

A Nation Conceived But Never Achieved: The Jewish National Consciousness that Never Formed a Nation in the Pale of Settlement, 1900-1920

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Nations develop when there is a centralized state, a particular culture, a rational argument for their formation, and educational and political institutions that promote the formation and dissemination of the nation's philosophy and governing principles. In addition, a vital economy and a common national language are essential to forming a nation.¹ This paper discusses how these factors congealed among the Jews in Eastern Europe between 1900 and 1920, so that for a time a Jewish nation existed. However, due to indecision within the Jewish community, anti-Semitism and persecution, and the Russian government's concerted efforts to block the development of an independent Jewish nation in Eastern Europe, this nation was never fully realized and did not survive.

Between 1900 and 1920 the majority of Jews in Eastern Europe lived in the western borderlands of Russia known as the Pale of Settlement. The Jews who lived in the Pale of Settlement were not always a nation, but during those years, fluctuations in political ideology and social institutions in Russia made it possible for the Jews of the Pale to consider establishing their own independent nation. The Russian Revolution replaced the Tsarist regime with the Soviet Union, and a spirit of nationalism arose among a number of ethnic peoples that had been part of the Tsarist Empire. Barry Trachtenberg writes that the 1905 Revolution in Russia "solidified the nationalist socialist agenda as the dominant emancipationist model for Russian Jewry."² And, while this revolution did not ultimately benefit the nationalist aspirations of the ethnic minorities in Russia and surrounding lands, many of these peoples saw it as a, "high point in their emancipatory [sic] expectations and dreams of national liberation."³ Even before the 1905 Revolution, Jews in Eastern Europe had begun to see themselves as having a distinctly Jewish national identity. David Vital writes that, "The Jews of Eastern Europe did manifestly constitute a discrete, readily identifiable social group that for all practical and theoretical purposes did constitute a nation."⁴ The Jews in Eastern Europe and Russia always had existed on the fringes of society, never fully assimilating but also not standing on their own.

By 1881, there were between seven and eight million Jews living in Europe. Five million of them lived in the borderlands between Russia, Poland, and Germany, with most of them living in the Pale of Settlement, an area established by Tsar Alexander I in 1804 as a place where it was decreed that Jews should live. The Pale encompassed 4 percent of Imperial Russia. Centered in the Ukraine, Lithuania, Belorussia, Latvia, and the Crimea, it ran along the western border of Russia from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.⁵ As time passed, some Jews were permitted to leave, especially if they spoke Russian and attended Russian schools. This created a class of Jews who were educated, worldly, and politically sophisticated. When they returned to the Pale of Settlement, many of them began to plan and work for the Jews of the Pale to have a nation of their own. During the late stages of Imperialist Russia and the early days of the Soviet Union, a series of ethnographic studies were carried out, which provided valuable information about the ethnic groups in Russia that had been woven together to form the Russian people. Because the Jews of the Pale were so numerous and their language and culture so distinct, they could not be ignored when these ethnographies were being developed.

The Jewish playwright and ethnographer Shoyme Z. Rappaport, generally known by his pseudonym S. Ansky or An-sky, was responsible for carrying out the ethnographic study of the Jews. Initially, An-sky did not identify the Jews of the Pale as a distinct people, as defined by the ethnographic criteria of his study, but his goal was to find a justification for considering the Jews in general to be a true *narod* (people/nation).⁶ By 1897, An-sky had been exposed to the ideas and writings of I.L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, who are accredited with creating a new Yiddish literary culture.⁷ He then began to think of the Jews in the Pale as a distinct people who formed a nation of their own, separate from Russia and the other nations that surrounded them. In 1909, the newly established Jewish Historical Ethnographic Society funded An-sky to conduct further exploration into the 'Jewish Dark Continent,' referring to the Pale of Settlement. Before the outbreak of World War I put an end to their groundbreaking work, An-sky and his team had traveled to three provinces of the Pale where many of the oldest and most culturally significant shtetls (Jewish towns)

¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 7.

² Barry Trachtenberg, *The Revolutionary Roots of Modern Yiddish 1903-1917* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 22.

³ Trachtenberg, *Modern Yiddish*, 25.

⁴ David Vital, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe 1789-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 412.

⁵ Trudy Gold, *The Timechart History of Jewish Civilization, London Jewish Cultural Centre* (Chartwell Books Inc., 2004), 20-21.

