplicity of his theory practically ensures that it falls short of simultaneously charting the reasons why it is correct. Sometime in the eighteenth century, the Russian state seems to have encountered a persistent confrontation between its traditional religious intolerance—dating far back to its Muscovite roots—and the potential for economic expansion through cooperation with Jewish merchants, traders and middlemen who worked with Poles. At the heart of the matter, religious intolerance—among other stereotypes such as the constant fear of Jewish merchants exploiting peasants or innate Jewish deficiency—prompted the state to enact restrictions on where Jews could reside, the occupations they were allowed to take up and sundry rights readily bestowed upon 'native' Russian subjects. Many of these restrictions prohibited Jews from participating in the kinds of economic activity that had previously proved beneficial to individuals, villages, towns, districts and the Russian Empire as a whole. In other circumstances, when the Russian government acquired new land or chose to develop some unproductive or unsettled part of the empire, they sought Jewish assistance in the form of residency, working in understaffed fields or the construction of infrastructure projects despite the fact that laws often barred Jews from the areas where Jews provided this much-needed help. In such instances, Russian officials typically repealed the restrictive measures on Jews in an effort to reclaim squandered economic vitality. For this reason, Demidov is correct in concluding that the main principle—but not the only principle—of legislation concerning the Jews took the form of granting a relaxation of previously established prohibitions with an eye on deriving some benefit for the Russian state.

## **Pragmatism in Russian Policy Toward the Jews Leading Up to the Polish Partitions**

Beginning in 1772, the Russian Empire continued its westward expansion by colluding with Prussia and Austria to control then divide the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Known as the Polish Partitions, the three Eastern European powers split the region in a series of annexations in the years 1772, 1793 and 1795. With these partitions came the shifting of enormous populations of Jews—not necessarily in physical relocation, but more often in terms of which country they would call home. As a result, Russia, an empire that had previously banned Jewish residence, had nearly 290,000 Jews in its empire, according to estimations of the 1764 Polish census.<sup>9</sup> Due to the roughness of initial estimates provided in the Polish census and natural population growth within the Jewish community, this figure expanded with subsequent recalculations. By the close of the eighteenth century, most widely cited statistics estimated roughly 600,000 Jews—or 1.5 percent of the empire's inhabitants—in Russia.<sup>10</sup> Historian Israel Bartal captures the predicament facing Polish-Lithuanian Jewish communities as a result of the partitions: “The most striking change caused by the partitions was the opening of the Russian empire. A country that, for age-old religious reasons, had never permitted Jews to reside in it now had annexed regions inhabited by hundreds of thousands of descendants of the 'God killers.’”<sup>11</sup>

While the Polish Partitions represent the natural starting point for Russia's formal handling of the Jewish Question—since Jews actually lived within the Russian domain—the beginnings of the sort of utilitarian approach Demidov accuses the state of taking with regard

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 34.

to the Jews are evident much earlier. Throughout the eighteenth century, Russian leaders faced a number of difficult decisions concerning whether to rescind previously enacted restrictions on Jews in order to boost economic gains. Living in the bordering Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Jewish merchants developed strong trading relationships with their Russian counterparts. Though Russian law barred them from residing within the empire, certain provisions allowed Jews to commute across the border for weekly markets and less frequent fairs that proved beneficial for Jewish and Russian merchants alike.<sup>12</sup> When Russian legislation against Jews severed, or even limited, these interstate trading relationships, petitions and complaints from merchants spelling out the potential loss of economic profit often persuaded the state to retract the offending laws. In the lead up to the Polish Partitions, this same pattern played out time and again, placing the Russian state's traditional religious intolerance of and general aversion toward Jews in direct conflict with the empire's economic interests.

After the initial partition in 1772, Empress Catherine II assured the Jews of White Russia that they would “retain and preserve those freedoms that they now enjoy by law regarding the control of their property because the humaneness of Her Imperial Majesty will not permit anyone to be excluded from Her all-encompassing generosity.”<sup>13</sup> However, a proclamation delivered by a different Catherine—Catherine I—almost a half century earlier in 1727 holds equal significance in understanding how the Jewish Question formed in Russia. Yielding to reoccurring complaints about Jewish tavern keepers and farmers, Catherine I issued a decree in 1727 that expelled all Jews from the Ukraine (then a part of the Russian Empire) and any other towns in Russia. As Demidov explains, Catherine intended to

<sup>12</sup> John Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews: The Origins of the "Jewish Question" in Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe*, 58.



