

The Cantonist Struggle and the Birth of the New Jew

Aaron Bornstein

In 1827, Tsar Nicholas I instituted the Cantonist Decree, which led to the impressment of thousands of Jewish children into the Russian army. While officially, Jewish religious freedom was to be protected, the unofficial goal of the Cantonist system was to assimilate Russia's Jewish minority. By encouraging the new institution of the Chapper or Kidnapper, the new legislation was successful in undermining the religious authority of the Kahal. Furthermore, many Cantonist children were coerced to convert to Russian Orthodoxy through abusive means. However, although the Cantonist system succeeded in converting over one third of Jewish recruits¹ and led to the dissolution of the Kahal, the non-standard treatment of the Jewish minority contributed to a feeling of otherness that culminated in the strengthening of Jewish identity in spite of institutionalized anti-Semitism.

Accounting for Sources: Opening a Closed Door

Any analysis of the Cantonist system cannot be conducted in a vacuum. The prevailing understanding of the events that occurred from 1827-1856 is shaped by access to primary sources. The lack of widespread written records, as well as the censorship of the Imperial and Soviet Era, has limited Western access to primary source material. The few surviving records of the period stem from collective memories in the form of later Court testimonies, poems and memoirs. The sources used in this paper, therefore, must be understood as subject to the flaws exhibited by these mediums. Furthermore, translation of Russian texts leads to varying interpretations, many of the records in this paper stem from the compilation, translation and

¹ Yohanan Petrovsky-Stern "Drafted into Modernity: Jews in the Russian Army (1827-1917)" pp.111-172

adaptation of historian Larry Domnitch, who scoured Russian, Ukrainian and Polish archives to compile a compelling list of primary sources for Western researchers. However, as the cover of his source compilation indicates, Domnitch believes that it was, “Nicholas I’s intent to destroy Russian Jewry.”² While potentially true, the goals of Domnitch’s narrative must be taken in to account. In spite of the limitations provided by adapted sources, they still provide first hand testimony of the events that occurred during the Cantonist struggle. The author of this article has worked hard to combine the Cantonist memoirs, testimonies and poems with official surviving imperial decrees and dispatches, to provide a balanced narrative of how the Cantonist system contributed to the original assimilation and renewal of Jewish identity in the late Imperial era.

The Emperor’s Motives: Assimilating an Empire

Shortly after the signing of the Cantonist Decree on August 26th 1827, Nicholas I wrote in a private memorandum; "The chief benefit to be derived from the drafting of the Jews is the certainty that it will move them most effectively to change their religion."³ The Tsar’s memorandum demonstrated his personal interest in using conscription to convert and assimilate Jews, despite guarantees provided to maintain religious freedom in the Cantonist decree’s Article 11 Section 91:

Jews in active military duty are permitted to observe their religious customs during their spare time. This is in accordance with the law of the land concerning accepted religions. Commanding officers shall protect the Jews from disturbances or abuses which may be caused by their religious affiliation.⁴

² Domnitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. Back Cover

³ "Cantonist Jewish Children." *The True Story of an Archangelsk Cantonist Soldier*. <http://www.jewishmag.com/99mag/cantonist/cantonist.htm> (accessed November 26, 2013).

⁴P. Levanda, *Polnyi khronologicheskii sbornik zakonov i polozhenii, kasaiuschikhksia evreev*[Complete chronological collection of laws and ordinances relating to Jews](St. Petersburg 1874), p193-200 Trns. By R.Weiss

Yet in spite of its guarantee of religious freedom, the decree's recruitment of Jewish children was indicative of an ulterior motive of assimilation. While other ethnic groups were enrolled in the Cantonist system, such as the children of Polish rebels, no other minority in Russia was expected to serve at such a young age or for so long a sentence.⁵ Furthermore, since the failed Polish November Uprising of 1830 occurred three years after the issuing of the Jewish Cantonist decree, it is clear that the Jewish Cantonist system was originally designed to assimilate Russia's Jewish minority.⁶

Three years after the passing of the Cantonist decree, Nicholas's Minister of Internal Affairs, Adjutant-General Zakrevskiy, sent a dispatch to all Civil Governors, granting permission to convert Jews to "the Christian faith of all creeds tolerated in Russia".⁷ The dispatch provides evidence of the Empire's early use of the Cantonist system to 'Rusify' Russia's Jewish minority. The dispatch ordered the commanders of different Cantonist battalions to serve as "instructors" for interested Jews. What is particularly significant about this document is the order to all civil governors to notify the Zakrevskiy of "arrangements", which implies that the "permission" to convert is indicative less of providing "interested" Jews with a choice, than the initiation of a predetermined plan by the Tsarist Regime.

