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The Social and Political Role of War Veterans

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Olga Litvak, Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 273 pages.

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- 1 Many American Jews are convinced that their ancestors fled the Russian Empire in the 1880s to flee pogroms and forced conscription, even of young Jewish boys. But as historians have long pointed out, forced conscriptions of young Jewish boys had ended decades before mass emigration. And yet in Jewish memory, the khapers (“grabbers”: Jews who captured and handed over Jewish lads to the tsarist recruiters) and conscription continue to loom large among tsarist Russia’s most cruel antisemitic policies. Olga Litvak’s scintillating new book wants to understand just how Russian military service came to occupy such a major place in Jewish memory. Examining the interstices between literature, history, and popular memory, this book is a major contribution to the history of modern Jewish and modern Russian history.
- 2 Litvak begins by juxtaposing the “official story of Jewish conscription under Nicholas I” and “its normative Jewish version” (p. 14), finding that the former stands up better under sober historical scrutiny. Drawing on archival records, instructions and correspondence within the Ministry of War, the author shows that the Russian army and bureaucracy motivated their conscription policy toward the Jews by arguing that only thus could Jews be made “useful” Russian subjects. In fact, as she further demonstrates, the desire to foster “Jewish utility” could never be entirely disengaged from a fervent wish to convert Jews to Christianity. Perhaps ironically, the contradictory attitude of Russian officialdom – wanting to make Jews more like Russians and yet distrusting acculturated (and even converted) Jews – helped open a space for a new ethnic-sociological group in the Russian Empire: “Russian Jewry.” Thus a group emerged that was largely alienated from traditional Jewish mores and traditions but at the same time was not accepted by non-Jews as “truly Russian.”
- 3 The rest of the book is devoted to showing how this group developed in Jewish literature in Russia throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Using the works and memoirs of such writers as O. A. Rabinovich, V. N. Nikitin, I. M. Dik, J. L. Gordon, Sh. J. Abramovich (“Mendele mokher-sforim”), and others, Litvak convincingly demonstrates the central role that the conscription narrative played not only in the identity formation of individual Jews, but in the making of a modern Russian-Jewish identity and, in part as a reaction to this, in the beginnings of modern Zionist identity. While many of the writers analyzed here will be familiar to specialists (in Jewish studies, that is, less so for Russianists), Litvak’s analysis is novel and compelling. Her work supplements other recent pioneering work in the field of Russian-Jewish history by such specialists as Gabriella Safran, Benjamin Nathans, and Yohanan Petrovsky-Stern. Indeed, in a sense this book sets down the background and preconditions to later developments described by Yuri Slezkine in his *Jewish Century*.
- 4 In western and central Europe, “modern Jews” welcomed the opportunity of military service as one way to show their patriotism and utility to their homeland. In Russia, however, even acculturated Jews seldom extolled military service as a “school for patriotism.” Olga Litvak’s book shows in elegant and sophisticated detail just how this came to be the case. For anyone interested in modern Jewish history and culture, imperial Russia, and the dynamics of acculturation and nation identity formation, this book is a “must-read.”

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