

Gavrila Derzhavin and “The Committee for the Organization of Jewish Life” in Early 19th Century Russia

Text and Translations by
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Few realize that the Jewish question was specifically addressed in imperial Russia under two successive emperors: Paul and Alexander I. Son and Grandson respectively of Catherine II, the “Jewish Commission” under Senator and poet Gavrila Derzhavin sought to alleviate the condition of the Jews in the newly incorporated parts of western Russia. What they discovered instead changed Russian royal opinion on the Jewish question forever.

I.

At the end of the 18th century, the decrepit Polish empire fell to pieces. Since most of the eastern lands of the Polish empire were once part of Kievan-Rus, these were absorbed into the Russian empire between 1772 and 1795. One consequence of this was that Russia found herself ruling over most of the world's Jewish population. Emperor Paul of Russia (1751-murdered 1801), concerned about peasant riots in these newly absorbed lands, ordered an inquest into their causes and possible solutions.

These inquests very soon became concerned with the Jewish population. As a result, they were called the “Committee for the Organization of Jewish Life” and operated under both Paul and Alexander. Needless to say, it is extremely rare to find a discussion of this in the English language literature.

Significantly, both committees were chaired by Senator Gavrila Derzhavin, a member of the imperial Senate and one of Russia's best known poets before Pushkin. The Senate's draft of the purpose and mission of the committee stated that it was to work

to discover the cause of the financial complaints from peasants and the nature of their livelihood. These complaints are to the detriment of agriculture and economic life generally in areas where Jews live. This Committee will deal with these issues and seek funds to remedy the present situation of the Jews (quoted from Katasonov, 1993).

Since Paul had an interest in civic peace in this newly annexed land, the emperor was especially concerned with the objectivity of the data. Paul wanted to incorporate Jews into Russia without creating friction. The region was ethnically mixed, containing Cossacks, Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, Jews, Russians, Magyars and Czechs. The emperor needed to tread carefully, avoiding anything that would pit one group against another.

The Baltic grain trade continued to be profitable, so maintaining peace in western Russia was both a security issue and an economic necessity. Further, as revolutionary France sought an

alliance with Polish elites, the gravity of the situation became considerable. In both Commissions, the essential purpose was to understand social relations in the area so as to assist Jews in their transition from Polish to Russian rule. In so doing, the Orthodox peasants were to get a fair hearing as to the causes of their unrest. The two purposes here were closely related. Derzhavin acknowledges that he was motivated primarily by ending arbitrary actions by Polish nobles, not Jews. He initially saw Jews as mere employees of the Poles, but this error was soon to be dispelled.

The membership of the Commission included V. Kotchubey, Minister of the Interior, Senator SO Potoki, and AE Czartoryski, deputy Interior Minister. Other than Derzhavin, it is notable that none of these names are Russian. The Potoki family in particular was essential in the process of Jewish empowerment briefly described above. Both Potoki and Czartoryski were very close to aristocratic Polish interests and elite Jewish money. Hence, at the very least, this Commission cannot be called anti-Semitic by any definition. Even more, that many of these old enemies of Russia were now honored as Senators might show how the tsardom viewed ethnic relations.

II.

Speaking about the historical role of the Jews in this part of the world, Jewish writer Anatoly Muchek writes in the Ukrainian newspaper *Ukrainian Choice*:

Traditionally, Jews were typically usurers, since more respectable occupations were not available to them, including the right to own land. There is no doubt that Jews were dishonest in their dealings—it must be admitted—because of the tax burdens laid on them. They required more income due to this. They had to figure any and all ways to make more money. [Under the tsars] they had to avoid all “malicious” occupations, such as owning liquor stores and bars, and become useful members of society (Muchek, 2013).

Muchek's comments are instructive, but are only half true. First, the most powerful financiers of the Russian empire were Jews, including the Polyakov, Ginzburg, Noikin and Peretz families. In the late 19th century, they were to buy up sugar plantations in Ukraine, finance railroads and, significantly, buy up the gold mines, the most famous of which was the Lena Gold Works.