ensure that all Jews “shall be immediately expelled beyond the frontier and not be allowed under any circumstances to enter Russia.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, when confronted with a fairly similar amount of pressure from Russian merchants on the other side of this debate the empress appears to have largely rolled back the restrictions. Despite the fact that Catherine I issued an expulsion decree that minced few words, when petitions poured into the government from disgruntled merchants and officials in various parts of the district, Empress Anna finally restored the right for Jews to participate in retail and wholesale trade throughout all of Ukraine in 1734.<sup>15</sup>

As this example demonstrates, the Russian Empire's economic interests had the potential to supersede policies the state had established in the spirit of traditional religious intolerance toward the Jews. Historian John Klier makes this point when he remarks how “pragmatic considerations could temper even Russian intolerance,” on religious grounds.<sup>16</sup> Considering the persistence of religious hostility directed at Jews in Russia, this alone was quite an accomplishment. As evidence that these religious sentiments still lingered in contemporary Russia, Aleksandr Voznitsyn, a retired naval officer who had converted to Judaism, and Borokh Leibov, a Jew from the Smolensk district charged with converting him, were both burned at the stake for their infractions in St. Petersburg in July 1738.<sup>17</sup> Before his death Leibov had actually played a leading role in Catherine I's aforementioned declaration barring all Jews from Ukraine in 1727. While working as a farmer in Smolensk, an important border town for moving goods into Russia from Poland, Leibov helped build a synagogue for some Jews in the nearby village of Zverovich.<sup>18</sup> These

<sup>14</sup> Demidov, *The Jewish Question in Russia*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 325.

<sup>18</sup> Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 28.

actions ignited protests from the local Orthodox clergy that prompted Catherine to expel Jews, setting the stage for the showdown between traditional religious sentiments and economic gain that resurfaced so often during this period.

Shortly after her ascension to the throne in 1741, Elizabeth, the devoutly Orthodox daughter of Peter I, targeted religious minorities in the empire—especially Muslims and Jews—by announcing the expulsion of “these haters of the name of Christ, the Savior.”<sup>19</sup> Once again, religious intolerance and economic considerations clashed with the execution of this policy. In response to her expulsion order, some Riga merchants drafted a petition for the Senate to express their fears that such a policy might induce substantial economic ramifications due to the “loss of their Jewish middlemen in trade with Poland.”<sup>20</sup> Administrators from Lifland province aired similar concerns, complaining to the Senate that “the commerce of Riga may be entirely destroyed, and there will be no one to sell the foreign goods imported,” with Jews expelled from the district.<sup>21</sup> However, instead of allowing all these claims of severe economic detriment to overwhelm her religiously motivated policy, Elizabeth fired back with a well-known retort when the Senate requested she reconsider: “I desire no mercenary profit from the enemies of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Even though Elizabeth's seemingly unshakable religious faith ensured that she would not deviate from expulsion order, a close reading reveals—specifically the word “profit”—that she too considered Jews, and other religious minorities, an economic boon for Russia.

Perhaps none of Elizabeth's fellow tsars and tsarinas shared her exact obstinacy when it came to the matter of acquiring a “profit” from the “enemies of Christ.” Despite retaining her predecessor's ban

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Demidov, *The Jewish Question in Russia*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 29.

on Jewish settlement upon taking the throne in June 1762, Catherine II showed a willingness to overlook religious differences when seemingly more significant economic and security considerations surfaced. Almost immediately after taking control, Catherine issued her first of two Imperial Manifestos –one in 1762 and another in 1763—with the intention of recruiting foreign settlers to populate Russian territories in the southern and western parts of the empire.<sup>23</sup> Even before the Polish Partitions, Russia possessed massive amounts of excessive land in these regions. In fact, the 1763 Imperial Manifesto plainly notes that “a great many...Places for the settlement and Habitation of Mankind...remaine (sic) yet uncultivated.”<sup>24</sup> While underpopulation remained a major concern for Catherine, Roger Bartlett explains that Russia's drive for foreign immigration also meshed with the “mercantilist and cameralist theories of statecraft prominent in Europe in the early and middle decades of the century.”<sup>25</sup> On a more practical level, Catherine's immigration program assisted in the growth of the economy, both from the standpoint of general population increase and “specifically through the use of immigrants to encourage trade, industry and agriculture.”<sup>26</sup>

