

The Emigration Boom of Russian Jews, 1881 to 1917

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Course	Title	Term
<i>HI 1332</i>	<i>Introduction to the History of Technology</i>	<i>A16</i>
<i>HI 2324</i>	<i>The British Empire</i>	<i>D17</i>
<i>HI 2320</i>	<i>Modern Europe History</i>	<i>B17</i>
<i>HI 2332</i>	<i>History of Modern American Science and Technology</i>	<i>D18</i>
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Abstract

This paper conducts an analysis of why Russian Jewish emigrants left their homes in such large numbers from 1881 to 1917. It argues that the reason they left was the culmination of internal Russian conditions: pogroms and anti-Jewish legislation. In addition to these factors the United States Jewish population eased resettlement of Russian Jews, providing another reason to leave. The argument is presented by first overviewing the history of Russian Jews, looking at quantitative statistics of their emigration, and lastly discussing pogroms and legislation that was put in place over the 16 year period.

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Introduction

“As we drove along I looked about in bewilderment. My thoughts were chasing each other. I felt a thrill: ‘am I really in America at last?’ But the next moment it would be checked and I felt a little disappointed, a little homesick” (“From Russia to the Lower East Side in the 1890s”). Rose Gallup Cohen arrived in New York in 1892, only twelve years old. She joined her father who had been living in the United States for the past year and was soon immersed in American culture. She went to an American school and helped her father work in an American shop.

The story of Rose and her father was not unique. They were part of the massive contingent of Russian Jews to leave home from 1881 to 1917. Over 2.5 million Jews left Russia throughout this 16-year period, many of them finding new homes in the United States.

This begs the question: Why was there such mass emigration? The simple answer is that life for the Jewish population in Russia was very difficult at this time: a substantial enough reason to leave. However, at a deeper look, Russia had a history of anti-Jewish sentiment going back far earlier than 1881. Given that fact, why did Russian Jews choose to leave in such large numbers from 1881 to 1917 despite a history of persecution? This paper will provide insight into what factors were responsible for the migration by looking at previous life in Russia, and new developments beginning in 1881.



The Russian Empire reached far west in 1881. Containing the modern-day national capitals Warsaw, Poland and Kiev, Ukraine, Russia was not the same as what we see today.

Silverman, Rachel. "Jewish Subject Rights in the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Poland." *AncestorCloud Blog*.

The Russian Jewish Population

The origin of Jewish bigotry in Russia did not start in 1881 where we begin our analysis of emigration. Rather, the history of the Russian Jewish population over hundreds of years is a history of unfounded ill-sentiment. To preface this analysis we must look first at the conditions and life of the Jews throughout Russian history.

Judaism originated in the Middle East in modern-day Israel. The people descended from nomadic tribes and established villages in the Israeli region. Jews resided in this area for hundreds of years before the first communities were established outside of Israel on the Arabian Peninsula and in Egypt circa 700 BCE. Roman occupation and Byzantine rule (66-135 CE and

324-640 CE, respectively) began the discrimination and prejudice that became so synonymous with Jewish people in the years to come. Under the Romans, Jews were banned from living in Jerusalem: the heart of Israel; under the Byzantines, Christianity was first introduced and anti-Jewish laws were enacted. This discrimination resulted in a Jewish minority by the 6th century in the land that was once their own (Kniesmeyer et al.).

It is from this point that there is significant enough movement of Jews towards the Caucasus mountains and beyond that it is worth our interest. In the 7th century, many Jews from Greece, Babylonia, Persia, and the Middle East undertook the journey north-east. Judaism spread throughout Eastern Europe and modern-day Russia in this time mostly because of Jewish merchants traveling through Slavic lands. Lithuanian control of Western Russia in the late 14th century is important for the fact that they granted privileges to the Jewish communities under their control ("Russian Virtual Jewish History Tour"). As a result, Jewish emigration to modern-day Ukraine and western Russia concentrated the Jews in the area where our interest in emigration begins and by 1800 Russia boasted a Jewish population of more than 800,000 (Klier, "Jews").

The period of 1825 to 1881 includes many Jewish-centric reforms and policies that could present motivation for emigration, but it does not result in significant departure. Czar Nicholas I reigned from 1825-1855 with an iron-fisted anti-Jewish regime. As soon as he came to power in 1825 he ordered conscription of young Jews into the Russian military starting at age 12. Many were kidnapped and forced to spend years with the military whilst Jewish families were forced out of their homes. The Government encouraged agricultural occupations for Jews which began a major resettlement to the area of western Russia known as the Pale of Settlement.

