**Jews and emerging nations**

Claire Le Foll and Mikhail Krutikov

This special section emanates from a workshop organised in July 2015 in the university of Southampton on “Jews and ‘small nations’ in Eastern Europe: cultural autonomy and nation-building in the western borderlands of Russia (1905-1939)”. Its aim was to change our focus on Jewish/non-Jewish relations in Eastern Europe, and instead of looking at relations between Jews and Poles or Jews and Russians, to consider Jewish relations with the so-called ‘small nations’, or ‘their neighbours’[[1]](#endnote-2) – Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Belarusians and Ukrainians. The intellectual challenge was to integrate into the Jewish Eastern European narrative groups that had been largely overlooked and swept away by the meta-narrative of Jewish integration/assimilation into the host society, given that ‘Russo-centrism’ and ‘Polono-centrism’ are still prevalent in mainstream historiography[[2]](#endnote-3).

This is not say that nothing has happened in the historiography of Eastern-European Jewry since Eli Lederhendler wondered whether there was a ‘Russian Jewry’ prior to 1917 or Jonathan Frankel in 1992 called for a reassessment of the Dubnovian bi-polar paradigm[[3]](#endnote-4). Many gaps have been filled, especially in social history, cultural history, gender and everyday Jewish life[[4]](#endnote-5). We also now have many excellent local studies, mostly focused on individual cities[[5]](#endnote-6). Furthermore, the renewal of historiography was reinforced by the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the independence of former Soviet/communist states triggered the birth of new, national historiographies or the renewal of local studies (*kraevedenie*)[[6]](#endnote-7). As a result of these parallel and reinforcing processes, a lot of research has been done on the distinct history of Jews in each country. In the last few years, collections of works on Jewish-Ukrainian and Jewish-Lithuanian relations have been published and have brought new insights to our understanding of political cooperation (or its absence), cultural interactions and anti-Semitism before and during the Holocaust[[7]](#endnote-8). But there are few regional studies [[8]](#endnote-9), and even fewer if no comparative studies. The original workshop, this publication and the project that will hopefully follow, aim to go further in this direction and to break with the ‘imperial model’ as Petrovsky-Shtern has labelled it, but also with national approaches in writing the history of Jews in each country. It argues for the use of a comparative/transnational approach, in order to grasp the bigger picture and evaluate at a global scale the importance and significance of the exchanges of Jews with their neighbours, in the ‘peasant nations’, ‘oppressed nations’, or emerging nation-states, whatever we choose to call them.

The second objective was to look more closely and in a comparative way at the national-cultural autonomy (NCA) principle. This principle, defined by the Austro-Marxists and Simon Dubnov, and then largely accepted and diffused in the political platforms of a wide range of Jewish and non-Jewish political parties after 1905, was then implemented in the context of the various independent states or Soviet republics emerging after 1918. The final ambition of this workshop was to compare how national-cultural autonomy was approached and used by previously oppressed nations to build their national state or identity; and how their policies towards ethnic minorities, mainly but not only Jews, aligned with this principle. In spite of recent major contributions to our understanding of the specific relations of Jews and Lithuanians, or Jews and Ukrainians, the connections between these national spaces and their similarities or divergences in addressing the issue of ethnic minorities are still little researched. This project set out to grasp a bigger process – the birth of a new model of nationality policy based on the NCA - and identify its various implications in terms of political and cultural interactions, the ways it was implemented, and its successes and obstacles.

The research on each country has developed along different lines and at different speeds. Research on Jewish-Lithuanian relations has been particularly dynamic, especially on political cooperation before and after the war, on education, and on the legal status of Jews as a minority in independent Lithuania[[9]](#endnote-10). Ukrainian-Jewish relations have also been quite well studied, with a strong focus on culture, literature and scholarship under the Soviets[[10]](#endnote-11). The Belarusian case seems to be the least researched, although Rudling’s book on the Belarusian national movement and other research by a new generation of Belarusian scholars on Jews in Belarus, based mostly in Grodno and in the European Humanities University hosted in Vilnius, are promising[[11]](#endnote-12). The state of the art for each case is thus uneven. This special issue confirms this imbalance and the historiographical differences between different national spaces. However it also confirms the fecundity of regional, cultural and comparative history.

