

Jews of the Vilna Guberniya: Recruits of the Tsar, Cantonists, Conscripts of World War I

The project contains a rich collection of early 20th-century photographs conserved by the Lithuanian State Central Archive. These are photographs of Jewish young people and conscripts to the Russian army from the Vilna guberniya from 1900 to 1915 with authentic inscriptions identifying the subjects, with surnames written on the photographs and confirmed by stamp and seal. The reverse sides of the photographs contain the signature of a Vilna guberniya police official confirming identity, and an oath to the that effect is sometimes attached to certain photographs.

The collection is comprised of 1,222 portrait photographs. This is the largest portrait-photo collection preserved in the archive and is important part of the historical legacy of the Jews who lived in Vilna guberniya. The photographs are very expressive, young men dressed in their finest clothes, looking with hope and aspiration to the future. The fate of many is unknown: did they serve in the Russian army, were they cantonists, or did they manage to avoid serving? This unique period of Jewish history has been little studied and very few publications about it exist. Research on the origins and fates of the people in the photographs is a subject for a separate historical study.

Most of the portraits were taken in Vilna, but others were done in Warsaw, Minsk, Kiev and St. Petersburg. These century-old photographs taken in the salons of famous photographers of the period (Rembrandt, E. Binkovich, A. Straus, S. Fleri and others) are both cultural and historical treasures and an important part of the history of photography about which the general public knows very little at the present time.

All of these documents were carefully restored and preserved by the Lithuanian State Central Archive. The photos have been digitized and included in the archive's electronic catalogue.

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In 1703, during the reign of Peter the Great, a military draft was introduced in Russia. In the late 18th century the conscription rate was 2 men out of 500 annually. They served for life and in many cases their children studied at military academies and they later became soldiers as well.

Service for life was scaled back to 25 years in 1736, which equated to a life of service anyway because of the low life expectancy in Russia then.

The nobility were excused from compulsory service in 1761 but were accepted as volunteers, which they pursued after graduation from military academies, entering as officers. The rank and file remained mainly peasants and lower-class city dwellers.

The idea of including Jews in conscription was a long time in coming and originated in the reign of Catherine the Great, who wanted to solve "the Jewish problem" by ridding her empire of Jews in three ways. She allegedly said, "One

third of Russian Jews will leave, one third will be baptized as members of the Orthodox Church and one third will perish." Fortunately for Russian Jews, the empress died in 1796 before her ideas could be implemented.

Nikolai I (Nicholas I) ascended the throne in 1825 and made great progress implementing his grandmothers Catherine's plans for the Jews.

He issued an edict in 1827 to have Jews conscripted as well. Before that change to the law on recruitment, Jews in the Russian Empire paid what was called a monetary contribution in place of military service. The conscription rate was slightly higher, 10 men for every thousand twice annually, which shows an intention to increase the number of young Jewish men in the army.

Russia saw many military engagements in the 19th century. Major conflicts included the war with Napoleon (with 300,000 lost on the Russian side), the Russo-Turkish War and Crimean War (Russian losses of 400,000) and the Second Russo-Turkish War. The 19th century was difficult for recruits in the Russian Empire and there was strong incentive to avoid conscription.

Jews faced discrimination and persecution in the army. Jews were rarely promoted to the officers' corps and never to its upper echelons. Anti-Semitism was fierce and there was an informal policy of forcefully baptizing young Jewish men. Many writers have described the horrible conditions and torture they endured, including beatings and starvation intended to compel them to renounce Judaism.

Usually recruits were posted far from their hometowns with virtually no opportunities to visit family on vacations during their service, which was often for life. Jewish conscripts wrote about their miserable and impossible situation in letters home. These reports from recruits caused much murmuring and rumors back in their communities in the Pale of Settlement.

People were frightened of being recruited and parents did their best to help their children avoid service in all sorts of ways. Vital records from the time show dates of conscription already noted on birth certificates of newborns in communal record books. Richer families paid poorer Jews to send their children instead. Relief was granted only sons, leading many to falsify family documents to show they had only one son. Some young men inflicted damage on their hands and fingers in order to be found unfit for service, while many other simply fled on the day before call-up. Many Jewish community leaders found themselves in trouble with the authorities over the issue, the leaders having been given responsibility for fulfilling conscription quotas. Some of them hired *khapunes*, Yiddish for "grabbers," to kidnap and force young Jews into military service. Often the victims were boys just 12 or 13 years old. These children were sent to what were called cantons, military schools where they were kept until the age of 17, following which they were to serve in the military for from 15 to 25 years. These conscripts became known as cantonists.

In most cases being deprived of the chance to live a Jewish way of life in the

Russian military resulted in assimilation. Those who survived combat and disease were granted a retirement stipend equal to the annual income of a 3rd guild merchant and a plot of land. Third-guild members were allowed to live outside the Pale, an aspiration held by many Jews in the Ukraine, White Russia and Lithuania. It was a ticket to a better life and greater rights.

Army service was relaxed to 15 years in 1851.

In 1874 the recruitment system in effect for two centuries was replaced with universal conscription of all young men for 6-year stints, reduced to 3 years in 1906. In the late 19th century many modern Jews sought to join the larger society and some even wanted to serve in the military.

Military service in the 20th century didn't seem as bad or as frightening as it had been the previous century, although many Jews were still terrified and fled conscription.