⁶ Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2011), 4-5.

⁷ Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent*, 6.

were located.⁸ After World War I, An-sky compiled a study of the devastating impact of the war on the Jews living in the Pale. An-sky's ethnographic study of the 'Jewish Dark Continent' sought answers to 2087 questions about all aspects of the lives of the Jews who lived in the Pale of Settlement. Some of the questions he asked were:

“Is there a belief that pregnant women should not enter the house of a non-Jew... Is it customary everywhere to treat the midwife with respect... Is there a belief that the dead will have no rest in the grave until someone is named after him or her... At what age is a child sent to school... When do school terms begin and end... What manners do people teach a girl... What is the youngest age at which to arrange and make a marriage... What signs of beauty exist for a male and for a female... What kinds of rhymes and tunes do people say and play at weddings... List all the Jewish dances you know... Do the townspeople ever intervene to make peace between husband and wife... Do more divorces happen now or fewer... What do people say when they bring the dead into the cemetery... Do the dead leave their graves at night?”⁹

An-sky's report begins by reversing his earlier position and insisting the Jewish people in the Pale of Settlement do in fact constitute a nation.¹⁰ The five parts of his ethnographic study depict the entire course of a human life: (1) The Child from Conception to Kheyder (school); (2) From the Kheyder to the Wedding; (3) The Wedding; (4) Family Life, and (5) Death. An-sky collected data about all manner of customs, beliefs, and understandings about the world. His findings describe and inventory the distinct culture developed and pursued in the Pale. He found that this culture was separate from the practices of other Jews and other groups who lived in the Russian borderlands. The Jews living in the Pale were a unified people in ways that transcended the mere fact that they lived in the same well-defined area. They had developed a self-conscious identity of themselves as Jews who belonged to an identifiable and unique group of people. As Ernest Gellner notes, proximity alone is not enough for a people to become a nation. They must identify themselves as belonging to a particular group and accept the responsibility that belonging to that group entails. “A mere category of persons becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it. It is their recognition of each other as fellows of this kind which turns them into a nation, and not the other shared attributes.”¹¹

In the early 1900s, members of the Jewish intelligentsia were trying to figure out how to transform the unique folk culture of the Jews living in the Pale into a nationalist movement. Their discussions focused on the importance of Yiddish, the everyday language of the Jews in the Pale, as a nationally unifying force. This was the period when the debate over whether to have Hebrew or Yiddish as the national language of the Jews became central to the Jewish nationalist movement. Hebrew, the ancient language of Jewish religious texts, was an essential part of Jewish religious practices, but Yiddish was the language spoken in day-to-day activities and in the social and cultural aspects of life in the Pale of Settlement. Kalman Weisser, in his book *Jewish People Yiddish Nation*, describes Yiddish as, “the spoken language of Ashkenazic Jews.”¹² Written with Hebrew characters, it sounds similar to German when spoken. Hebrew was the language Jews used when they spoke to God, but Yiddish was the language Jews spoke to each other at home, in the markets, and in all their ordinary interactions. Yiddish united Jews from different regions of Europe. It was what mothers taught their children; it was the language one would hear in the countryside, in the streets of shtetls, and among Jews in the cities. Yiddish reflected a long Jewish history, and as it traveled and grew with the Jewish people of Eastern Europe as they settled in the Pale, it would define and delineate their surroundings.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, many educated Jews in Eastern Europe began to cultivate the Yiddish language and culture in an effort to shape them into a respectable foundation for a Jewish national identity. However, according to Gellner, a shared language alone is not enough to define a culture, let alone a nation. In the process of forming a nation, “a situation arises in which well defined and educationally sanctioned unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit with which men will willingly and often ardently identify.”¹³

In 1908, the First Language Conference was convened in Czernowitz, in what is now modern-day Romania. This conference attracted Jewish intellectuals from all over Eastern Europe, both within and outside the Pale of Settlement. These people came together to discuss Yiddish and its place in the effort to establish a Jewish nation. The goal of many attendees was to make Yiddish the Jewish national language. While Yiddish was spoken in almost every

⁸ Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent*, 10-11.

⁹ An-sky, “The Jewish Ethnographic Program,” trans. Nathaniel Deutsch in *The Jewish Dark Continent*, 103-324 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2011), 113, 117, 153, 196, 201, 228, 229, 239, 248, 295.