However, even if one were to interpret Zakrevskiy's dispatch in a less sinister fashion and infer that it did not explicitly call for forced conversion, by 1844, seventeen years after the distribution of the dispatch, it was clear that the religious identity of Cantonist Jews was stronger than initially anticipated. Many priests reported that the boys were better informed on biblical

⁵Ibid

⁶ "November Insurrection (Polish history)." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 10 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/421161/November-Insurrection>>.

⁷ Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p136

texts than they themselves were, and requested more reading material from their Orthodox superiors.⁸ The Tsar was not pleased at the low estimates he received from the instituting of monthly reporting on conversion statistics from each battalion. After writing in his personal records that “too few children are being baptized”⁹ he notified the Procurator of the Holy Synod that he was “disappointed at the lack of successful baptisms of Jewish Cantonists and soldiers, and that this fact should be brought to the attention of the responsible clergy.”¹⁰ However high conversion rates in select battalions, such as the Saratover Battalion, led Nicholas I to conclude that coercion and forceful methods of conversion were effective.

As such, from 1844 to 1845, new and harsher methods sanctioned by the Tsarist regime in direct contradiction to the original decree, led to explosive conversion rates. Former Cantonists such as Lentiya Isaakovich Tauber described the effects of the shift in policy:

In early spring just at the time of the Purim holiday, seventy Jewish boys from Zhitomir were brought to us in the Omsk Cantonist Battalion. By Pesach [i.e. within exactly four weeks], one of them had died, sixty had been baptized and only nine of them remained Jews...¹¹

The implicit sanctioning of abusive methods by the tsarist regime led to the period from 1845-1856 known as the Cantonist Struggle.¹²

⁸Ibid p34

⁹Ibid p39

¹⁰ Stanislawski, Michael. "Conscription of the Jews." *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: the transformation of Jewish society in Russia, 1825-1855*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983. p23

¹¹ Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p40

¹² The author of the article is coining this term since he feels it appropriately demonstrates the abuses of the Cantonist system.

The Cantonist Struggle: Torture, Coercion and Conversion



Cantonist Jews in Formation¹³ (Date Unknown)

The abuses of the Cantonist struggle were recorded in the memoirs and testimonies of many survivors. In 1879, during his attempt to sue for the return of his Jewish Status, former Cantonist Zelik Leizorov Grinfeldt testified on the brutal methods used to convert Jewish children:

I did not want to convert to Orthodoxy. Since I was born a Jew, I wanted to die a Jew. I cried and begged. But they continued to torture me. Once, the sergeant hit me so hard on the head that it left a mark that remains to this day. They took me to the hospital, where I laid unconscious; when I came around, I learned that they had baptized me and named me Petr. But I never considered myself anything but a Jew.¹⁴

Grinfeldt's testimony reveals the horrific lengths to which his commanders went in order to convert him. Not only was he emotionally and physically abused, but he was forcibly baptized while unconscious, in direct violation of the religious freedom guarantees provided by the Cantonist decree. Grinfeldt's struggle was not an isolated incident. Dimitry Kaufman, from a separate battalion, testified that during his own appeal for the return of his Jewish Status "he had been beaten on the hands, that needles had been inserted under his nails and that he had been denied food for days¹⁵" before he gave in to conversion. When bathing, Officers often attempted

¹³ Ibid Cover

¹⁴ Avrutin, Eugene M. . "Returning to Judaism after the 1905 Law on Religious Freedom in Tsarist Russia." *Slavic Review* 65, no.1 (2006): 97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148524> (accessed November 26, 2013).

¹⁵ Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. P38

to mass baptize their battalions in nearby rivers. In one documented instance, an Officer was reported to repeatedly push the heads of his children underwater and shout, "Be baptized and I will leave you alone."¹⁶ Many of these children lost their hearing due to flooding of their ear canals and became nearly useless as soldiers.¹⁷ Incidents such as these demonstrate that to some battalion commanders the conversion of recruits superseded the need to train them as soldiers for the Tsar's army. In his memoir, the retired Cantonist Yaakov Moisyevich Iertsel wrote:

I do not myself know how I remained a Jew. When I remember the past, I relive that whole nightmare. First they whipped me because I ran away to town without permission, to see my fellow Jews. Then they whipped me for some childish misbehavior of fighting with a comrade. When I was threatened with a third whipping, I could not hold out and I finally agreed to be baptized.¹⁸

