

Competing with entrepreneurial diasporians: origins of anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Russia

Pål Kolstø*

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo, PO Box 1003, Blindern, N-0315 Oslo, Norway

(Received 23 August 2013; accepted 22 December 2013)

The popular, stereotype perception of Russian anti-Semitism is marred by a number of misconceptions. It is generally believed that it originated among the peasants, partly as a result of religious bigotry and partly as a reaction against an alleged Jewish exploitation. In actual fact, pogroms almost invariably started in towns and cities, and the main instigators were artisans and merchants and other people who plied the same trade as the Jews, later also professionals such as lawyers. Hence, economic competition rather than exploitation was the most important driving force. This is reflected in the writings of Russian anti-Semites and is also how most contemporary Jews understood their causes behind their ordeals. The Jews could be targeted for persecution because they were a diaspora group and did not enjoy the same protection as the indigenous population. Thus, even though the tsarist regime can be cleared of any suspicion that they deliberately whipped up the pogroms, they contributed to them by failing to give the Jews the same rights as other subjects of the empire.

Keywords: anti-semitism; ethnic competition; Jews; discrimination; pogroms

Nineteenth-century Russia was notorious for its widespread and undisguised anti-Semitism. A number of laws were specifically directed against the Jews and designed to restrict their freedom of movement and occupational opportunities. A system of *numerus clausus* limited their access to institutions of higher learning. Starting in 1871, a series of violent pogroms erupted during which the mob went rampant with indiscriminate killing of innocent Jews. What caused this official discrimination and popular frenzy?

In discussions on the roots of Russian anti-Semitism, four explanatory strands can be distinguished: those that stress racism, religion, politics, and socioeconomic factors. Of these, I believe, the last one, the socioeconomic interpretation has the strongest explanatory power. Of the other strands, both the religious and political explanations in my view point to important aspects, while the racialist theory barks up the wrong tree. Before I present my own view, I will briefly discuss some pros and cons of the rival explanations.

Religion

Traditionally, anti-Jewish sentiments – not only in Russia but all over Europe – were normally presented in religious language. The Jews were accused of having killed Christ, and

*Email: pal.kolsto@ilos.uio.no

their bloodthirstiness, it was claimed, had continued up to the present. Proof of this was found in their alleged killing of Christian boys for ritual purposes. This medieval superstition, which in earlier centuries could be heard all over Europe,¹ in Russia lingered on until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1830s, there were a number of widely publicized blood libel cases, and in 1880 Liutostanskii published an entire two-volume treatise on *The Jews' Use of Christian Blood for Ritual Purposes* (1880). As late as in 1913, the notorious Beilis case in Kiev was based on the continued strength of this myth (Rogger 1986, 40–55). While Mendel Beilis was eventually acquitted, since the prosecution for obvious reasons had no evidence, the fact that he was charged at all for this murder nevertheless testified to the pervasive power of this bizarre idea.

It should be noted that many Russian anti-Semites who focused on the religious aspect of Judaism, often seem to have been very much concerned also with the Jews' allegedly pernicious influence in Russian society and how they used their economic power to hurt the well-being of their Christian neighbors. Thus, for instance, Liutostanskii claimed that "exploitation of the Christians is the historical and most characteristic trait of Jewry, as established in the Talmud" (Liutostanskii 1880, vol. 2, 250). Also another anti-Semitic diatribe, *The Secrets of Talmud and the Jews in Their Relationship of the Christian World* (1880), was on the face of it devoted to unmasking the Jewish religion. In the preface, the author Mordvinov explained that he will not write about how the Jews exploited the Russian peasants in the most unscrupulous ways, how they drive them to utter ruin and stupefaction, neither will he focus on the enormous losses which the Jews afflicted on Russian society (1880, 4). The reason why he would skip all this was not that it was untrue or unimportant, but that it was too well known already. Moreover, while most books on the subject only scratched the surface of "the Jewish problem," Mordvinov claimed, he wanted to uncover the deeper, religious roots of Jewish exploitation which he found in the Talmud (Mordvinov 1880, 48–49).

Political

Already in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Jews were discriminated against in Russia in various ways, but it seems clear that their plight took a deep downturn under the two last tsars who both were convinced anti-Semites. The circumstances under which Alexander III ascended to the throne – the assassination of his father on 1 March 1881 – turned him into an ardent reactionary, dedicated to roll back the danger of revolution (Gessen 1906, 100–106; Rogger 1986). Much of the anti-Jewish legislation that was adopted in the last decades before the 1917 revolution clearly was part of a drive to combat left-wing terrorism. Jews were disproportionately well represented in the revolutionary movement – not surprising, considering the way Jews were being treated – but most of the new laws intended to limit their rights were either ineffectual or even counter-productive as anti-terrorist measures. Thus, for instance, the basic thrust of the notorious May Laws of 1882 was to bar the Jews from residing or doing business in the countryside. It is far from clear how this would make them less rebellious, on the contrary, as one tsarist official later pointed out, such restrictions "only angered the Jews, were easily evaded and therefore of no real benefit to the Russian population; they bred a revolutionary spirit among the Jewish masses" (quoted in Rogger 1986, 92–93). Much of the same could be said about the various *numeri clausi* which restricted the entrance of Jewish students into gymnasiums and institutions of higher learning. Rather than weaning ambitious and intellectually capable Jewish youth away from the revolutionary movement, such restrictions could easily lead them into its embrace.