Two articles question the accepted stereotypes on Ukrainian-Jewish relations during the imperial and Soviet period. Sofia Grachova’s contribution on the emergence of a Ukrainian-Jewish trend of historical writing emphasises its imperial roots, before its consolidation in the 1920s, while breaking with a determinist vision of history-writing connected to nation-building. Her study of the Jewish topics published in *Kievskaia Starina* (KS)confirms this ‘imperial’ bias among Jews, as she argues that it is because Jews had the ambition to integrate into Russian imperial society that they engaged with the debates on Ukraine and produced local case studies. This imperial view, encapsulated in Galant’s exclamation about Kiev being ‘the mother of Russian cities’, is confirmed by the lack of interest in Ukrainophile political aims among Jewish intellectuals. But Grachova also highlights the importance of local and regional factors in their choice to use Ukrainian case studies to demonstrate the ‘integrability’ of Jews. It is because Kiev was not the main centre of Jewish culture and scholarship, nor a centre of the Ukrainophile movement, that it allowed for more political pluralism and also provided a platform for Jewish publication, at a period when Jews were banned from Russian universities. The relative political neutrality of KS and its ambition to reach a large audience led to acceptance of papers from amateurs, including from Jewish amateur historians, about Jews. Grachova convincingly demonstrates that ‘local or regional frameworks were more inclusive towards topics and sources concerning the Jewish minority’. Barats or Galant therefore used examples from the history of Jews in ‘Southern Russia’ to demonstrate their loyalty and usefulness, and the long-standing Jewish presence in Russia. In a context of growing Russian nationalism, these Jewish historians did not engage primarily with Ukrainophile political views but challenged and counter-acted anti-Jewish stereotypes by using sources and examples taken from the Ukrainian past. This article shows that an imperial integrationist model was still prevailing for these Jews but also that the local conditions favourable to the emergence of Jewish scholarship paved the way for what happened after 1917 - the crystallization of a Jewish-Ukrainian historiography. Galant’s work in particular, although using imperial categories (Southern Russia, Kiev as a Russian city) demonstrates a loyalism to ‘Ruthenian lands’ and a feeling of regional belonging, that show the special relation that connected Jews to their ‘native country’.

Mayhill Fowler’s article on ‘Backstage in the Yiddish Theatres of Soviet Ukraine’ also offers a re-evaluation of accepted views about the effect of indigenisation policies in Ukraine. Questioning the idea that Ukrainian and Yiddish cultures developed separately, as autonomous and hermetic ethnic spaces, she argues that in a very multi-ethnic republic such as Ukraine ethnic boundaries were far from impassable, and that Jewish, Ukrainian or Polish identities were not clearly fixed in the 1920s. Apart from the fact that there were several Jewish theatres and Ukrainian theatres, the cultural landscape was complicated by the fact that although ethnic categories prevailed, they were still in the making and not easily defined. Taking an original and fruitful angle – backstage– she recreates the conditions in which these new theatres built themselves, under economic constraints and financial pressures from the Centre, and their struggles over subventions and audience. Fowler demonstrates that the circulation of a young generation of actors, directors or technical staff from one theatre to the other was less a question of ethnic origin, than of job market competition. Like Grachova, she shows that places mattered more than ethnicity. In other words, the local factors that made Ukraine what it was (a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic region that had strong Jewish and Ukrainian cultural traditions but also an imperial legacy of hybridity) determined the process of building national Soviet cultures to an equal or larger extent created than ethnicity.

