

### **Jews and Muslims in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union**

**Veranstalter:** Martin Schulze Wessel / Michael Brenner / Franziska Davies, International Research Training Group on „Religious Cultures in 19th and 20th Century Europe“, LMU Munich / Charles University Prague

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Recent scholarship on the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union has stressed the imperial character of these states and how they interacted with the non-Russian population. Major contributions have been made to either the history of Jewish or of Muslim communities in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Yet only rarely have these histories been considered in a comparative perspective. The conference took place on June 20-21, 2013 in the *Historisches Kolleg* Munich and brought together specialists from both fields to pursue a comparative approach to Jewish and Muslim experiences from the 1860s until the 1920s. It was conceptualized by Martin Schulze Wessel, Michael Brenner, and Franziska Davies of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU) and organized through the International Research Training Group on „Religious Cultures in 19th and 20th Century Europe“, a partnership between LMU Munich and Charles University in Prague.

The conference opened with the lecture of YOHANAN PETROVSKY-SHTERN (Evanston). Although the conference was focused on teasing out similarities, Petrovsky-Shtern's lecture served as a reminder that we cannot lose sight of the numerous and significant differences that existed between these two groups and how they were treated in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. For example, the process through which Jews and Muslims became incorporated into the empire was strikingly different, with the eastern territories, where the majority of Muslims lived, being appropriated over a period of roughly three centuries (1550-1860), while the western lands, including Poland-Lithuania, where most of the Jewish population lived, were in-

corporated in less than three decades (1772-1795).

While the opening lecture approached the themes of the conference from a macro perspective, in the keynote lecture, MICHAEL STANISLAWSKI (New York) provided rich biographical details and close textual analysis in his comparison of two important Jewish and Muslim intellectual figures, Judah Leib Gordon and Ismail Bey Gasprinski, respectively, and the movements that they represent, the Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, and the Muslim Enlightenment, generally known as *Jadidism*. Gordon and Gasprinski were both writers, educators, and reformers. As Stanislawski strikingly illustrated by reading short excerpts from their poems and prose, their views of their religious communities and their future was essentially the same: both believed in the need for cultural and social reform that would push their communities to integrate fully into Russian culture and society.

But there were also important differences between the two advocates of reform: Gasprinski was a more militant and consistent supporter of the Russian Empire and praised its colonial expansion into Central Asia, while Gordon, though he remained loyal to the Russian state, at least until the pogroms of 1881-82, believed that Jews must be loyal to the rulers of whatever country they lived in, be it tsar, king, emperor, president, or prime minister.

The first panel explored the experiences of Jews and Muslims in politics and the military. VLADIMIR LEVIN (Jerusalem) focused on the period 1905-1917 and demonstrated that Muslim and Jewish political organizations developed parallel to each other, but that, despite having similar goals (representation in government, extraterritorial autonomy) and facing similar challenges (e.g. bills aimed at prohibiting animal slaughter), they did not collaborate with each other and did not have political successes to the same degree. Muslim political groups were more effective in achieving their goals, and owed their effectiveness in a great degree to the government, which increasingly came to see Jews as a homogenous population harmful to the Russian sense of statehood but took pains to differentiate Mus-

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lims between loyal conservatives and troublesome modernizers.

Islam was also more integrated within military structures, as FRANZISKA DAVIES (Munich) argued in her analysis of Jewish and Muslim Tatar experiences in the military. Davies argued that while the military was willing to accommodate the religious needs of both Jews and Muslims, it addressed Muslims' needs much more thoroughly and elevated the public profile of Islam through the creation of Muslim military chaplains. The military signaled out the Muslim clergy as a potential ally to realize its ultimate goal: the creation of a disciplined, obedient soldier, brave in battle and loyal to his faith and his fatherland.

The first panel was completed by an analysis of the economic life of the Jewish community of Odessa by DAVID SCHICK (Munich). Instead of studying mainly economic data and facts, Schick's framework is guided by the concept of economic history as a product of entangled relationships. He reminded the audience that, if for example, focusing solely on the legal framework when trying to understand the special economic conditions that Jews in the Russian Empire were subjected to, it would reduce the Jewish community to being just an object of the Tsarist state, allowing the coping strategies employed by peddlers, merchants, manufacturers, and entrepreneurs to disappear from the historical narrative. Studying transnational networks, linking the micro and macro perspectives, and reconstructing the relationship between beliefs and economic strategies prevent such a one-sided narrative.

The speakers of the second panel addressed the issue of representation – representation by others of Jews and Muslims, and representation by Jews and Muslims of themselves – in the Russian Empire and the early Soviet Union.

Through her research on ethnographic studies organized by the Russian Imperial Geographic Society, YVONNE KLEINMANN (Leipzig) illustrated that ethnographic research hardly ever distinguished methodologically between the study of ethnically Russian people and of the other ethnic groups that made up the empire. Moreover, it was

often the same scholars – geographers, historians, and statisticians alike – who studied peasant life as well as the culture of Siberian or Asian peoples. Figures such as Moisey Berlin and Chokan Valikhanov are vivid examples of Jewish and Muslim elites who participated in such ethnographic enquiries.