To point out that a certain policy is counterproductive is of course not the same as to disclose the “real” motives behind it. People often act irrationally, and it seems well documented that the specter of the revolutionary Jew really haunted the last two tsars as well as many of their advisors. Viacheslav Plehve, for instance, Minister of Interior 1902–1904 and often singled out as one of the most anti-Semitic tsarist officials, was quoted as saying that in Russia as a whole Jews made up 40% of the revolutionaries; in Western Russia, 90% (Mindlin 2003, 89). However, as Daniel Gutwein has pointed out, even for this ardent reactionary his views on the Jewish question were to a large extent determined first and foremost by his economic policy. Plehve aimed to

encourage the peasantry to develop a capitalist, commercial, entrepreneurial class from its own midst. In order for this to happen, the rising Christian rural capitalist class had to be protected from the competition of the commercially more experienced Jews. This concern to secure optimum conditions, and mainly the necessary time, for the development of an indigenous capitalist class in the Russian village, and not anti-Jewish feelings as such, accounts for [his] refusal to open up the Pale and allow the Jews to settle freely all over Russia. (Gutwein 1994, 219)

Racism

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, racist ideas gradually took over from religious arguments in Western Europe as justification for anti-Jewish policies (Gobineau [1854] 1999; Frederickson 2002; Benz 2004; Laqueur 2006). The Russian reading public followed closely intellectual and quasi-intellectual debates in other European countries, and from around 1880 racialist language can be detected in some Russian anti-Semitic tracts. In his classical book on *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia* (1986), Hans Rogger discusses to what degree racism can explain official Russian policy toward the Jews under the two last tsars, and points out that many of the new legal restrictions that were passed affected not only those Jews who professed the Mosaic faith, but also those who converted to Christianity. If anti-Semitism had been driven by religious bigotry, the latter group would have been left in peace, hence, the religious explanation must be discarded, Rogger points out (1986, 36).

Rogger concludes that the available evidence does not give us reason to claim that the regime pursued a conscious and consistent racist policy. However, while Jewish policy after 1881 in his view was not guided by pseudo-scientific interpretations of biology or anthropology, it nevertheless “came as close to racism as it is possible to be without explicit theory” (Rogger 1986, 36).

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions (for an overview, see Weinerman 1994, 444–445). In a copiously documented article, however, Eli Weinerman convincingly shoots down the racialist thesis. He has studied the arguments put forward by those Russian anti-Semites who insisted that anti-Jewish legislation should affect not only those who professed the Mosaic faith but also Jews who converted to Christianity. The most commonly cited reasons behind this demand, Weinerman points out, was not that the Jews kept their harmful genes also after conversion but that it was necessary to eliminate Jewish economic and professional competition:

Black Hundreds’ periodicals frequently published the names of converts who served in the state bureaucracy. Although these offices, as a rule, had no connection with national security, extreme anti-Semites complained that converts should be dismissed from them because hiring converts deprived ethnic Russians of the means of gainful employment. (1994, 463)

Jewish converts to Christianity were no less resourceful or socially ambitious than other Jews, if anything, the opposite was the case. Hence, the need to keep the converts down was

greater, not smaller. Weinerman concludes that although some narrow groups of Russian nationalists did accept racist anti-Semitism, “[t]he Russian legislation against converts was motivated by concerns other than racial bias” (1994, 474). In any case, the tsarist authorities never closed the entrance to state service for Jews who had converted.

It seems clear that religious superstition among the broad masses as well as political fears of revolution among the authorities did influence the course of Russian anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century, but for the most part as *facilitating factors* only. This means that when a pogrom got going, the instigators behind it could easily find willing rioters who would do the dirty work. At the same time, the high share of Jews among the revolutionaries – even if not as high as the rumors claimed – meant that in the eyes of many officials the Jews *as a group* were untrustworthy. The authorities were therefore less prepared to protect them than they otherwise would have been. The driving force behind the pogroms, however, as well as the main lobby group behind discriminatory legislation that targeted Jews, were more often than not social and professional groups that competed with the Jews for jobs and market shares and had a vested interest in keeping the Jews down.

The socioeconomic factor

One of the most consistent and thorough attempts to give a socioeconomic explanation of Russian anti-Semitism is Hans-Dietrich Löwe’s book *Anti-Semitism and Reactionary Utopia* (1978). Löwe sees the rise of Russian anti-Semitism as a reaction against the rapid socioeconomic modernization that Russia underwent over the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The Jews were regarded as one of the driving forces behind the new economy and for that reason became a convenient target of all anti-modernist forces. Löwe identifies the nobility as the greatest losers in the modernization and consequently regards this estate as the main wellspring of anti-Semitic sentiment.

As Löwe himself points out, however, it was illogical to associate the Jews with the phenomenon of modernization. The vast majority of them continued to be linked to the traditional economy and way of life. Therefore, Löwe, remarks, “the image of the Jews as a spearhead of capitalism which the Russian conservatives created was more an artificial ideological construction than a reflection of real conditions” (Löwe 1978, 39).

This present article shares Löwe’s conviction that economic conditions and social transformation were indeed behind the emergence and spread of Russian anti-Semitism. In contrast to him, however, I believe that the anti-Semites were not lashing out at the Jews due to some misconceived ideas about the Jews actual socioeconomic condition. They were hitting at people whose economic activity represented a real threat to their own. This means that the motor of Russian anti-Semitism should be located among the urban classes and in particular among those social groups that were in direct competition with the Jews. Russian anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century was fueled not by the confrontation of two different classes, but by economic competition *within* the same social segments. This also means that as the Jews gradually moved into new socioeconomic niches anti-Semitic sentiments also started to creep into new social environments that earlier had been known for their liberal attitudes, such as the legal profession.

In the premodern Russian society, the Jews had been barred from tilling the soil (with the exception of certain regions such as Novorossia). They had been restricted to certain occupations, in particular trade, arts and crafts, stewardship on noble estates, and the production and sale of alcohol. As a result, the instigators of Russian anti-Semitism were for a

long time found primarily among Gentile practitioners of these same trades. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, the Jews as well as other population groups in Russia were caught up in the processes of modernization. Reduced infant mortality led to rapid population growth. Another important consequence of modernization was a marked increase in education, both at the basic level and in higher education. Young people left the Russian villages as well as the Jewish *shtetls* in increasing numbers, the majority ending up in the larger towns and big cities. Here, some got employment at the new factories that were sprouting up under Russia's crash industrialization, while many tried to enroll at the universities. This created a scramble for university slots and, in turn, to competition for white collar jobs among university graduates. These processes exported anti-Semitism to ever new professional groups at various levels of society.

