

CHAPTER ONE



RUSSIA DISCOVERS ITS SHTETL

In 1823, Andrei Glagolev defended his dissertation in literature and decided to take a trip through Europe, which would result in his famous *Notes of a Russian Traveler* and would bring him fame as a perspicacious ethnographer and geographer. Glagolev did not expect to see much once he left Kiev, yet his discovery of the shtetls in Ukraine fascinated him.

He visited Berdichev with its “eternal Jewish marketplace.” He found Korets with its beautiful palace and Christian Orthodox convent to be as nice as the Russian districts’ central towns. He liked the fortress and the valley around Ostrog and observed that the house in Ostrog that held the first Slavic printing press now belonged to a Jew. In Dubno, he found an impressive Catholic temple, a military depot, the castle of the Polish magnates, and an excellent hotel with top-notch cuisine.¹

Whatever town he visited, he never failed to mention its Polish owners—the Potockis or the Lubomirskis—and to notice whether Russia had or had not already purchased the town from the magnates for its own

treasury. Of course, he complained of the importunate Jews who besieged him in Radzivilov, but his encounter with them did not mar his impressions of the towns situated on the Russian lands belonging to Polish nobility where Jews served as translators, commercial intermediaries, and tour guides.

His impressions, appended with a lengthy ethnographic chapter about the Jews, transcended the travelogue genre. His was one of many early discoveries of the shtetl, quite different from the experiences of later Russian travelers, who were supercilious and xenophobic and who called the shtetl muddy and moldy.

NEW IMPERIAL BORDERLANDS

The golden age of the shtetl coincided with the period of Russia's enlightened despotism and geographic expansion. It was precisely this epoch, from Catherine II through Alexander I, that came to be known as Russia's golden age. Russian monarchs found themselves in new political and geographic circumstances.

Between 1772 and 1795 Russia, in close cooperation with Austria and Prussia, partitioned Poland and swallowed up 66 percent of its territory—about 400,000 square miles, the entire eastern part of the country with its cities, towns, townlets, villages, valleys, roads, lakes, rivers, forests, and 900,000 to 1,200,000 Jews. Yet in the early 1790s, self-indulgent Russian statesmen showed little if any interest in exploring their new domain—a strange reaction in light of the nascent Polish military resistance, the 1794 Kosciuszko rebellion, and the 1795 third partition of Poland. The newly established administrators sent Catherine II dozens of “Potemkin” reports, which unsurprisingly ignored the reality on the ground and surprisingly neglected the Jews, never before allowed into Russia.

The newly appointed rulers felt they were living in a bucolic utopia. Your Majesty, reported the administrators, in Your territories nothing extraordinary has happened: no fires, epidemics, sicknesses, or accidents. “Everything is calm and peaceful,” assured the Volhynia governor. “Everything is alright here,” penned a state clerk from Podolia. Oh, yes, acknowledged a Kiev official, there was a fire in Kiev's Laura monastery, a flood near the Dnieper River, and an earthquake in the Kiev region, but

this was all local and had no negative impact elsewhere. True, locusts did harm crops here and there but this was really of minor concern.

In passing, a senior clerk mentioned that Count Potocki had purchased weapons—2,000 rifles, 2,000 pistols, 4,000 swords—and the Russian governor allowed him to bring this cargo to his shtetl: after all, Potocki was a magnate, and who could prevent a magnate from purchasing some hunting weapons for personal use? Overall, the Eastern Orthodox peasants were happy, and the Catholic gentry—the Poles—were not, but the optimistic Russian bureaucrats thought they could tame the Polish landlords: they'd make them take an oath of allegiance to the Russian Empire, and their further compliance would be a matter of time.²

More prescient than all her governors put together, Catherine knew that things were not that simple. She presented herself as a female savior who had come to redeem Poland from the vicious political threat emanating from revolutionary France. Not from the Poles in general and not from the Sejm—the Polish parliament—in particular but from the “evil-thinking party” of the “encroaching French Jacobins,” who had “exhausted her patience” and triggered the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. She, Catherine the Great, had come forth to suppress a “hideous rivalry” among Poles and eradicate those “furious and corrupt French rebels who were destroying Poland.”

Thanks to Catherine II, Polish patriots would thus appear in Russian discourse as alien French-inspired revolutionary mutineers, enemies of the supposedly submissive Poland, rather than fighters for Polish independence. Only half a century later did Catherine's suspicions concerning some disloyal Poles become transformed into full-fledged governmental mistrust of the Russian Poles at large. By the late nineteenth century the regime had transferred this mistrust to the Jews, dismissing their growing loyalty to the Russian crown, and eventually to other borderland ethnicities, including Eastern Orthodox Ukrainians.

Yet before Russia's rampant late nineteenth-century xenophobia came to dominate politics, Catherine addressed her newly acquired peoples—Jews included—with the same empathy a stepmother would show her foster children. She expected awe, not love. From her subjects she sought mercantilist profit, not cultural homogeneity. She ordered a manifesto

declaring the results of the partitions and the incorporation of the Polish lands into Russia. She wanted the territories rearranged: Kiev, Podolia, and Volhynia provinces established in lieu of the old Braclaw *województwo*, districts introduced, and governors appointed.

All Polish crown assets were confiscated for the benefit of the Russian treasury. Combining military candor and political paternalism, Catherine warned her administrators to be “nice” in their treatment of the newly acquired borderland population. “We desire,” she explained, “that these provinces be conquered not only by the power of weapons. Russia will win the hearts of the people in these lands by a kind, righteous, merciful, modest, and humane management.”

Now the Jews found themselves in Catherine’s field of vision, though what would be notoriously called the Russian Jewish question was treated by the tsarina as something quite secondary at best. Like many travelers of that time, she considered the Jews in the Polish private towns as a profitable asset, not a burdensome liability. With her flowery rhetoric, Catherine extended her powerful benevolence to the Jews. She loved the docile and loyal, and abhorred dissenters and rebels. She expected the Jews to be the former, never the latter.

