

The Jewish intelligentsia, state administration, and the myth of conversion in tsarist Russia¹

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BY RUSSIAN LAW, conversion to Christianity signified an unambiguous break with Judaism and the Jewish community and marked a commitment to Christian values and the Russian civic order. In the practice of everyday life, however, baptized Jews faced great difficulties in finding acceptance in their new environment. Even though conversion signaled the end to all legal and social restrictions, imperial officials often subjected baptized Jews to severe scrutiny due to their unreliable Jewish 'origins' (*proischozhenie*). Imperial officials continued to mistrust baptized Jews, while members of the Russian polity continued to identify them as Jews, paying little attention to their religious conversion. Unlike in England, where the majority culture usually incorporated baptized Jews with little resistance, in Russia both ancient religious prejudices and the more modern racial stereotypes stigmatized the newly baptized.² Conversion, therefore, was a *de jure*, but not *de facto*, ticket to integration for Jews. Baptized Jews endured persistent mocking and unpleasant, at times crude, reminders of their Jewish origins. Their collective sincerity was questioned routinely in conservative journals; in public spaces such as work and school, they endured much skepticism from other ethnic minorities and Russians. Contrary to the popular belief of the times, the task of breaking away from the Jewish community and erasing all visible signs and symbols of Jew-ishness was a difficult and complex process of negotiation.³

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² Todd M. Endelman, 1990, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History*, Bloomington, Ind., 44

³ My own work has been influenced by recent studies of conversion, especially Elisheva Carlebach, 2001, *Divided Souls: Converts From Judaism in Germany, ijoo-i/fo*, New Haven; and Todd M. Endelman, 1998, Memories of Jewish-ness: Jewish converts and their Jewish pasts, in: Elisheva Carlebach et al. (eds), *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Hanover, N.H., 311-29.

The limited historical studies of Jewish converts have attempted to explain either the sociological factors that led Jews to convert or the autocracy's attitude towards conversion.⁴ Influenced by the nineteenth-century school of Russian-Jewish history, a number of historians have generally assumed that formal conversion to Christianity marked the end to all legal restrictions and the beginning of relatively successful integration in Russian society.⁵ As I argue in this paper, nineteenth-century conceptions of conversion contributed to the construction of a myth that still informs many recent treatments of this subject. Conversion to Christianity thus signified the beginning of an arduous, and at times long, process of negotiation between multiple categories of social being during which individuals attempted not only to change their self-presentation, but also to establish an acceptable cultural identity. A skeptical bureaucracy further complicated this process by questioning the authenticity and sincerity of baptized Jews.

Emergence of a myth

If nineteenth-century Jewish historians were correct in their interpretation of Jews' legal status as 'anomalous' within Russian legal culture, then conversion to Christianity constituted the only means by which Jews could ameliorate their civic and material situation. Upon conversion, as the nineteenth-century legal scholar I. G. Oršanskij argued, all the 'constraints' (*stesnenija*) and 'restrictions' (*ograničenija*) that had burdened the Jews would immediately vanish. Oršanskij interpreted conversion in 'dichotomous' terms, which conformed essentially to the same logic that pervaded the thinking of nearly every historian influenced by the nineteenth-cen-

⁴ Mikhail Agursky, 1990, Conversion of Jews to Christianity in Russia, *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 20:2-3, 69-84; Michael Stanislawski, 1987, Jewish apostasy in Russia: a tentative typology, in: Todd M. Endelraan (ed), *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, New York; Todd M. Endelman, 1997, Jewish converts in nineteenth-century Warsaw: a quantitative analysis, *Jewish Social Studies* 4: i, 28-59; John Klier, 2001, State policies and the conversion of the Jews, in: Robert P. Geraci & Michael Khodarkovsky (eds), *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia*, Ithaca, N.Y., 92-112 ; and Eli Weinerman, 1994, Racism, racial prejudice and Jews in late imperial Russia, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17:3,442-95.

⁵ See esp. Klier, State policies; Weinerman, Racism, racial prejudice and Jews. For an important exception, see Hans Rogger, 1986, Jewish policy of late tsarism: a reappraisal, in: idem, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia*, Berkeley, 2 5-39.

ture Russian-Jewish school of history: the convert's legal standing stood in stark contrast to Jews' legal status in the Russian Empire, which was mired by disabilities, restrictions, and abnormalities.⁶

The legal and material temptations of conversion that underscored Oršanskij's analysis also contributed to the hyperbolized perception of the rise in the rate of conversion and to the prevalent belief that Jewish society was in a profound state of crisis.⁷ The historian Simon Dubnow described the general tension eloquently: 'The soul of the Jewish people was filled with sorrow, and yet there was no way of protesting publicly in the land of political slavery.'⁸ The Jewish novelist and ethnographer S. A. An—skij noted that the new generation of modern Jews 'forget their mother tongue, renounce their loyalties, and convert';⁹ and the memoirist Pauline Wengeroff wrote that the '1880s and 90s broke in upon us Jews and our children like a flood.... People desperately sought a safe haven and thought they had found it in baptism.' As many of her contemporaries, Wengeroff interpreted baptism as a disease that threatened to destroy the Jewish people: 'Baptism—the heavy, horrible word reached like an epidemic, a plague into the innermost core of the Jewish people, tearing apart those closest to one another.'¹⁰ For the nineteenth-century educated Jewish public, then, conversion constituted an absolute break between baptized Jews and the Jewish community. That imperial law forced baptized Jews to break all familial, religious, and professional ties to the Jewish past only reinforced the belief that conversion constituted an insurmountable rupture.

⁶ И. Г. Оршанский, 1877, *Русское законодательство о евреях: Очерки и исследования*, Санкт-Петербург, 7-8. For an analysis of the ways in which bipolarity became a central trope in the writings of historians influenced by pre-Revolutionary Russian-Jewish historiography, see Jonathan Frankel, 1992, *Assimilation and the Jews in nineteenth-century Europe: towards a new historiography?*, in: idem & Steven J. Zipperstein (eds), *Assimilation and Community: the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Cambridge • New York, 1-37.