Assimilation efforts were started with government-organized schools, specifically targeting Jews. These schools were paid for by extra tax on the Jewish population and were required to have both Christian and Jewish teachers. In 1855, Alexander II inherited the Empire from his deceased predecessor and thus ended some of the harsh treatment of Jews, nevertheless, assimilation efforts continued. Jews began to migrate back out of the Pale of Settlement to the rest of Russia where they were allowed to enroll in standard Russian secondary-schools. Population soared under Alexander II due to high birthrates and low mortality. In 1850 the Jewish population was 2,350,000 and by the late 19th century it had nearly doubled to 5,000,000. It is here that Jews begin to emigrate from Russia in numbers never before seen by their community (“Russian Virtual Jewish History Tour”).

Emigration of 1881 to 1917

Jewish emigration from Russia was illegal throughout this time however this did not stop the population from leaving in large numbers. It does mean that the Russian government did not take attentive records on who was leaving and how many of them were departing. To measure the number of Jews leaving we can look at estimates of emigration from Eastern Europe, most of which was Russia, and well-documented immigration numbers to the United States and other popular destinations.

The United States had incredibly detailed records on immigration for both this time period and the years before. From 1820 to 1886 the official census reported that 184,305 Russian immigrants arrived in the United States. Of this group, 100,000 arrived between 1820 and 1880, meaning that nearly half (84,000) arrived just in the span of 6 years: 1880 to 1886. In 1884 the

United States began classifying immigrants according to their religion rather than just their country of origin. Beginning in 1884 the United Hebrew Charities undertook a study of Jewish immigrants arriving through New York. They were able to find a majority of Jewish immigrants were coming from Russia:

Year	Total # of Jewish Immigrants	Russian-Jewish Immigrants
1885	18,535	11,348
1886	27,348	17,396
1887	25,788	16,682
1888	29,602	20,809
1889	22,674	15,977
Total	123,947	82,212

These raw numbers show just how many Russian-Jews were leaving the country over this 5-year span. If we combine these numbers with immigration from 1880 to 1886, we can evaluate over an increased period of time. It is estimated that under ten percent of the Russian immigrants arriving post-1880 were non-Jewish: so deducting those from the calculation, we find that over nine years 184,000 Russian Jews arrived in the United States, nearly double those who arrived in the 60 years preceding 1880. This sudden increase further piques our interest into why this could have been (Price 32).

Looking ahead, in 1891 and 1892 the United States again received huge numbers of Jewish immigrants. In 1891, 111,000 Jews entered the United States while in 1892 137,000 arrived. This compares against 50,000 to 60,000 in the previous years. Internal developments within Russia caused the numbers to double over the two year period.

Another time period of interest is 1905 to 1906. More than 200,000 Jews left Russia in this time; again a result of internal developments. Looking more deeply at this group of emigrants we see that 154,000 went to the United States, a much larger number than the 13,500 that went to Argentina (the second most popular destination). Understanding the draw of the United States will help our understanding of emigration in general.

The general Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe was astounding. Over 2.5 million Jews left from 1881 to 1914; roughly equating to 80,000 each year (we know that it was not an equal distribution). Again the United States was an extremely popular destination with around 2 million Jewish immigrants arriving (Ettinger).

Explaining Why

The raw statistics of Jewish emigration from Russia cannot be ignored and must be classified as no coincidence. To explain the reasons for mass emigration we first look at the internal situation of the Jewish people in their Russian homeland. There are two main factors that pushed them out of the country: a series of pogroms at different points in the 16-year period and government legislation against the Jewish people. Lastly the United States was statistically by far the most popular destination; part of the reason so many Jews left Russia was because of the United States.

i. Pogroms

“A pogrom is generally understood as an attack on a minority population, usually perpetrated by a quasi-military mob” (Abramson). In Henry Abramson’s article on pogroms and

the history of their use in Russia he outlines what pogroms are and continues to say that the word was in fact created to describe the mass violence that targeted Jews in the late 19th century.

Pogroms are distinct from unplanned mob violence as well as organized national movements; in fact, they are contained within the spectrum between the two.