To be sure, not only Jews and Russians were caught up in the whirlwind of modernization. Also other ethnic groups in the empire participated in the new educational boom. There were, however, a number of reasons why the xenophobia created by the new job competition should manifest itself first and foremost as anti-Semitism.

Firstly, the Jews had the highest level of urbanization of all the ethnic groups in Russia. Secondly, for a number of reasons they embodied what has been called "an achievement-oriented culture" (Lewis, Rowland, and Clem 1976, 87–96). This was perhaps not so much a result of Jewish religion – although the heavy emphasis on scriptural studies in Judaism may have played a part – as it was a culture they shared with other diaspora groups around the globe and hence can be explained as a result of "the diasporic condition."

Thirdly, Jewish competition was particularly resented by other job seekers since Gentiles were used to regard Jews as poor and powerless underdogs. When they started to penetrate new and more prestigious segments of the labor market – and frequently succeeded – their Christian neighbors were threatened by a status reversal. To be bettered by a Jew was regarded as a greater affront than to lose out to, for instance, a German or a Pole, two ethnic groups who had historically had a large upper class in Russia and been highly overrepresented in the tsarist bureaucracy.

Finally, the attitude of the Russian authorities was clearly important. It has been convincingly proven that the tsars and their ministers cannot be saddled with direct responsibility for the pogroms, but they clearly were guilty of anti-Semitism. On numerous occasions the tsarist state gave in to pressure from the Jews' competitors and adopted anti-Jewish legislation. By doing so they signaled to the populace that the Jews in a sense stood outside the law. As long as the authorities did not treat the Jews as full-fledged members of society, the mob felt free to deal with them as they pleased, at least in periodic killing sprees.

While this article is limited to a study of the roots of Russian anti-Semitism, I believe that economic competition is often a crucial factor behind ethnic hatred and xenophobia also in other societies and at other times. A similar pattern we find, for instance in ethnic relations in Soviet Central Asia during perestroika. In the 1980s, Central Asia was the only part of the USSR with a general problem of unemployment: here, job competition developed on the grassroots level of society and inarticulate ethnic riots erupted. These riots, however, were not directed against the ethnic Russian population, instead, the frenzy targeted members of small, vulnerable diasporas such as Armenians, Chechens, and Meskhet-Turks, who, it was felt, did not to the same degree enjoy the support of the state (Kolstø 2008).

Job competition and diaspora groups

Jews and Armenians are prototypical examples of achievement diaspora groups. The successes of Jewish bankers or Armenian merchants, however, have nothing to do with biology

or ethnic culture as such. In a global comparative study, Cohen (1997, 25) found that members of a number of different diasporas – not only Jews and Armenians, but also Lebanese, Chinese, and Indians – tend to do far better than their co-ethnics who stay at home. The explanation for the social advancement of the diaspora members, then, must probably be sought in the diasporic condition itself. One possible reason is that diasporians tend to have all the odds stacked against them in their host society: they simply have to strive harder and do better than others in order to survive. Another possible explanation is historical. Already in premodern times, many diaspora members were engaged in professions in which economic calculation and competitive spirit were important assets, at least more so than in the subsistence agriculture in which the majority of the indigenous population engaged (Sombart 1913; Slezkine 2004).

While some diaspora groups are grafted onto their host society at the top, others end up somewhere toward the bottom. John Armstrong distinguishes between a mobilized and a proletarian diaspora. The former is “an ethnic group which does not have a general status advantage, yet which enjoys many material and cultural advantages compared to other groups in the multiethnic polity.” Among the latter we find, *inter alia*, labor immigrants to Western countries from the third world, “a disadvantaged product of modernized polities, a nearly undifferentiated mass of unskilled labor.” Rather than gradually bettering their lot they tend to go down a downward spiral, Armstrong argues. Their upward mobility is blocked, and they “tend to become progressively more distant culturally and in physical appearance from the dominant ethnic group and to suffer more discrimination” (Armstrong 1976, 393 and 406).

Armstrong’s dichotomous typology, however, has not been universally accepted and may be rather misleading. Cohen points out that Poles and Italians in interwar USA, two groups that Armstrong identifies as proletarian diasporas, have in fact done quite well (Cohen 1997, 58–59). Hüttermann documents that many members of a typical “proletarian” diaspora, such as Turkish *Gastarbeiters* in Germany, have moved out of the ghetto and into middle class and this has caused tension:

For members of the autochthonous group the advancing Stranger becomes a problem and in a sociological perspective a social objective because in their everyday experience they have overcome the status boundaries that had been taken for granted, and thus put in question the identity-affirming ranking order in society. (2000)

In such a situation of “structural assimilation”, the Peripheral Stranger in the perception of the autochthonous mutates into a threatening Advancing Stranger, and the likelihood of ethnic conflict increases. Job competition between members of the autochthonous group and diasporas involves not only material matters of income and daily bread, but also crucial issues of status and status anxiety.

The modernization of tsarist Russia

Until a few decades before the demise of the Russian Empire the social distinction of estate (*soslovie*) overruled any distinction based on culture or ethnicity in Russian society. Russians constituted the largest ethnic group but they were not favored by the state authorities. Non-Russians and in particular Germans were strongly overrepresented in the higher echelons of the state bureaucracy. For a long time, this did not produce any strong feeling of resentment among ethnic Russians, simply because there was a surplus of such jobs. If a Russian with the necessary qualifications applied for a position he could be pretty sure to get one, not because he was Russian, but because he was qualified. As Kappeler points out, reports from the Russian ministries bristled with laments over

maloliudstvo, or lack of qualified personnel to fill the vacancies (1993, 111, 115, and 136). Russian nobles often possessed an excellent education and impressive language skills, but many of the best qualified among them did not bother to serve (obligatory state service for the nobility was abolished by Peter III in 1762). They were wealthy enough to live a life of leisure and very often preferred to do so. In such an environment, ethnically based competition for elite jobs could not arise.