⁷ On the post-1881 ideological crisis, see Jonathan Frankel, 1981, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, Cambridge • New York, esp. 49-132; and more generally, Alexander Orbach, 1992, *The development of the Russian-Jewish community*, in: John Klier & Shlomo Lam-broza (eds), *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge • New York, 137-63.

⁸ Simon Dubnow, 1918, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 2, Philadelphia, 286.

⁹ С. А. Ан—ский, *s.a.*, *Сочинения*, 1, Санкт-Петербург, 101.

¹⁰ Pauline Wengeroff, 2000, *Rememberings: the World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, transi Henny Wenkart, Bethesda, Md., 218-19.

In S. Jaroševskij's novel *Roza Majgol'd*, for example, we meet a young man who left a small town in the western provinces, ceased communication with his mother for ten years, and embarked on a brilliant career. 'All of this proves', Jaroševskij wrote, 'that he has been baptized.' While one of the main characters in the novel *Roza Majgol'd* defended the young man and argued that pure ability led to his career, another character remarked, 'Well, with abilities you won't go too far. How many capable people sit around without a piece of bread in their hand?'¹¹ While in the late imperial period an unprecedented number of Jews climbed the professional and social ladder, long, unexplained absences from home or breaks in familial communication raised suspicion among Jews of possible, if not probable, conversion. Indeed, material gains such as professional employment, residence permits, and marriage often functioned as incentives, as well as temptations, for religious conversion, appearing as powerful tropes in the works of a number of Jewish authors who wrote in the Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian languages.¹²

In imperial Russia, as in early modern Europe, religion served as a primary marker of identification. The lack of a neutral territory, at least in legal and administrative terms, necessitated that baptized Jews renounce all their familial, religious, and professional links to the Jewish community. And as in early modern Europe, the Jewish community often regarded baptized Jews with extreme hatred and loathing, and characterized converts as arch enemies who had betrayed the Jewish people and its values. When a father shot his own son for converting to Christianity in Mogilev province in 1912, the newspaper *Rassvet* expressed no remorse for the father's actions. It asked its readers: 'Can you really deny that the son, who stepped over to the enemy's side, insulted his own father and prompted the murder?'¹³ Although sensational, these types of incidents painted an impenetrable line between the two communities, fed a popular Jewish imagination that viewed converts as careerists and traitors, and reified baptism as 'final', 'abrupt', and 'conclusive' in the minds of Jewish novelists, journalists, and memoirists. These

¹¹ С. Ярошевский, 1897, РозаМайгольд, *Восход* (May 1897), 64-5.

¹² See the discussion in David Patterson, 1964, *The Hebrew Novel in Czarist Russia*, Edinburgh, 215; and Gabriella Safran, 2000, *Rewriting the Jew: Assimilation Narratives in the Russian Empire*, Stanford.

¹³ The conservative *Zemščina*, on the other hand, labeled the incident as a 'tragedy'. Both of these newspaper articles can be found in Российский государственный исторический архив (Russian State Historical Archive, St Petersburg, *henceforth*: RGIA), [fond] 821, opfis] 133, d[elo] 740.

incidents, moreover, contributed to the making of a myth of conversion, which was one of the most pronounced social concerns that occupied the educated Jewish public at the end of old regime Russia.¹⁴

Increasingly, images of successful converts who escaped 'Jewish' disabilities and restrictions and who were perceived by the educated Jewish public as a threat to the health of the Jewish nation became popular motifs in Jewish newspapers and *belles-lettres*¹⁵ These images, however, usually do not reveal the tensions or difficulties that baptized Jews endured in their integrationist attempts. In 1881, K.P. Pobedonoscev, the Supreme Procurator of the Holy Synod, remarked:

On the whole, baptized Jews are some of the least fortunate people. Jews consider them a lost people, and even the parents deny them any assistance. Christians view them with prejudice and likewise offer very little assistance.¹⁶

As early as the 1840s, imperial officials attempted to help alleviate the material and psychological burdens of conversion to Russian Orthodoxy by offering small sums of money and other incentives (monetary help was not offered for conversions to Protestantism or Catholicism).¹⁷ For many, the burdens remained: the fifteen to thirty rubles the state offered baptized Jews hardly improved their material situation. Social realities, moreover, dictated that many baptized Jews experienced conflicted identities as Jews and as Christians. As the celebrated pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein remarked of his own conflicted identity, 'To Jews, I am a Christian, and to Christians, I am a Jew.'¹⁸

¹⁴ See, for example, Л. Я. Фарберг, 1911, Причины ренегатства, *Еврейская хроника* 20, 7.

¹⁵ See, for example, the popular sketches of famous converts, some of which first appeared in the Yiddish mass circulation press, Šmuel Leib Tsitron, s. a., *Mešū-modim: tipn un siluetn fun noenln over*, Warsaw; and Saul Ginzburg, 1946, *Mešumodim in tsarišn rusland*, New York.

¹⁶ RGIA, f. 821, op. 9, d. 163, fo. 2r.

¹⁷ Between 1841 and 1855, the Jewish Committee discussed the possibilities for easing material and psychological hardships that baptized Jews encountered upon converting to Russian Orthodoxy or to other Christian confessions (see RGIA, f. 1269, op. i, d. 10). Monetary help was offered to conversions to Russian Orthodoxy as early as 1842 (see RGIA, f. 821, op. 8, d. 183).

¹⁸ А. Г. Рубинштейн, s. a., *Мысли и афоризмы*, transi Н. Н. Штраух, Санкт-Петербург, 113.

