

Leighton James

## **Jews and the Russian Campaign**

Alongside the Cossacks, the Jewish population of Poland and Russia are the most commonly depicted peoples in German soldiers' memoirs of the Russian campaign. Indeed, Jews rarely appear in German officers' memoirs of other Napoleonic campaigns, but one of abiding memories of the 1812 campaign appears to be the large number of Jews encountered by the soldiers. This is in part a consequence of the size of the Jewish population inhabiting the so-called Pale of Settlement, which lay across the *Grande Armée's* line of march to Moscow. Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century the Jewish population of Russia had been relatively small some due to the exclusionary policies of earlier Tsars and Tsarinas. In the 1770s, however, Catherine the Great had encouraged Jewish traders within the empire. Their success created resentment amongst the Russian merchant community, which complained that Jewish traders undercut competition by manipulating coinage and selling smuggled goods. In response Catherine limited the Jewish residency to the western provinces of Minsk, Iz'iaslav, Kiev, Chernigov, Novgorodsk-Seversk, Ekaterinoslav and the Tauride district in 1791. Jews were also subject to higher taxation than the non-Jewish population. This was the origin of the Pale of settlement, although some have also seen in the restrictions placed on the Jews a fear of the French Revolution and the potential transmission of foreign intellectual ideas in Russia.

The Russian Jewish population of the Pale increased in size following the Second and Third Partitions of Poland in 1793 and 1795 respectively. Russia's Jewish population expanded by some half a million as a consequence of this westward expansion of its borders. In the years prior to the 1812 campaign the Russian Empire adopted a vacillating policy that alternatively sought to integrate and segregate this new Jewish population. A Committee for the Amelioration of the Jews was established in 1802, while the Statute for the Jews of 1804 allowed them to attend schools and universities. It also, however, sought to restrict Jews from engaging in certain trades, such as the sale of alcohol, which it was believed contributed to the impoverishment of the peasantry. At the same time privileges were offered to those Jews willing to engage in agriculture and manufacturing. The Statute also envisioned a resettlement of Jews from the countryside to urban centres, but this was ultimately unsuccessful, partly as a consequence of the war of between Napoleonic France and Russia in 1807. The proportion of the Jewish population that inhabited urban centres varied by region.

Bernard Weinryb has estimated that the share of the population made up of rural Jews increased from 19 percent to 36 percent the further east one traveled into the Polish heartland. It was within this context that most German officers and soldiers involved in the Russian campaign encountered Jews. That the Orthodox Jewish population exercised a certain degree of fascination for the soldiers of the *Grande Armée* is evident in Faber du Faur's and Christian von Martens's drawings. Like the Cossacks, the German soldiers' accounts were deeply influenced by pre-existing stereotypes in contemporary German culture. Unlike the Cossacks, whose depiction is at least leavened with some acts of kindness or generosity, the portrayal of the Jews is overwhelmingly negative. Nicoline Hartzitz has argued that early modern German antisemitic texts attacked Jews on four grounds - religious, economic, biological-anthropological and nationalist. Moreover, on a more generic level, the supposed backwardness of the Eastern Jew had also been promoted by German Jews involved in the Haskalah, who strained 'to shed their backward image in Christian culture by projecting this stereotype onto Polish Jews' (Gelbin, 39).

Julia Murken identifies the first three of the antisemitic tropes present in early modern antisemitic literature in Bavarian military diaries and memoirs in which Jews are depicted. The same can be said for almost all German accounts of the campaign in which Jews figure. Many focused on the supposed avaricious nature of the Jewish population. For example, during the advance Karl von Suckow wrote caustically that the Jews could find provide any goods so long as one had the money to pay. This perceived profiteering was at the root of much of the antipathy directed towards the Jews, particularly within the context of the chaotic retreat from Moscow. In the winter 1812 and later in memoirs that appeared in the course of the nineteenth century, Jews were accused of profiteering from the suffering and hardship endured by the broken remnants of the *Grande Armée*. Johann von Gießé depicted the Jewish population of Neustadt in Poland as verbally abusing the soldiers when they realised they had nothing to trade.

The Jews were also depicted as being inconstant in their loyalties. Faber du Faur wrote, 'the Jews behaved badly towards us. Whilst the Allied army had still been present in force, they came and offered their services and goods and even invited individuals into their houses. However, as soon as news of the Russian approach was received they threw Allied troops out into the cold streets, thereby seeking to ingratiate themselves in the eyes of the victors'.

Finally, and in common with much of the Polish and Russian peasantry, the Jews were also depicted as poverty stricken and dirty. Suckow commented on their ragged appearance and did the Bavarian soldier, Josef Deifel. The anti-semitic sentiment evident in the accounts of

the 1812 campaign were not limited to German officers and soldiers, however. In his *Études d'histoire* the French historian Arthur Chuquet used French memoirs, which described the Polish Jews encountered by the *Grande Armée* as having 'pointed faces that looked as if they had been stretched, piercing, covetous eyes, and long reddish beards ... They all fleeced the French seamlessly, and their lust for gain, as well as their uncleanness, inspired the invader with contempt and disgust'. The work was translated into English in 1913 as *Human Voices from the Russian Campaign of 1812*.

The hostility evident in the German military memoirs was despite the fact that during the 1800s Jews across most of German Central Europe had experienced some degree of emancipation. In Prussia, for example, the Edict Concerning the Civil Relations of the Jews in the Prussian State of 1812 removed most restrictions on Jews. Yet the new legal freedoms were not matched by increased social acceptance. The fragility of their new status became obvious after the end of the war. In 1819 the anti-semitic Hep-Hep riots broke out in Bavaria, Württemberg and Baden. Political reaction and a cultural turn away from the Enlightenment ideas to Romanticism also meant that the many of the promises of emancipation were never met or were rolled back.

### **Sources**

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