Second, Jews owned land everywhere. There were no laws restricting it unless it came from the Jewish kahal, the official autonomous Jewish community empowered by nearly all Central European empires. Any prohibition or discouragement on Jewish ownership of agricultural land would have been a dead letter regardless, since the kahal was not subject to the laws of the empire and was totally self-governing.¹

Jewish land holdings developed in part due to the illiteracy of many Polish lords and their typically aristocratic disdain for commerce. As Polish nobles granted their business dealings to Jews centuries before, de facto land ownership in the area by Jews was the norm. While a discussion of Polish policies towards the Jews is beyond the scope of this essay, several historical facts need to be made clear.

Polish nobles had for many centuries hired Jews to collect taxes, hold leases and buttress elite, aristocratic assets. They were far more than accountants, however. By 1620, Jews had full

control of the Polish economy with the express permission of the higher level aristocracy. Why? Jews were given these privileges (including exemption from taxation) so as to keep the commerce of the cities from becoming an ally of the Polish crown. The Polish king, generally speaking, was a powerless figure at the mercy of the totally dominant aristocracy. This is why Poland was being dismembered.

Traditionally, the rise of European monarchy was based on the alliance of mercantile cities, poorer nobles and the church. The upper aristocracy was the target, and these elites were consistently the most unrelenting antagonists to royal centralization. To forestall this alliance, Polish nobles imported Jews to dominate commerce, both urban and rural.

Poland became an oligarchic republic from 1580 to 1772 because the alliance of nobles and Jewish kahals was unbreakable. Having no standing army, the military was under powerful landed magnates as finance was in Jewish hands. The victims of this fiendish coalition were peasants and the hapless crown. For this reason, Polish serfdom was the harshest and most exploitative in Europe.

III.

After his first trip to western Russia, Derzhavin wrote several essays, collectively called his *Opinion*. These were his impressions of the situation and his views to reform it. According to Vladimir Kozlyakov, writing in the Belorussian Journal *Soyuz (Union)*, Derzhavin discovered the following:

Arriving in Belarus in the Summer of 1800, the senator was struck by the condition of the peasants. They were hungry and malnourished, yet their barns were full of grain. He quickly ordered the distribution of this produce from the possession of Polish Prince Jan Oginski. He informed Emperor Paul that he had taken the names of all offending landlords who were deliberately starving peasants. . . Stopping a cart in Vitebsk owned by powerful Jewish merchants from Krychau full of grain and flour, he sent it back to the landlord and distributed its contents to the peasants. He forced landlords to make permanent adjustments to their exploitative way of living (Kozlyakov, 2014).

One abuse he discovered was that both Poles and Jews were granting peasants only short-term leases, so as to be able to raise the rent in the near future. Derzhavin demanded that leases be, at a minimum, nine years, and that all stipulations be enforced. He advocated the end to the Jewish vodka monopoly and sought considerable structural changes in the distribution of wealth. Derzhavin was a man of high ethical standards which are rarely challenged. His opinion had tremendous weight. However, the reality was that both Poles and Jews were alarmed.

In his own words, Derzhavin states:

Many different opinions on the Jews have been given. I find that the Kahal to be a nest of hatred and subversion of Christians (школы их не что иное, как гнездо суеверств и ненависти к Христианам кагалы). These organizations are effective and well funded. In Prussia, they have been destroyed. They do not serve anyone but themselves. Making their money from liquor is based on it being used as a lure. Few can refuse. The legal device of *Hazaka* is a way for them to keep in their hands control over

peasant land in perpetuity. *Herimy* is a cover for atrocities to the detriment of all local commerce. And *Koledov*—an impervious, profane concealment of the most horrifying barbarities to the detriment of public and private life. It is a method of proficient thievery (quoted from Solzhnitsyn, 2003: Part I).