The two articles on Lithuania look at the interwar period and at cultural interactions between Jews and Lithuanians after the abolition of Jewish autonomy in 1925. Both question the idea that the failure of Jewish cultural autonomy put an end to the Jewish-Lithuanian encounter, from different angles. Eglė Bendikaitė provides an overview of the cultural exchanges that took place between 1925 and 1940 in education, literature, and art. The ‘Lithuanisation’ of the Jewish population produced tangible results, both because of political decisions (the obligation to learn the Lithuanian language in Jewish schools), ideological pressure (Jews were asked to demonstrate their loyalty to the state) and social stimuli (prospects for social mobility and higher education). Although often criticized for their poor command of the language, Jews increasingly sent their children to Lithuanian schools. However Jewish schools, especially Tarbut (Zionist) ones, remained very popular among Jews of Lithuania. This reluctance of Jews to learn the Lithuanian language put them at a disadvantage when applying for positions in public services or the army. To Bendikaitė, literature and art in particular provided more opportunity for mutual recognition and cultural exchange. The publication of translations both ways, as well as the creation of a Lithuanian-Jewish association testify to the intention and initial impetus for exchanges among some intellectuals, but the scale and impact of these initiatives are questionable. Similarly, the press became a platform for collaboration and the popularisation of the other’s culture to a wider audience. The Zionist party made special efforts to familiarise the Lithuanian population with Jewish culture by publishing a supplement to its newspaper in Lithuanian. However this initiative was not well received by Lithuanian intellectuals and other attempts by Lithuanian newspapers to write about Jews were short-lived. In spite of a more fruitful Jewish-Lithuanian dialogue in art, Bendikaitė qualifies the extent of this collaboration and mutual recognition, emphasizing rather the unwillingness on both sides to accept the other’s culture.

Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė’s article focuses on one aspect of this Jewish-Lithuanian interaction – literary translations. Although focusing on translations of Jewish literature into Lithuanian, the discussion also analyses the project of an anthology of Lithuanian folk-literature in Hebrew and the reasons for its failure. Verbickienė’s analysis of the personal files of some of the main translators in the interwar period reveals that most of them were of Jewish origins and exemplify the successful Lithuanisation of a minority of Jewish intellectuals. However the motivations behind their translation ventures are more practical than ideological. Their highly-sought-after linguistic skills and proficiency in Lithuanian led most of them to become teachers of Lithuanian language in various Jewish schools and gymnasiums. The lack of appropriate textbooks in Lithuanian appears to have been the starting point for most of their translations of short stories. Only for Ozer Finkelshtein, who was older than the others, an attachment to *doikayt* and autonomist theories seemed to have explained his promotion of the Lithuanian language among Jews. Practical reasons however seem to have been at the origin of these translations, as well as of the linguistic transfers that resulted from these translations.

A comparison of these four studies leads to a few reflections. In spite of significant contextual differences, the encounter between Jews, their country of residence and the ‘native population’ is obvious – either through history, artistic collaboration or translations. What this native country meant to them in terms of identity or social strategies varied depending on time and place, and ranged from the acceptance or rejection of identification with a nation-state (Lithuania), to the *ad hoc* use of the regional history (of Ukraine) to integrate into the Russian empire, including the messy and chaotic circulation of talents and skills in Soviet theatres of the Ukrainian republic. In all cases however, local networks, regional conditions and pragmatic alliances are crucial to understand how government policies or more distanced aims – whether integration, Lithuanisation or Sovietisation – were to be attained. In these multi-layered spaces where competing loyalties and points of references coexisted (state, community, nationality, region), the local or regional dimension did not produce interactions only in the tavern or on the marketplace, but, with the emergence of new nations and states, started to inform the conscious formation of hybrid national and cultural identities.