The first wave of Russian pogroms targeting Jews occurred in 1881 and lasted for multiple years until 1884. The first example of violence broke out in Elisavetgrad, in what is now modern-day Ukraine. The attack occurred in April and before the year was out, the country saw more than 200 additional breakouts of a similar nature. To those Russian Jews targeted, the outbreaks of violence caused a range of problems. “At the very best there was inconvenience and disruption; at the worst there was rape, physical injury, and death. In between, there was harassment, destruction of property and loss of livelihood” (Cassedy 130). The results of the attacks were undoubtedly a detriment to Jewish life in Russia. The extremes of physical violence and rape would have made many want to leave home in search of safer living conditions. The loss of property and livelihood also provided impetus for people to seek new opportunities elsewhere. When we later look at government acts and legislation we will see that effects on livelihood and where the Jewish population called home was nothing new.

There are a few hypothesized reasons as to why this happened. The attacks occurred directly after the assassination of Czar Alexander II and many Russians believed that the Jews were responsible for his murder. Of the group of revolutionaries who attacked the Czar, only one was Jewish and she, along with another woman and four men, was found responsible for the assassination (Gitelman). Despite the attack having no correlation to Judaism, word spread throughout the empire that the Jews had killed the Czar and thus began the pogroms. Jewish

activists at the time believed that the Russian government even orchestrated some of violence with rumors that Alexander III (Alexander II's successor) gave permission to "beat the Jews for three days" (Abramson). Of course the pogroms lasted far longer than a few days, and contributed to the first wave of mass migration beginning in 1881.

If we revisit the numbers we gathered in the previous section we can see a direct correlation with the start of the pogroms and the increase in emigration. Nearly 84,000 Russian Jews arrived in the United States from 1880 to 1886, instigated by the '81-'84 pogroms.



"The bodies of Jews killed in a Russian pogrom, 1905"
(Abramson)

Pogroms on this scale were not seen again until the 1900s were they reappeared, more violent than ever, in 1903. On the 18th of April in Kishinev, pogroms recurred once more. Three day of riots in the city resulted in 50 Jews killed and brought world-wide attention to the anti-Jewish sentiment prevalent in twentieth century Russia (Klier, "Pogroms"). The trend of blaming the Jews for actions beyond their control was brought into prominence again. The violence was

instigated by an anti-Semitic newspaper, which blamed the death of two children on the local Jewish population. In addition to the mass murder there was also pillaging and the destruction of homes.

From 1903 to 1906 these ultra-violent pogroms raged every so often as Jews continued to attract unfounded accusation. Jews were a common target in the political battle that raged within Russia. Often accused of supporting the decreasingly popular Czarist regime, political protests and meetings became the source of pogroms. Again in Kishinev, in 1905, protests turned into anti-Semitic attacks resulting in the death of 19 Jews. In Kiev, a city hall meeting led to riots against Jews, citing them as the cause of Russian problems, this time killing 100 (“Pogroms”).

In addition to civilian-led pogroms, Czar Nicholas II (Alexander III’s successor) had little to no sympathy for Russian Jews. He openly supported organizations that targeted the Jewish people, including the “Black Hundreds” who led many of the attacks against the Jews (Abramson). The second wave of pogroms caused even more death and destruction to the Jewish population and it was a clear instigator of the 200,000 who chose to leave the country from 1905 to 1906.

On reflection on the 16-year period, there are distinct increases in emigration that corresponded with pogrom years. The initial pogroms kickstarted emigration from Russia, while the 1903 to 1906 pogroms saw the greatest number of emigrants over that short period of time.

ii. Legislation

Legislation and government regulation were an important factor in the oppression and mistreatment of Russian Jews at this time. The pogroms represent a spontaneous and violent

response targeting the Jewish people, but government measures show a much larger disrespect for the people that had been in place far longer than just 1881 to 1917.



“Map of the Pale Settlement in The Russian Empire.” *Babi Yar - I.*

The first piece of government regulation and legislation we will look at begins not in the 1880s but a century before. We are addressing it in this section because of the changes that revolve around it in our time period of interest. The history of the Pale of Settlement is a history of the Russian Jews. The area spans around 386,000 miles from the Baltic to the Black Sea, separating the rest of Russia from Prussia and Austria-Hungary.

The region came into Russian control after the three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795). The annexation introduced a large Jewish population to an empire that had previously been unaccepting of the religion. To deal with this issue, Russian leadership decided to allow Jews to continue residence in this area with restrictions on where they could move. Catherine II, commonly known as Catherine the Great, issued a series of decrees in 1783, 1791 and 1794 that restricted the commercial right of Jews to this area. Over the ensuing years more regulations were placed that confined Jews to residence in the Pale of Settlement.