Following the April 1905 law on religious freedom (which permitted converts to transfer legally back to Judaism)¹⁹ many baptized Jews noted in their petitions that the inability to break all cultural and religious ties, as well as financial and social disappointments, played important roles in their desire to return to their former religion. Aleksandr Rozenfel'd, for example, petitioned because Christian society would not offer him medical help.²⁰ Another baptized Jew, Raisa Levovna, wrote that she had initially converted with the hope of marrying a Russian Orthodox man. Levovna's fiancé, however, broke his word and refused to marry her:

This was the sole motive that had induced me to betray the religion of my parents, which I continue to practice to this day. Raised in the Jewish tradition... I could not have become acquainted with the Orthodox Church and developed a heartfelt conviction for its teachings. I decided to take a fatal step which tore me away from my family; what I said and did then were not my thoughts, words, and deeds, but were imposed upon me. I was in a hypnotic state and could not account for my actions... I do not have any desire to practice this religion, which I don't and won't believe in ... I have never frequented the Orthodox Church and have never fulfilled any of the Orthodox rites ... In my soul, by my beliefs and convictions, I have remained a Jew. In this fashion, I am only nominally a member of the Russian Orthodox Church.²¹

And Ljudmila Molašaskaja converted to Catholicism at the age of fourteen in hope of improving her material situation. After the conversion, which she claims was influenced by her Catholic neighbors, her life circumstances only deteriorated. Her Catholic friends abandoned her and left her in poverty and in poor health. She petitioned with the hope of reuniting with her parents and improving her medical condition.²²

The majority of Jews chose to convert to Christianity for strategic reasons: either to alleviate the existential burdens of Jewishness, to improve their emotional and professional opportunities, to resettle in the interior provinces, or to marry legally outside the

¹⁹ *Полное собрание законов Российской империи* (PSZR1), series in, no. 26126 (17 April 1905).

²⁰ RGIA, f. 796, op. 186, d. 5926.

²¹ RGIA, f. 796, op. 186, d. 1932.

²² Molašaskaja petitioned eighteen years prior to the law of religious freedom; many (young) baptized Jews petitioned for similar reasons (RGIA, f. 821, op. 8, d. 185(1887)).

faith. While conversion, at least legally and administratively, signified that baptized Jews escaped the constraints that had burdened Russian Jewry, social realities dictated that converts would have a difficult time breaking with all the symbols and memories associated with their pasts. For many of the 684 Russian Orthodox Jews who chose to return to Judaism after 1905 the process of reinvention thus proved to be difficult and demanding.²³ Due to a variety of personal and external reasons, many of the baptized Jews chose to return to Judaism because they could not live up to the challenges and demands of conversion, which only further demonstrates the socially burdensome process of conversion *from* Judaism *to* Christianity.

But a number of recent historians, who have been influenced by the interpretations of pre-Revolutionary legal scholarship or by select autobiographical accounts of successful, well-to-do converts, have tended to emphasize the unambiguous legal status of converts as Christians and to minimize the integrationist dilemmas that most baptized Jews endured after their initial conversion. The historian Eli Weinerman, for example, argues that 'in general converted Jews were accepted by Russians, and [that] the majority of the Russian elite endorsed Russification of the Jews and their inclusion in the Russian people.'²⁴ The inconsistencies and discrepancies of the law code and the ambiguous status of baptized Jews (which have usually been overlooked in standard historical accounts) should be taken seriously, since in the practice of everyday life they often helped stymie successful integration.

²³ RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 263. These numbers should be used with caution, for the Holy Synod and the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions (DDDII) often reported conflicting data. In 1912, for example, the Holy Synod reported that 38 Jews, 1914 Catholics, and 4245 Old Believers returned to their former religion, whereas the DDDII reported 64 Jews, 2932 Catholics, and 2106 Old Believers (see RGIA, f. 821, op. 10, d. 288 (1912)). I have chosen to use the statistics provided by the Holy Synod for the simple reason that their numbers are more complete and accessible. The Synod published conversion statistics to Orthodoxy, and after 1905 from Orthodoxy, in *Всеподданнейший отчет обер-прокурора святейшего синода* (Санкт-Петербург, 1886-1916). I have not been able to locate reliable conversion statistics to Judaism from other legally recognized Christian confessions, however. These numbers would most likely increase the absolute number of returnees, for it seems that other confessions such as Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism proved attractive to Jews as well.

²⁴ Weinerman, *Racism, racial prejudice and Jews*, 472. Following Oršanskij, John Klier states in a recent article that 'conversion remained the surest means to escape all legal disabilities' (Klier, *State policies*, 93).

Even though most pre-Revolutionary legal scholars tended to characterize imperial law as favorable and receptive towards conversion, we also find important exceptions that often questioned the collective sincerity of baptized Jews. M. I. Mys, the author of a popular nineteenth-century legal handbook, noted that the law mandated that those people who were born and raised in Russian Orthodoxy (i.e. 'Russians') watch the conduct of newly baptized Jews.²⁵ Russian law stipulated that baptized Jews take nine months to register within an estate and sever all former communal and religious ties. During this so-called 'trial period', the law obligated converted Jews to change their 'style of life' (*rod žizni*) or else forfeit their newly gained privileges and exemptions.²⁶ Imperial authorities not only expected baptized Jews to fulfill religious rites and obligations, they also expected them to exhibit upstanding moral qualities and become respectable, contributing members of Russian society, while never losing track of their Jewish origins. The imperial administration's skepticism of Jewish origins translated into a number of extreme stipulations. As Mys explained,

[i]f it was noticed that newly baptized Jews did not behave in the prescribed manner (if they failed to go to church and continued to maintain their customs), then they must be admonished, their actions reported to the parish priest.²⁷

In the late imperial period, then, paradox often pervaded bureaucratic and legal attitudes towards converted Jews. The Russian Orthodox Church was often suspicious of Jewish converts and of 'false' conversions.²⁸ While conversion of the Jews in imperial Russia has yet to be the subject of a systematic scholarly study, a cursory analysis of archival documents housed in central depositories suggests that the Holy Synod, the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions, and other bureaucracies routinely questioned the authenticity and sincerity of Jewish converts and the place of 'marginal' baptized Jews in Russian society.²⁹ In the last decades of the old regime, for example, the Russian bureaucracy debated whether baptized Jews, who had committed crimes after

²⁵ М. И. Мыш, 1898, *Руководство к русским законам о евреях*¹, Санкт-Петербург, 43.

²⁶ Я.И. Гимпельсон (сompil.), 1915, *Законы о евреях, 2*, ed Л.М. Брамсон, Петроград, 685-99, esp 687.