¹⁰ An-sky, “The Jewish Ethnographic Program,” 103.

¹¹ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 7.

¹² Kalman Weiser, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 7.

¹³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 54.

Jewish home, it was not necessarily a standardized language, and many people, Jews included, viewed it as a ‘gutter language’ that was not worthy of serious study. However, this attitude toward Yiddish was changing, and according to Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky who was in attendance, the goal of the conference was “to elevate Yiddish to the plane of national tongue by forging it into a popularistic, [sic] cultural instrumentality”¹⁴ I.L. Peretz asserted that Yiddish was a distinct “mother tongue” of 90 percent of the Jewish people. The Conference emphasized that Yiddish schools were needed, as were books written in Yiddish. While Hebrew would still be recognized as the language that bound together Jews of all times, and would retain its religious role and significance, many attendees at the conference wanted Yiddish was to be the national language of the emerging Jewish nation.

Jewish literary societies were crucial in the movement to legitimate Yiddish as the national language of the Jewish people. Jeffrey Veidlinger writes that, “literary societies were the foremost means by which Jews in the early twentieth century Russian Empire organized for cultural activity in the public arena.”¹⁵ These Jewish literary societies pursued a variety of purposes. Some were dedicated to Hebrew, while others were Zionist and sought to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Some even celebrated Jewish writers who wrote solely in Russian. The supporters of Jewish nationalism had expected the literary societies to agree to establish Yiddish as a Jewish national language, “suitable for discussion, deliberation, and other forms of communication and cultural expression in the public sphere.”¹⁶ However, the Jewish literary societies were never able to agree to provide unified support of Yiddish as the national language of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement.

Establishing a Jewish nation in the Pale, with Yiddish as its national language, would require the development and engagement of a strong political organization. This responsibility became the mission of the Jewish socialist political party called the Bund. The Bund is described by David Vital as, “a national, secularist, class oriented in the Marxist mode, syndicalist, revolutionary organization.”¹⁷ David Passow explains that “secularists [such as the Bund] took the firm position that a language spoken by eight to nine million people is unquestionable to be considered a [national] language. They stoutly rejected the contention that Yiddish [was] merely a jargon which includes German, Hebrew and Slavic words.”¹⁸

In the beginning of the 20th Century, efforts by the Bund dramatically increased the number and availability of Yiddish books and periodicals. The appearance of sophisticated journals such as *Literarische Monatschriftan* (1908) and *Di Yidishe Velt* (1912-1916) were clear indicators that a Jewish intelligentsia was emerging, writing, and publishing in Yiddish.¹⁹ Despite their support of Yiddish, the leaders of the Bund spoke and conducted their meetings in Russian. They supported Yiddish as the national language of the Jews because it was popular amongst the working class in the Pale; at the same time they saw themselves as separate, since many of them were from the cities. The Bund’s goal was to create a nation, and they used propaganda in Yiddish to stimulate greater Yiddish literacy among the Jewish working class.²⁰

The writer Noah Prylucki used Yiddish out of necessity in order to communicate his nationalist message to people who spoke no other language. The fact that Yiddish papers had such wide readership in the Polish borderland regions challenged arguments for Polish nationalists’ claims of hegemony.²¹ While the Bund had not always been a Yiddishist or nationalist organization, it was clear in the early 1900s that these two things went hand in hand with the Bund’s commitment to socialism. “The first leaders of the Bund to advocate ‘national equality’ for the Jews of Russia explained that such equality entailed freedom of speech, press, and assembly in Yiddish.”²²

According to Gellner, nation building requires a narrative that enables leaders to control the dissemination of information to the masses through an educational system that defines the culture for the people and helps create a national identity.²³ The Bund opposed efforts to assimilate Jews into Russia. Establishing Yiddish schools was one way to do this. Modeling themselves after other emerging nationalist groups, the Bund established Yiddish schools, which taught a standardized form of Yiddish and strengthened the claim that Yiddish was indeed a national language. One of the Bund’s goals for these schools was to inform the masses about the socialist ideology supported by the Bund and gain support for a socialist Jewish nation.

¹⁴ David Passow, *The Prime of Yiddish* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing, 1996), 65, 68, 70.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 114.

¹⁶ Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture*, 127.

¹⁷ Vital, *A People Apart*, 415.

¹⁸ Passow, *The Prime of Yiddish*, 72.

