

Report on Jews Fleeing Russia (October 11, 1881)

Abstract

This October 1881 article reports on the background to the flight of numerous Russian Jews from anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia. The refugees usually reached the German Reich as transit migrants who emigrated overseas, mostly to the United States, from one of the German seaports.

Source

Berliner Gerichtszeitung, October 11, 1881

The persecution of Jews in Russia. — Masses of Russian Jews arrived in Vienna this May; they had fled to Austria to escape the horrors of their homeland. Each railway train brought new droves. The author saw these emigrants with his own eyes. It was a pitiful sight: Men and women, old folks and children tightly thronged, with the last remains of their salvaged belongings on handcarts and in boxes, dragged along in dirty bundles and ragged sacks, fear and desperation on all of their faces. And yet these were the better situated, the not yet completely disinherited who had managed to flee; for acquiring a passport costs money in Russia, a good deal of money, and even a pariah rejected by the authorities must negotiate with the lower and higher police officials before passing the border to the West. In Vienna, co-religionists took pity on them, and among the Christian population there were also many merciful souls who took in the refugees, who mostly speak no German and were uncertain of their ultimate destination, offering them food and temporary lodging and advice and help for their onward journey.— Since that time, namely since the massacres and pillaging committed by the urban and peasant mob in Kiev under the very eyes of the police, the committees formed to assist the Jews expelled from Russia have been working constantly. The governments of Turkey and Spain have offered a new homeland to the homeless; the “Alliance israélite” has taken up collections, and wealthy Jews — Baron de Hirsch in Paris for example, with one million francs — have participated generously. They did so on the — as we soon saw — correct assumption that firstly, those who had already arrived would soon be followed by even greater waves, and secondly, that the persecution of Jews in Russia would be pursued not just by envious and greedy anti-Semites, but also by the government itself. Indeed, the committees will soon have their hands full organizing the settlement of the Jews in Palestine, which is also promoted by the “Christian Social” party in Berlin.

On August 25th of this year, Minister General Ignatyev sent a circular letter to all of Russia’s civilian governors with the following content: For twenty years the government has been trying to enact a series of measures to initiate the assimilation of the Jews into the rest of the population. But the anti-Semitic movement that erupted violently at the beginning of the year, especially in South Russia, proves that the desired assimilation of the Jews in Russia is impossible because of the economically harmful activities of the Jews and because of their fanaticism. Over the past twenty years, the Jews have succeeded not merely in gradually getting their hands on all of trade in Russia, but also in amassing significant landownership through lease or sale. In this process, however, the Jews’ intention has not been to increase Russia’s productive forces, but always to “exploit” the native population of Russia, and among them the poorer classes. To put an end to such an unbearable situation and to pacify the outraged population, the governors and their commissars shall be instructed to report on the harmfulness of the Jews “specifically,” and to make suggestions as to how the Jews can be prevented from circumventing the laws, amassing land by lease or purchase, engaging in usury, selling liquor, etc. etc.

In his circular, Ignatyev demonstrates that he has earned the title that — as recently claimed — also accrues to the ministers of other countries, and that he is indeed the “foremost anti-Semite” of his country. As to the measures he boasts about having been taken to promote the “melding” of the Jewish with the Russian nationality, it is well known that they have served only to separate and marginalize. There was never any talk in Russia of laws to “assimilate,” as Mr. Ignatyev puts it, let alone to “emancipate” the Jews. The Jews were and still are fundamentally excluded from the capitals of the empire, and if they are allowed there, only in exceptional cases and under difficult conditions. In the provincial towns they are subject to exceptional laws and the most onerous police surveillance if they engage in trade or lease or purchase land; certain industrial and artisanal activities are forbidden to them, in the countryside very strict limits are set, and for example it is exactly stipulated at what distance from the border they are allowed to settle. In short, they are regarded and treated as social pariahs, and nearly everywhere it is made virtually impossible for them to acquire the virtues—Lord have mercy! — of Russian civilization.

The governors will no doubt accede to the anti-Semitic demands made by the interior minister, and most likely they will all answer in a manner similar to that of the Odessa regional assembly. That august body namely resolved to petition the government to forbid the Jews altogether from: 1. Trading in spirits in the countryside; 2. Leasing Crown lands or buying land; meanwhile, 3. Jewish pupils should not be accepted into the academic secondary schools in larger percentages than they represent in the population; 4. Jews should be prevented from occupying elected office, especially that of justice of the peace; 5. The prohibition on Jews employing Christian servants should be renewed; 6. Jews should be prohibited from living in the countryside if they do not have a specific occupation; 7. They should not be allowed to buy promissory notes, unless they possess guild certificates; 8. Lawyers of the Mosaic faith should not plead before justices of the peace.

What joy the German anti-Semites must feel when they look at Ignatyev, Odessa and the events of the recent past as well as those that we can surely expect in the immediate future! After all, what the gentlemen in Odessa demand is in many points almost identical with the demands of the well-known Berlin Petition, which has unfortunately not received enough attention from Prince Bismarck! How enviously some pious gentlemen must gaze towards beloved Russia! Yes, there it would be impossible for the head of a court to refer to an address by an anti-Semite as an “outrageous speech.” There it would probably never occur to the judiciary to say “We place as much credence in Jewish witnesses as in Christian ones. For us judges not the slightest difference exists in this regard.” — While the liberals in Germany hope — whether correctly or incorrectly — that the agitation against Jews will end after the elections, Russia’s anti-Semites can rest assured that the business of persecuting Jews and the tidy little business associated with it is just beginning to flourish.

Source: “Die Judenverfolgung in Rußland,” *Berliner Gerichtszeitung*, 11. October 1881. Available online at: <http://freisinnige-zeitung.de/archives/5893>

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