²⁷ Мыш, *Руководство*, 43.

²⁸ Safran, *Rewriting the Jew*, 10-11.

²⁹ The Holy Synod was established in 1721 to train clergy, regulate the publication of texts, religious practices, and schooling. In 1832, the DDDII (cf. fn2₃) was established for a similar purpose for all other minority religions. For a good overview, see Robert P. Geraci & Michael Khodarkovsky, 2001, Introduction, in: eidem (eds), *Of Religion and Empire*, 5-6; more generally on the Holy Synod, see Gregory Freeze, 1985, Handmaiden of the state? The church in imperial Russia reconsidered, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36:1, 82-102.

converting to Christianity, could be accepted as 'equals' among the majority culture due to their Jewish origins.³⁰ The Academy of Military Medicine would not accept baptized Jews or individuals of Jewish descent who sought admission.³¹ And as more and more Jews turned to either Lutheranism or other not legally recognized confessions (as opposed to Russian Orthodoxy or Catholicism in the Kingdom of Poland), imperial officials frequently discouraged what was perceived to be 'insincere conversions'.³² The administration, in short, encouraged acculturation (of the adoption of western clothing, languages, attitudes, and norms) and ultimately 'sincere' conversions, while at the same time maintaining a profound skepticism of Jewish origins; this skepticism translated into a plethora of restrictions and inconveniences for Jews as well as baptized Jews.

Documentation of Jewish origins

As Jewish society began to be fundamentally, realigned in the second half of the nineteenth century, due to state policies as well as to internal pressures in the Jewish communities, Russian officialdom found themselves to be increasingly concerned with maintaining authority over what was perceived to be a 'dangerous' and 'unrelia-

³⁰ Between 1872 and 1884, the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) ruled that Jews who convert and commit a crime could be denied the right to live among their Christian neighbors and subsequently exiled to Siberia. In 1892, the MVD softened its stance and ruled that criminals of Jewish descent should be 'watched' for at least four years, although they too could be ultimately banished to Siberia. See, Государственный Архив Российской Федерации (State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow, *henceforth*: GARF), f. 102, делопроизводство 2, оп. 76А, д. 1342.

³¹ For other examples of institutional discrimination of baptized Jews, see Rog-ger, *The Jewish policy*, 3 5-6.

³² See, e.g., RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 740, fos. 56r, 44r. For a good explanation why Jews chose to convert to Lutheranism in Warsaw, see Endelman, *Jewish converts*, 46-8. Most statistical work has hitherto focused on the conversion of the Jews to Russian Orthodoxy. Klier concludes that 'very few Jews converted to Christianity in the Russian Empire'. For a good overview of the sources on statistics, see Klier, *State policies*, 109. Archival sources, however, seem to point to an increase in the conversion to Lutheranism as well as to illegal 'sects' in the late imperial period, which would not fall under the statistical purview of the Holy Synod but rather the DDDII. These documents (located in RGIA, f. 821, op. 10) may very well shed much statistical light on the conversion of the Jews.

ble' population. During the Great Reform era (1856-81), the intensification of social and geographic mobility exposed the inadequacies of customary record-keeping practices, traditional taxonomies, and accepted forms of social control. The imperial administration was forced to rethink its governing strategies, as it sought to improve social and fiscal conditions, while maintaining order and stability and fostering a greater sense of inclusion and participation in its population.

Beginning in the 1860s and '70s, the 'select' integration of Jews in the interior provinces of the empire, the increase in internal migration, and gradual acculturation in and beyond the Pale of Permanent Settlement raised a number of questions with respect to social order.³³ As an increasing number of Jews began to shed signs and symbols of their Jewishness (their dress, speech, names, and religion), imperial authorities were often forced to ask 'Who is a Jew?' and 'Where is a Jew?' when they were not able to recognize and identify Jews by their appearance or when they lacked knowledge of their whereabouts. Jews, like migrant workers, became increasingly aware of the symbolic distinctions in dress, behavior, values, customs, and cultural consciousness that separated them from other urban peoples.³⁴ As the Yiddish novelist Šolem Aleichem noted of the Jews' turn to 'civilization':

The caftan and yarmulke was exchanged for a round top hat, and yesterday's Mair Berels, Zorech Naftalis, and Kalmen reb Velvels suddenly appeared as Moric Borisovič, Zachar Pantelemonovič, and Klimentij Vladimirovič.³⁵

For Jews, changes in Russian names and clothing, as described by Šolem Aleichem and his contemporaries, were attempts to minimize cultural differences between themselves and other peoples. Imperial officials, on the other hand, often interpreted these changes as attempts by Jews to hide their criminal past and circumvent residence restrictions.³⁶ For these and other reasons considered below,

³³ On select integration, see Benjamin Nathans, 2002, *Beyond the Pale: the Jewish Encounter with Russia*, Berkeley; and on internal migration, see Shaul Stampfer, 1998, Patterns of internal migration, in: Yaakov Ro'i (ed), *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Essex, 28-47.

³⁴ On the impact of consumer culture on workers' tastes, see, for example, Jeffrey Burds, 1998, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*, Pittsburgh, ch 6.

³⁵ Šolem Aleichem, 1925 [1884], Taibele, in: idem, *Ale verk fun Šolem Aleichem* 23, New York, 14.

³⁶ Safran, *Rewriting the Jew*, 9-11.

the imperial administration attempted to control the movement and place of Jewish identities in a number of ways, from enforcing geographic restrictions and educational quotas to compiling a complete book of 'Jewish' names that would standardize naming practices and facilitate the documentation and identification of Jews.

Name changes did, in fact, create numerous record-keeping problems for the state. As in France and Germany in the nineteenth century, imperial law mandated that its subjects petition state authorities to change surnames.³⁷ Unlike for most other subjects in the Russian Empire, the changing of names for Jews and, as we soon shall see, baptized Jews became the object of extensive legal interest.³⁸ The desire to stabilize the Jewish name emerged from a concern to identify Jews more easily and efficiently. A number of reasons contributed to the growing involvement with the forenames and surnames of Jews and individuals of Jewish descent.