When Catherine sent the Initial drafts of her 1762 Imperial decree to the Senate, she excluded Jews from the ranks of potential foreign settlers for Russia's sparsely populated southern and western borderlands. Hinting at religious difference, the October 14, 1762 draft stated: “to receive henceforth into Russia without further report to Us all persons wishing to settle, except Jews. We hope in time by this means to increase the glory of God and his Orthodox faith, and the well-being of Our Empire.”<sup>27</sup> The final line perfectly encapsulates

<sup>23</sup> Roger P. Bartlett, *Human Capital: The Settlement of Foreigners in Russia 1762-1804* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), xiii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

the dilemma facing Russian officials. Most often in regards to the Jewish Question, the choice came between maintaining the purity of the Orthodox faith within Russia and the “well-being of Our Empire.” When Catherine issued a revised Imperial Manifesto a year later, mention of Jewish exclusion was curiously missing. This time Jews became directly involved in the recruitment process. Some Russian immigration officials secretly used Jewish emissaries to recruit Jews from Prussia and Poland for districts in New Russia.<sup>28</sup> And Russian officials seemingly opened the door to any prospective settler, which is clear from this circular sent to southern border authorities in 1764: “People of any nationality and [religious] observance crossing the border with the intention of entering service or settling in the New Russia province shall immediately be admitted into the aforementioned province. They shall not be asked their nationality, or required to produce passports.”<sup>29</sup> Looking past the irony of the Russian government actively seeking out Jews to settle in particular parts of empire—a scenario that would replay itself with far-off colonization programs in the nineteenth century—an expulsion decree still restricted Jewish residence in most other districts. Nevertheless, only eight short years after enacting this rather curious colonization policy, Catherine II would sign the first of the Polish Partitions, shortly making Russia home to one of the world's largest Jewish populations. Catherine perhaps embodies the perfect Russian leader for the sort of Jewish policy Demidov articulated. Throughout her reign Catherine willingly bent entrenched rules regarding the Jews in order to derive an economic or strategic benefit for Russia. Polonsky explains this tendency quite well when he argues that “Finance conditions—the need to pay for the wars of the eighteenth century and

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the attendant imperial expansion—were also a constant factor in determining her policies.”<sup>30</sup>

From the relatively short period between Catherine I's expulsion decree in 1727 and Catherine II's proclamation of supreme generosity toward the Jews in 1772, Russian policy seems to have made some fairly substantial shifts in regards to the Jewish Question. Clearly, the Russian Empire had not evolved into a completely accepting, Enlightenment-minded state in the course of some 45 years. That Catherine II set in motion what would become the Pale of Settlement less than 20 years after the latter of these two dates assures us that this is certainly not the case. What changed then during this period? Most significantly, the traditional religious intolerance that had longed barred Jews from Russia started to give way to the same sort of economic interests Demidov describes in his report. As Bartal explains, the two primary problems the Russian state encountered following the partitions included how best to integrate the Jews and how to organize Jewish economic “activity so that it would be of benefit to the state and at the same time not harm the economic interests of other groups in the population.”<sup>31</sup> While an obvious long-term concern, religious difference hardly constituted a major issue at this time since “the trends of enlightened absolutism were dominant,” and the “Jews in Russia were not necessarily perceived according to the traditional Christian image but as a population of great economic value.”<sup>32</sup>

Some decisions the Russian state committed to immediately following the Polish Partitions support Demidov's claims about the “narrow utilitarian spirit,” that often motivated its policy. Klier offers a fascinating suggestion when he questions why Catherine II failed to employ the most “Muscovite” approach to the partitions by simply

<sup>30</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 336.

<sup>31</sup> Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

expelling all Jews residing in the areas of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that Russia annexed.<sup>33</sup> This approach would have jibed best with supreme religious intolerance. However, as Demidov suggests, perhaps the Russian state allowed Jews to remain in the same provinces they occupied before the partitions, which eventually became the Pale of Settlement, in order to derive maximum economic benefit from their inclusion in the empire. In another calculating maneuver, the Russian state opted to “retain and expand” the Jewish autonomous institutions after the first partition.<sup>34</sup> Part of the reason for this policy is the Russian government feared that administrative weaknesses might lead to losses in tax revenue. Lacking the means to collect taxes from most Jewish communities, the state had to rely on the *kahal* to gather taxes from the members of its community. In this way, the government permitted Jews to preserve their autonomous communities (the extension of a right) in exchange for a consistent method of tax collection for the Russian state (a valuable economic benefit)—a government-initiated tradeoff executed much as Demidov suggested.