Under Czar Alexander II restrictions were lessened, and we previously discussed his more lenient attitude to the Jewish population after the harsh conditions of Nicholas I. In 1855 Alexander II removed restrictions, thus allowing some expansion of Jews from the region. The results was less settlement regulations up until the Czar's death, after which his successor promptly reverted back to strict restriction practices. The May Laws led to the return to the Pale of Settlement of those Jews who had taken up life outside the area. In 1897 around five million Jews lived within its boundaries while only 200,000 lived elsewhere in Eastern Russia ("Pale of Settlement, Jewish"). Within the Pale of Settlement, Jews constituted eleven percent of the region's population, despite being only two percent of the entire empire (Gitelman 28).

The treatment that Jews faced within the Pale of Settlement caused considerable hardship and prompted emigration. To begin with, secondary schools were given an upper limit on the number of Jews allowed to attend. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, it was only 3 percent, outside of those two major cities, 5 percent, and in the Pale of Settlement, the region where Russian Jews were found in their greatest numbers, the limit was a maximum of 10 percent. Over time the numbers became even smaller. In 1890, Jewish stores were forced to have the family's Hebrew

name displayed on the front, a cruel effort by the government to stifle Jewish business (Gitelman 10).

Legislation like this, clearly targeting the Jewish population within the Pale of Settlement, provides insight into the unfair conditions the people faced. Often times prominent Government officials blamed Jews for the problems that surrounded them in an attempt to justify the treatment. Regardless, life was cruel in the Pale of Settlement, it is no wonder that so many chose to leave when they did.



“Alexander III.” *Saint-Petersburg.com*.

Some of the most impactful legislation on the Russian Jews were they afore-mentioned May Laws that restricted settlement. The May Laws were, “a series of ‘temporary laws’ applying to Jews confirmed by Czar Alexander III in May 1882 and repealed in March 1917 by the revolutionary provisional government” (“May Laws”). These laws were a set of government-

organized rules and regulations put in place as a response to the pogroms of 1881. Government officials blamed the violence on the very victims of the violence, the Jews, despite them being the target of the heinous acts. Russian leadership, believing the attacks were a result of Alexander II's lack of attention to the Jewish population, moved to address the issue. Minister of the Interior Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatiev wrote the following to Czar Alexander III: "the principle, indeed exclusive cause of this [anti-Jewish] movement is the economic situation; over the last 20 years the Jews have gradually gained control of commerce and industry [...] they have generally made every possible effort to exploit the general population" ("May Laws"). Ignatiev points to the Jews as the culprits of their own destruction. He demands regulations put upon them so that unfair relations between Jews and the rest of Russia could be balanced.

Ignatiev's letter caused Alexander III to further investigate the issue, forming committees of various economic backgrounds to determine, "which kind of Jewish economic activity had a harmful effect on the lives of the general inhabitants" ("May Laws"). The committees ultimately chronicled their discoveries leading to the formation of the regulations on May 3, 1882. "(1) Jews are forbidden to settle outside the towns and townlets; (2) deeds of sale and lease of real estate in the name of Jews outside the towns and townlets are canceled; and (3) Jews are prohibited from trading on Sundays and Christian holidays". These regulations essentially limited the Pale of Settlement, preventing Jews from leaving and spreading out. The laws resettled Jews from villages in Ukraine and forced them to live in terrible conditions in the Pale of Settlement ("May Laws").

These laws were destined to be discriminatory from the beginning, even before their inception. Government officials began their analysis of the origin of the pogroms already holding

a prejudice against Jews. This allowed them to warp their perception of violence as the fault of the victims. The Minister of Interior speaks with harsh language, truly believing that Jews are attempting to destroy Russia from within. Alexander III already confines the committees to persecuting the Jews through his clearly bias directive. Not only did the May Laws hurt the Jewish population through the strict regulations placed on everyday life, the origin of the laws shows an inevitable distrust and prejudice that was inherent in high ranking Russian officials.

iii. United States

The Jewish people had been undeniably persecuted and targeted by the rest of Russia, however, the inclusion of the United States as a possible influence is very important when trying to understand why the numbers were quite so large. Why was migration to the United States so much larger than other countries at this time? The assumed answer would be the opportunity that was there for immigrants of all backgrounds, and this constitutes some of the pull the country. However the real reason was that current Jewish residents in the United States made it easier for Russian Jews to come to the country and start new lives.

The United States Jewish population did not experience the same sort of discrimination that was felt in Russia. American Jews helped to bring their Russian equivalents across the Atlantic by forming organizations dedicated to creating new and prosperous lives. In 1882, American Jewish societies met and together formed an organization known as the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society. The society established three areas where they would concentrate their work. “To establish temporary shelters and kitchens where the poverty-stricken could procure food and lodging [...], to find work for tradesmen [...], to establish agricultural colonies.” (Price

35). The society situated in New York helped new immigrants start their lives in America. They helped with getting jobs for the large portion of Russian Jews who stayed in New York City, and they also contributed to some of the agricultural communities of Russian Jews that sprang up across the United States.

