

From the Editor

DOI: 10.31168/2658-3364.2021.2.02

Belarus – Belorussia – occupies an important place on the Jewish map of the world. Historically, Belarusian Jews have perceived themselves, and have been perceived by others, as “Lithuanian” Jews – Litvaks, preserving in their name the memory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, once the largest state in Europe. In the Russian Empire this territory was included into the Pale of Jewish Settlement, where Jews had to reside according to the Russian legislation. Among many duties imposed upon Jews during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-56), the military conscription was the most burdensome and oppressive one. Its purpose was not so much to strengthen Russia’s defense capability as to disrupt the traditional Jewish way of life. The regular conscription of recruits turned into a tragedy for many Jewish families which were forced to part with their sons for 25 years, and often forever. It is not surprising that Jews were trying to find all kinds of ways to evade this duty, often using the well-known propensity of Russian officials to bribery. In more detail these ways and means are explored in the article by the Belarusian historian Fillip Nekrashevich, which draws upon rich sources from the Belarusian archives.

At the early 20th century both Jewish and Belarusian intellectuals began searching for a specific Belarusian-Jewish identity that was historically rooted in the local cultural and natural landscape. This issue became politically relevant during the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic (1918-19). As the French-British scholar Claire Le Foll demonstrates, the Jewish people was occupied an important place in the Belarusian national project in the wake of World War I. Those ideas, Le Foll concludes, became one of the foundations for collaboration between Jews and Belarusians during the interwar period in the Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Soviet Belarus became the site of a unique historical experiment, in which Jews played a prominent role. Yiddish, along with Belarusian, Polish and Russian, was recognized as one of the official state languages. The Soviet authorities had created a wide infrastructure of Yiddish-language cultural, educational and public organizations, and Jews had come to occupy important positions in the government, Communist Party and security services of the BSSR. This was accompanied, as the Israeli historian Arkady Zeltser demonstrates, by the ongoing decline of the traditional shtetl way of life and the rapid integration of Jews into the new Soviet society. The “Jewish Question” acquired a new prominence at the turn of the 1930s with the solidification of the dictatorial regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. The marker of “fascism” – which was occasionally also applied by the Soviet ideologues also to Jewish movements and organizations

abroad – became, as the American scholar Andrew Sloin demonstrates, an important “meme” of the Soviet propaganda. The Soviet annexation of the eastern parts of Poland in September 1939 set the Soviet leadership a task of integrating the multiethnic population of those regions into the Soviet society. The Russian researcher Yanina Karpenkina examines the situation of the Jewish youth in Western Belarus during 1939-41. The article by the Russian folklore scholar Andrei Moroz concludes the Belarusian block. He analyzes various folkloric interpretations of the Holocaust among the contemporary population of eastern Poland and Belarus.

The current issue includes reviews of five books dealing with various aspects of the history and culture of Belarusian Jews as well as the perception of Jews in Belarusian culture. The growing interest in Belarusian-Jewish issues is evident in the success of the online-conference “The History, Culture and Heritage of Jews in Belarus across the Age’, which was jointly organized in June 2021 by the Minsk Center of Belarusian-Jewish Heritage and the University of Southampton (UK). Claire Le Foll provides a detailed report about this conference.

Mikhail Krutikov

(Ann Arbor, USA)

PhD, Professor,

Preston R. Tisch Professor of Slavic and Judaic Studies, University of Michigan

E-mail: krutikov@umich.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-3853-4118