### **Defining Jewish “Usefulness” Through Nineteenth Century Policy**

As Enlightenment ideas gained increasing prevalence in Eastern Europe toward the middle of the eighteenth century, the influence of powerful notions of the individual recast societal bonds. Now instead of large collections of groups, societies were thought to consist of individuals who each possessed their rights while also maintaining various obligations to the state. As Enlightenment influences reached Russia, societal structures and the economic landscape adapted accordingly. Adam Teller explains precisely how these larger social and economic shifts impacted Jews as they came within the fold of the Russian Empire: “The economic component of this ideology—

<sup>33</sup> Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 332.

physiocracy—that valued the natural economy and agricultural work above all, viewed Jewish economic activity negatively. It argued that in order to make Jews useful members of society, their economic life should be reformed to make it more 'productive.' In real terms, this meant causing Jews to abandon petty trade in favor of agriculture, or at least crafts and industrial labor.”<sup>35</sup> Russian officials strove to more fully integrate Jews into the empire's economic order while simultaneously employing them in those industries considered desirable or in demand to secure the greatest boon for the empire's economy. Evidence of such motives is strewn through state legislation from Alexander I's Jewish Constitution in 1804 to Alexander II's more permissive laws that allowed certain Jews to reside outside the Pale of Settlement in the 1860s.

With the Polish Partitions now complete and a nascent Pale of Settlement forming along the western borderlands of the empire, Russia's Jewish policy became more focused at the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the rather short half-decade reign of Catherine's son Paul, the empire welcomed a new tsar to the throne in 1801: Alexander I. For the next quarter century, Alexander would orchestrate Russia's efforts to “transform” the Jews into useful and productive subjects capable of helping boost the empire's often sluggish and unsatisfactory—when compared to Western powers—economic performance. Few contemporary Russian officials would likely consider the task easy. Jews had acquired several unpleasant stereotypes that the Russian government, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, hoped it could purge en route to morphing them into positive, contributing members of the empire. First, many Russians claimed Jews “disrupted relations between landlords and peasants in

<sup>35</sup> Adam Teller, “Economic Life,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Economic\\_Life](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Economic_Life).

the sensitive western provinces,” with their “oppressive” behavior.<sup>36</sup> A related accusation that severely complicated the Jewish Question in Russia contended that Jews exploited peasants in the countryside, prompting much legislation to protect the latter group from these devious Jewish traders and tavern keepers. The other perceived hurdle to shaping Jews into useful subjects was they supposedly “disdained physical labor,” and “felt should be performed by the 'inferior' peasant.”<sup>37</sup> Despite these potential pitfalls, Russian leaders had a “high regard for Jewish commercial acumen,” and believed that, with the proper legislation in place, they could represent a useful and economically beneficial asset for the empire.<sup>38</sup>

Alexander's issuance of the Statute Concerning the Organization of the Jews—or, as it is more commonly known, the Jewish Constitution—on December 9, 1804 marked a seminal moment in the relationship between the Russian state and its Jewish subjects. The statute aimed to overhaul Jewish life, delving into areas as far-ranging as education, economics, religion and community associations. In this way, the Jewish Constitution of 1804 represented the first significant attempt on the part of the Russian government to define Jewish usefulness. Reacting to complaints from Russian natives about Jews working as innkeepers and tavern keepers in the Western provinces, Alexander barred all Jews from agriculture-related leasing in article 34 of the statute in order to “increase the economic benefits they provided,” and encourage “Jewish agricultural settlement.”<sup>39</sup> Relatedly, the statute abolished all Jewish leaseholders from the villages: “No Jew, beginning on the 1st of January 1808, in the provinces of Astrakhan and Caucasia, and in those of Little Russia and New Russia, and from the 1st of January 1808, elsewhere, in any

<sup>36</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 328.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>39</sup> Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe*, 59.



village or in the countryside, is allowed to hold a lease on a tavern, drinking house or inn ... nor to sell liquor, nor even to live where this is done, except when passing through.”<sup>40</sup> Despite the specificity demonstrated above, the policy remained only partially implemented for all practical purposes came to a halt with a Jewish committee report in March 1812 that claimed, “Jews performed valuable economic functions in the countryside.”<sup>41</sup>