Only when Iertsel converted was he spared from further beatings. Once Jews converted to another 'recognized' religion, they could not regain their Jewish status. Due to the ethnic and cultural nature of Jewish customs, by converting the Jews, the Cantonist system forcibly worked to assimilate them. These direct violations of the religious freedom guarantees of the Cantonist decree led to both explosive conversion rates and the strengthening of cultural Jewish identity within Cantonist circles. While over one third of Jewish Cantonist recruits converted¹⁹, the following excerpt from a popular Cantonist poem demonstrates the growing sense of otherness.

Better to learn the Chumash and Rashi
 Than to eat the soldier's Kasha
 Better to lie on wooden boards
 Than to call the Yavan "Uncle"
 Better to wear a tallit and kittel
 Than to wear the Kaiser's hat
 I would rather lie ten cubits underground

¹⁶ Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p37

¹⁷ *Ibid* p46

¹⁸ *Ibid* 37

¹⁹ "Cantonist Jewish Children." *The True Story of an Archangelsk Cantonist Soldier*. <http://www.jewishmag.com/99mag/cantonist/cantonist.htm> (accessed November 26, 2013).

Than to wear the Kaiser's sword²⁰

The lines "Better to learn the Chumash and Rashi than to eat the soldier's Kasha" reveal that many child soldiers dreamed of being able to study in the Yeshiva instead of continuing in military service. The refrain, "Better to lie on wooden boards than to call the Yavan²¹ "Uncle"" showcase a sense of otherness that Canonists felt from the rest of the Russian nation, which they exemplified through the idea that it is better to die than to serve the Tsar.

Even after forcible conversion, many former Jews were treated with contempt by their fellow soldiers. In his memoir, the retired Cantonist Israel Itzkovich noted that:

A former Jew in an argument with a Christian comrade would still hear the epithet "Parkhatyy Yevri!" (Disgusting Jew). Sometimes they would add, "A Jew who has been baptized is like a wolf that has been fed!"²²

Such insults and disrespect led to an increased sense of otherness and cultural identity. Itzkovich later wrote that "they strengthened his inner resolve to remain a Jew."²³ In addition to the anti-Semitism faced after conversion, feelings of being cheated of their identity led to a cultural awakening. Iertsel wrote after his being baptized in a state of unconsciousness that "I still felt myself to be Yaakov. I do not know what powerful force held me in its grip, but I continued to feel myself a Jew. A nationalist instinct, the tears of my mother who begged me, an eight-year-old boy, to remain a Jew, or a natural resistance to those who I could not avoid considering my enemies."²⁴ While the Cantonist Struggle progressed, and these feelings began to fester among many of the child soldiers, back home in the Pale settlement a similar cultural identity struggle was underway.

²⁰Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p44. p44, p23

²¹ Hebrew word for Greek

²² Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p75

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid p46

The Kahal's Complacency and Undermined Authority

The Cantonist Decree forced conscription quotas on the Kehilim of Eastern Europe. The Kehilim, or the local Jewish community representatives, were allowed to substitute unmarried children over the age of twelve for over twenty five years of military service, though children as young as eight were often sent to the army. Under the law, religious students and leaders were exempt from the draft. Ironically it was the old Jewish leadership that chose to send children to the army in place of their fathers, in an attempt to preserve productive members of the community. The inductee oath, recited by every Jewish Cantonist recruit prior to conscription in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian, under the supervision of the Kahal leadership exclaimed:

God forbid that I should seek a way out of this oath. However, if I do sin and transgress this oath and do not work diligently as a faithful servant, my family and I will be excommunicated, both in this world and the world to come.²⁵

The power of the oath revealed the bond between the Kahal and the Tsar. Furthermore it demonstrated that the position of a Cantonist's family in their community and the world to come was linked to the success of his service.

As such the family unit adapted by attempting to ingrain Jewish values to their children at a younger age. The adapted excerpt below, from the memoir of Yehda Lieb Lebin, portrays a typical example of the austere scenes that surrounded the gathering of young children as their communities sent them off to the army.

