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Rites of Empire: Jewish Religious Reforms in Imperial Russia, 1850-1917

Project Abstract

The humanities is at a crossroads in its understanding of the secularization process and the paradoxical rise and creative development of religion at a time when it should have declined. My project reconsiders the supposed irreconcilability between modernity and religion through Judaism's encounter with Russian imperial modernization and the diversity of Jewish life in pre-war Eastern Europe. With the aid of PERS funding, I will spend two summers conducting qualitative, archival research in Lithuania and Israel to explore how the Russian empire, home to Europe's largest Jewish population over the long nineteenth century, tried to reform Judaism and how Jews responded to and independently shaped their religious lives. The pairing of these two countries will allow me to use both Russian imperial state archives and internal Jewish sources to explore the rich terrain of religion and empire. Jewish Lithuania in the imperial Russian period was home to a vibrant Jewish Orthodoxy and secular Jewish culture, and Vilnius (then Vilna) served as the imperial Russian administrative center for the northwest borderlands. Israeli archives offer access to internal Jewish scholarship and publishing on religious liberalization.

Rites of Empire analyzes Jewish religious reforms in imperial Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century when the Russian state became more interventionist in the realms of religion and culture, with interests in rationalizing and systematizing religion and wiping out native superstition. I plan on studying the role of Jewish state servitors (Expert Jews, censors, Rabbinic Commission and Congress delegates, crown rabbis, interwar Duma members) and the rising prominence of reformist jurists, medical practitioners, and public safety officials in bringing multiple legal regimes into conversation with Jewish law, and translating Jewish law and practice for the state. My project also investigates internal Jewish projects for religious reforms and changing modes of behavior. The newly emerging Jewish press in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian circulated proposals for reforming Jewish law, empowering individuals with legal interpretive authority, and identifying and discrediting "superstition." At the same time, urban Jewish communities built progressive synagogues and rabbis struggled with nonconformity such as parental protests against circumcision and women who turned to civil courts to evade patriarchal Jewish divorce laws. I am interested in external and internal impetuses and legitimations for reform through an analysis of gender and economic critiques of rabbinic law raised by contemporary outbreaks of famine and cholera and the rising incidence of deserted wives due to Jewish migration in the late imperial period. And I seek to analyze how religion functioned in the secularist movements of Jewish nationalism and socialism.

Rites of Empire charts new territory in Jewish and Russian history by exploring non-traditional forms of Judaism in the Russian empire in the half century leading up to World War I and the Russian Revolution. My research demonstrates that religious diversity and individual non-conformity shaped notions of Jewish identity in the Russian Empire, a context heretofore identified with religious intolerance and orthodoxy. My work challenges understandings of minority religious behavior as solely a response to imperialism and looks at how minorities take part in shaping secularisms.

Schinker Budget

Project Budget

I plan on using PERS funds to conduct two successive summers of research abroad in 2019 and 2020. In summer 2019, I will conduct two months of research in Israel on Jewish religious affairs during WWI and the inter-revolutionary period by working with the papers of Lazar Nissenovich Nisselovich, one of the few Jews elected to the Duma and a member of the religious affairs committee of the third Duma. His papers are in the process of joining the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, a constituent archive of the National Library of Israel. I will also explore internal Jewish writings on reforms in the Jerusalem collection at the JTS-Schocken Library in Jerusalem, which includes rich material on East European rabbinic correspondence and Jewish legal responses to pressing religious debates of the day. In summer 2020, I will conduct research in Lithuania, in the Lithuanian State Historical Archives in Vilnius. This will allow me to focus on religious politics in the imperial Russian northwest provinces which were a central site for contests between emerging progressive and orthodox Jewish voices in the Russian empire. Archival collections of interest include those of the Governor General of Vilna, Vilna Civil Governor, and papers of state-sponsored Jewish institutions such as the Vilna Rabbinical Seminary and administrative boards of various Jewish communities. I will also take short day trips to regional state archives in Kaunas. Research abroad will complement previous research I have completed on published reformist writings (essays, satires, memoir and autobiography) and debates on Jewish ritual in a variety of Hebrew and Russian Jewish presses.

Travel Expenses

Israel, June-August 2019

Airfare (roundtrip Atl-Tel Aviv, from Kayak.com)	1,800
Lodging: apartment rental in Jerusalem (based on previous rental)	4,000 (2,000/month)
Ground Transportation (to/from airport, monthly city bus pass)	350

Lithuania, June-August 2020

Airfare (roundtrip Atl-Vilnius, from Kayak.com)	1,800
Lodging: apartment rental in Vilnius (from VRBO)	4,200 (70/day x60)
Ground Transportation (to/from airport, monthly city bus pass)	120

Personnel Expenses

Research Assistant, Lithuania (for short excursions to regional archives)	768 (\$12/hour, \$96/day for 8 days)
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Total: \$13,038