First, in the 1860s and '70s the MVD began to regularly cite 'disorder' (*besporjadok*) in the registration of births, marriages, and deaths in metrical books (parish registers) as a primary cause for failure to maintain accurate population statistics and inability to easily identify Jews.³⁹ During the imperial period, metrical books functioned as the principal means for registering an individual's identity and origins: 'who' they were, 'where' they were, and 'what' religion and legal status they were born into. As a fundamental

³⁷ Jane Caplan, 2001, 'This or that particular person': protocols of identification in nineteenth-century Europe, in: eadem & John Torpey (eds), *Documenting Individual Identity*, Princeton, 49-66.

³⁸ For a good overview on Jewish names and Russian legal culture, see the encyclopedia article by Julij Gessen: Ю. Гессен, [1906], Имена собственные по русскому законодательству, *Еврейская энциклопедия: Свод знаний о еврействе и его культуре в прошлом и настоящем* 8 (Санкт-Петербург, 1991 (*reprint of the 1906 edn*)), 149-53. For a comparative perspective on name changes in the Russian Empire, see Andrew M. Verner, 1994, What's in a name? Of dog-killers, Jews, and Rasputin, *Slavic Review* 53:4, 1046-70.

³⁹ Peter the Great first introduced metrical books in 1724 as a way of registering the births, marriages, deaths, and divorces of the Russian Orthodox population. Between 1826 and 1837, most of the tsar's non-Orthodox communities began recording their vital statistics in metrical books (Old Believers constituted a prominent exception). For an overview, see Charles Steinwedel, 2001, Making social groups, one person at a time: the identification of individuals by estate, religious confession, and ethnicity in late imperial Russia, in: Caplan & Torpey (eds), *Documenting Individual Identity*, 67-82; and on Jews and metrical books, see Г. Вольтке, [1906], Метрические книги и свидетельства, *Еврейская энциклопедия* 10,925-7.

marker of identity, the document followed individuals as they changed place of residency, religious confession, and marital status. As one official commented,

[i]f the registration of metrical books is not well regulated, you can be sure that if not half then a great majority of the Jews will evade their civic duties with absolute disregard for the law.⁴⁰

Second, 'state' rabbis—who like Russian Orthodox priests maintained metrical books—proved to be an easy target of criticism and were often blamed for the inaccurate registration of Jewish names (whether intentional or accidental). As part of the 1835 statute on the Jews, rabbis were required to document the precise date of the birth, death, marriage, and divorce of each Jew. The rabbi recorded the names of the newly born in Russian and Hebrew during either the circumcision for the boys or the naming ceremony for the girls, and upon death, he documented the age, name (and nickname), legal status, and cause of death.⁴¹ The 1835 statute thus differentiated between 'state' and 'spiritual' rabbis, and made officially sanctioned rabbis formal administrators or 'record keepers', as they were often categorized derisively by the Jewish communities. In an attempt to improve the accurate registration of Jewish births, marriages, and deaths, the imperial government made an important amendment to the statute on metrical books: only officially sanctioned state rabbis would be able to perform religious rites such as circumcisions and marriages.⁴² Unsurprisingly, the ukase immediately evoked quite a stir in Jewish communities and confirmed all the worst fears of tsarist oppression.

Third, the incompatibility of the civil code with Jewish law accounted for many gaps in the accurate compilation of Jewish population statistics and the state's heightened interest in Jewish names. As a member of the Bessarabian statistical committee explained, [b]y Jewish law, any eligible and informed Jew can perform religious rites. These rites need not be observed in an institutionalized religious ceremony. The bigger the Jewish community, the more eligible Jews . . . official government rabbis do not have the means to supervise all naming ceremonies, or at least force [*members of the community*] to report the names of the newly born to them.⁴³

⁴⁰ RGIA, f. 821, op. 9, d. 94, fo. 70r-v.

⁴¹ PSZRI (cf. fn 19 above), series 11, vol. 10, no. 8054, art. 96 (13 April 1835), 320.

⁴² PSZRI, series n, vol. 1 j, no. 13750 (31 August 1840), 547.

⁴³ RGIA, f. 821, op. 8, d. 377, fo. 6r.

State authorities therefore had to convince a people that had no historical tradition of recording vital statistics of the books' civic importance. That Jews did not pay much significance to birth dates represented an immediate obstacle to the accurate recording of vital statistics. As the Yiddish novelist Mendele Moicher Sforim wrote in his novel *A Little Man*, 'Of what use was such knowledge? A Jew remembers an anniversary of a death; but an anniversary of a birth—what for?'⁴⁴ Well into the late imperial period, officials often encountered difficulties in conveying the civic significance of the books, not only to the so-called 'record keepers' but also to local Jewish communities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, that Jews often used Russian nicknames (*kinuim*) in day-to-day affairs instead of their sacred names (*šemot hakodeš*)—which were usually recorded in metrical books—confused local officials and often led to disagreements over their true identity. As one author explained in the *Journal of the Ministry of the Interior*: 'Since ancient times Jews have customarily used either one or a number of nicknames instead of their "real" [*sacred*] names.' Most of the time, the author argued, nicknames had no correlation whatsoever to the respective sacred names. Jewish naming practices often sounded foreign and appeared exceptional to authorities, as well as to ethnographers and other observers.⁴⁵ In an effort to facilitate their identification, Jews were not allowed to change either their forenames or surnames throughout the imperial period. In fact, since the civil code denied Jews this privilege, routine clerical errors (when rabbis either misspelled names or incorrectly inscribed them in metrical books) also often led to disagreements over the true identity of Jews.⁴⁶

Only as part of this broad context concerning Jewish names and the politics of record keeping can we begin to examine the practices by which the imperial bureaucracy scrutinized baptized Jews with respect to their origins and hampered their integrationist efforts. In all official documentation such as passports and service records, imperial officials needed to mark 'of the Jews' (*iz evreev*), in order to unambiguously document Jewish origins.⁴⁷ Its purpose, as a

⁴⁴ Mendele Moykher Sforim, 1991 [1864-6], *A Little Man*, in: idem, *Selected Works*, eds Marvin Zuckerman et al., Malibu, Calif., 144-5.