Their parents, relatives and neighbors crowded around the wagon, crying bitterly. Parents thrust into the hands of their sons books of psalms, sets of tefillin, whatever small religious articles they had in their possession, "Stay a Jew!" they entreat their boys. "Whatever happens, stay a Jew!"²⁶

²⁵ Ibid p135

²⁶ Ibid p30

The artifacts these parents passed on to their children served to connect their sons to their Jewish roots. However, in direct violation of the religious guarantees of the Cantonist decree, these religious articles were often confiscated during the arrival of the new recruits to their barracks.²⁷

The Cantonist struggle transcended the 70,000 Jewish children who suffered through the trials and tribulations of being in the Tsar's army. The threat of losing one's sons had a profound impact on the Jewish communities of Russia. For each child, there existed an affected parent, sibling, and peer. When the Imperial administration continued to raise their demand for new recruits, the Kahal resorted to the creation of the institution of the Chapper to fulfill its quota. These Chappers were paid by the Kehilim to kidnap wayward children and impress them into the army. The profession of Chapper was considered to be a lucrative job, since they often supplemented their high salaries by ransoming the children of wealthy families. With Chappers and informants roaming the streets, parents were terrified to let their children outside the house. A common poem known by many in the Jewish community refrained.

Tears are pouring into the streets,
Bathed in children's blood,
Tiny chicks are torn from school,
And dressed in uniforms
Alas, what bitterness.
Will day ever dawn.²⁸

The terror served to dissolve familial bonds. In one recorded instance, a family whose father was already in the army lost its only son to the Chappers, since they deemed him an orphan. The ensuing grief caused the daughter of the family to fall ill, leaving the mother of the family childless.²⁹ In another case, a mother burst into the community synagogue and interrupted the

²⁷ Stanislawski, Michael. "Conscription of the Jews." *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: the transformation of Jewish society in Russia, 1825-1855*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983. p23

²⁸ Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p23

²⁹ *Ibid* p26

service, screaming, “Master of the Universe, You take pride in our forefather Abraham, who consented to sacrificing his own son Isaac. Order me to kill my own son, and I will obey you. But you would never have gotten Abraham’s consent to surrender his son for baptism.”³⁰ While such stories seem overly dramatic, the fear faced by the uncertainty of never being able to see one’s children again caused a great deal of tension within the Jewish community. Since the Kahal received a monetary compensation for each boy provided to the Tsar, many corrupt leaders abused their positions in order to amass great wealth.³¹

In many cases, towards the 1840s growing resentment of the Kahal leadership led to outward revolt. In the village of Volkovysk known for its exceptionally corrupt local Kahal, the great Hungarian Hasidic Rabbi Moshe Schick led the Jewish villagers to rise up against their leaders to free their sons from captivity.

He went to the courtyard of the Synagogue, “My fellow Jews!” he cried. “Why are you silent? Come and let us save Jewish souls!” There was a great tumult when he proposed that the community revolt against the Kahal leaders, wreak havoc upon their community house and raze it to the ground. Everyone grabbed a hatchet or an ax and followed the Rabbi to the Kahal building housing the captives. The mob forced their way into the building, broke down the doors, cut the bonds of the captives and freed them.³²

The success of similar revolts in Oshitz and other Shtetl congregations highlighted the growing discontent of many in the Jewish community, with what they deemed as antiquated orthodoxy. These Jews turned to the Hassidic teachings of the Rabbis such as Moshe Schick and the Lubavitch, Tzemach Tzedek. The Hasidim, in turn clandestinely undermined the Kahal institutions that supported the Cantonist system.³³ While the Hasidic movement had attempted to

³⁰Ibid p27

³¹ Stanislawski, Michael. "Conscription of the Jews." Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: the transformation of Jewish society in Russia, 1825-1855. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983. p29-30

³²Domntitch, Larry. The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p55 adapted from D.Pines in Battles Against Chappers published in 1915

³³ Stanislawski, Michael. "Conscription of the Jews." Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: the transformation of Jewish society in Russia, 1825-1855. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983. p33

challenge the authority of the Orthodox Kahal since the late 18th century, the resentment of the Jewish community against its traditional leadership largely due to the Chappers and the Cantonist system shifted the balance towards the Hasidim.³⁴ The growing resentment of the Jewish communities towards their leadership also empowered the Imperial administration, and led to the official dissolution of the Kehilim by Nicholas I in 1844.³⁵

Abolition and the Birth of the New Jew

The dissolution of the Kehilim marked the last period that traditional Jewish orthodoxy controlled Russian Jewry without great opposition. Without the central authority of the Kahal, Russian Jewry was transformed. On August 26, 1856, after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, Tsar Alexander II, in response to the Jewish community's appeal, abolished the Cantonist system. The increased cultural awakening as a result of the feelings of otherness in the Russian army, and the lasting effects of the dissolution of the Kahal, led to a transformation of Russian Jewish identity.