At the heart of the Jewish Constitution of 1804, the Russian state began to sketch its definition of a useful Jewish subject. Dubnow characterizes the government's attempts nicely when he writes that from an economic standpoint “the new statute establishes two opposite poles,” a “negative pole” that includes “the rural occupations of innkeeping and land-tenure” and a “positive pole” that features agriculture, “which on the contrary is to be stimulated and promoted among Jews in every possible manner.”<sup>42</sup> According to the statute's provisions, all Jews were placed in one of four economic categories: merchants, townspeople, manufacturers and artisans, and farmers. Furthermore, the state offered loans to individuals who established factories which were “in particular demand” in hopes of spurring Jewish enrollment in occupations such as industry, manufacturing and artisanry.<sup>43</sup> Demidov even cites a *ukase* from July 29, 1827 that states, “the Government measures adopted for *deriving State advantages from this race* by the enactment of the special Regulations of 1804 for the administration of the Jews, and the contrivance of means for the transfer of Jews from villages to the towns have not as yet been attended with the desired success.”<sup>44</sup> While a number of factors—including recent events, the intended audience and unknown political

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>41</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 350.

<sup>42</sup> Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 342.

<sup>43</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 347.

<sup>44</sup> Demidov, *The Jewish Question in Russia*, 42.

circumstances—might ultimately be responsible for the mention of “deriving State advantages from this race,” its inclusion remains rather curious, and serves as fairly solid evidence that the Russia state perceived Jews as a tool for which to derive economic benefit.

One potentially overlooked factor that demonstrates the importance that Alexander I placed on the ability for Jews to substantially contribute to the empire's economic vitality is the unprecedented amount of attention the tsar devoted to the topic. Prior to Alexander establishing the Committee for the Organization of Jewish Life in November 1802, no formal body specifically for the investigation of Jewish legislation and issues had existed in the tsarist empire or Poland. Within the next couple years the government formed yet another commission. Then in January 1809 Alexander appointed a third Jewish Committee, “with a mandate to examine all aspects of the problem of how Jews could be diverted from the rural economy and the liquor trade to other economic activities.”<sup>45</sup> In March 1812, after three years of hard work, the committee released a report that argued Jews should be permitted to sell alcohol in the countryside (“It is not true that the village Jew enriches himself at the expense of the peasant. On the contrary, he is generally poor, and ekes out a scanty existence from the sale of liquor...”) and fought forcefully against article 34 of the Jewish Constitution of 1804 banning Jews from leaseholding (“The recent experiments of the Government have had no effect. On the contrary, the Jewish people 'has not only remained in the same state of poverty, but has even been reduced to greater destitution, as a result of having been forced out of a pursuit which had provided it with a livelihood for several centuries.’”).<sup>46</sup> With Napoleon's army advancing toward Russia's western border, Alexander reasoned that the empire would be better off with the Jews remaining in the countryside for now. However, this

<sup>45</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 349.

<sup>46</sup> Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 354.

would not mark the final time a Russian tsar ordered the formation of a committee to investigate the Jewish Question.

While Russian leaders openly expressed their desire to refashion Jews into an economically beneficial group in the articles of their statutes and decrees, often times the less provocative language contained in these documents proves just as valuable for the historian. A prime example of this concept is Nicholas I's Recruitment Statute of the Jews issued on August 26, 1827. The statute ordered that "for the relief of all Our loyal subjects, the recruitment duty be equalized for all categories of subjects liable to it, We order that Jews be required to fulfill the recruitment duty in person," rather than pay a 500-rouble exemption tax.<sup>47</sup> As a militant person who regarded "all human life as being nothing more than service because everyone must serve," Nicholas believed the army could cure the ills of Jewish society, thus helping Russia solve its problem with Jews and cultivating a growing group of useful economic contributors.<sup>48</sup> In this way, the military would serve as a sort of classroom for the twelve to twenty-five year-old Jewish recruits since "they would learn not only Russian but also useful skills and crafts, and eventually they would become his loyal subjects."<sup>49</sup> However, Nicholas planned to protect a select group of individuals from the compulsory twenty-five year conscription terms. Aside from rabbis, the other categories of exempt Jews possessed some level of economic usefulness, or potential economic usefulness, for the Russian state: members of the merchant estate (likely paying hefty taxes and stimulating the economy with many financial transactions), Jews who had taken courses in state-sponsored institutions (learning the language and practical skills the

<sup>47</sup> Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 16.

<sup>48</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 359.

<sup>49</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "Military Service in Russia," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Military\\_Service\\_in\\_Russia](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Military_Service_in_Russia).

government desires) and those living on Jewish agricultural colonies (which the state wished to develop into productive, lucrative ventures in formerly barren districts). Apparently Russia's definition of Jewish usefulness changed little because a couple decades later Alexander II would select similar groups for exemption from the Pale of Settlement.