“It goes without saying,” she declared, “that Jewish communities, dwelling in the towns and lands attached to the Russian Empire, will maintain all those freedoms which they now legally enjoy, because Her Majesty’s love of humanism makes it impossible to exclude them from the universal future commonwealth under Her blessed rule, while the Jews in turn as loyal subjects will dwell with appropriate humility and engage in trade and industry according to their skills.”³

With her enlightened paternalism firm in hand, Catherine legalized Jewish residence in some fifteen western provinces of the Russian Empire, the future Pale of Jewish Settlement, or simply the Pale—a turning point in the history of the country previously intolerant of the Jews. Catherine allowed Jews to enroll in the established estates by declaring their status as merchants or townsfolk, thus administratively integrating them into the texture of the empire and extending to them the privileges granted to the Christian merchants and townsfolk. Naturally, the *shtetl*, the dwelling

place of most Jews and the economic headquarters of the new imperial lands, became a focal point of Catherine's geopolitics.

THE SHTETL OF CONTENTION

Catherine was essentially an enlightened despot, quite often more despotic than enlightened, whose intuition did not always serve her well.⁴ She committed herself to preserving the privileges of the landlords, the Polish gentry in the western borderlands included, and got herself stuck in a trap. Any town with a Polish landlord would find itself under the dual control of the Russian administration and the Polish nobleman. Catherine realized that this double management would be counterproductive and turned to political manipulations.

In 1794, she instructed two borderland governors, Saltykov and Tutolmin, to indiscriminately apply punitive measures to Polish magnates conspiring against Russian authorities. "Take the towns and estates of the secret rebels under state control," she instructed, "so that they should not turn their income into harmful actions against the Russian state."⁵ These private landlords' towns were the shtetls, now becoming a point of contention between the Russian and the Polish elites.

After Catherine, subsequent Russian rulers up to Alexander II had to consider the shtetl problem again and again. In the tone set by the tsarina, they instructed the governors "to do whatever possible to get data and acquire the townlets for the state treasury by purchasing them from the owners." They would require that the magnates, the richest among Polish nobility, submit reports disclosing their regular income, number of registered taxpaying inhabitants, number of unregistered inhabitants and plans for resettling them, and the sum they would like to get for selling the town.⁶

The Polish landlords were frightened: their privileges were in jeopardy. Most avoided submitting the data. Strutinski, whose case stands for many, feigned naiveté: my town, he wrote, with the surrounding villages costs 1,025,000 zloty—and he did not provide any further information: take it or leave it.⁷ Despite the ambiguous treatment of the Polish magnates, some of whom the imperial regime appointed to supervise the local

Russian administration, the internal Russian documents reiterated: we should suppress in the former Polish territories “a false concept of freedom which is nothing but arbitrariness,” and therefore we should take over such and such shtetl aggressively and appropriate it from the Polish magnate.⁸

The more serious the attempts of the Poles to restore independence and separate themselves from Russia, the more decisive the Russian regime became about appropriating the shtetls, which functioned as pawns in Russian relations with Poles. As early as 1795 the Russians introduced state management and established governmental offices, magistrates, post offices, and provincial courts in such shtetls as Tulchin, Yampol, Mogilev, Makhnovka, Lipovets, Bershad, and many others, allocating impressive government funds for the purpose.

Whatever the town’s economic significance, the governors named towns such as Vladimir-Volynsk, known in Jewish cultural memory as Ludmir, and Kamenets-Podolsk, known as Kamnits, as district capitals. Jews could not but benefit from these developments as legal and state institutions moved into the shtetls, previously run and ruled by the whim of a magnate.

Shtetls such as Litin, Khmelnik, and Gaisin, recently withdrawn from Polish noblemen but preserving the entirety of their *shtetldike* infrastructure, were to become district centers, with a solid presence of Russian power.⁹ To this end, the governor ordered that officials “begin inventory of the assets” of the Polish crown where Russian state institutions, including but not limited to custom houses, courts, and hospitals, could be established.¹⁰ “Very nice buildings could be used for government offices,” wrote the Zhitomir governor with the Polish nobleman’s palace in mind, which he was planning to expropriate.¹¹

As soon as the shtetl emerged as a point of contention between the Poles and Russians, relations between the Russians and Poles came to a head. “It is harmful for the government to have its power shared between the state treasury and the town owner,” argued the Zhitomir military governor in 1839. “We should replace privately-owned central district towns with state-owned ones.” He recommended establishing a commission in charge of what we would call today information hijacking and insisted



1.1. Town hall (ratusha) in Kornits.

IA, f. 9, spr. 43, ark. 27. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

that the administration “should buy out Ostrog and Starokonstantinov from Karla Jabłonska and Countess Rzewucka.”¹² When Count Lubomirski suggested exchanging his Dubno for a couple of villages, the enlightened Count Kiselev wrote on his petition that the government does not bargain and that Lubomirski should “sell the town—that’s it!”¹³ Even as late as the 1870s, the Russian administration still urged “getting whatever possessions possible from Polish hands.”¹⁴

Still, by the 1870s, Russia, with all its resolve, had managed to take from the Poles only fifty-six shtetls, if quite significant ones, out of 378 shtetls in Kiev, Podolia, and Volhynia provinces, and transfer forty to fifty shtetls to the Russian gentry. The Russian rulers took pains to remove the shtetls from the Polish magnates, yet, bound by the promises of Catherine to maintain gentry-protective laws, they limited their own initiative. The old system of state mercantilism and protectionism coexisted with the new unifying tendencies of the enlightened and well-managed state; to

an extent, they neutralized one another. This loophole is precisely what allowed the shtetls to remain for the time being in their own element and in relative peace.