In the last 30 or so years of the nineteenth century, however, things began to change. Nationalism gradually became a factor to be reckoned with in Russian politics and social life. Now for the first time a state-sponsored program was set forward to base the Russian state on Russian culture and the Russian language. The non-Russians were supposed to participate in this culture by undergoing Russification. Several circumstances seem to have contributed to this change of policy: bureaucratic standardization and centralization; a desire to emulate the more “progressive” European nation-states; nationalist mobilization during the 1876–1877 Russo-Turkish war; and finally fear of revolution, in particular, after the assassination of tsar Alexander II by terrorists in 1881 (Kappeler 1993, 226–228).

One important aspect of the new Russian nationalism, however, did not fall into this pattern, and that was the policy toward the Jews. In the last three–four decades of the tsarist era anti-Semitism developed into one of the most crucial ingredients of Russian nationalism, both official and popular. *This* policy, however, was not a program for Russification, on the contrary, it was aimed at the *isolation* and rejection of the Jews as “aliens.” Why were the Jews treated differently?

The simple but misleading answer to this question is that the Jews *were* different, and therefore had always been treated differently. While this is basically true, official Russian policy on the so-called “Jewish question” had right up until the 1870s been aimed at *the very opposite of isolation*. The problem, it was felt, was that the Jews had isolated themselves, and they had to be brought out of their self-imposed seclusion and into the mainstream of society, with equal rights and equal obligations with the tsar’s other subjects (Rogger 1986; Klier 1998). Sometimes this goal was pursued through a benign policy of integration and emancipation, but more often through a coercive policy of assimilation. Under Nicolas I, in particular, these measures consisted in the extension of obligations, particularly military service, rather than the emancipation of Jews on the basis of equality under the law.

Not surprisingly, the state’s assimilation drive was fiercely resisted by the religious establishment within the Jewish community, but in the last decades of the nineteenth century it was nevertheless beginning to bear considerable fruit. Jewish youth left the shtetls in droves looking for jobs and education in the large towns and cities. But when this happened, the assimilation policy toward the Jews was not only abandoned, but *reversed*. This strange paradox can only be understood against the background of the demographic and educational development of Russia at the time. As the most achievement-oriented minority group in Russia these modernized Jews became direct competitors to the dominant Orthodox-Slavic groups on the labor market.

Between 1864 and 1913, the population of the Russian Empire increased from 74 million to 164 million, an average of 1.6% per year. Except for typical immigrant countries such as USA, Canada, and Australia, this was the highest population increase experienced by any country in the world in that period (Gatrell 1986, 50). Some of this increase may be accounted for by the annexation of new territories, but most of it was caused by declining death rates in an environment of continued high fertility. Part of the demographic pressure was taken off the overcrowded Russian villages by rural–rural migration to periphery regions and some

overseas migration from the Western provinces. Most of those who left the Russian villages, however, filled up the rapidly expanding cities. Between 1855 and 1913, the population of Moscow increased three times; of St. Petersburg, four times; and of Kiev, eight times. Many typical industrial cities grew even more.

In relative terms, the Jews contributed more than any other ethnic group to this population boom in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Jews were encouraged by cultural traditions and communal pressures within the shtetls to marry early and have many children, in spite of prevailing poverty. In combination with a relatively low child mortality, this resulted in a rapidly expanding population. The Jewish population had always been urban, but in this period they clustered in towns and large cities to an even higher degree than before (Orbach 2004, 139). Already in the early 1880s, Jews made up more than half of the town population in eight *gubernii*s: Mogilev, Volhynia, Minsk, Kovno, Podolsk, Vitebsk, Grodno, and Vilnius (Demidov 1883, 63). In the 1897 census, Jews were by far the most urbanized group.

While only 0.2% of the Russian population in the 1897 census had higher education that group nevertheless amounted to the substantial figure of 238,000 individuals. In addition, another 1,245,000 men and woman had full secondary education (Shanin 1985, 61). Most of the new school graduates stemmed not from the nobility but from the new middle-layer or *raznochintsy* group. They were men and women of strictly limited means and could not afford a life of leisure such as the scions of the nobility could. Hence, the *maloliudstvo*, or lack of qualified people for the state bureaucracy, was eliminated. Jews were not allowed to compete for these jobs which were open only to the tsar's Christian subjects. This meant, however, the Jewish converts could, and did, apply for jobs in the state administration, a circumstance that added grist to the mill of right-wing anti-Semites such as the Black Hundreds. In this case, however, the authorities stood their ground, and did not give in to pressure (Weinerman 1994, 463 and 470).

Roots of official Russian anti-Semitism

During the nineteenth century, numerous laws and regulations were adopted that restricted the legal position and economic rights of the Jews. Even so, the Russian state seems to have played a more passive and reactive role in the development of Russian anti-Semitism than has often been assumed. It can be demonstrated that when anti-Jewish legislation was adopted, this often came about as a result of pressure from various lobby groups, in particular from professional groups that felt threatened by Jewish competition.

From an economic point of view the state had nothing to gain from restricting the movement and rights of any particular group in society, and certainly not when this group contained a strong element of experienced merchants and artisans. When it did, therefore, the state acted against its own economic interests. The incomparably most important institution that regulated the position of the Jews in the Russian Empire was the Pale of Settlement. This special residence zone was established in 1791 to restrict the movements of the Jewish population in Belorussia which had become Russian subjects after the first partition of Poland in 1772. Later, with the new territorial gains in the eighteenth century, the Pale was extended to cover most of the western and southern parts of the empire. The motives behind the establishment of this special zone were complex, but the most important were clearly economic. By limiting the Jews' permitted area of residence, the imperial powers tried to ensure the growth of a non-Jewish middle class in the other parts of the empire (Klier 1986, 75–77). The first demand for the establishment of a restricted zone of movement for Jews came from Russian merchants who complained that their Jewish competitors

engaged in shady business such as smuggling, tax evasion, and “selling goods at bargain prices” (Avrutin 2010, 5).