These terms were discovered by the Senator and required interpretation. In essence, *Hazaky* and *Heremy* were ways of taking and legitimizing the property of others. The former is the taking of symbolic landownership, and was a means of getting around any law against it. The latter is a means of voiding all contracts made with the peasantry (or any non-Jew). In general, they were arcane tricks neither the peasants nor the Polish grandees understood. Since the economy was in Jewish hands and the kahal not subject to outside law, these legal scams were fairly simple in operation.

Koledov was more insidious. It was the practice of getting peasants drunk at harvest time (when they had money) so as to entice them to take out larger loans at usurious rates. The broader point is that this is not the news Derzhavin wanted to bring back to the capitol. Since Jews functioned as the middlemen of the Polish economy, to solve peasant problems was to either expropriate them or assimilate them. Emperor Paul sought a third option, settling them on the land as small proprietors.

Of course, nearly all Jews refused this, realizing that the life of the peasant was not nearly as profitable as unproductive parasitism. Jews made their money gouging peasants (and the occasional lord) because they were seen as mere cattle to be manipulated. Solzhenitsyn's *Two Hundred Years Together*, Part I, deals with these Commissions and the significance of their findings. He reprints Derzhavin's opinion in full, and, to this writer's knowledge, has not been translated into English.

Elsewhere, Derzhavin writes:

Landlords, having granted Jews a monopoly over alcohol sales, work together to the point where peasants had very little. . . This, and Jews as powerful tax farmers brought peasants to poverty, forcing peasants to take one loan to pay other loans off. Half of peasant income is easily taken this way, while peasant incomes would otherwise have given them a prosperous livelihood (from Solzhenitsyn, 2013).

One obnoxious result of this was the Jewish ownership of Orthodox parishes. The Polish nobility, though theologically illiterate, were very Roman Catholic. This made exploiting peasants much easier since the farmer was religiously, ethnically and culturally alien. The few Orthodox parishes remaining in eastern and southern Poland were padlocked for services until a substantial fee was paid to the Jewish leaseholder. As might be imagined, this situation was particularly noxious to the peasantry.

Worst of all, the Slavic peasant had proven himself an efficient cultivator of immense amounts of grain. This did not benefit them, however. The intensity of Central European serfdom was driven by the Renaissance-era spike in western populations. Growth of the money economy and urban development brought grain demand to a very high pitch, increasing the price.

Given the realities of Polish economics, this meant that Slavic grain was exported by a Jewish network headquartered in several cities: Antwerp, Constantinople, Krakow and London, with satellite branches in Spain, Amsterdam and soon, St. Petersburg. This is the financial

network that permitted Jewish bankers to secure interest rates far lower than any other. Such rates were irresistible and, if guaranteed by Jewish elites in the network, would place those close to the Jews at a distinct advantage against rivals.

Derzhavin continues from his findings concerning poorer Jews:

The simple, poorer Jews are blinded and dazzled (ослепляют) by other Jews so that an imperishable partition is created. They are surrounded by superstition such that they remain a unified society. Children learn from the Talmud, which protects the position of the rich. Talmud gives us no hope in the eventual change of manners. . . .

Concerning the kahal, he writes: “Their income is far greater than what they pay tax on, and kahal elders will not turn over any records. The poor live in extreme want while the kahal rulers live in abundance, having great power over the simple.”

Derzhavin saw poorer Jews as victims of the kahal. For him, the Talmud mystified the power of the rabbis and justified their rule. The depiction of all gentiles as savage beasts kept all Jews huddled together in fear, and, as a result, total control was fairly easy to maintain. Hence, the kahal victimized peasants, nobles, and most importantly, their less wealthy members.

IV.

Unsurprisingly, Derzhavin was slandered endlessly as soon as his *Opinion* was published.ⁱⁱ As the “leader of Russian anti-Semites,” as one Jewish newspaper puts it, Derzhavin was and is eternally punished for exposing what had been hidden from public view for centuries.ⁱⁱⁱ Neither Emperor had any preconceived notions of Jews and were certainly not prejudiced against them. The very existence of the “Jewish Committee” proves that. Derzhavin too, had no animus against Jews prior to his mission. Unfortunately for both Russia and the kahal, what the Commission uncovered was an evil with which Russia had only little experience.