This peace lasted as long as the administration, caught in its own paradoxical attitude to the shtetls, did not start aggressively undermining the economic prosperity and social stability of the shtetls. Until about the mid-1830s, administrative control of the shtetls in the borderlands remained weak; the gentry were treated with condescending negligence; police supervision was relaxed. Despite strong orders, from the 1790s to the 1830s the shtetl remained the servant of two masters and more often than not existed in a vacuum of power, a unique situation that ordinary shtetl dwellers took advantage of immediately.

Although now on Russian territory, the shtetl continued to function as an old Polish entity. The Russian regime found this intolerable but for the time being unavoidable. The moment the Russian administration turned aggressively against the Poles in general and the shtetl owners in particular coincided with efforts at undermining the shtetl economy, forcibly integrating its Jews, and therefore breaking the spine of the shtetl.

Before this trend became dominant in the later years of Nicholas I, the relatively undisturbed shtetl saw better times. In the 1790s and early 1800s, even the Russian enlightened monarchs found this situation beneficial, especially when they initiated what we might call the great geographic discovery of the shtetl.

EXPLORING THE SHTETL

The first Russian discoverers of the shtetl really liked what they saw. Contrary to the contemporary Italian diplomats, English missionaries, or French painters touring East Europe on a quest for the East European noble savage, the first Russian discoverers of the shtetl were an anonymous, modest, and diligent group of clerks: cartographers.¹⁵ Commissioned to survey, among many other things, what the shtetl was, they discovered what it did.

In 1797 the Kiev governor dispatched twelve clerks to various localities to prepare maps and plans, an indispensable tool of control and development. The cartographers had to collect the data that, as we have seen,

Polish town-owners were reluctant to provide.¹⁶ To conceal their true goals, the Russian clerks were called variously “cartographers” or “topographers,” although the information they amassed went far beyond routine territorial measurements. These twelve were the first, between 1797 and 1801, to travel through the newly acquired Russian lands, meticulously recording what they saw and later submitting their notes for further bureaucratic use.¹⁷

It is no exaggeration to say that these men were the first East European ethnographers of the shtetl. Unlike the professional ethnographers who came later, such as Pavlo Chubynskyi in the 1850s or S. Ansky in the 1910s, the cartographers of the 1790s focused on economic geography, not on folklore. And unlike the Western travelers of the time with their condescending approach to the alien and enigmatic European Orient, the Russian clerks treated what they saw with the empathy of collectors discovering for the first time what the Russian Empire had come to own, its new promised land.¹⁸

Their encounters with the new lands were as positive as unexpected. These Russian intelligence servicemen on a scholarly mission were struck by the abundant flora of central Ukraine with its oaks, hornbeams, maples, limes, ash trees, birches, alder trees, aspens, hazel groves, and vast fields of wheat, rye, beans, and oats. Used to dealing with scarce resources in Russian villages far to the northeast, they were surprised to discover the abundant cornucopia of Ukrainian orchards and gardens where not only the standard apples, pears, and carrots grew but also exotic apricots and peaches, mulberries, plums, cherries, nuts, currants, and strawberries.¹⁹

They explored the towns with their private Polish noblemen, noting robust bridges, many breweries, well-managed town councils, and fire stations.²⁰ If we read between the lines of their reports—overall dry, clumsily written, almost illegible—we can sense the authors’ amazement. The unusual locales they visited combined urban and rural features, and beside architecturally urban buildings they found peasant homes whose inhabitants grew cherries, parsley, carrots, onions, garlic, beans, cucumbers, radishes, and cabbage.

These semi-urban, semirural settlements were the shtetls, the major discovery of the cartographers. They saw the busy “privileged fairs” in



1.2. The former house of the town leaseholder in Slavuta.

IA, f. 9, spr. 42, ark. 7. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

Letichev; beautiful churches, shabby synagogues, and decent trading stalls in Chechenik, Brailov, and Balin; the town-owner's palace, two stone Eastern Orthodox churches, and a wooden synagogue in Zhinkov; the town-owner's castle, several Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and a beautiful stone trading marketplace—"arcade"—in Medzhibozh. They noticed that the houses in the shtetl stood at a comfortable distance from one another—quite different from what we find in the popular etchings of Yudovin, who visited the same Medzhibozh a hundred years later, when this shtetl was already in complete decay.²¹

The shtetl impressed them because it was a predominantly Jewish enterprise. If anything was unique about it, it was because of what the Jews did there. The Russian petty clerks found Jews leasing mills, breweries, taverns, saltpeter factories, road check-posts, pastures, central square trading stalls, marketplace weights and measures, posts of trade and customs duties collectors, lots to build houses, fish ponds, forests—to the



1.3. A mill in Krasnopol, Volhynia.

IA, f. 9, spr. 40, ark. 12. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

extent that they diligently recorded it all and wrote, “this is all leased by the Jews from the town owners.” They also filled their lengthy rosters with lists of items and produce available in the shtetl markets, prefacing the lists with the heading “in these stores Jews sell”—as if there were nobody else trading in the shtetl marketplace.²²

Not only did the cartographers accurately portray Jews as “merchants and townsfolk engaged in trade, middleman activities, and even more in distilling and tavernkeeping,” they also emphasized Jewish craftsmanship, noticing that there were “among them craftsmen of quite impressive skills.” One might be unsurprised and even question these first impressions of the Russians clerks visiting the shtetls in Volhynia and Podolia. But one cannot fail to notice their sheer astonishment, particularly when they remarked on religious tolerance in the shtetls, exclaiming that “Jews were allowed to worship in their houses and conduct all the necessary life rites.”²³