Because of these connections to local Jews, the emigration and settlement of Russian Jews became easier and more popular. It helped to establish Jewish communities that grew in number over the years after establishment. If we revisit the story of Rose and her father moving to the United States, we can see that Rose's father was able to find work as a tradesman, working in a shop sewing coats. He was able to establish himself in the United States with this help and was then able to bring Rose over to join him. With a work ethic that prompted Rose to ask, "Father, does everybody in America live like this? Go to work early, come home late, eat and go to sleep? And the next day again work, eat, and sleep?" ("From Russia to the Lower East Side in the 1890s"). Rose's father strived to earn even more money to bring the rest of the family to join them. Stories of immigrants working to bring more immigrants to the United States are not uncommon, and Russian Jewish immigrants were given help from the American Jewish societies to accomplish this.

Those immigrants who were not aided in settling into city life were ushered to the countryside to establish farming communities of Russian Jewish immigrants. Organizations like the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society helped to establish homes for the arriving Jews away from the crowded city, and other organizations ensured the success of the communities. The Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society (JAIAS) provided the agricultural immigrants with loans to improve their farms. Charities donated around 3,000 dollars for the communities to build

factories in order to have off-season employment. The JAIAS then provided a variety of incentives for factories to relocate to these colonies, such as mortgages and below-market rent (Siobhan). Again the aid from American Jews helped the Russian Jewish immigrants establish a life in the United States.

The answer to why Russian Jews left in such large numbers is now evident with this analysis. The push factors from Russia are undeniable: directed and continual violence would have been enough to make anyone want to leave. Furthermore, the government tried their best to persecute Jews, holding a constant bias against them. Those push factors coupled with the ease of transition into the United States that was provided by American Jews, allowed for a mass emigration that the Russian Jewish population had not experienced to date.

Conclusion

Now that we have looked at the influences both pushing the Russian Jews out of their country and the ease of transition they had in the United States, we know why emigration numbers were so great. Ultimately this was a boiling a point in Russian Jewish history with more reason to emigrate than ever before.

Did this brief period of emigration have a lasting impact on us today? The treatment of Jews in Russia provided a certain influence on the Russian revolution and the founding of communism. There were Jews in the Bolshevik party who overthrew the government and Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders, was Jewish. But the connection that this has to emigration is only representative in the fact that the Jews who did participate in the Revolution chose not to

emigrate unlike so many others. The real impact of Russian Jewish emigration is that on American Jewry and American liberalism (or socialism).

The interaction between Jewish populations in the United States and the immigrants from Russia contributed an American Jewish socialist identity that is still prevalent today. The Jewish persecution in Russia had an impact on Jewish emigrant ideas of economic equality. They were victims of the Russian system that tried to put Jews on the back foot whilst claiming this was because Jews were taking advantage of the rest of Russia.

The Russian Jews who immigrated to the United States joined the industrial working class for the first time after leaving the largely agricultural and less developed Pale of Settlement. They aligned with socialist ideologies upon joining American communities and gradually began to have an impact on the rest of the Jewish working class. Jewish unions were created, there were even brief political parties dominating the Jewish sections of New York in 1914. The result of the Russian Jewish influence was a legacy of American Jewish socialist ideals (Soyer).

Emma Goldman presents an opportunity to look at the impact of a specific Russian Jewish immigrant who stood strong in her views of anarchism and socialism. Goldman was born in the Russian empire in 1869, later immigrating to the United States in 1885. Her time in the United States was marked by literature and forceful speeches on the oppression of the government. She was eventually deported to Russia after speaking out against military involvement and conscription in World War I. This Russian Jewish immigrant woman preached liberal ideas in the early 1900s that are at the center of society today. She lectured on “free love” that did not involve the church in any way, and she was jailed for her thoughts on birth control.

Goldman provides an example of an impactful immigrant on the socialist beginnings of the American Jewry (“Emma Goldman”).

The importance of Russian Jewish emigration is not just a matter of recognizing the oppression that these people faced simply for being Jewish. But it is essential for us to see the impact that this treatment left on the emigrants; the manner in which they brought new ideas of equality and fairness to the United States encapsulates the significance of their migration to a country where they expected to be able to live without persecution.

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