**Haim Sperber**

**Jewish criminal activity in response to modernity and migration: Odessa 1870–1914**

**Introduction**

Jewish society in Eastern Europe from 1772 onwards faced unprecedented challenges and realities it had never before experienced. This paper argues that the nature of criminal activity in the Jewish community in this period was largely shaped by crises of modernity and life under new political regimes, analyzing the phenomenon of organized criminal activity within Jewish society in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Odessa as a case study. The decline of rabbinical authority and the rise of alternative communal and spiritual leaderships within the community, combined with Jewish society’s increasingly urbanized character, fostered a profound crisis within the community.

The “enlightened absolutist” Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires that emerged as the ruling powers in Eastern Europe after the 1772–1795 partition of Poland. Most Eastern European Jews lived under these regimes, which intervened far more in the affairs of the Jewish community than had their Polish predecessor. In this period, the evolution of organized Jewish criminal activity accompanied the modernization in the large East European cities in the nineteenth century, including cities like Warsaw, Lodz, Lvov, and Zhitomir, where Jews dwelt in large numbers.

Many Jews also resided in the city of Odessa, but this city could be distinguished from the others mentioned in three ways.First, it was a new settlement created by the Russian Empire shortly after Poland’s partition, offering a new place of settlement for Jews in areas previously uninhabited by them in Russia’s Pale of Settlement. Second, it was a port city, a rarity in the Russian Empire. The insights gained from the vast research conducted over the last 20 years on port cities and on the Jews residing in them make important contributions to understanding the specific situation of Odessa.[[1]](#footnote-1)Third, the transformation of “Polish Jews” into “Russian Jews” created a new version of modern Jewry. As a cosmopolitan city, Odessa had a singular role in this process. Indeed, as Sicher puts it, Odessa has a uniqueness within the Jewish East European experience.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Criminality and social deviance were among the reactions to the process of transformation of societies from traditional to modern models, during which the old social system lost its legitimacy and the ways of the new one were not yet been embedded. Odessa — founded in 1794 — and “Russian Jewry” —were recent creations, with Jews generally not having been allowed to live within the Russian Empire until the first division of Poland in 1772. Consequently, Jewish society in eastern Europe was reshaped between the late-eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries due to both the external change of being incorporated into the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and internal social, religious, and ideological changes.

Jews had to adjust to their new life under the Tsarist and Austro-Hungarian regimes. After occupying the former Polish territories, in which many Jews resided, the Russian authorities decided to retain the limitation of Jewish settlements to those areas and not allow them to enter old Russia itself, from which they had been almost entirely excluded since the fourteenth century. They also decided to relocate Jews to the cities within the former Polish territories known as the Pale of Settlement, thereby transforming the Jewish population of the Russian Empire into a predominantly urban one. Mobility and migration were, thus, part of the day-to-day life for many Jews in the late nineteenth century. This, and the fact that the Russian authorities did not allow Jews (like other non-Russian groups within its Empire) the same relative autonomy they had enjoyed under the Polish regime, profoundly affected the nature of Jewish society.

Simultaneously, Jewish society in Eastern Europe was transformed due to factors totally unrelated to the identity of their ruling powers. Until around 1760, Jewish society was a largely homogeneous one under a single unified religious leadership, but thereafter became much more diverse, with new influences infiltrating its political, cultural, and religious landscape. Once a traditionally religious community, many of its members now advocated its secularization and the end of traditional rabbinical rule. Thus, reactions to the challenges that faced Jewish society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created a new and much more complicated Jewish community; criminal activity was but one of the reactions to this crisis. By the late-nineteenth century, Jews engaged in two main kinds of criminal activity: that related to immigration and that related to “white slavery,” that is, prostitution and people trafficking. The latter became the main criminal activities of Jews in the port of Odessa, over which they had monopoly control.

Georg Simmel’s theory on “the metropolis and mental life” can provide relevant insights into the phenomenon of new urban populations in new cities, especially those that are also ports and/or on national borders. According to Simmel, in such new environments:

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. The antagonism represents the most modern form of the conflict which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily existence.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Simmel emphasized that the eighteenth century had brought about “liberation from all the ties which grew up historically in politics, in religion, in morality and in economics in order to permit the original natural virtue of man, which is equal in everyone, to develop without inhibition.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The nineteenth century, however, “may have sought to promote, in addition to man’s freedom, his individuality (which is connected with the division of labor) and his achievements which make him unique and indispensable but which at the same time make him so much the more dependent on the complementary activity of others.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Simmel claimed that this resulted in major change, whereby a “fundamental motive was at work, namely the resistance of the individual to being leveled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Frederick Jackson Turner’s classic “frontier thesis” is also directly relevant the study.[[7]](#footnote-7) Ports like Odessa are a juncture where new populations encounter one another and new settlements are established. A new kind of individual who had crossed countries and continents to arrive at their new destinations emerged in Odessa, as in other such places, and they were individuals who had to find new solutions to new problems created by their new environment. The frontier community applicable to both border and port cities is characterized by informality, violence, crudeness, democracy, and initiative that allows immigrants to leave behind the old habits and embrace new ones and this term is applicable to both border and port cities. Ports, being transitory by nature, provide a space that enables one to relinquish the old and embrace the new. When new populations meet new cities, as the newly “Russian Jews” did when they met in the new Odessa, the intersection can sometimes take a criminal turn.