These Russian clerks likely never had seen Jews before, and the only conventional wisdom at the time was that the Jews had killed Christ and served the Polish gentry; one might wonder which of those crimes the clerks considered worse. Russian travelers normally expressed squeamishness toward Jews in the Polish lands, as for example the Russian academician Nicholas Ozertsovsky, who in 1783 observed, “Suddenly there appeared along the roads the yids’ taverns, to be seen nowhere in Russia, and it became obvious that these lands are those of a different state.”²⁴ In 1810, Count Dolgorukov also found these lands alien, dubbing them “a shred of Old Poland: yids trade and swarm everywhere, like bees in bee-hives.”²⁵

On the contrary, the anonymous cartographers spoke of the Jews as no different from other ethnicities, Poles or Armenians, and they referred to them predominantly with a capital “J,” calling them Jews (*Evrei*), although once in a while they also slipped into the lowercase *yids* (*zhidy*). The Jews of these new lands were formidable in the eyes of the Russian clerical spies. Later in the nineteenth century the state clerks would become much less tolerant, even viciously xenophobic, and would switch in their unofficial parlance to the derogatory *yids* for the Jews, *liakhy* for the Poles, and *khokhly* for the Ukrainians.

We do not know how the imperial clerks read the reports of the cartographers. More important is how the cartographers wrote them. They described villages, landscapes, bridges, roads, and forests, but put unequivocal emphasis on the shtetls, *mestechki*. The shtetls in their eyes were worthy not only of being conquered by military force but also of being appropriated administratively and economically.

The discovery of the shtetls by the Russian cartographers late in the eighteenth century to early in the nineteenth century paved the way for a systematic study of the region by the Russian regime. Unlike the cartographers, Russian statesmen were much less fascinated by the Jewish-driven Polish economy in the shtetls, and yet they saw them as an economic competitor of the interior Russian trading cities and sought to either appropriate or ruin the shtetls.

Carrying out this task implied uprooting Jewish labor from Polish capital—or more simply, separating the Jews from the Poles. This pivotal

goal inspired multiple Jewish reforms of Nicholas I in the 1820s to 1850s, but there was an effort to win over the Jews for the Russian cause even earlier than that. Why did the Russians think that they would always have problems with the Christian Polish noblemen yet perhaps be able to domesticate the religiously alien shtetl Jews? Because the shtetl Jews proved to be loyal Russian subjects long before they were ordered to do so by the empire and because the “loyalty of subjects to the ruler and the dynasty was a linchpin of the Russian empire,” as the historian Andreas Kappeler instructs us.²⁶

It was this Jewish attitude, juxtaposed with Russian paternalism, that delayed Russian reforms of the Jews and inspired new hopes for a rapprochement between the Russians and the Jews, a never fulfilled promise of an alternative Russian Jewish development that never took shape.

MOTHER RUSSIA

Although we know little about the feelings of the shtetl Jews toward the Russians during and immediately after the three Polish partitions, Hebrew documents of the time tell fascinating stories about Jews cursing the Poles and blessing the Russians.

Let’s take a look at the Jews from such Podolia shtetls as Zhvanets, Zhinkovets, Karvasar, and Orynin: expelled from Kamenets-Podolsk in 1750 by the Polish king Augustus III, they settled in these nearby shtetls.²⁷ In 1797, Paul I of Russia retracted the previous ban, readmitted the Jews to Kamenets, and confirmed their residential privileges.²⁸ The shtetl Jews from nearby could then resettle in the previously inaccessible town. And one of them, Yaakov ben Hayym from Orynin (called in the records “Oryniner”), turned for help to the temporary military ruler of the town, Colonel Dementii Semenovitch Meleshchenko. Yaakov Oryniner received from Meleshchenko a commission to rebuild the walls of the pompous Kamenets fortress, while Meleshchenko helped Oryniner erect a wall around the Jewish cemetery—thus making it fit for the rigorous funeral standards of the reestablished burial society.

Inspired by the cooperation of Russians and Jews, the Kamenets Burial Society scribe recorded this story, giving it a political message and a religious tinge. He probably conveyed the feelings of the entire local



1.4. The kiddush cup of Meir Karvisar (Karvasar, near Kamenets-Podolsk).
MIK, no. 258, Odessa collection. Courtesy of MIK and the Center for Jewish Art at Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

Jewish community, which just two years after Paul I's decision numbered some 2,650 people, including twenty-nine guild merchants. Was this not a new redemption from Babylonian bondage, a new return to the Jerusalem of Podolia?

The scribe used metaphors from the book of Lamentations to depict Jewish suffering under Polish dominion and from the book of Esther to portray Jewish redemption under the Russian tsars.²⁹ The Poles embodied the evil biblical Amalekites, whereas the partitions of Poland turned out to be a salvific “fateful lot.” Paul I was referred to as the “blessed one Pavel Petrovich” who “allowed what they did not allow,” that is, brought Jews back to Kamenets.

The communal scribe attributed the merits of the late Catherine II to the living Paul I:

And the Jews were destined to come under the auspices of the mighty and great tsar of justice and mercy Pavel Petrovich, the tsar of Russia,

may God exalt His Majesty, raise his kingdom to the heights, and increase his mercy toward our brethren, the Jews. And the kingdom announced that the tsar granted the Jews permission to return to the place of their previous residence and to dwell anywhere they find fit. And the previous power vanished like the mist.³⁰

The scribe undeniably put forth the feeling that the community aspired to project. The burial society records left no doubt: the Russians were not only good in Jewish eyes, they were redeemers who conveyed the Jews from bondage to freedom, and their enemies became the enemies of the Jews. If anything, the communal record expresses the hopes of the Jews, a mistreated ethnic minority, for protection and benevolence from the new power. And benevolence and protection were precisely what they found!