However, the economic benefits of the Pale were mixed at best. The provinces outside the Pale suffered economically from the lack of a mercantile class of Jews while the population within the Pale got far more merchants and craftsmen in many trades than they needed (Klier 2004). As a result, the Pale of Settlement over time had to be supplemented by a host of other regulations and palliative measures intended to mitigate its negative consequences.

The vast majority of the Jews were incorporated into the Russian estate system as petty bourgeoisie (*meshchane*), while the richer merchants among them were classified as *kuptsy* – merchants – and enrolled in one of the three merchant guilds. Catherine II subjected them to the same rights and restrictions as other members of the same two estates. Initially, she “scrupulously ensured that the Jews really were allowed these new rights, as this was of great importance for their activity as merchants and craftsmen” (Gessen 1906, 25). Later, however, under pressure from Christian merchants and *meshchane*, these rights were gradually reduced (Klier 1986, 67–68).

Even so, the Jews continued for a long time to enjoy the support of the government for their economic activities since this benefited the country as a whole, and a number of exceptions were made from the restrictive regulations that were passed. Nicolas I introduced some new restrictive policies, but, notes Iulii Gessen, “the government was so dependent on the merchant and artisan activities of the Jews that it was forced to partially reverse several of the new restrictive regulations” (Gessen 1906, 26).

Under the liberal regime of Alexander I, a number of special Jewish restrictions were eased or abolished. This new liberality, however, lasted only until the so-called May Laws of 1882 limited the rights and movement of Jews in numerous new ways (Klier and Lambroza 2004, 41). These laws had been prepared by the minister of interior, Count Nikolai Ignatiev, a notorious anti-Semite, who presented them as a countermeasure to combat the revolutionaries who the year before had managed to kill “the liberator tsar,” Alexander II.

It soon became clear, however, that Ignatiev’s measures created more problems than they solved. This was recognized by the so-called Pahlen Commission which was established in 1883 to examine virtually all aspects of “the Jewish question.” After five years of laborious work, it came up with surprisingly liberal recommendations, as summarized by Rogger:

The constant enlistment of state aid by the competitors of the Jews had to stop. If in free competition [the Russians] were the losers, it was because they were less agile, less parsimonious, less sober, less enterprising than the Jews and too dependent on the state. (1986, 65)

None of the recommendations of the Pahlen Commission, however, were implemented.

Many decisions to restrict the activities of the Jews were made by local authorities. This was normally the case for instance when it was decided to evict the Jews from a certain town or city. Their self-government organs were often controlled by their economic competitors. In 1891, some 30,000 Jews, mostly artisans, were expelled from Moscow and sent back to the Pale. This constituted more than 85% of the Jews living in the city (Pinkus 1989, 31). Elsewhere Jewish artisans were allowed to make up only a certain percentage of the total number of artisans in a given corporation.

In many cases of expulsion from a city only a specific group of Jews was targeted, such as when all Jewish students of pharmacy, medical attendance (*feldsherstvo*), and obstetrics in 1897 were denied the right of residence in Moscow (Gessen 1906, 22). This decision was

linked to a growth in the number of Gentile practitioners in these professions in the capital. Nathans maintains that “without denying the state’s readiness to discriminate against Jews and other minorities ... the decisive impetus for such action increasingly came from within the Russian public itself” (2004, 364).

A professional group that was specifically targeted was Jewish lawyers. The struggle to keep the Jews out of the legal profession became one of the most embittered battle fields in the war against Jewish occupational rights (Shmakov 1906, 333–336; Rogger 1986, 35; Nathans 2004, 340–366). Since only converts were allowed into state service, other Jews with higher education flocked to the professions that were still open to them, such as the bar. In 1889, a report in the journal of the St. Petersburg Juridical Society pleaded with the authorities: “Here, as elsewhere, free competition between Jews and Christians is dangerous and even simply impossible.” The reason for this was that the Jewish people allegedly had “a resourcefulness that stops at nothing” (quoted in Nathans 2004, 352). The plea was heard, and the same year a decree required every admission of a non-Christian to the bar to receive the personal approval of the minister of justice. As a result, the number of Jewish lawyers fell precipitously (Nathans 2004, 355–361). Later, new and even tighter restrictions were introduced. In 1915, it was decided to limit the number of Jewish lawyers to 15% in Warsaw, Vilnius, and Odessa; to 10% in St. Petersburg and Kiev; and 5% elsewhere (Löwe 1978, 166).

Restrictions to higher education

The Russian state’s changing attitudes toward Jewish higher education nicely illustrate its complete volte-face on “the Jewish question” in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The “Statute on the Jews” from 1804 had stated that all Jewish children should be allowed entrance into all Russian educational institutions, including gymnasiums and universities. In 1841, the Ministry of Education reported that “the acceptance of Jews into our civil schools has so far had no negative consequences.” In 1844 and again in 1859, the right of all Jews to send their children to general state schools was reconfirmed (Kosven 1904, 168–169).

In the traditional Jewish society, bookish education (for boys) was regarded as a sacred duty, but this education should be conducted at the Jewish religious community schools, the *chederim*, and concentrate on the study of the Torah. The Russian authorities attempted to attract Jewish students into the regular state schools but Jewish community leaders regarded this with great skepticism. As a concession to Jewish concerns the state also established certain schools and colleges reserved for Jewish students, where they could study without mingling with their Gentile coevals. In 1873, however, these specialized Jewish colleges were closed. “This devastating blow, however, had some positive effects,” explains Iulii Gessen. “The liquidation of specialized Jewish colleges, together with the general renewal of the Jewish life that took place at the time, stimulated interest among Jewish youth for general institutions of higher learning” (Gessen 1906, 107).