⁴⁵ Собственные имена, употребляемые евреями, *Журнал министерства внутренних дел* 4 (1843), 100-1.

⁴⁶ This is a theme that appears frequently in archival documents on the registration of Jewish vital statistics; for one example, see RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, a. 716.

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 102, deloproizvodstvo 2, op. 76A, d. 1194, fo. *Ab*; RGIA, f. 821, op. 133, d. 792, fo. 14Г-Ф. In 1906, the passport law was abolished (GARF, f. 102, deloproizvodstvo 2, op. 76A, d. 1969, fo. 14Г).

member of the MVD explained, was to give local clergy an opportunity to 'reinforce the traditions of [Russian] Orthodoxy'.⁴⁸ While in theory internal passports allowed police and other government officials to monitor the movements and whereabouts of Jewish converts, in practice this was often not possible. While religion, residency, and 'distinguishing marks' (*primety*) needed to be marked on passports, a number of officials, according to the governor from Cherson province, 'issue [passports] on which religion, *primety*, and place of residency are not marked'. It was difficult, the governor concluded, to 'discern by the passport if a Jew is in fact a Jew'.⁴⁹

Unlike passports or other official documents that were often unreliable, the surnames of baptized Jews became convenient symbols by which individuals of Jewish descent could be recognized and distinguished. Since the surname often 'appears as the person's main referent, as the principal mark of identification', it often interfered with the successful integration of baptized Jews in Russian society.⁵⁰ Jewish surnames often replaced official documents in those instances when passports or service records were not readily available, destroyed, or lost. 'For those who associate with baptized Jews on a daily basis and cannot see their papers, then, the administration will not be left without an opportunity to monitor baptized Jews who abuse the rule of law,' an MVD official concluded.⁵¹ The law of 1850 on the surnames of baptized Jews was thus designed to hinder the 'complete' and 'successful' integration of baptized Jews in Russian society.

Since it was a conventional belief that Jews converted with the purpose of escaping legal restrictions, lawmakers did not want Jews to have a convenient loophole through which they could readily escape supervision, to hide their Jewish identity by changing their surnames. Allowing baptized Jews to change their surnames, state officials argued, would present an opportunity to every Jew who, upon committing a crime or other illegal act, wished to hide his or

⁴⁸ GARF, f. 102, deloproizvodstvo 2, op. 76A, d. 1969, fo. 14r.

⁴⁹ RGIA, f. 821, op. 9, d. 94, fos. 222&-223; f. 821, op. 133, d. 792, fo. 14r.

⁵⁰ Б.А.Успенский, 1996, Социальная жизнь русских фамилий, in: idem: *Избранные труды 2*, Москва, 203; and more generally on name changes, see his article in the same volume: Мена имен в России в исторической и семиотической перспективе, *ibid.*, 187-201.

⁵¹ И RGIA, f. 1284, op. 224, d. 42, fo. iv.

her true name and place of residency by converting and changing surname. It would allow Jews, 'if not forever, then for a long period of time, to evade lawful pursuit by government officials'.⁵² However, when lawmakers first debated the merits of the law on surnames in 1849, a number of officials, including the Minister of Internal Affairs Count Perovskij, argued otherwise. In fact, Per-ovskij posited that if Jews were allowed to change their surnames upon baptism, it would not only give them an opportunity to eliminate various reminders of their origins, but it would also attract baptized Jews to the Russian Orthodox Church by placing them in closer contact with Christian society. Count Perovskij even suggested that in all official documents such as service records, state certificates, and passports baptized Jews should be registered under the forenames and surnames that would be given to them at baptism. Perovskij's suggestions were eventually dismissed, for, it was argued, if baptized Jews changed their surnames it would 'hardly correspond to the measures of caution and supervision (*nadzor*) that the state administration deemed necessary because of the Jews' special place in the civil sphere'.⁵³

By the mid-1890s, an increasing number of Jewish converts began to petition the Chancellery of Petitions to change their surnames. Changing surnames, the petitioners argued, would allow them to 'break all ties with their [*Jewish*] past' and facilitate their integration in Russian society.⁵⁴ Such frequent petitions even interested Nicholas II. In 1899, Nicholas requested that the Chancellery 'not accept requests from baptized Jews save for the most exceptional cases'.⁵⁵ What exactly Nicholas meant by the 'most exceptional cases' was debated among government officials at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In a memo to the MVD, a member of the Chancellery sympathized with those Jews who converted out of religious conviction:

For sincere converts, changing a Jewish-sounding surname would help avoid the [hostile] attitudes and relations between Christians and Jews that have developed [*at the end of the nineteenth century*].

⁵² *Ibid.*, fo. 7r-v.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, fos. 14 r-v, 25 r-v, 26r

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, fo. 8v.

⁵⁵ RGIA, f. 1412, 0p. 251, d. 107, fo. 14r.

Their requests, the official argued, 'have to be recognized as practical and deserving'.⁵⁶ The **DDDI** responded by reminding the Chancellery that those baptized by law were not allowed to change their surnames. Only 'in light of special circumstances' could their requests merit respect. While, as one historian has argued, the process of legally changing a surname was a relatively simple process for the population at large, usually a case of bureaucratic formality, the Chancellery of Petitions denied permission to the vast majority of baptized Jews.⁵⁷ The remaining part of this paper explores in greater detail the political and social realities that motivated baptized Jews to change their surnames.

Names as symbols

Vsevolod Petrovič Gendel'man, for example, a second-year student at the Warsaw Polytechnic Institute, requested that his surname be changed to 'Renskij'. As a young boy, Gendel'man began to lose interest in all things Jewish. In secondary school, he associated with Christian children, which caused his Jewish family much anguish and consternation. 'My family', he wrote, 'cursed me for my apostasy and reproached me for my friendship with Christians.' At school a general atmosphere of contempt surrounded the young Gendel'man. Jewish children made fun of him and some of the stronger boys even beat him. Christian students did not treat him any better than the Jews. As he still depended on his parents for financial support, Gendel'man could not convert to Russian Orthodoxy, which had always 'attracted him by its grand spirit and external simplicity'. For the next ten years, due to his unfortunate financial dependency, he concealed what he called his 'Russian patriotism'.