Perhaps the hereditary monarchy of Russia with its absolute power appealed to the Jews more than the Polish magnate oligarchy with its elected kings and looser state structure. The Jews preferred Russia as long as this new power practiced its tolerance and extended its paternalism toward its new ethnicities. Perhaps because of this preference, just after the Polish partitions—not before—the leading Hasidic masters, leaders of the pietistic movement of religious enthusiasm, made their communal power transferable on a hereditary basis and established the longlasting Hasidic dynasties, the Jewish doubles of the Romanovs. The idea of an absolute ruler with enormous power and royal pomp seems to have inspired them much more than the opulence of the Polish magnates who failed to introduce absolutism and lost the political game.³¹

If this was an attempt of the Hasidim to imitate the Russian hereditary and dynastic tsarist power, with its royal luxury, bodyguards, orchestras, *côterie*, arrogant palatial courts, thousands of visitors, and material abundance, it speaks volumes about the Jewish perception of the Russian tsardom. The mother of the future famous Rizhiner (or Sadigora) tsadik, Israel of Ruzhin, tacitly agreed that her son, still a child, after her husband's death should take a silver cup in his hand, say a blessing over the wine for the *ganze mishpokhe*—the entire family—and become the master, the *rebbe*, and the leader of the generation, a *tsadik*.³² Conscious of it or not, at that moment she made her son into a Judaic version of a young Russian tsar inheriting the scepter.

One doesn't imitate what one dislikes. Whatever the Jewish suspicions of the imperial authorities in the 1890s, in the 1790s Jews admired the Russian Empire, which had, as it were, liberated them from Polish bondage. They had no way of knowing that the Russian regime would seek to exploit, undermine, and criminalize Jewish economic endeavors. This would become clear only later.

Meanwhile, the rapidly changing political situation of the early nineteenth century enabled the Jews to demonstrate their genuine loyalty to the new power. The Jewish reaction to the Napoleonic invasion of Russia proved that the Jews were supporting the empire in deeds, not only in feeling. Most likely, Jewish leaders knew about the widely circulated December 1806 Appeal of the Russian Holy Synod, which associated Jews with Napoleon and was read aloud in all Russian parish churches.

The Holy Synod condemned Napoleon Bonaparte's plans to convene the Grand Sanhedrin and presented it as "the same godless institution which in its time conspicuously condemned Our God and the Savior Jesus Christ to the Cross." Napoleon, said the Appeal, intended to "unify the Jews, whom divine rage dispersed throughout the land," while the Jews, those alleged haters of Christ, were more than eager to "assist Napoleon in his infamy."³³

In an effort to disassociate themselves from Napoleon in general and from his messianic pretensions in particular, Jewish communal leaders in Russia called for their congregants to extend full support to the Russian army, especially once Napoleon Bonaparte's troops defeated Austria and approached the Russian borders. Rabbis and rebbes unanimously condemned Napoleon's messianic aspirations and secularizing plans. They raised their voice against Napoleon to make a point: East European Jews did not share the revolutionary fervor of their West European brethren but did share the aversion of the Russians toward the evil French beast, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Rabbi Levy Isaac went from Berdichev to a meeting with Hasidic leaders in Warsaw at which they rejected Napoleon's plans of enforced emancipation, by no means befitting the traditional East Europeans, Christians and Jews included. Rabbi Nachman from Bratslav mocked Napoleonic plans as dangerous heresy that threatened the very existence of Judaism

tradition. Schneour Zalman of Liady, the founder of the Habad movement, issued an eloquent appeal to the Jews in Lithuania and Belorussia: we Jews, he argued, should fully support the Russian military efforts against Napoleon (he paraphrased the 1806 Russian patriotic appeal) who had come to destroy Judaism. The Habad rebbe cursed Napoleon and crowned Alexander I with the wreath of hope as genuine protector of the Jewish people.

The Jews articulated their anti-Napoleonic feelings in folkloric narratives about great Hasidic leaders. As legend has it, Yaakov Isaac, the Seer of Lublin, claimed that if Napoleon had known about the Hasidic efforts to foil his plans, he would have led his cavalry against the Hasidic masters and not against the armies of his political adversaries.

They also told a story of Napoleon coming for a blessing to the renowned Israel ben Shaptai Hapshtein, called the Preacher (or the Maggid) of Koźienice. Napoleon came on Purim of 1812, and appeared at the threshold of the synagogue when the maggid was reading aloud the Scroll of Esther and had reached the verse *napol tipol le-fanav*, “you will definitely fall before him,” the warning of Haman’s wife to her husband.³⁴ In this *napol* the preacher heard a prophecy of Napoleon’s fall, which he did not hesitate to convey to his preeminent guest, refusing to give him a blessing.³⁵ This story could, of course, be a legend, ex post facto presenting the Hasidic master as a prophet, after the fall of Napoleon. Still, it projected the prescriptive meanings of those who composed it: reject the enforced Napoleonic secularization, stick to traditional Judaic values, and love Mother Russia.

The deeds of ordinary Jews also proved Jewish allegiance to the Russian cause. Although free from the burden of conscription, the Jews still found various ways to contribute to the victory of the Russian troops. Wealthy purveyors helped provide the army with food and donated large sums to the military; traveling merchants informed Russian commanders about the treatment of the French troops by the local populations in Austria, Prussia, and Poland; several Jews, such as Usher Zholkver from Dubno, travelled back and forth across the border on reconnaissance missions.³⁶

One shtetl Jew informed a regimental commander about the French general Corsin sojourning at a Polish landlord’s palace—and the Russian

army unit took the general by surprise.³⁷ According to the informers of the Russian police, on the eve of the 1812 campaign the Jews established an extra fast to impress the Almighty and pray for the success of the Russian troops.³⁸

These deeds challenged the anti-Jewish bias of many a Russian statesman. To the Russian regime, Jews were no better than Poles—suspicious religious aliens and exploiters of the Eastern Orthodox peasantry in the imperial western borderlands. To Russian officials, Poles were stereotypically unreliable, unpatriotic, hypocritical, irrational, politically unsavvy, rebellious, ungrateful, arrogant, conceited, and treacherous. Throughout the nineteenth century, imperial legislation discriminated against the Poles, prevented their social mobility, forced their petty gentry (unlike Eastern Orthodox gentry) to serve in the Russian army, segregated them in terms of upward mobility in whatever state institutions possible, adamantly insisted on the Eastern Orthodox and not Catholic education of Polish children of mixed marriages, and even relocated Poles from the western to the central parts of the Russian Empire to accelerate their russification.³⁹