An important impetus behind the decision for an increasing number of Jewish youth to take higher education was clearly the desperate economic situation in the Pale. There was simply no room for more Jewish goldsmiths, cobblers, or shop-keepers, and some of the Jewish artisans’ many sons had to seek another livelihood. Higher education opened up new, promising prospects for them. In 1861 – the same year as the Russian peasants were emancipated – Jews with higher education had been allowed to settle in any part of the country. This was a measure in line with the Enlightenment spirit of the great reforms and aimed at the gradual and selective assimilation of the Jews.

The shtetl Jews responded with alacrity. In 20 years, the number of Jewish gymnasium students rose from less than a thousand to more than 7500, while the number of university students increased by more than 14 times. In 1886, there were 1856 Jewish students in the country, comprising no less than 14.5% of the total study body (Nathans 2004, 218).

The enormous success of this educational policy, however, brought about its own undoing, and in the early 1880s a backlash set in. In March 1880, the conservative newspaper *Novoe vremia* published a letter to the editor under the title “The Yid is Coming!” The anonymous author lamented the fact that the Jews were flooding the universities:

In another decade or so, we will see that in certain areas of Russia, Jews will dominate not only the practical professions, but also the so-called liberal professions, that is, they will hold in their hands both the material and the intellectual power. (Nathans 2004, 259)

Employing a zero-sum kind of reasoning, the author claimed that “Every Ioshka and Hershka who passes through a gymnasium, prevents a poor Russian from doing the same” (Quoted in Nathans 2004, 259).² The article triggered a wide debate and became one of the most influential anti-Semitic texts published in Russia in the nineteenth century.

A year later, in March 1881, Alexander II was killed, and a general backlash against Enlightenment and liberalism set in. In a move intended primarily to stem the recruitment of students to the ranks of the revolutionaries, Alexander III decided that higher education ought to be a prerogative of the upper classes, and in 1887 the Ministry of Education prohibited the “children of coachmen, menials, cooks, washerwomen and the like” from studying in gymnasiums (Nathans 2004, 267). The same year, a decree from the Ministry of Education restricted the number of Jews to be enrolled in gymnasiums in the Pale of Settlement to 10% of the total, 3% in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and 5% elsewhere (Gessen 1906, 110). In 1901, these quotas were reduced to 7%, 2%, and 3%, respectively. In 1908, the *numerus clausus*, which hitherto had been an administrative rule, was given the force of law. Hagglng over the size and application of the quotas, however, continued. In 1909, they were extended also to private schools. The next year one of the last loopholes was closed when the *numerus clausus* was applied also to “external” students who took exams without following the regular teaching (Rogger 1986, 96). However, in most institutions the *numerus clausus* was never fully enforced, and Jewish share of the student body year after year exceeded the norms (Nathans 2004, 270–271).

As Jews with higher education found entry into public service extremely difficult they tended to cluster in those professions where restrictions were fewer or difficult to enforce. This is probably a part of the reason why so many of them ended up as lawyers or in the humanistic intelligentsia. As a result, remarks Viktor Kelner, at the turn of the century anti-Semitism began to spread also among the Russian intelligentsia, which had hitherto been rather immune to such attitudes. A noticeable shift could be detected among Russian writers, artists, journalists, and people in the so-called free professions as soon as they got many Jewish colleagues: “In the new circumstances, their previous Judeophilia smoothly but quite naturally (*zakonomerno*) flowed into the opposite sentiment” (Kel’ner 2004, 77).

Who were behind the pogroms?

The most sinister expressions of anti-Semitism in tsarist Russia were the pogroms. In the older scholarship on the history of the Jews in Russia, and also in the popular understanding, the causes and dynamics behind the pogroms were poorly understood. In recent decades, newer and more scrupulous research has identified and dispelled at least three

serious misconceptions on the issue: (1) That pogroms were a frequent, indeed perennial occurrence in Russian history. (2) That pogroms were a rural phenomenon involving mainly peasants revenging alleged Jewish exploitation. (3) That the state authorities instigated the pogroms.³

In actual fact, the pogroms almost invariably started in the cities and only later spread to the surrounding villages. Furthermore, no major pogrom took place in the first eighty years after the partitions of Poland that for the first time gave Russia a large Jewish population. The first large pogrom erupted in Odessa in 1871.⁴ Later, a new wave of pogroms broke out with on the average 15-year intervals, in 1881–1883, in 1903–1906, and finally under the Russian civil war, in 1918–1920. With each recurring sequence, the violence tended to become more gruesome and claim more lives. Finally, the newest studies have acquitted the tsarist authorities of the charges of active involvement in the planning and execution of the pogroms. While many highly placed persons clearly nourished anti-Jewish prejudices, their visceral distrust of “the mob” was equally deep, and their basic law-and-order instinct prevailed over any temptation to incite the “dark” masses (Rogger 1986, 28–31; Aronson 2004, 55–56). But if not the authorities, who, then, were behind the pogroms, and what were their motives?

The answer to these questions is not the same in all cases and with regard to all perpetrators. We must distinguish between individuals and groups who whipped up a pogromist atmosphere for their own reasons prior to the actual outbreak of violence, and the people who smashed Jewish shops, raped Jewish women, and killed their husbands. These people were normally recruited from very different social groups. Moreover, there were important local variations, and in particular the 1918–1920 pogroms, which were far more lethal than the earlier ones, seem to have been driven by very different dynamics. While casualties in the earlier pogroms ran into tens or hundreds, under the civil war, largely as a result of near total societal collapse and the disappearance of law-enforcement structures, *tens of thousands* of Jews perished. In contrast to the previous cases, the violence this time was also to a large extent a rural phenomenon (Budnitskii 2002; Kenez 2004).