Gendel'man, like many young Jewish converts in the last decades of the old regime, sought to better his personal situation by receiving a secular education and becoming a 'cultured individual' (*kul'turnyj čelovek*). Once he finished secondary school, he entered the Warsaw Polytechnic University. There, he met and married a young Jewish woman whom he encouraged to convert. Once he realized that his wife would not convert, he felt trapped in the 'narrow world of the Jews', where he could not attain happiness or be faithful to his ideals. He therefore proceeded to divorce his young

⁵⁶ RGIA, f. 1284, op. 224, d. 42, fo. 9r.

⁵⁷ Verner, *What's in a name?*

wife. Upon conversion, he wrote, 'I became a true Russian Orthodox', although he admits that even after baptism he could not find the spiritual comfort he sought. The reasons he states are extremely revealing. They highlight the general problem of communal tension between the Christian and Jewish communities, as well as the practical realities of integration for newly baptized Jews. If Jews believed that conversion severed the religious and communal ties between themselves and the Jewish community and welcomed them to the Christian fold, they often found radically different realities upon conversion.

Gendel'man converted with the hope of breaking all religious and communal ties and disassociating himself from the Jewish community. He sought friendship and 'moral support' (*moral'nuju podderžku*) from his new Christian friends, since the baptism estranged him from his Jewish family. Due to his 'Russian' appearance and his uncanny ability to hide his surname—what he called the last external sign of his Jewishness—from co-workers, Gendel'man worked and associated only with Christian neighbors. As soon as they found out his surname, however, his co-workers began to 'despise' him. 'In these situations', he wrote, 'it was unbearably difficult for me.' Gendel'man was certain that the behavior of his co-workers changed at precisely the time when they found out his surname, since, thanks to his external appearance, 'no one suspected a Jew' (*nikto ne podozreval evreja*).⁵⁸

Anatolij Fedorovič Ginsburg, like Gendel'man and most other petitioners, argued that he no longer had spiritual or communal ties with the Jews; his Jewish-sounding surname was the only symbol that reminded him of his former Jewish life. In St Petersburg, he met and married the daughter of a Russian Orthodox merchant. He, his wife, and their two daughters lived and associated only with Russians. Ginsburg explained that his surname was a constant source of moral suffering for his family. For him it was a reminder of something so 'foreign and abandoned', and for his family, something so 'hateful and contemptible'.⁵⁹

For most Jewish converts, Jewish-sounding surnames were a constant source of social harassment, petty insult, and other forms of unpleasant behavior such as teasing and pranks. They also caused, as Jan Ajdel'man explained, many moral and material hard-

⁵⁸ RGIA, f. 1412, op. 4, d. 443.

⁵⁹ RGIA, f. 1412, op. 4, d. 398.

ships. It was difficult, for example, for Ajdel'man to find a position in the bureaucracy or in private establishments or even a suitable marriage partner. 'These same hardships in life await my children,' Aidel'man warned, 'although they will have no connection whatsoever to the Jews.'⁶⁰ Nikolaj Vladimirovič Aptekman echoed Ajdel'man's warning. As a father of three young children, Aptekman did not want his children to share his past misfortunes. Aptekman petitioned on February 5, 1904, seventeen years after his baptism. His three young sons, he argued, should not have to suffer the same tortuous path in life that he had.⁶¹ Another petitioner Evol'mij Drajšpic wrote that his surname 'brings me sorrow, especially by the thought that my children, who have nothing in common with Judaism, have to contend with a Jewish surname'.⁶²

Many baptized Jews such as Jan Ajdel'man and Nikolaj Aptekman sought to fashion a new life for themselves and their families, free from social harassment and devoid of constant reminders of their Jewish past. Having achieved a degree of respectability and acceptance in their new surroundings and severed ties to their familial and religious past, baptized Jews sought to solidify their precarious foundations by removing (or, in some cases, concealing) all signs and symbols of their Jewish origins. In all official documents, however, such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, as well as conversion and service records, their confessional status and religious origins should have been clearly marked. In these essential documents the clear delineation of the individual's confessional and religious origins was as important as other vital facts such as name, place of residency, work and criminal record. Yet for an overwhelming majority of baptized, the confessional status was delineated as Russian Orthodox (or Catholic or Protestant), without any mention of their Jewish background.⁶³ Without clear and unambiguous evidence of Jewish origins, state officials as well as the greater Christian populace often could not readily distinguish baptized Jews, at least on paper. Jewish-sounding surnames functioned, therefore, as important semiotic indicators of religious origins.

Precisely because the Jewish surname carried so much symbolic weight, the Chancellery of Petitions rejected most requests. Only in exceptional cases did the Chancellery present a case for the tsar's

⁶⁰ RGiA, f. 1412, op. i, d. 208.

⁶¹ RGiA, f. 1412, op. i, d. 471.

⁶² RGiA, f. 1412, op. 5, d. 576.

⁶³ For an exception, see, for example, RGiA, f. 1412, op. 2, d. 614, fos. 10r-12r.

approval that merited extra-legal considerations. The Chancellery (or any of the other ministries that reviewed the petitions) did not use a set of guidelines for affirming name-changing requests; at least they have not been preserved in written or archival documents. In the archival records, however, the Chancellery did provide ample evidence of the logic they used when approving or denying petitions. From the correspondence, we can piece together the evidence and attempt to explain why select petitions were approved.