Unlike the reliable and patriotic Jews, the Polish gentry in the shtetls of the Pale of Settlement unnerved the Russian authorities, triggered their anxiety, and kept them constantly on the alert.⁴⁰ In the wake of the war against Napoleon, French plans to recruit Poles and a Polish ongoing supply of food to the French army added fuel to the fire. Early in 1812, Russian governors of the borderland provinces panicked when they realized that Austria could enter the war on the French side, that Polish officers could defect, and that several Polish landlords had already joined the French troops. “Volhynia is a big wooden house on the edge of town,” said one of the Russian officials. “If the wind blows from the side of the house, the town can be burnt to the ground.”⁴¹ This of course was a metaphor for the latent Polish rebellion and the Napoleonic invasion.

Because they formed an economic nexus, Jews and Poles dwelling in the shtetls found themselves under close surveillance. “Military reasons necessitate paying attention to the opinions of the gentry and townsfolk,” argued the war minister. We should compose two lists, echoed the minister of police, one for those considered “dubious” and another for the

“definitely suspicious,” and dispatch the lists to Grodno, Minsk, Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev provinces.

These lists identified more than a hundred “highly suspicious” magnates and rank-and-file gentry: Count Chotkiewicz from Dubno, Count Jabłonowski from Ostrog, the landlords Rzyszewski and Tarnawski from Kremenets, the noblemen Kniaziewicz from Rovno, and Teodor Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad’s grandfather) from Zhitomir. The Police Ministry added Polish ladies to this impressive list, since they were “haters of everything Russian”; all those who corresponded with Poland and France; Catholic clergy; former owners of confiscated estates; and the “Radziwiłłs of all sorts.”⁴² Surprisingly, the Russian secret police used very different language for the Jewish dwellers of the same shtetls owned by these Polish noblemen.

Officers at all levels reported acts of Jewish patriotic behavior. One officer mentioned in his memoirs the “courage of the cowardly Jews, who despite the unclear outcome of the campaign dared accomplish a dangerous deed, caught the messenger and brought him to the Russian detachment—a brave and noteworthy act.”⁴³ “Jewish people have demonstrated particular loyalty to Russia,” a secret informer reported from Volhynia to the Ministry of Police; “they do not want any change of regime.” Several shtetl Jews hurried to inform the Russian authorities of Polish gentry hiding French transports, thus proving how Jews “loved the Russian government.”⁴⁴

The Russian regime faced a dilemma: Poles were Christians but Catholics, hence unreliable; Jews were the offspring of Judas but proved loyal. If so, the Jews should be empowered. The minister of police realized that perhaps he could use the Jews to establish a network of reliable informers. “Due to their attested loyalty,” he argued, “[we should] use their representatives to investigate the way of life and behavior of the gentry and peasantry.” To keep things secret, Jews would take a special oath befitting their religious rituals. A month into the war against Napoleon, he formally advised using Jews for secret reconnaissance.⁴⁵

This was a major breakthrough: for the time being, and only for the time being, Russians took expressions of Jewish commitment at face value and singled out Jews as patriotic, loyal, and reliable. The Russian tsar

Alexander I, participant in the campaign, spoke about the services the Jews provided to the Russian army and emphatically stated that the Jews “demonstrated amazing loyalty.”⁴⁶

Nicholas I, not a great lover of Jews and Poles, made this point particularly clear, comparing and contrasting Poles and Jews: “The gentry in Belorussia, almost entirely composed of wealthy Poles, showed no loyalty toward Russia, and, except for a few Vitebsk and south Mogilev landlords, everybody else swore an oath to Napoleon.” At the same time, the Jews, although they were “exploiters of the poor,” had surprised Nicholas, because they “in 1812 were particularly loyal to us and even helped us, wherever they could, by risking their own lives.”⁴⁷

Much later, in the 1820s, this patriotic fervor of the Jews led the Russian authorities to think that Jews would “move toward useful occupations,” “submit themselves to the civil laws,” and “defend the motherland.” It was Nicholas I’s hope that the loyal and reliable Jews could and should be integrated into the state, and not his alleged antisemitism, that caused him to start drafting them into the army, long before he allowed the allegedly untrustworthy Poles to join the conscription pool.⁴⁸

Once the Jewish shtetl dwellers found themselves under Russian rule, their loyalties belonged to the empire, which, they hoped, would take them under its protective aegis. Of course, not everybody would write a personal letter of gratitude to the emperor, as Rabbi David Gertsenshtein from Shargorod did in 1798, and not everybody would be able to donate oxen to the Russian army during the Polish rebellion, as Aizik Rabinovich from Kamenets did in 1830.⁴⁹ But many, especially members of trading elites, would join a certain Girshberg from Uman, who, persecuted by Count Potocki for financial reasons, wrote to St. Petersburg that he was a guild merchant and “pleaded for protection.”⁵⁰ Perhaps not without some exaggeration of the Jewish aversion toward the Poles and empathy toward the Russians, Yisroel Aksenfeld (himself a writer and an army purveyor) observed that Polish aristocrats were arrogant; they cursed the Jews and regularly humiliated them. But the Russian aristocrats were “quite a different breed.” They were never arrogant; they treated the Jew as their little brothers and got “to love him” if Jews served them loyally. This literary

image might not be historically accurate but it does convey the feelings that many Jews shared in the 1820s or 1830s.⁵¹