A common element in the first waves of anti-Jewish violence was the involvement of Christian merchants and other social groups who saw Jews as dangerous competitors. In the 1871 Odessa pogrom, the turmoil started when a rumor spread that a cross had disappeared from a Greek church; allegedly it had been stolen by the Jews. Most commentators agree that the rumor had been put out by Greek merchants who feared Jewish competition. The early 1870s was a transition period during which Jewish merchants were establishing themselves in the city in competition with Greek firms (Morgulis 1910, 63–64; see also Klier 2004, 15–16; Weinberg 2004, 251).⁵

When new and much more widespread pogroms broke out in a number of Southern towns and cities 10 years later, the highly respected Russian lawyer, Prince Demidov San-Donato, a member of the Pahlen committee, gave the following explanation for the rapid spread of the violence:

In major trade and production centers such as Odessa, Kiev, Rostov-na-Donu and others, [the pogrom] movement found an especially propitious soil, for several reasons. A significant part of the population in these cities were merchants and manufacturers who were hostile towards the Jews due to the extremely dangerous competition they faced from them in virtually every branch of trade and industry. Secondly, in such large trade and production centres there are an assorted group of uncultured and benighted (*temnye*) people, who covet other people's goods, as well as workers, mostly migrants who are known for their tempestuous instincts. The downtrodden and despised Jews represent the most convenient element upon which they can take revenge for their various grievances, without risking either resistance from the victims, or rebuff from the local population. (1883, 79)

This view is corroborated by modern scholarship, in particular the meticulous research of Michael Aronson (1990, 108; 2004, 47–49). Aronson points out that the number of artisans who participated in the pogrom was relatively high and attributes this to economic and professional rivalry.

The most vicious pogrom in the third cycle of violence broke out in Kishinev in 1903. The riots themselves seem to have been started by a loosely organized bunch of hooligans whose original goal was to “teach the Jews a lesson,” but contemporary observers as well as modern researchers agree that there had been a deliberate prior campaign to whip up an anti-Jewish climate, orchestrated by the notorious editor of the Kishinev newspaper *Bessarabets*, P.A. Krushevan. Articles in *Bessarabets* demanded that Jews should be fired from municipal jobs to make room for non-Jews (Lambroza 2004, 196). One of Krushevan’s closest collaborators cherished a reputation as a spokesman for the Christian workmen in their alleged struggle against Jewish competition and exploitation. Another was a businessman who had found himself in serious competition with several Jewish contractors. “Unable to better the Jews in open competition, he tried a different tack: he began using his wealth and influence to undermine the Jewish community through political intrigue and public slander” (Judge 1992, 33 and 37; see also Löwe 1978, 63). Some Kishinev burghers clearly had a vested interest in the pogrom.

Another serious pogrom in the 1903–1906 cycle, in Ekaterinoslav in 1905, has been studied by Gerald Suhr who focuses on the alleged role of industrial workers in the riots. Suhr concludes that the term “workers” that has been used by contemporary observers as well as by historians is misleading: the *pogromshchiki* were *not* factory workers from the suburbs; instead, they were disproportionately recruited from among the artisans, laborers, and clerks in small factories and small businesses, that is, “from among those in direct competition with Jewish workers” (Suhr 2003, 160).

In October 1905, Odessa was once again the site of a vicious pogrom, far more deadly than the previous ones; more than 800 Jews were killed. As explained by Weinberg, this time non-Jewish day laborers, more than any other group, filled the ranks of the *pogromshchiki*. They competed with unskilled Jews who made up roughly half of the workers at the docksides and in the railway depots. During the quiet October month in the off-season hardly more than half of the dockworkers were able to find employment. These workers were “especially prone to anti-Jewish violence” (Weinberg 2004, 263–264 and 272). Idle and hungry, they vented their anger and frustration at the Jews as soon as the possibility presented itself.

It might seem incongruous to try to explain such violent and uncontrollable actions as pogroms – involving so much wanton and indiscriminate destruction – in terms of economic interests. In a global comparative study in which she analyzes precisely how hatred against economically successful minorities fuels violence in the modern world, Amy Chua makes an explicit exception for East European anti-Semitism and claims that “economic grievances certainly had nothing to do with the numerous pogroms directed at poor shtetls in Russia and Eastern Europe” (2003, 201). Pogroms, however, is not a subject Chua has studied in detail and her opinion on this matter simply indicates that the legacy of the older research tradition on pogroms continues to influence secondary sources. More meticulous and updated studies from recent years suggest otherwise: the pogroms cannot be *reduced* to a mere function of economic competition, but they certainly has *much* to do with economic grievances nevertheless.

A Jewish lawyer from Odessa, who witnessed the 1871 pogrom in the city, gave the following explanation for what happened:

The lawyer who loudly proclaims that the mob which loot the Jews are acting legally and naturally, is in fact interested only in the Jewish lawyers who know their profession better than he does himself, the ones who enjoy more confidence among the public – even among the Christian public – and as a result can take away a significant part of his practice. He does not dare to act in a similar way vis-à-vis, for instance, German lawyers who similarly hurt his business, since he knows that the Germans enjoy the same rights as he does himself. But when a Jew, whom he since the days of his childhood has been used to regard only as a day worker and a petty salesman, has the temerity to become his equal and even surpass him, he inevitably regards this as a scandalous infringement on his national rights ... It turns out, then, that each citizen hates only that Jew who prevents him from monopolizing his business. But since it is shameful to admit openly to such a crude egotism, he takes resort to the well-known and age-old subterfuge which is practiced by people all over the world: they mask their personal concerns behind loud words about the common weal. (Orshanskii 1877, 167)

Thus, as we see, this Jewish commentator explains the hatred against the Jews in Russian society not by any peculiar Russian character traits, but with reference to universal human nature and general laws of psychology and sociology, in this case, to dynamics of individual feelings of shame and mob psychology. Orshanskii's account also suggests that the contribution of the authorities to the pogrom was very indirect, but no less important for that: by depriving the Jews of certain rights they suggested to the populace that the Jews stood outside the law and were free targets that no-one would be punished for attacking.