As Paul's “resettlement” order was only partly carried out (due to his murder soon after), Alexander I reorganized the Commission. He did not, however, continue Paul's policies. The Second Committee was inspired partly by Napoleon's desire to restore the “Sanhedrin” in the Middle East under his protection. This proto-Zionist idea meant that Jews would become declared enemies of any rival of the French emperor.

If the Jews in former Polish lands were satisfied with Russian rule, they would have no reason to serve Napoleon. While Alexander was quite naive, his primary concern was to ensure a loyal Jewish presence in western Russia. The order for the Second Committee stated that the “Committee ought to carefully consider the proposals of Derzhavin and make observations on the improvement of the Jews, not only in Belarus, but also in other regions purchased from Poland, as well as in the provinces of the south.”

After Derzhavin's *Opinion* became common knowledge, the kahals in western Russia threatened a ban on any Jew cooperating with it. Given Derzhavin's first report, Europe's Jews were extremely anxious about his second trip to Poland and Belarus. Sending over 1 million rubles to St. Petersburg, the kahals wanted Derzhavin off the Committee. Beyond that, money poured in to Petrograd from Jews throughout Europe. Kotchubey was offered huge sums. Then, at the request of the Emperor, the kahal of Minsk was invited to St. Petersburg to give their point of view.

Two Jewish bankers in Petersburg, Nola Notkin and Abram Peretz, became the point men

for Jewish control over the Second Commission. Their job was to bribe anyone they could to do two things: first, to rewrite the Opinion of Derzhavin so as to make it more accommodating to Jewish interests, and second, that Derzhavin be removed at any price.

Notkin had visited Derzhavin in his office earlier and offered him 200,000 rubles to rewrite his report. Derzhavin, his suspicions now confirmed, angrily refused. Alexander I, as a gesture of “good faith,” fired Derzhavin from his post in 1803, just two years after Paul's mysterious murder (Solzhenitsyn, 2013: Part I). Hence, Derzhavin has the distinction of being one of a select handful of politicians in history who were punished for refusing to take a bribe.

The bribery worked, since the Second Committee permitted the continuation of the Jewish monopoly in liquor, which was a longstanding complaint of peasants and the church in western Russia. In fact, according to writer Paul Skakun, the kahal had the full support of the state once the pliable grandson of Catherine II was in power (Skakun, 2013). After the murder of Paul, unquestioningly at the behest of the elite monied interests, Alexander soon proved himself much easier to manipulate. He appointed Mikhail Speransky to head the remaining work of the Second Commission, music to the collective ears of the kahal. Speransky was fairly liberal and a high ranking Mason. Hence, the entire commission was now made up of pro-Jewish elements.

Derzhavin was now Minister of Justice and not involved in Jewish affairs. In fact, the clear policy of keeping him away from these affairs caused his resignation after two years (1801-1803). He then retired, focused on writing, and died in 1812. The continued impoverishment of Ukrainian and Belorussian peasants was ceaselessly.

Solzhenitsyn writes on these events:

The [second] Committee included magnates Adam Czartoryski, Potocki, Severin and Valerian Zubov, who owned large estates in Poland and were closely associated with the Jews. Derzhavin, along with Mikhail Speransky, were on the Committee. The committee invited Jewish deputies from all the provincial kahalns and prominent Jews including Notkin and tax farmer Abram Peretz and their employees (2013, Part I).

Of the two Commissions, the first, under Emperor Paul, was the only one that had a chance for a rational solution to the Jewish problem. Jewish haughtiness, fraudulent practices, and the ignorance of the Polish nobility were ruining thousands of peasant families. The normal and expected insurrection against this received very little redress from Petersburg.^{iv}

IV.