These feelings inspired the rising Russian Jewish patriotism. Take, for example, Berdichev Jews, who celebrated Nicholas I's saint's day in 1834. Local *sheyne yidn*, wealthy merchants, purveyors, leaseholders, kahal elders, and bankers, invited a Bohemian orchestra to accompany the outdoor ceremony and later a festival dinner by the Radziwiłłs. They illuminated the entire Great Prayer House and the Choral synagogue with gas lamps. A huge poster displaying his majesty's monogram adorned the Great Synagogue. About eight thousand people, mostly Jews, both men and women, gathered in the center of the town. Merchants of the first and second guilds, the town police chief, and two governors, Levashov of Kiev province and Rimsky-Korsakov of Volhynia, joined them. According to the sympathetic report of policeman Zabelin, they all recited "a prayer for the health and long life of the Emperor, His Wife the Emperess and their heirs, and also for the wellbeing of the authorities of their land," according to Jewish custom. After the prayer the crowd shouted "hurrah" and "long live our emperor Nicholas I"—three times, no less.⁵²

It was precisely this Jewish political reliability that pushed the Russian authorities to allow Jews to lease a strategically crucial state business, the mail service. Jews were in charge of the post offices all along the muddy roads between Kiev, Zhitomir, Rovno, and Brody. They fed and changed horses, dispatched messengers, provided transport wagons, and accommodated state officials and couriers. Andrei Glagolev called the road from Kiev to Radzivilov "a Jewish operational line," which had "only Jewish post offices."⁵³

The Chernigov commercial counselor Nikolai Lazarev, an Eastern Orthodox, and Beltsy merchant Pesakh Libman, a Jew, leased post offices in Vasilkov and Lipovets districts: their horses were always ready to go, as police reports testified.⁵⁴ Jews were allowed to make bids for the lease of post offices even after the lottery was over, as for example happened with Temkin and Kleinerman from Kiev province in 1826.⁵⁵ This was politically savvy and economically advantageous—and put the Jews in regular contact with state officials, a key factor in the Russian state-surveyed economy.

Not only did Russia legalize the Jews and empower them economically, it also empowered them administratively. Representatives of Jewish mercantile elites, particularly those able to express themselves in languages other than Yiddish, were encouraged to become *ratmans*, members of the city councils.⁵⁶ This prospect seemed to have great promise, but the Jews had to make concessions.

The governor general insisted that elected Jews shave their beards, like Russian state bureaucrats, and remove their traditional Jewish kaftan and wear Polish or Russian dress, if they were uncomfortable with the German dress.⁵⁷ Whether this was enforced or not, Jews joined the state service as town council scribes, translators, heads of the economic and army quarters' commissions, and even as those responsible for the town police.

State service was a key opportunity for the Jewish and Christian local elites to master religious and cultural tolerance. In 1796, Itsko Abramovich, elected to the Volhynia provincial council, observed the local priest sprinkling holy water and sanctifying the new governmental building. He and his German colleague Samuel Gottlieb Wuttke spent time together studying state legislation, comparing translations of legal documents from Polish to Russian and training themselves to sign their names in Russian.⁵⁸ Berko Rabinovich, the third-guild merchant, felt so secure as a member of the Zvenigorodka town council that he did not hesitate to publicly scold his colleagues for sleazy dealings.⁵⁹ The entry of Jews into the Russian state service signaled a crucial moment of trust. In addition, Jewish elites could not have missed that Poland refused them any representation before the state, whereas Russia allowed the institution of communal representatives, the deputies.⁶⁰ However, this empowering of the Jews did not last long.

A BREACH OF TRUST

Russian confidence in the political reliability of the Jews and Jewish support of the Russian cause were filled with the promise of an emerging rapprochement. The associations of Jews with the French Revolution and its catastrophic upheavals, with the Napoleonic short-lived Sanhedrin and liberalism, the satanic threat to the foundations of the Eastern Orthodoxy,

and other propaganda metaphors of the Napoleonic wars, were by and large dropped or marginalized. Although the idea of creating a network of Jewish secret service informers in the Pale of Settlement and across the border spying for Mother Russia never crystallized, the official attitude well up to mid-century was that Jews could be useful, useless, or economically harmful, yet they were loyal to the Russian Empire.

From the 1790s through the 1830s, Russian authorities treated the Jews as trustworthy state clerks. This was no longer the case at the height of Nicholas I's reign with its new governmentally inspired nationalism, when Russian became the official nationality, Eastern Orthodoxy the best among religions, and the Russian people the pillar of the state. Loyalty came to be viewed as a desire to join this religiously defined nationality. Being Eastern Orthodox came to signify being loyal. A Jew in state service became nonsensical. The Poles in the western borderlands had been and remained unreliable, particularly after the 1830 rebellion, when Russian administration sequestered more than a thousand Polish estates, belonging to the Polish rebels in Ukraine, into the state treasury.⁶¹ To disassociate the Jews from the untrustworthy Poles, the Russian regime launched a series of forceful reforms aimed at Jewish integration, without, however, the previous presumption of trust.

Whatever their diplomas—and some of them were certified medical doctors with Austrian degrees—these Jews were now laid off, just for being “of Mosaic persuasion.” The Zaslav doctor Grinberg and the Novograd-Volynsk doctor Rautenberg, seven magistrates of Kamenets-Podolsk, six from Proskurov, four in Letichev, three in Litin, four in Bratslav and Gaisin, six in Balta, three in Yampol, four in Mogilev and in Bar—all lost their positions with the town councils.⁶² This was the beginning of the end of Russia's tolerance toward peoples of non-Eastern Orthodox creed.

Once the enlightened considerations of Catherine II ceded to the rising Russian nationalism during the late years of Nicholas I, Russia's previously benevolent treatment of the peoples in the borderlands came to naught. By the end of the nineteenth century not only the Jews, but also the Catholic Poles and even the Eastern Orthodox Ukrainians had become aliens. Of course, it would take a tumultuous half century for Russia to start singling out Jews and blaming them for the shortcomings of

Russia's modernization. And it would take a consistent merging between the ruling elites and far rightist circles for the Jews to appear as Russia's aliens, exploiters of the peasantry, subversive revolutionary elements, and Russia's traitors in World War I. By the end of the nineteenth century the Russian regime had disowned its loyal Jews.