DAVID SHNEER (Boulder) provided a visual tour of the works of Jewish photographers Semyon Fridly and Georgii Zelmanovitch, whose photographs in the 1930s documented the creation of Birobidzhan, a territory along the Manchurian border that was meant to provide Jews a territorial home to incubate a Soviet Jewish nation, and which required the migration of Jews from the Ukraine. Instead of following traditional empire photographic styles and emphasizing the distance between subject and photographer, Zelmanovitch and Fridly played with that distance to show how sameness and difference co-existed. According to Shneer, the tension in their photographs reflects the Soviet Union's own ambivalent stance as an empire – a socialist paradise that tried to both celebrate diverse cultures and demand modernization, crafting a new, Soviet identity in the process.

Building conceptually on research of Islam in the Russian Empire, ELLIE SCHANKER (Atlanta) focused on the confessional conversion options Jews had and what multi-confessionalism meant in practice. By providing detailed stories of Jewish conversion experiences, Schinker sought to complement traditional scholarship, which emphasizes the bureaucratic view of the confessional state „from above“. Schinker illustrated that there is evidence of converts following minority faiths rather than the preeminent Orthodoxy, and that they did so not because of conversion incentives, but because of personal choices and interests.

The last panel offered a span of perspectives, moving from internal developments that shaped Jewish and Muslim communities to the interaction of these communities with the state and the creation of imperial consciousness.

DAVID FISHMAN (New York) analyzed the changing position of the Yiddish language in Russian Jewry in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century. While Yiddish had been

a feature of Ashkenazic Jewish life for centuries, the scope of Yiddish cultural output, and the size of the audience that consumed it, exploded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Russia. The Jewish urban population grew rapidly in the late nineteenth century as a result of migration from shtetlekh to cities within the Russian Empire, with the populations of cities such as Odessa, Warsaw, and Vilna exploding. But the Polonization or Russification of Jews' linguistic identities was slow to develop. Nonetheless, they did adapt to modern city life, which led to the explosion in the consumption of modern Yiddish press, literature, and theatre.

ADEEB KHALID (Northfield, MN) addressed cultural developments within the Muslim community of Central Asia, in particular the deep conflicts between Muslim modernists and conservatives in the period after the revolution. The revolution of 1917 brought into the open the deep cleavages that had been boiling underneath the surface of Central Asian Muslim society. Acting on a long tradition of skepticism of piety in Islam, and with an explosion of literature, theater, and poetry in the background, the modernists, known as the Jadids, worked against the ulama by entering the new Soviet and party organs as well as adopting elements of the European language of anticlericalism and media such as cartoons in their work.

MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY (Chicago) took on the development of Russian historiography in order to examine what role non-Christians played in the construction of an imperial consciousness. For the overwhelming majority of the Russian intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, Russia's expansion, though it mirrored the colonialism of Western countries in many ways, avoided the violence associated with European empires and was fundamentally benevolent to its non-Christian peoples. At the same time, the expansion of the Russian Empire led to non-Russian local elites serving as intermediaries between the imperial authorities and the native peoples, in the process becoming integral to the development of the imperial administration's policies towards non-Christian subjects. Khodarkovsky sketched portraits of several of these individuals, illustrating the

fluid exchange between ethnic Russian government officials and local communities, both of whom played a central role in the creation of ethnic identities in the Russian Empire.

There were relatively few such comparisons in this field before, and as the conference concluded with a discussion among all the participants, it was agreed that while the differences are just as remarkable as the similarities, the conference had underlined that the comparison makes sense and is productive for many research areas. However, it also brought home how difficult it is to have a truly comparative analysis when so many varying areas of research focus are presented. In spite of such difficulties, the conference showed that a comparative framework helps to broaden our understanding of the complexities and nuances of imperial rule in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Opening remarks*

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern (Evanston): Jewish Apples and Muslim Oranges in the Russian Basket: Options and Limits of a Comparative Approach

*Panel I: Jews and Muslims and their Encounter with the Imperial and Soviet States*  
Chair: Christoph Neumann (München)

Vladimir Levin (Jerusalem): Common Problems, Different Solutions: Jewish and Muslims Politics in Late Imperial Russia

Franziska Davies (Munich): Jews and Muslims as Soldiers of the Tsar: The Army and the Challenge of Difference

David Schick (Munich): The Jews in the Economic Policy of the Russian Empire: The Example of Odessa (1855-1894)

##### *Keynote Lecture*

Introduction: Michael Brenner (Munich)

Michael Stanislawski (New York): The Jewish and Muslim Enlightenments in Russia: A Comparison

*Panel II: Depicting Difference: Visual and Discursive Representations of Jews and Muslims in Late Imperial Russia and the Early Soviet Union*

Chair: Heléna Tóth (Munich)

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Yvonne Kleinmann (Leipzig): The Power of Documentation: Ethnographic Representations of Jews and Muslims in the Late Russian Empire

David Shneer (Boulder): Documenting the Ambivalent Empire: Soviet Jewish Photographers in Birobidzhan and the Soviet East

Ellie Schinker (Atlanta): A View of the Confessional State from Below: Converts from Judaism and Confessional Choice in Nineteenth-Century Imperial Russia

*Panel III: The Making of National and Religious Identities*

Chair: Guido Hausmann (Munich)

David E. Fishman (New York): Yiddish and the Formation of a Secular Jewish National Identity in Czarist Russia

Adeeb Khalid (Northfield, MN): From Muslim Anticlericalism to Soviet Atheism: The Uzbek intelligentsia through the Revolution, 1917-1929

Michael Khodarkovsky (Chicago): „Who Are We And Why?“ Imperial, Islamic, and Ethnic Identities in the Russian Empire

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