

## The Origins of the Soviet Jewish Community

### Historical Background

Jewish presence in the areas ruled by the Russian Empire dates back to the Hellenistic Period when the Jews fled religious persecution they had experienced in the Byzantine Empire. In these areas, they established communities, and from the early Middle Ages, a large number worked as traveling merchants. They encountered a negative attitude immediately upon their migration. This negative attitude towards the Jews was due to a general hatred of foreigners, as well as to a specific targeting of any minority that differed from the mainly Christian society.

The Czarist Russian Empire ruled Eastern Europe from 1721 until its fall in 1917, and held onto the medieval attitudes towards the Jews. Though the Jews mainly got along with their Christian neighbors, often the traces of the old fear and hatred of Jews would erupt when there were political, social, or economic changes. The Jews would be used as scapegoats for the empire's problems and were subjected to various abuses. The Church itself didn't initiate these actions, the government bodies did. However the Church did not do anything to protect the Jews either. There were many attempts by the czars to convert Jews to Christianity as an expression of their hope that the Jews would eventually completely assimilate.

Despite the Czars' restrictions on entry of Jews into Russian countries, many Jews managed to penetrate and set up small communities whose populations grew steadily. In 1792, Czarina Elizabeth Petrove put forth a decree of expulsion of the Jews despite the economic prosperity that Jewish merchants brought with them. This became moot at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when hundreds of thousands of Jews were placed under Russian rule when Poland was partitioned. From this time, the government related to the Jews as a problem which needed to be solved. Jews were confined to the **Pale of Settlement** (western part of the empire), which caused their middle economic status to decline. Jews were expelled from villages due to accusations against them by the Christian peasants and were moved to agricultural settlements.



Under Czar Nicholas I, government schools for Jews were established with a secret goal of disconnecting them from their Jewish heritage and bringing them closer to Christianity. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an expansion of Jewish settlement outside the Pale of Settlement due to permission given by Alexander II to Jews with select skills who would be useful for the empire. At this time, Jews became more involved in economic, political, and cultural life, which led to a backlash from the population and to renewed anti-Semitic attitudes. Jews were accused of being foreigners taking over these areas in which they were becoming prominent and they became victims of blood libels. Although all religions were officially acknowledged by the Empire, there were certain restrictions put on Jews. They were persecuted by discriminatory laws and by pogroms which were approved by or organized by the Czars.

In 1881, the assassination of Czar Alexander II was blamed on the Jews and sparked an escalation in the persecution and pogroms. The May Laws of 1882 restricted Jewish civil rights within the Russian empire. Jews were expelled from places in which they had previously lived peacefully and were confined to living in **shtetls**. Limits were put on the number of Jews admitted to schools and universities and anti-Semitic propaganda was put out by the press. This resulted in mass emigration of Russian Jews to Western Europe or to America before the outbreak of WWI – approximately 2.5 million Jews. Young Jews joined the revolutionary movement in opposition to the oppressive regime. Others became involved in the Zionist movement which began after the pogroms of 1881, but which was considered illegal. Jews began to form defence societies to protect themselves against pogroms. In 1915, the usage of Hebrew letters was prohibited. At the end of WWI, Jews were blamed for Russia's losses, and many Jews did not remain in territories under the Czar at all. By the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, 4.2% of the population was Jewish