Once the conservative ideology prevailed over economic interests and common sense, the Russian authorities blamed the Jews in the shtetls for mistreating and ruining the peasants. Shattered at the end of the century by internal social conflicts, the regime saw the Jew as a useful scapegoat accountable for all the doubts about the reform of the peasantry and declared the Jews exploiters and bloodsuckers.⁶³ In 1882, several hundred shtetls were reclassified as villages just to get rid of the shtetl Jews, who were no longer allowed to reside in rural and semirural areas.

Seeking a new place of residence, Jews had to move to bigger towns and cities. This is precisely what happens to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, who must sell his hut, part with his cow, load a wagon with his scanty belongings, and move elsewhere. It was this Russian modernization, peppered with state-supported xenophobia, that transformed the shtetl into an impoverished godforsaken village. And it was Russian state nationalism that breached the trust between the state and its Jews, adopted racial discourse, and turned the Jews into disloyal aliens, no longer protected by the state.

In the late nineteenth century the Russian shtetl came to signify provincialism, timidity and stupidity, ghettoization, uncivilized manners, a coarse accent, pedestrian thoughts, and bad taste, with the Jews possessing all these qualities. By that time the era of Catherine's paternalistic benevolence was long gone. But the shtetl had known very different times, and merits a very different attitude from those who saw it at its height.

IN RUSSIAN EYES

The bustling shtetls both fascinated and offended Russian travelers, who came to the Pale of Settlement from the much slower and parsimonious provinces of interior Russia. Their scornful remarks revealed not only cultural resentment but also genuine sympathy.

If the shtetl of the later Yiddish writers was about the dearth of opportunities, economic decline, and a stiffly ghettoized atmosphere, the early nineteenth-century Russian observers, not particularly unbiased, emphasized the beauty and abundance of the shtetl. In Uman, wrote Count Ivan Dolgorukov, you can find “anything you want.” And in Zlatopolie, he remarked on the trading stalls where Jews “trade in anything one can think of.” He could not help admiring “the extensive trade . . . in various luxurious commodities” he found there.⁶⁴

Olimpiada Shishkina, a member of the Russian nobility, travelled from St. Petersburg through Kiev to the Crimea and passed through a number of shtetls. In Belaia Tserkov (literally White Church; the town was known in Jewish memory as *Sde Lavan*, White Plains, or *Shvartse Tume*, Black Impurity) she saw the annual fairs where nobody seemed to be trading but Jews: “Stores here are made of stone and two-storied. Jews trade in



1.5. Trading stalls (arcade) in Slavuta.

IA, f. 9, spr. 42, ark. 5. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

them, and one can get many quality and inexpensive goods there, but one has to be cautious, especially while choosing textiles.”⁶⁵

Alexander Muraviev, a Russian officer, mason, and mystic who had been commissioned to do a topographic description of Volhynia, portrayed Berdichev as a “big trading townlet overflowing with Jews, who control not only local, but most of the southern trade.”⁶⁶ Alexander Butenev from the Ministry of the Interior seconded him, describing the shtetl in the 1810s as a “dirty townlet with wooden houses and apparently poor yet very industrious Jews.”⁶⁷ The army statisticians from the Russian War Ministry surveyed the shtetls in Podolia and reported that Jews engaged in tavernkeeping and liquor brewing and were engaged in “glorious trade.”⁶⁸

Jewish women were hardly secondary in their entrepreneurship to male Jews: Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, the Polish romantic writer and talented painter, found many colorful words to describe them: “Nearby industrious Jewesses sit in their little stores, aloof from the crowds of people, and with their shrieks and yells they call people in, tempt them, beg, pull in, quarrel, bargain, even fight—with astonishing multitasking astuteness and unappreciated talent.”⁶⁹

We might appreciate the opinion of the Decembrist Rozen from the Life Guard regiment, by no means a great friend of the Jewish people. Rozen traveled through the shtetls and noticed unparalleled Jewish vigor: “The middle estate—merchants, artisans, tavernkeepers—included numerous masses of trading Yids, tirelessly active. During my constant travels and transfers, neither in the daytime nor at night have I seen a sleeping Yid.”⁷⁰

And although some later travelers, as if copying one another, mentioned the dirt, stench, and poverty of the shtetls connecting these unpleasant features to the swarms of Jews, others, much more independent in their observations, described the shtetl as a decent place. A Christian missionary and biblicist from Scotland, Ebenezer Henderson, liked good looks testifying to good well-being of the Jews in Dubno, noticed that their Great Synagogue resembled the Meeting House of the Church of Scotland, and admired the landscapes of Podolia, which he compared to Devonshire.⁷¹ Officer Alexander Muraviev loved the Podolia and Volhynia

shtetls, particularly Medzhibozh and Uman, whereas Nikolai Basargin, one of the Russian officers serving in the 1820s in Ukraine, remarked on the shtetl's homey feeling, its beauty, its visual attractiveness. "At the end of May," he wrote, "my wife and I traveled to Tulchin. We passed through Belaia Tserkov, Skvira, Letichev, Nemirov, and Bratslav. Podolia province looked like a gorgeous orchard. Wonderful land, fantastic climate. Beautiful places. Willy-nilly you get amazed and start thinking: it is here that you would like to live. I particularly liked Nemirov, a nice clean townlet, with its own special freshness."⁷²

This was the pleasant, vigorous, and abundant shtetl at the zenith of its provincial glory and hopes for a happy future. It was too abundant, vigorous, and independent for the Russian regime to reconcile with. In the next chapter we enter the shtetl and explore how the Russian authorities sought to dislocate one of the driving mechanisms of its prosperity, its international trade.