Some former Canonists who felt they had been cheated of their identity attempted to sue for the return of their Jewish status, even though such a move would nullify their newly granted rights and mobility. However, even in the reform oriented era of Alexander II, these appeals were rejected and quelled. In the case of Israel Itzkovich, who after his release attempted to sue for the return of his Jewish status, his army commander threatened him and demanded that he drop his request. Itzkovich responded "that he would no longer betray God or his people and that he would no longer attend Church or go to confession."³⁶ When his appeal was forwarded up the

³⁴ Domntitch, Larry. *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar*. Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2004. p50-60

³⁵ Encyclopedia of Ukraine, (1989) volume 2, entry for Kahal

³⁶ Ibid p75

chain of command, instead of deliverance, Itzkovich received the following response from his superiors: “Non-commissioned Officer Itzkovich, who had strayed from Russian Orthodoxy, is to be presented for exhortation by a priest. If he remains unrepentant, he is to be transferred to another troop unit.”³⁷ Itzkovich was transferred to Siberia where he served for the remainder of his life.

Many former Cantonists, such as Wulf Trumpeldor, attempted to reconcile their new sense of Jewish cultural identity with the reality of an increasingly industrialized Russia. They exploited their new mobility in an attempt to make a name for themselves in Russia’s urban centers; however, the 1859 and 1871 Odessa pogroms served as a wakeup call, and a new generation of Jew began to emerge, one shaped by the experiences of its parents, uncles and elder siblings. A prime example of this generation was Peretz Smolenskin, who after losing his father at a young age, lost his brother to the Cantonist system, and was sent to Yeshiva in order to escape the Chappers. In 1868 Smoenskin wrote *The Wanderer in the Paths of Life* in which he outlined the struggle of his youth. He began to publish a Yiddish periodical, *השחר*, The Dawn, in which he questioned the ability of Jews to ever truly integrate into Russian society, and called for national revival.

Conclusion

After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, a new wave of anti-Jewish sentiment helped to further solidify Jewish feelings of otherness. The conservative backlash of Alexander III’s regime, and a new wave of pogroms from 1881-1883, served as a catalyst for a new generation of Jewish identity. With the orthodoxy of the Kahal already a distant memory, three major movements took hold of the children of the Cantonist Struggle. The Bundist movement preached

³⁷ Ibid

that Jews should join with other revolutionary movements to end Tsarist oppression. The emigration movement argued that Jews had no home in Russia and should immigrate to more tolerant countries such as the United States. The Zionist movement preached Jewish self-determinism and encouraged Russian Jews to found a Jewish State in Palestine. These movements were influenced by the Cantonist struggle and the rediscovered cultural Jewish identity of their parents' generation. For example, Joseph Trumpler, the Russian Jewish war hero, founder of Kibbutz Degania and savior of Tel Chai, often attributed his Jewish identity and upbringing to his Cantonist father.³⁸ Furthermore, the increased mobility of former Cantonists and their families allowed their children and relatives to better integrate themselves into the revolutionist circles of Russia through increased admission into academic institutions.³⁹ Vladimir Medem, the son of a Cantonist medic who converted to Russian Orthodoxy, studied at the University of Kiev, where he was inspired by Marxist ideology and joined the Minsk socialists. The political anti-Semitism of the early 20th century turned Medem away from populist Marxism, and inspired him to join and lead the Bundist movement.⁴⁰ While leaders such as Medem and Trumpler manifested themselves in the generation following the Cantonist struggle, were directly influenced by Jewish Revival in Western Europe and were shaped by the pogroms of the 1880s and early 1900s, they would not have been successful if the Cantonist system had not contributed to the undermining of the Kahal's religious authority. Prior to the Cantonist system the Russian Jewish Orthodox Kehilim were the most entrenched, dense and conservative Jewish institutions in all of Europe. Therefore, while Nicholas I's Cantonist system was successful in undermining the autonomous authority of the Kahal and in partially Russifying

³⁸ Segev, Tom (1999). *One Palestine, Complete*. Metropolitan Books. pp. 122–126.

³⁹ Gartner, Lloyd P. *History of the Jews in modern times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print. p187

⁴⁰ *Ibid* p243-245

the Jewish minority, it failed to fully assimilate Russia's Jews, due to the awakening of Jewish identity by institutionalized anti-Semitism and feelings of otherness.

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