The arguments of the anti-Semites

Russian anti-Semites produced an entire library of books, booklets, and articles in which they expounded their views and gave their reasons why it was necessary to fight the Jews and restrict their rights. Some of the best known, and certainly most voluminous, texts were written by Orthodox believers and other religiously motivated people and coated in a religious language. As pointed out above, this was the case with, for instance, the works of V. Mordvinov and Ippolit Liutostanskii. Many other nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Russian anti-Semitic texts addressed socioeconomic issues more directly than these two (Chernoiarov 1890; Iarmonkin 1894; Shmakov 1906; Tuchkevich 1906; Rossov 1907). A central message for Aleksei Shmakov (1852–1916) for instance, was the need to keep the Jews out of the legal profession. In a 500-page anti-Semitic diatribe published in 1897, Shmakov declared that “We must keep *Russia for Russians*, and in particular, the profession of lawyers in Moscow must remain *Russian*” (62, emphasis in the original). It comes as no surprise that Shmakov was a Moscow lawyer.

In 1907, one of the most militant Russian anti-Semitic authors, S. Rossov, published a book on *The Jewish Question* in which he presented a long list of harms allegedly caused by the Jews to Russian society. Crucial to his argument was what he called Jewish “Exploitation and usurpation.” Rossov's understanding of exploitation, however, was quite peculiar and in fact basically covered what most of us today would call “economic competition.” Rossov lamented that Jews had invaded the best towns and cities in the empire. Even in Moscow and St. Petersburg they had wormed their way in. Everywhere they drove Russians out of business:

Wherever the Jews arrive, the business of Russians grows noticeably weaker. For instance, factory owners in Moscow are losing money due to the fact that pushful Jews turn up that the hotels where they intercept and adroitly ensnare the wholesale dealers as they come to town, and offer to deliver goods below factory price. (Rossov 1907, 43–44)

Another Russian anti-Semitic publicist writing at the same time as Rossov, Tutkevich, confided that in his personal experience “there is not a single sphere of life where the

Jews are not harmful” (1906, 11). Perhaps not every Jew was a crook, but the honest people among them were fewer than the number of righteous in Sodom and Gomorra at the time of Lot. To prove this, Tutkevich pointed to the activities of Jewish artisans. It was often claimed that they perform a useful service to Russian society, but that view was utterly misconceived:

The Jewish artisans ruin the trade: they use unsuited, poor quality material and are sometimes not even disposed to pay for them. In that way they can produce their goods very cheaply. An honest and conscientious artisan cannot and will not behave in that way, and due to the competition from Jews and the inclination of the customers to buy as cheaply as possible, the conscientious artisan is driven out of business. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the Pale of Settlement the Jews are more and more taking over all the trades. (Tutkevich 1906, 23–24)

It is often assumed that the most common economic accusation against the Jews was that they fleeced the innocent population by charging extortionate prices. Indeed, such accusations may sometimes be found in Russian anti-Semitic tracts, but as we have seen, much more often the *opposite* charge was made: the Jews were selling their goods *too cheaply*, at dumping prices. This was a problem, of course, not for the Jews’ customers, but for their competitors.⁶

Conclusion

Underdog groups that begin to advance will often be considered as particularly threatening since they challenge not only the income security of other groups but also their social status. Typical underdog groups are diasporas, that is, groups which have, or can be construed to have, weak historical roots in the country. Groups that can present themselves as “indigenous” can denounce the diasporas as “aliens,” “intruders,” etc. Diasporas are also favorite targets since they normally have little political power.

The causes behind the economic competitiveness of the Jews are complex. The Jews of Russia (as well as in most other countries) specialized in crafts, trade, and other “middleman” jobs. In a global perspective, this social position was not unique, but one which the Jews shared with numerous diasporas around the world.

Few kinds of enmity toward “the Stranger” have been regarded as more irrational and less interest driven than anti-Semitism (Benz 2004, 10 and 237). Bronner (2003, 34) believes that among the causes behind anti-Semitism economic jealousy is “only the most superficial.” Prager and Telushkin (2003, xi) insist that Jew-hatred is “unique.” It is triggered not by any socioeconomic factors but by the Jews’ superior religion and higher quality of life. The present study, however, is based on the premise that anti-Semitism is *not* a unique phenomenon. I believe that the way Russians and other European nations have reacted against the Jews in their midst to a large extent can be explained by the social position occupied by the Jews, and this is a position which the Jews have shared with many other diaspora groups around the world. I have, however, in this article not attempted to formulate a new catch-all theory of nationalism or anti-Semitism. No doubt other factors besides job competition influence the crystallization of xenophobic sentiments and movements, in particular religious bigotry and the willingness of the authorities to accommodate anti-Jewish pressure groups aggravated the situation.

To explain Russian anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century as interest driven is, of course, not to condone it or “explain it away.” Economically motivated anti-Semitism is no less and no more reprehensible than anti-Semitism driven by racism or religious bigotry.

Notes

1. See, for instance, the prioress' tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
2. Nathans (2004, 257–307) points out that the Russian students at the time were politically radicals and did not push for the expulsion of Jews from the universities.
3. Typical examples of older scholarship are Vishniak (1942, 79–110), Dubnov (1975, vol. 2, esp. 247–283), and Pinkus (1989, esp. 27–29). For a critical assessment of this scholarship, see Aronson (1990, 1–15).
4. Smaller pogroms, or anti-Jewish riots which had claimed no lives, had taken place also in 1821 and 1859.
5. The Greeks were of course a diaspora no less than the Jews, but as Orthodox Christians they were less “alien.”
6. For more examples, see Kolstø (2009).

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