In 1985, the journal *Orthodox America* stated concerning Paul:

The dreams which this idealist Orthodox monarch had conceived during the lone and often frustrating period before he ascended the throne were destined to be thwarted by the prevailing attitude of a degenerate nobility which had long forsaken the best interests of a Holy Russia to which the new Tsar was committed. Paul realized that only an iron hand could save Russia from the brink of disaster to which it had been brought by Catherine [the Great]. At the same time he felt keenly the opposition of the pampered nobility. . .

Emperor Paul was one of the great rulers of the early 19th century. He forced nobles to pay taxes and forced even the highest elites to suffer the same judicial penalties as the lowliest peasant. The 18th century in Russia was a dark time. Most of the monarchs (or those who controlled them) had no legitimacy. Catherine I was a serf girl captured by Peter and served as a sex slave to the army. His marriage to Peter was just as absurd as her “reign.” Under Catherine, the state was an oligarchy of high noble families such as the Menshikov controlling the country. Catherine, illiterate and fascinated by the shiny dresses Menshikov bought her, was a laughable irrelevancy. It is not so laughable that these same high Russian nobles, looted the treasury in Catherine's name. Just as pathetically, Anna of Courland and Anna Leopoldonva, ruling in the middle of the 18th century, came to power through noble intrigue, which also meant that the German, Masonic nobility ran the Russian state. In a legal, ethical and religious sense, the Russian state ceased to exist until the rise of Empress Elizabeth.

From Peter I to Peter III, that is, the entirety of the 18th century, the church came under attack. Half of the Orthodox parishes were closed down, as were more than two-thirds of the monasteries. Those who resisted, such as Sts. Arsenii of Rostov and Paul of Tobolsk, were thrown in prison and starved. To believe that the Bolsheviks were the first to attempt a liquidation of the church is to ignore the realities of the “Russian Enlightenment.” Needless to say, oligarchical rule meant the intensification of serfdom, as the monastic lands (where peasants were tenants, not serfs) were forcibly given to court favorites.

Formerly free peasants of Ukraine were forced into serfdom and, under Catherine II, the Cossack center in Zaporozhye was shut down. When Orthodox peasants violently revolted against noble, Polish and Jewish rule in the *Koliivishina* starting in the 1760s, Catherine sent troops to quash it, saying that they had the “divine obligation” to work for their Polish lords. This era has been called the “Golden Age” of the “Russian” nobility (the richer of whom spoke only very bad French). In reality, it was the oligarchy of foreigners in St. Petersburg who raped the country in any way it could. The worst consequence was that the common people began to lose faith in the monarchy and the Russian crown, once a potent source of loyalty, was now seen as a foreign, Masonic and cosmopolitan institution serving to justify the auto-demolition of Russia.

Paul, who, like most Russians, hated his mother Catherine II, reversed much of this. He released many of the “political” criminals that the “Enlightened” Catherine the Great had thrown in the dungeon. Further, he spend quite a bit of his own fortune opening peasant schools in hundreds of villages. He banned Masonry that had seeped into the very high reaches of the aristocracy. Due to the manifest evils of the two Annas and both Catherines, he forbade women from ever becoming empresses again.

Paul sought to create a class of peasant yeoman, so he made it easy for peasants to complain against their lords and offered serfs generous terms to buy noble land. Learning of the massive grain profits accruing to Jews and other elites through Baltic ports, he used state power to lower the price of bread. In brief, there was no faction of the elite he did not irritate.

Paul's reform program, in short, was to force nobles back into their much older service capacity. For Paul, as for rulers before him, nobles exist only to serve the state. Otherwise, there is no reason for their class, titles or privileges. The nobles responded by murdering him in 1801, bringing Alexander to power who, it was thought, was more responsive to “Enlightenment.”

An admirer of Paul, Derzhavin promoted a system extremely progressive for its time. He saw the traditions of the rabbis as “musty medieval ideas” that maintained rich Jews at the expense of all others. Once Derzhavin advocated for the revocation of the Jewish vodka monopolies, the kahal declared war on him, which meant that all gloves were off. He was the subject of moral terror: Slander, blackmail, and threats. He was fortunate to not have met Paul's fate.