Following the reoccurrence of famine in the former Polish provinces in the late 1830s, Nicholas sought new methods to solve the Jewish Question. For this purpose, he enlisted the assistance of Pavel Kiselev, who was charged with investigating the issue and reporting his findings. Kiselev's recommendations might represent the most poignant example of the Russian state's efforts to define Jewish usefulness in the nineteenth century. Kiselev took the opportunity to call for a "fundamental transformation of this nation ... [by] the removal of those harmful factors that obstruct its path to the general civil order."<sup>50</sup> Beyond banning separate Jewish dress and setting up schools that would teach Russian language and history, Kiselev's program greatly emphasized the importance of Jews taking up the sorts of "useful" occupations the Russian state had been encouraging them to embrace since Alexander I assumed the throne in 1801.<sup>51</sup> Not stopping at a mere outline of his proposal to "transform" Russia's Jews, Kiselev offered an execution plan to accelerate the "productivization" of the Jews. Based on particular criteria, the government would separate Jews into "productive" and "non-productive" categories. Members of the latter group would have five years to establish—by "stable residence through the ownership of property or by becoming artisans, farmers, or guild merchants"—their case for elevation into the "productive" category. If unsuccessful, however, Kiselev's guidelines dictated that these "non-productive"

<sup>50</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 359.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

Jews would be conscripted or forcibly retrained for one of the aforementioned occupations.

Despite its radical nature—and the fiery opposition it touched off among Nicholas I’s advisors—Kiselev’s plan served as the basis for the Russian state’s reclassification policy adopted in 1846. Much like the proposal Kiselev offered, Jews would have to prove themselves as useful by joining a merchant guild, owning property in a city or town, becoming a member of an artisan guild, or declaring as a farmer—for whom the government would subsidize with financial support.<sup>52</sup> The new law required all Jews to register for their chosen category by January 1, 1850, with any Jew who failed to do so liable to “suffer the unpleasant consequences which their persistence on the path of evil must to.”<sup>53</sup> Even though Kiselev’s plan earned the tsar’s blessing, as Stanislawski points out, it missed the target because most of the Jews who the government sought to improve through the reclassification program were too impoverished to cobble together enough money to learn a new trade or buy admission into a guild—let alone purchase a house in a city or town.<sup>54</sup> “The illness of the Jews, their poverty and exploitation of the peasants,” Stanislawski argues, “would only be exacerbated by crowding them into the big cities without sufficient means of support.”<sup>55</sup> Thanks in part to the inability of Jews to dramatically change their circumstances and the dysfunction common to the tsarist bureaucracy, the deadline for Jews to register in the categories passed. First it was extended to July 1, 1852 then November 1, 1852, but enforcement never came. The combination of the Crimean War starting less than a year later in October 1853 plus

<sup>52</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 385.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>54</sup> Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews*, 157.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

the Nicholas's death sixteen months later are often cited as the primary reasons for this policy remaining unimplemented.<sup>56</sup>

This exact same combination—the Crimean War loss and death of Nicholas I—ushered in a series of sweeping changes in the middle of the 1850s. By virtue of its defeat in the Crimean War, Russia faced mounting debt and the harsh reality of economic and military inferiority to stronger Western powers such as Britain and France.<sup>57</sup> Replacing the deceased tsar, the new leader Alexander II sought to “narrow the gap between Russia and the European powers,” an ambition that would substantially alter Jewish life in the coming decades.<sup>58</sup> The first domino to fall came with the abolition of serfdom in 1861, which rapidly propelled Russia from the depths of an agricultural feudal economy toward a primarily capitalistic one. Since many Jews still depended on the leasehold system, this sudden change constituted a significant shock that forced them to seek other means of employment to survive. But the next domino affected Jewish society even more directly. Shortly after becoming tsar, Alexander convened the Jewish Committee to review legislation concerning the Jews—a common practice for new nineteenth century Russian leaders. When the committee canvassed the Pale of Settlement to ask the various province governors whether restrictions on Jewish residence and occupations should be lessened, many advocated “the immediate granting of civil rights to the Jews and allowing them freedom of both residence and choice of occupation.”<sup>59</sup> Several even highlighted the positive national economic ramifications such a policy would have if enacted. Unfortunately for the Jews, the Jewish Committee wished for a more gradual emancipation process that would assure Jews had

<sup>56</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 385.