¹⁹ Zvi Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 108.

²⁰ Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, 110.

²¹ Weiser, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation*, 33, 71.

²² Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, 113.

²³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 159.

The Yiddish schools attracted a wide range of students, even though they operated in violation of a law stipulating that Russian was the only language permitted for instruction in school.²⁴ While the number of students at the Yiddish schools may have been comparatively small in relation to the total Jewish population, it is impressive that the teachers and students were willing to go against the Russian State in order to establish and participate in educational institutions that furthered their nationalist goals.²⁵ Kenneth Moss notes that the development of Yiddish, as well as Hebrew schools “reflected a nationalist belief that children were a means to reform the nation.”²⁶

According to Gellner, a nation cannot just rely on culture to unify a people. It also must have a rational and secular foundation.²⁷ Part of the rational and secular foundation of Jewish nationalism among the Eastern European Jews in the first two decades of the twentieth century is evident in the development and popularity of Yiddish literature. Many Jewish scholars and authors were eager to add to the body of Yiddish literary works available to the public and to use their writings to promote the formation of a Jewish nation. By not writing in Hebrew they separated themselves from the religious people. They created a secular language and culture separate from synagogue and also from their gentile neighbors who spoke other languages. Yiddish was a language of the people, not of religion.

Shmuel Niger was a prodigy in the study of Talmud who turned to secular activities in pursuit of Zionism and support of the renaissance in Yiddish literature. He became the foremost Yiddish literary critic and was responsible for the discovery and launch of notable Yiddish writers such as Sholem Ash. Barry Trachtenberg describes him as “intimately involved with nearly every major Yiddish literary movement to appear during the first half of the twentieth century.”²⁸ He promoted an intellectual approach to Yiddish, which he hoped would raise the language to a level equal to that of other more generally recognized national languages. Niger’s works “focused on raising the awareness of Jewish workers to the revolutionary potential of a vibrant Jewish nation.”²⁹ He looked at other nations and saw how the bourgeoisie were responsible for furthering culture and refining the use of language among the people. He did not see this happening among the Jews, and he held the Jewish bourgeoisie responsible for the stunted development of Yiddish. He believed that elitist bourgeois Jews who had chosen to assimilate rather than support Jewish nationalism had done a great disservice to the Jewish people. An outspoken critic and political activist, Niger was arrested and tortured a number of times. When the 1905 Russian Revolution failed to further the cause of Yiddish and Jewish nationalism, Niger saw an opportunity to create a true Yiddish literary culture separate from partisan politics. In 1908, Niger, a Zionist and a Socialist, A. Vayter, a member of the Bund, and Shmarya Gorelik, a non-socialist Zionist started the short-lived journal, *Di Literarische Monatshriftn (The Monthly Literary Journal)*, which cultivated the elegant use of Yiddish in literary works in an attempt to raise Yiddish up as a national language.³⁰ Like Niger, Nokhem Shtif wanted Yiddish to flourish as a national language, deserving of respect and study. He defended Yiddish from Hebraists, elitists, and of course, from those wishing to ignore Yiddish all together.³¹

Sholem Aleichem is regarded as one of the greatest Yiddish writers. Born into a well-to-do Jewish family in 1859 in the Ukraine and originally named Solomon Rabinovich, he grew up in a small shtetl near Kiev. He eventually attended school in Kiev, where he learned both Russian and French. Solomon Rabinovich spoke Russian during the day, but at night, he became Sholem Aleichem, taking a Yiddish greeting meaning ‘peace be with you’ as his pen name. Sholem Aleichem wrote more than forty books, founded and was a constant contributor to a popular Yiddish literary magazine, and produced an anthology of Yiddish literature for which he recruited contributions from the most noted Yiddish authors of the day. His writings enjoyed such great popularity among the Jews of the Pale and around the world that many people learned to read Yiddish just so they could read his stories. In his writings, the humor and wisdom of ordinary Jewish people comes alive. His wit and insight, conveyed through the unforgettable characters he created, tell us much about the resilience of the human spirit, while the picture of shtetl life he provided has preserved that world for the ages.