In Derzhavin's *Opinion*, he argued that the Talmud, after many interviews with Jews of all stripes, peasants and merchants, made simple Jews hate everyone else. The basic view was that, when the “Messiah” comes, all the wealth of the world will accrue to Jews. Under the Polish system, it is no surprise that Messianic ideas flourished. Of course, the Cossack rebellion under Bogdan Khmelnytsky and the decimation of Jews in Poland showed these prophesies to be premature.

The “Jewish yoke” hung over the head of the peasant as an unproductive burden. Increasing interest compounded over decades ensured that no one, the nobles included, will ever get out of debt. The nobility of Poland, often ignorant of their own financial condition, saw the Jews as excellent enforcers. A clear community of interest kept the noble-Jewish alliance in Poland alive, and the price was the destruction of the state in the 1790s.

Derzhavin, the best known Russian poet of his day, wrote, after his removal by Alexander:

So I should not die; part of me remains great;
running away from the dust of death
and my will to live
And the appreciation of glory, not fading;
The universe will honor the race of Slavs

And elsewhere:

Nobleman should be
steady of heart, enlightened; An example shall he display
the title of nobility is sacred; the power he possesses
Tear down your palaces!
All his thoughts, words, Acts
Should be for the good and the honorable (quoted from Kozlyakov)

Derzhavin was writing in an age when the nobility did not seem to have a role. Having been liberated from any service by Catherine II, the nobility could not justify their existence. The more significant point is that nobility was being redefined in these lines. The purpose was moral elevation. Seeing what was occurring in western Russia, the nobility were seen as parasites, not state servants. Westernization just meant greater expenditures, false facades of cosmopolitanism, liberalism and justifications for oligarchy.

Contrary to popular myth, the upper layers of the nobility were extremely liberal. They had no interest in a monarchy unresponsive to money. Every leftist movement had high level noble influence. The fact that Derzhavin was removed through Jewish bribery suggested that their power went unchecked. That the nobility, by this period, was almost totally Masonic again,

strongly suggests that haggard myth of the “conservative” noble needs to be jettisoned. Derzhavin left the Ministry of Justice primarily because the urban elites were anti-royal, Masonic and revolutionary.

Like all urban revolutions, the upper class, believing that traditional forms of authority do not promote their interests as they should, create liberalism to challenge it. Slogans of liberty and free trade are the rhetorical weapons they use against agrarian frugality. Individualism means that whoever has the most money and influence when such policies are enacted automatically wins. Furthermore, it also meant that the Jewish network now could function unchecked. If the English writings on Russian history are any indication, it continues its activities today.

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Alexander Milant

- i It should be noted that The Pale of Settlement, contrary to myth, featured low taxes, self-government, and free trade, something not permitted to Orthodox peasants. Nor were Jews confined to this Pale, since they traveled freely throughout the country and dominated the financial life of St. Petersburg.
- ii Probably the most absurd “analysis” of Dzheravin is from History of the Jews in Modern Times by Lloyd P. Gartner. A man without historical scruple or honesty, his views show the fraud of Russian history in English.
- iii Court historians spared no feelings in heaping abuse on Paul. Then and now, the ignorant assert that Paul was “crazy,” “unbalanced” and, in more contemporary language “another Hitler.” One example of this poor and ignorant “history writing” is So Dark a Stream: A Study of the Emperor Paul I of Russia, 1754-1801, by Edith Martha Almedingen from 1959
- iv Poland received one of the most liberal constitutions in Europe from the Russian crown at this time. Fully independent (except in foreign policy), the old nobility continued its vulturous and predatory policies with an army of Jews ready to profit from it. The Polish nobility slowly found their way to Freemasonry (which became a fad in high-class Polish circles) and these became the cells for the rebellion against Russia in 1836. Autonomy for Poland was a total disaster for Russia and, most of all, for both Polish and Ukrainian peasants.