<sup>57</sup> R. M. Guseinov, "The Phantom of Capitalism in Russia (I)," *Problems of Economic Transition* 42, no. 12 (2000): 37-52.

<sup>58</sup> Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe*, 102.

<sup>59</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 395.

“reformed their communal life, acquired Western-style education, and become engaged in ‘useful’ occupations.”<sup>60</sup>

Following the pattern of previous policies regarding the Jews during this period, Alexander’s decision of which Jewish groups would first experience eased restrictions weighed heavily on economic considerations. To be fair, Russian officials also took into account which Jewish groups would least likely clash with peasants, but the choices speak for themselves in terms of their potential financial attractiveness to the government. Three main groups of Jews fit this criterion: merchants of the first guild, university graduates (recipients of doctorates, master’s or bachelor’s degrees) and all artisans that possessed membership to a guild.<sup>61</sup> From March 1859 to June 1865, the Russian state relaxed restrictions on the aforementioned groups, allowing them to exit the Pale of Settlement in search of more enticing opportunities in the interior of the empire. Only the artisans—which included craftsmen, mechanics, distillers, brewers and others—were forced to follow specific protocols for fear they might exploit peasants or become unproductive. With that said, artisans had to routinely obtain passports from their hometowns in the Pale and return there if they became unemployed.<sup>62</sup> Even though this policy may have opened the interior for an estimated one-fifth of the Jewish population in the Pale, the bureaucratic laws deterred most eligible Jews from leaving at this time.<sup>63</sup>

Alexander’s policy of exempting a small percentage of the most “useful” Jews from the harshness of life in the Pale of Settlement serves as the best representation of Demidov’s accusation that the Russian state often offered a “certain extension of civil rights [to be]

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> John Klier, “Pale of Settlement,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pale\\_of\\_Settlement](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pale_of_Settlement).

made in favor of the Jews,” in exchange for “the acquisition of material benefits for the State from this race.”<sup>64</sup> With each major piece of major legislation concerning the Jews from Catherine II to Nicholas I, the Russian state further defined the Pale of Settlement’s boundaries, which effectively sealed its provinces off as bastion of economic underperformance and Jewish poverty. Many officials in the Russian government believed, like the liberal newspaper *Golos* (The Voice) that the Russian peasantry would “would be ‘eaten alive’ by the literate and crafty Jews if the latter were allowed free entry into the interior.”<sup>65</sup> However, much like the conflict between religious intolerance and economic considerations Russian leaders encountered before the Polish Partitions in the eighteenth century, when the state wished to rectify the well-known “unfavorable comparison between Russia and Western Europe in terms of development,” it would draft policies allowing the most prosperous, economically beneficial Jews to live or conduct business outside the Pale of Settlement.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, the Russian state demonstrated a keen interest in the development of Jews into “useful” and “productive” subjects who would derive immense economic benefits for the state. When the time came to endow Jews with some level of emancipation during Alexander II’s attempts to revamp the Russian economy, there is little surprise that the first groups to earn the privileges of residence and occupation choice perfectly matched the state’s long-crafted definition of “usefulness.”

<sup>64</sup> Demidov, *The Jewish Question in Russia*, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Klier, “Pale of Settlement.”

<sup>66</sup> Eli Lederhendler, *The Road to Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 85.



## **How the State's Jewish Legislation Impacted Relations between Russians and Jews**

The Russian government's focus on deriving economic benefits from Jews during the period starting in the middle of the eighteenth century and ending with Alexander II's death in 1881 was not responsible for the deep schism between native Orthodox Russians and Jews. Religious tensions and political squabbles between the two groups are thought to date back to the late fifteenth century under the rule of Muscovite Russia.<sup>67</sup> Therefore Russian policies enacted three to four centuries later might have exacerbated existing problems but could not reasonably be considered the cause of them. With that said, the Russian state perpetuated relations between Jews and non-Jews in the empire through its policies in a few significant ways: The establishment of the Pale of Settlement increased Jewish separateness and the erratic nature of Russia's Jewish policy made it challenging for society to settle around a firm understanding of the Jews within the Russian Empire.

Representations of Jewish deviation from the rest of Russian society constituted one of the primary targets of state restrictions during the nineteenth century. Whether focusing on autonomous organizations, traditional Jewish dress or teachings at Jewish religious schools, the general thrust of Russian legislation sought to remove these perceived barriers from rest of the population. Sergey Uvarov must have considered this part of his motive when he vowed to accomplish "a complete transformation of Jewish life" in the early 1840s.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, however, the Russian state used the Pale of Settlement as a sort of pen for "unproductive" Jews. Even before Alexander II opened the interior up to the Jewish population's best and brightest in the late 1850s and early 1860s, legislation in 1835

<sup>67</sup> Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. "Muscovite Russia," <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12943-russia>.