1. The term ‘small nation’ comes from Miroslav Hroch seminal book on *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) (first edition in Prague in 1968). Although published in the 1960s it is still useful for its definition of smaller nations, its typology (phases A, B and C) and comparative method. According to Hroch, these ‘small nations’ had historical, social and political characteristics that distinguished them from the ‘great’ or ‘historical’ nations: they lacked a ruling class, nobility or bourgeoisie; they did not have a state or a tradition of statehood; they did not have a continuous literary tradition in their own language. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. On the ‘anti-imperial choice’ made by some writers of Jewish origins who contributed to Ukrainian culture see Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Anti-Imperial Choice: The Making of the Ukrainian Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Eli Lederhendler, “Did Russian Jewry Exist prior to 1917 ?”, in *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* ed. by Yaacov Ro’i (Cummings Center Series, 1994), pp.15-27; Jonathan Frankel, “Assimilation and the Jews in nineteenth-century Europe: towards a new historiography”, in *Assimilation and Community. The Jews in 19th century-Europe*, ed. by J. Frankel, S. Zipperstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. For example Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); ChaeRan Y. Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2002); Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The golden age shtetl: a new history of Jewish life in East Europe* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2014); ChaeRan Y. Freeze and Jay M. Harris (ed.), *Everyday Jewish life in imperial Russia: select documents, 1772 – 1914* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013); David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, Press, 2005); Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) ; Kenneth Moss, *Jewish renaissance in the Russian revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.); Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish public culture in the late Russian empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.); Anna Shternshis, *Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2006) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Zipperstein, Steven J. *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985); David E. Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995) ; Natan M. Meir, *Kiev, Jewish metropolis: a history, 1859-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews. The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Arkadiï, ZEL’TSER*, Evrei sovetskoï provintsii : Vitebsk i mestetshki 1917-1941* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2006); Viktoriia Khiterer, *Jewish City or Inferno of Russian Israel? A History of the Jews in Kiev before February 1917* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. I will limit my examples to Belarus: Albert Kaganovich, *The long life and swift death of Rechitsa: a Jewish community in Belarus, 1625-2000* (Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); Leonid Smilovitsky, *Jewish life in Belarus : the final decade of the Stalin regime, 1944-53* (Budapest : Central European University Press, 2014); Aron SKIR, *Evreiskaia dukhovnaia kul’tura v Belarusi* (Minsk: Mastatskaia litaratura, 1995); Emmanuil IOFFE, *Stranitsy istorii evreev Belarusi* (Minsk: Arti-Feks, 1997) ; issues of journal *Evrei Belarusi* edited by Inna Gerasimova. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. See for example: Volume 26 of Polin on *Jews and Ukrainians,* ed. by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Antony Polonsky (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Paul Robert Magocsi, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Jews and Ukrainians: A Millennium of Co-Existence (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); *A pragmatic alliance : Jewish-Lithuanian political cooperation at the beginning of the 20th century,* edited by Vladas Sirutavičius and Darius Staliūnas (Budapest: Central European University, 2011); Amelia M. Glaser, *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia's literary borderlands : from the shtetl fair to the Petersburg bookshop* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012); Myroslav Shkandrij, *Jews in Ukrainian Literature. Representation and Identity* (Yale University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. See for example the volume 12 of Polin *Focusing on Galicia: Jews, Poles and Ukrainians, 1772-1918,* ed. by Antony Polonsky and Israel Bartal (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009); or volume 25 on *Jews in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania since 1772,* ed. by ChaeRan Y. Freeze, Šarūnas Liekis and Antony Polonsky (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. See for example Šarūnas Liekis, *A state within a state? Jewish autonomy in Lithuania, 1918-1925* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2003); Staliunas (ed.), *The vanished world of Lithuanian Jews* (Amsterdam, 2004); volume 25 of Polin on *Jews in the former Grand Duchy;* Darius Staliūnas, *Enemies for a day : antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence in Russian-ruled Lithuania* (Budapest : Central European University Press, 2015); Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish culture* (Vilnius : Baltos Lankos, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Apart from the above mentioned work by Glaser, Shkandrii and Petrovsky-Shtern, see also Alfred Abraham Greenbaum, *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in Soviet Russia, 1918-1953* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978) and Viktoriia Khiterer, “Documents of the Jewish Historical-Archaeographical Commission, 1919–1929,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 23.2 (1993): 73–77. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh press, 2014); Olga Sobolevskaya, *Povsednevnaia zhizn evreev Belarusi v kontse XVIII – pervoi polovine XIX veka* (Grodno: GRGU, 2012); Ina Sorkina, *Miastechki Belarusi u kantsy XVIII – pershai palove XIX st.* (Vilnius: EHU, 2010); Journal *Tsaytshrift* edited at the European Humanities University since 2011; series of shtetl books published by the Moscow SEFER Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization on Belarusian shtetls (Zheludok, Lepel, Glubokoe); Special Jewish issue of *Belarusian Review*, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)