In his story “Two Anti-Semites,” Sholem Aleichem tells of a traveling salesman named Max Berlliant, who had dark, shining eyes and “real Semitic hair.” Max “speaks Russian like a cripple, and God help us, with a Yiddish sing-song. At every twist and turn, he is reminded who he is and what he is. In short, he’s a sorry creature.”³² To hide his Jewish identity, Max has removed his beard and eats lobster, a non-Kosher food. He is traveling to Kishinev, the site of the 1903 Easter Pogrom, and even though he is not from the area, “his heart was flooded with grief and filled

²⁴ Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, 115.

²⁵ Gitelman, *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, 116.

²⁶ Kenneth Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009), 201.

²⁷ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 20-21.

²⁸ Trachtenberg, *Modern Yiddish*, 82.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89, 94.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 140, 145, 148.

³² Sholem Aleichem, “Two Anti-Semites,” trans. Miriam Waddington in *The Best of Sholom Aleichem* 163-172, ed. Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse (New York: New Republic Books, 1979), 164.

with blood when he was told about the atrocities.”³³ Not wanting to hear from the sad people who had survived, he develops a plan. When the train stops, he buys an anti-Semitic newspaper and returns to his rail car, where he covers himself with the paper to hide his identity as a Jew. He hopes that if any Jews come onto the train, they will not want to sit near him, let alone want to talk to him. While he sleeps, another man comes into the rail car and mimics his actions. Later, Chaim Nyemchick, a general inspector for a company, who also travels for work, comes into the car. Sholem Aleichem describes how Chaim too has tried to mask his Jewish identity by adopting the name Albert, even though everyone calls him Patti. With his characteristic humor, Sholem Aleichem writes: “How from Chaim you get an Albert is understandable. Our first move is to get rid of the ‘ch’ in Chaim. Then we say goodbye to the ‘i’ and the ‘m,’ leaving only the ‘a’ by itself. All you now need to do is add the ‘lbert’ to make Albert, and that is just a hop skip and a jump to Patti.”³⁴ The inspector finds it hilarious to discover that not one but two men were lying in the train, with pages from an anti-Semitic newspaper covering them. Patti decides to test his theory about the men being Jewish by whistling a popular Yiddish tune, to which Max responds with the next line of the song. In the end, all three men are singing the Yiddish folk song.³⁵

The moral of the story is that a Jew cannot change who he is, even if he changes his name, participates in ‘Gentile practices,’ and hides under a cover of anti-Semitism. In the end, it is neither their religion nor their physical appearance that unites the three men as Jews. It is the fact that they embraced the Yiddish language and culture by singing a popular folk song, which they all knew, even though they were from different regions. The grief Max feels about what happened to the Jews during the pogrom also reveals his Jewish identity and sensibility, despite his efforts to deny or hide it.

In 1917, Kalman Zingman wrote a utopian fantasy *In der Tsukunft-shtot Edeniya* (In the City of the Future Edeniya) in which he imagines what it would be like to have a modern independent Jewish nation. This story highlights the aspiration for an autonomous Jewish nation existing within Europe, with Yiddish as its predominant language. Zingman’s story is the tale of an unrealized utopian aspiration, just as the aspiration for a Jewish nation in the Pale of Settlement was never fully realized.

By the time Jewish sentiment in the Pale coalesced in favor of the formation of a Jewish Nation, the Soviets were in power and were committed to not allowing the Jewish people to form their own nation. The Soviets continued the anti-Semitism and repression of the Jews that had been all too common under the tsar, contradicting the socialist ideals of the Russian Revolution. While Lenin wrote, in 1903, that there must be opposition to the suppression of nationhood, he also believed that “the idea of a separate Jewish people [was] untenable scientifically.”³⁶ Lenin advocated assimilation of the Jews into Russia as an answer to Jewish nationalism. However, for a period between 1905 and 1907, other ethnic minorities in Russia, such as the Ukrainians and Armenians, were able to advance their nationalist claims. Their struggle to establish independent nations often resulted in open hostilities towards the Soviet State. This may have prompted the Bolsheviks, who had taken power of the Russian government, to consider granting a limited form of nationalism and self-determination for the ethnic minorities; however, the Bolsheviks never considered allowing the Jews of the Pale to form their own nation.³⁷

