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“Hey, Guys, Hide behind Stones and Bushes... ”: The Life and Fate of Jewish Soldiers in
Yekaterinburg, Russia: 1843–58

Abstract

While the Jewish studies in Russia include many publications devoted to the history of Jewish population beyond the Pale of Settlement, the historiography on the Jewish cantonists is rather limited. Most studies are based almost exclusively on the negative experiences and sad memories of the cantonists themselves. This article aims to reconstruct the environment in which the Jewish soldiers lived when serving in the Orenburg Line Battalion No. 8 housed in Yekaterinburg between 1843 and 1858. We have based our research on administrative records of the battalion stored in the State Archive of the Sverdlovsk Region. Thorough analyses of the newly discovered documents permits quite balanced view on the Jewish conscripts' fate in the Urals. The newly discovered and analyzed documents have allowed us to reconstruct the soldiers' everyday life: what they were doing; what they ate; what opportunities they had for maintaining Judaism and how they adapted to the new conditions. The study has revealed that Jewish soldiers were often involved in work unrelated to military service; many took their opportunity to learn new crafts of military musicians, shoemakers, tailors, and barbers. During their years of service in Yekaterinburg, many Jewish soldiers received awards, regular military ranks, some got married and fathered children. Jewish soldiers had the opportunity to preserve their ethno-religious identity: they could gather on Saturdays for collective prayer, celebrate major religious holidays, conduct life cycle rituals, and follow main religious prescriptions. Former cantonists were not barred from contacts with their relatives and other Jewish residents of the Ural-Siberian region. At the same time, they actively contacted the urban Orthodox population, which sometimes entailed conversion to Orthodoxy. This could have been prompted by such factors as unfavorable personal circumstances and desire to radically change their fate. Baptism could provide opportunity for extraordinary promotion, it enabled them to marry Orthodox girls, to obtain the status of a city dweller, to join one of the Orthodox parishes in Yekaterinburg, and to obtain legal residence in the city. According to our calculations, about 20% of the Jewish soldiers converted to Orthodoxy during their stay in Yekaterinburg. The study has allowed us to detail the situation of Jewish soldiers and to assess the Yekaterinburg period in the cantonists' life with regard to preserving traditional religion and to integration into the urban community as well. How unique was the Yekaterinburg 15-year episode in the life of former cantonists can only be ascertained after studying similar documents from other battalions.

Keywords

Historical sources, State Archive of the Sverdlovsk Region (GASO), cantonists, Jews, Yekaterinburg, Jewish soldiers, Russian Empire, history, everyday life, soldier's synagogue.

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