Evol'mij Drajšpic, in one of the earliest requests that has been preserved, petitioned in 1890 to change his name to 'Artemeev'. The Ministry of Finance and a St Petersburg municipal officer reviewed the petition before the Ministry of Justice, and the Chancellery of Petitions responded to Drajšpic's request. In their response, the officials noted a number of facts that became crucial in their decision. Chief among these was the petitioner's confessional status and marriage partner—Drajšpic's young baptismal age and his Russian Orthodox wife certainly helped his cause. Since he and his wife raised their children in the 'spirit of Russian Orthodoxy', the Ministry of Justice concluded that the 'surname appears especially burdensome'.⁶⁴ State officials were also cognizant of the law code and noted in their correspondence that baptized Jews did not have the legal right to change their surnames. The law only made one exception—for Jewish converts in the military.⁶⁵ But Drajšpic never served in the military. Officials also noted an important precedent: a number of Jewish converts, who never served in the military, were allowed to change their surnames in the 1870s and '80s. Due to Drajšpic's exceptional moral qualities and genuine faith in Russian Orthodoxy, the Ministry of Justice as well as the Chancellery of Petitions found his request deserving.⁶⁶

In its yearly reports, the Chancellery of Petitions did not categorize the petitioners by religion, estate, or ethnicity; the reports only indicated the total number of petitions received and the total number it either declined or approved. In their correspondence, however, the Chancellery made an occasional reference to the number of petitions approved for baptized Jews who wished to change their surnames. For the most part, the Chancellery only approved a handful of such petitions. In 1894, for example, only

⁶⁴ RGIA, f. 1412, Op. 5, d. 576.

⁶⁵ RGIA, f. 1269, op. i, d. 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

three requests were approved (unfortunately, the archival records do not indicate the total number of petitions received that year)⁶⁷ In 1897, seven Jews who had converted were allowed to change their surnames, whereas in 1899 only one request was affirmed.⁶⁸ These numbers conform to the tendency to deny a high percentage of petitions by Jews or individuals of Jewish descent who petitioned to receive 'special exceptions' from the law.⁶⁹

For first-generation baptized Jews, imperial officials usually looked for at least four redeeming factors when approving requests. In most cases, the petitioners had to have been converted for a 'considerable' amount of time. Second, baptized Jews had to exhibit what was regarded as 'respectable conduct and ways of life'.⁷⁰ Usually this meant that they had broken all ties with their Jewish parents and relatives, married a Russian Orthodox (or in some cases a Catholic or Protestant) spouse, and attempted to raise their children in a non-Jewish environment. Third, they needed to be useful, politically reliable members of Russian society. Without question, a criminal history signaled denial. And finally, all of their papers—such as baptismal records, service records, and birth and marriage certificates—had to be in order. If just one of these papers was missing, the Chancellery rejected the petition. First-generation baptized Jews had to prove that they had made the transition to the 'faithful'; their surnames, in short, needed to be 'powerful' burdens as well as symbolic reminders of a life that either had vanished altogether or had been relegated to 'distant' memory. Although sympathetic to these requests, the Chancellery affirmed only a handful of such petitions, as their correspondence indicates.

Second-generation baptized Jews and other individuals with Jewish-sounding names also petitioned for many of the same reasons discussed above, but these petitions were usually affirmed. The townsman Aleksandr Michajlov Berenštejn, for example, who was the son of a baptized Jew, petitioned to change his surname to 'Andreev', which he already used in common day-to-day affairs. He wrote that his surname associated him and his family with the Jews, an association, which he as a 'native Russian', did not want.⁷¹ Individuals with common Jewish-sounding names such as Osip

⁶⁷ RGIA, f. 1412, op. 251, d. 106.

⁶⁸ GARF, f. 102, deloproizvodstvo 2, op. 76A, d. 1987.

⁶⁹ RGIA, f. 1412, op. 251, d. 109, fos. 100v-101r.

⁷⁰ GARF, f. 102, deloproizvodstvo 2, op. 76A, d. 1987.

⁷¹ RGIA.f. 1412, op. 2, d. 637.

Vasil'ev Barkovič petitioned for similar reasons. As a Russian, Bark-ovič did not want to 'turn red from painful questions' that associated him and his family with Jewish origins. Barkovič explained:

There were plenty of times when people said: 'Yes, you are a Jew. You have a Jewish surname.' And when I explained to them, they just commented: 'If you are not a Jew, then you are an apostate, and there's no difference.'⁷²

In the late imperial period, with the rapid growth of ethnic consciousness and nationalist sentiment, officials were sensitive to such associations and respected the wishes of second-generation baptized Jews and individuals with Jewish-sounding names.

Conclusion

In spite of efforts to distance themselves and their families from their Jewish past, converted Jews faced a number of difficulties. In post-Reform Russia, discriminatory policies persisted, although Russian law officially stated otherwise; and popular hostilities grew more acute as Jewish converts attempted to embrace new cultural values and religious practices. In the practice of everyday life, conversion did not necessarily transform Jews, nor did it signal a radical break with the Jewish past. From the point of view of the Jews, Christians, and the state, baptized Jews continued to maintain real and imagined ties to the Jewish nation (*narod*). Jewishness was perceived as bound not only by religion but by an inner spirit and ways of life. As the nineteenth-century legal scholar **M. I. Mys** argued, even if conversion terminated religious ties between baptized Jews and their co-religionists, Russian law ambiguously maintained that baptized Jews should be recognized as Jews by their origins: 'Alongside the appellation "baptized Jews" exists the somewhat offensive term "apostate from the Jews".'⁷³

While the nineteenth-century educated Jewish public perceived baptism as 'final' and 'complete', political and social realities usually dictated a complex process of negotiation. A number of historians, influenced by what might be termed as the myth of Jewish conversion, have overlooked this process and instead emphasized the relative ease with which baptized Jews integrated in Russian society. But as in imperial Germany, first-generation baptized Jews could

⁷² RGIA, f. 1412, op. 2, d. 740.

⁷³ Мыш, *Руководство*, 39.

not readily escape or erase their Jewish past.⁷⁴ Even when baptized Jews had broken all familial, communal, and religious ties, they often found not only increasing institutional discrimination in the last years of imperial rule, but also continual disparagement from their Christian neighbors. And even when baptized Jews overcame these social divisions and cultural antagonisms, they also had to come to terms with the symbolic reminders of their Jewish origins that played no small part in their efforts to integrate in Russian society.

⁷⁴ Marion Kaplan, 2002, Redefining Judaism in imperial Germany: practices, mentalities, and community./eww» *Social Studies* 9: 1,17-20.