Stalin defined his own criteria for determining the conditions necessary for a people to form their own nation. A nation would have to satisfy the following conditions: “historically evolved, a stable community of language, territory, an economic life, and a psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture”³⁸ Although Stalin did not think the Jews in the Pale qualified as a nation, the Jews, in fact, met all of his criteria for nationhood. Jews had lived in Europe since 1000. They had resided in Lithuania, Poland, and Germany since at least the 1100s, with a Jewish community established in Kiev in 1124. The oldest surviving Yiddish text is dated 1382.³⁹ Some of the earliest accounts of the expulsion of Jews from Russia occurred as early as the late 1400s. In 1580, a council was formed in Poland to address the Diaspora of the Jews, and a similar council met later in Lithuania. Stalin’s assertion that the Jews did not have an historic claim to the land on which they lived was clearly unfounded because Jews had been in the region for almost eight hundred years. The Jews had a stable community of language, residence, and culture, as well as a psychology and tradition of identifying themselves as a nation.

Gellner asserts that a solely agrarian society cannot be a nation and that a nation needs to have a viable and fully functioning economy that supports industry, trade, and a merchant class.⁴⁰ The Jews in the Pale satisfied these

³³ Aleichem, “Two Anti-Semites,” 165.

³⁴ Aleichem, “Two Anti-Semites,” 168-169.

³⁵ Aleichem, “Two Anti-Semites,” 172.

³⁶ M. Altshuler, “The Attitude of the Communist Party of Russia to Jewish National Survival, 1918-1930,” *YIVO* 14 (1969): 68.

³⁷ Altshuler, “The Attitude of the Communist Party of Russia to Jewish National Survival,” 70.

³⁸ Altshuler, “The Attitude of the Communist Party of Russia to Jewish National Survival,” 71.

³⁹ Trudy Gold, *The Timechart History of Jewish Civilization* (London: Chartwell Books, Inc., 2004), 19.

⁴⁰ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

conditions in their own unique way. David Vital writes that the Jews of Russia never fit into the Russian class system because they were not of Russian origin, despite having lived there for so long. They were a people set apart because of restrictions on where they could live. In addition, their culture, traditions, religion, and language separated them from the main stream of Russian society. However, they did co-exist and engaged in business in Russia with both Jews and non-Jews, although there were limits on Jewish businesses that non-Jews did not face. One of them was that Jewish merchants and artisans could not become members of the guilds, which regulated important aspects of commercial life. Both the cost of membership and the unwillingness of the guilds to include Jews kept them out. Despite this, Jews played a significant part in the economic life of their communities. “They served directly and indirectly as leaseholders, bailiffs, rent collectors, suppliers, distillers of alcohol, inn, tavern, and shop keepers, as cobblers, tailors, carpenters, and as members of other similar crafts.”⁴¹

In his book, *The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine explains that the market economy characterized by trade between Jews and gentiles also supported an advanced banking industry. “Jewish banks based in Warsaw, Vilna, and Odessa had been among the first commercial lending institutions in the Russian Empire.”⁴² When, “in 1915-16, the imperial capital was formally closed to all but specially licensed Jews, at least seven of the seventeen members of the St. Petersburg Stock Exchange Council and twenty-eight of the seventy joint-stock bank managers were Jews or Jewish converts to Christianity.”⁴³ The developed economy of the Jews spread and functioned throughout all strata of the Jewish community, as well as having a significant place in the overall economies of Russia and other Eastern European nations.

While some Jews were townspeople (*mecschantsvo*) many Jews lived in the country or in small rural villages. Sholem Aleichem’s famous character Tevye the Dairyman, whom many know as the protagonist in the musical *Fiddler on The Roof* adapted from Sholem Aleichem’s stories, lived in the countryside and made his living selling milk.⁴⁴ However, from the late 1880s through the first decade of the 1900s, many Jews living in the Pale migrated to the cities. In fact, at the turn of the century, Jews were the most urbanized non-Russian population in Russia, with 52.6% of Jews living in urban areas. Many of the Jews who migrated to the cities sought employment in factories. These Jewish factory workers preferred to work for Jewish business owners, because other factory owners would not accept the Jewish Sabbath or high holy days as reasons to miss work.⁴⁵

All of this points to a vibrant Jewish consciousness, language, culture, history, and economy existing in Eastern European and the Russian territories between 1900 and 1920. At that time, five million of Europe’s seven million Jews lived in Russia, where Russia’s residential policy for Jews concentrated them in and around the Pale of Settlement, making it easy for them to develop and maintain their own language, culture, and economy. Most of this Jewish population spoke Yiddish, with many individuals not able to speak or understand Russian. By 1918, the Bolsheviks, who controlled the Russian government, had established a Commissariat for Jewish National Affairs, which recognized Jews as a significant and important ethnic group in Russia. Why, then, were the Jews unable to establish an independent Jewish nation in the Pale of Settlement?