<sup>68</sup> Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 365.

“permitted only short, temporary sojourns outside the Pale,” for elite merchants.<sup>69</sup> While Russian leaders rewarded a small handful of Jews, the vast majority had no exposure to life outside the Pale of Settlement. This lack of face-to-face experience with Russians made Jewish stereotypes much more powerful, which may have aided in the rise of anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Louis Greenberg explains the problem: “the Jew as a human being was practically an unknown entity to the Russian people. Whatever notion did exist about him was usually distortion and caricature. Even in classic Russian literature the Jew appears either as an unreal being or as a ludicrous creature.”<sup>70</sup>

Beyond the matter of Russian state forcibly separating Jews and non-Jews through the creation of the Pale of Settlement, the constant twists and turns of the government’s Jewish policy probably took quite a toll on relations between the two groups. Above all else, the state created a scenario with a moving target. No one ever quite knew where the Jews stood—*except* for at the top—or where they might be headed in the coming weeks and months. The constant back and forth likely transfixed society in a sort of perpetual unease regarding the Jewish Question. For example, Alexander II might take two steps forward with the partial emancipation of a select few Jews. But the backlash would arrive swiftly in the form of the Russian press running headlines that remarked “The Jew is on the Move” and Russian writers complaining about the number of Jews enrolled in the secondary and higher education system.<sup>71</sup> Predictably, Alexander would have to change course once Christian pressure became too much, which obviously happened in this instance. The inability of the state to outline a specific policy—rather than opportunistically

<sup>69</sup> Klier, "Pale of Settlement."

<sup>70</sup> Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia: The Struggle for Emancipation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 53.

<sup>71</sup> Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe*, 136 and 142.

jumping from issue to issue—created a situation where Russian-Jewish relations were bound to fester then fail.

### **Conclusion**

What this review of Russia's policy toward Jews from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of Alexander II's reign demonstrates is the sheer complexity of the Jewish Question in the Russian Empire. Clearly no single motivation prompted Russia's leaders to enact the various policies they passed during this period. On this point, Demidov's theory misses the mark. The Russian noble claimed that the state's consistent pursuit of economic enhancement served as the "main principle" underlying Russian legislation concerning Jews. After a complete and thorough examination of Russia's policy, it remains unknown whether this impulse acted as the main principle when Russian officials they crafted the various pieces of legislation that affected Jews living in the empire. While the statutes and decrees that Demidov cites often blatantly speak about the government's wish to derive economic benefits from the Jews from the configuration of its policies, the historian must also consider that officials frequently include certain language in documents to mask their actual intentions. This makes gleaning their actual meaning and motivations virtually impossible. Another matter to consider is that the Russian government framed its Jewish policies hoping to achieve several goals at the same time. Maybe it sought to protect the peasants from Jewish exploitation while concurrently gaining an economic advantage from the Jewish population. Determining where the aim of one part of the policy ends and another begins is another quandary capable of forever baffling the historian.

With that said, overwhelming evidence exists to show that the Russian government hoped to craft policies during this period that would transform Jews into economically advantageous subjects for the empire. Even before the Polish Partitions, the state demonstrated a propensity to allow economic considerations to supersede traditional

forms of religious intolerance, which typically kept Jews outside the empire's borders. However, when Jewish presence was determined beneficial at local fairs or settling the western and southern provinces, the Russian state suddenly felt compelled to relax such restrictions. Following the Polish Partitions, Russia's policy toward Jews became more focused on how the state could gain from the new additions to the empire. Beginning with the Jewish Constitution of 1804, the Russian state sought to define Jewish usefulness. For the most part, this meant transferring Jews out of leasehold jobs such as tavern keeping and innkeeping and into more "useful" and "productive" occupations that would help Russia develop into an economic powerhouse capable of rivaling those in the West. Subsequent pieces of legislation such as the military conscription policy, reclassification and Alexander II's easing of residence and occupation restrictions all separated "productive" and "non-productive" Jews in some capacity—rewarding the former while punishing the latter.

All of this evidence is enough to prove that while the Russian state may not have attempted to answer the Jewish Question in exactly the manner Demidov proposes, the prospect of deriving economic benefits from Jews certainly influenced the decision-making of officials when they crafted policies that affected Jews.

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