With the benefit of historical perspective, it is clear that certain things were missing that might have enabled the Jewish nation envisioned in the early twentieth century to solidify and survive in the Pale of Settlement. The language question embodied a level of complexity that was difficult to resolve. Some factions supported Yiddish, while others argued in favor of Hebrew. Some were even dedicated to the language of the ruling class, be it Polish or Russian. Hebraists did not think Yiddish was up to the task of supporting the intellectual weight, historical significance, and religious importance of Jewish texts that were thousands of years old.⁴⁶ When the Jewish literary societies could not reach an agreement on a Jewish national language, it was clear that such a decision would have to be made by a strong central authority, but such an authority did not exist. Without definitive decisions about a Jewish national language and a standardized educational system to promote and teach that language, it was impossible to reach a unified decision on other issues relating to establishing a Jewish nation. The factionalism among the Jews of the Pale regarding the formation of a Jewish nation was a significant barrier. Opinions seemed to differ from city to city and region to region. There were even groups that rejected the whole idea of establishing a Jewish nation in Eastern Europe and Russia.

In the midst of these discussions and debates, the Bund became a primary advocate for Jewish nationalism.

⁴¹ Vital, *A People Apart*, 85.

⁴² Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 118.

⁴³ Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 119.

⁴⁴ Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye and His Daughters* (or *Tevye the Dairyman*), 1894.

Fiddler on the Roof, (Original Broadway musical, 1964; Film adaptation, 1971).

⁴⁵ Vital, *A People Apart*, 416-417.

⁴⁶ Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture*, 114-140.

The Bund and similar groups created charities and social organizations to help the Jews in the Pale of Settlement and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. However, the Bund was not large enough or strong enough to successfully establish the Jewish nation.

Perhaps the most serious obstacle to Jewish nationalism was the fact that the 1917 Russian Revolution had given the Soviets control the Pale of Settlement, and they were adamantly opposed to a Jewish nation in the Pale. The Jews did not have the power to overcome the Russian opposition to an independent Jewish nation in the Pale of Settlement. Thus, even if they had achieved unity of purpose in support of forming a Jewish nation in the Pale, Russia would not have allowed that nation to be established.

Jeffrey Veidlinger writes in his book *Jewish Public Culture* that “the central determinants in a nation’s evolution are both the individual traits with which its people are endowed and that evolve based on their interactions with surrounding peoples, environments, and universal values shared by all peoples.”⁴⁷ Neither Russia nor all the Jews in the Pale had a shared vision and goal of a Jewish nation in Eastern Europe. In fact, many Jews looked forward to leaving Russia and Europe completely. Between 1900 and 1914, almost 2 percent of all Jewish residents of the Pale of Settlement were leaving every year. Most headed to the United States. Some cast their eyes longingly toward Palestine.⁴⁸ Zionists were a powerful faction who did not support the cause of a Jewish state in Eastern Europe. They refused to give up their goal of returning to the ancestral homeland of the Jews and establishing a Jewish nation in Palestine. While Zionism was not strictly a Hebraist movement, Zionists and Hebraists often were attracted to each other and therefore were not supportive of Yiddish.

By the end of World War II, the effort to establish Yiddish as the national language of the Jewish people had lost much of its momentum. The repression of the Jews perpetrated by the Soviet Union, which took up the practice of anti-Semitism from Tsarist Russia, continued to disrupt Jewish nationalism. Finally, the devastation of World War I and the horrors visited upon the Jews by the Holocaust, which exterminated millions of Yiddish-speaking Jews, shattered the hope for a Yiddish-speaking Jewish nation in Eastern Europe. Instead, out of the ashes of the war came a strengthened movement for a new Jewish nation in the land where the Jews had originated. Eventually, Hebrew, not Yiddish, became the national language of Israel. In the end, despite the tragedies that befell the Jews of Europe, and perhaps partially because of the scope of those tragedies, the Zionist cause survived and triumphed. A Jewish nation was established, and has since then thrived, but it was not the one that was conceived and supported by the Jews of the Pale of Settlement between 1900 and 1920.

⁴⁷ Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture*, 271.

⁴⁸ Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 117.