Theories of marginality and marginal people also serve as useful explanatory tools in this context.[[8]](#footnote-8) Marginalization is an individual’s cultural adaptation style involving rejection of both the values of the dominant “host” culture, in our case the Russian Empire, and the values of the culture of origin, in our case the Jewish community.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this regard, Eldering and Knorth observe that: “Marginalization refers to a process by which a person becomes distant from the conventional institutions in society (e.g., family, school, labor market).”[[10]](#footnote-10) People experiencing such marginalization sometimes transgress into the criminal scene, especially in port and border cities, and this can apply to both young and old, with the latter also running the risk of falling into delinquency when they migrate, physically and culturally, from a traditional to a new, more modern environment. This was a case of for many of the new “Russian Jews” encountering a new regime in the Russian Empire in the new space of Odessa.

**Odessa: A new settlement and a new form of East European Jewish community**

Odessa was founded as an Imperial Russian naval port on the ruins of the former Ottoman fortress of Khadjibey (Kotsyubiiv), which had once been under the rule of the Lithuanian-Polish Kingdom until its capture by the Ottomans in1480. The Russian Empire took control of it in 1789 from the Turks and it was ceded to Russia in 1792. A new sea fort was built between 1792 and 1793, with a naval base and commercial dock added in 1794. In 1795, the new port was named Odessa after the ancient Greek colony of Odessos, the site of which was believed to be in the vicinity.[[11]](#footnote-12) An already existing nearby separate settlement of Moldavanka was incorporated into Odessa during the nineteenth century. Having been established by Romanians, Moldavanka became Odessa’s Jewish quarter from the mid-nineteenth century onward.[[12]](#footnote-13)

As already noted, the Jewish community in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire was a new form of its social organization in two ways. Under the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom, most of East European Jewry lived within its boundaries, but almost all Jews were forbidden from entering Russia. After this kingdom’s demise between 1772 and 1796, Poland’s partition between the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Prussia[[13]](#footnote-14) meant that, by 1796, most of the approximately one million Polish Jews resided within the Russian Empire, which, until 1772, had forbidden Jews from living within its boundaries.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Most Jews in the Russian Empire continued to live in the provinces of Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, as they had done for many years. The Russian regime, unable to rid itself of Jews, who were crucial to the Ukrainian economy, decided to leave them largely where they already were. Given that the main reason why Russia had decided to occupy Poland was Ukraine’s status as “the granary of Eastern Europe,” driving the Jews out of it would have been against its interests. Most of the Jews were thus forced to stay in what became to be known as the Pale of Settlement,[[15]](#footnote-16) with only a few who were important to the industrialization of Russia allowed to dwell in “Old Russia.”[[16]](#footnote-17)

Permitting Jews to settle only within the Pale of Settlement was but one facet of Russian policy toward them, however, and Russian policy as a whole radically changed relations between the Jews and the authorities. Under Polish rule, Jews had little contact with government officials. The Jewish community paid tax revenues over to the local administrators and, in return, the authorities allowed it to run its own affairs largely without interference. The Russian Empire, in contrast, aspiring to establish a modern state unified under the rule of the Czar and to “Russify” all religious and ethnic groups within the Empire, governed according to principles of “enlightened absolutism.”[[17]](#footnote-18)

Nineteenth-century Russian rulers, especially Czar Nicolas I (r. 1825–1855), promoted both industrialization and Russification[[18]](#footnote-19) across its multicultural population, especially in Ukraine.[[19]](#footnote-20) As part of this policy, Jews and others were relocated to large industrial centers such as Odessa.[[20]](#footnote-21) The Jewish population of the Russian Empire had to adjust to the new regime and its policies[[21]](#footnote-22) and its way of life changed drastically, as Freeze and Harris demonstrate.[[22]](#footnote-23) Some Jews reacted to the new realities by adopting deviant and criminal behavior, as we shall show.

From around 1760, new religious and secular movements also emerged within East European Jewish society. Two key new movements reshaped Jewish society in eastern Europe: Hasidism and the *Haskalah*. Hasidism offered a new version of religious leadership, emphasizing the role of the individual in religious behavior, and new, more ecstatically-oriented daily religious practices.[[23]](#footnote-24) The *Haskalah* was a movement based on Enlightenment and secularism and also became an important non-religious component of East European Jewish life, with many Jews rejecting religious observance while nevertheless still living within the Jewish community.[[24]](#footnote-25) For the first time since the early Middle Ages, Jewish society was no longer a homogeneous, religious society.[[25]](#footnote-26) Migration into the urban centers[[26]](#footnote-27) together with the deterioration of authority of religious leadership created opportunities for groups hitherto on the margins of Jewish society. This migration also changed the occupational structure of the Jewish communities in centers like Odessa significantly.[[27]](#footnote-28)

Immigration from small cities and villages to the new urban centers further weakened the eroding role of rabbis within the Jewish communities.[[28]](#footnote-29) In traditional Jewish settlements, rabbinical institutions were key communal components, but Jews – more often men than women – migrated to new settlements like Odessa as individuals and lived within non-Jewish neighborhoods, proving that Jews could live outside of Jewish society. Only after the new communities became large enough were religious institutions established and rabbis recruited. As a result, religious observance was very difficult to maintain and many people began to denigrate or doubt the value of the religious commandments once so central to Jewish religious life.[[29]](#footnote-30) In new spaces like Odessa, religious adherence ceased to be the basis of communal existence and rabbinical establishments became gradually less important.

**Jews in Odessa**

The first significant group of Jews came to Odessa in the 1850s.[[30]](#footnote-31) At that time, most Jews in the Pale of Settlement lived in small townships known as *shtetls*.[[31]](#footnote-32) Odessa was by this time a tax-free port and most of the city’s Jews operated small businesses on its outskirts.[[32]](#footnote-33) With industrialization and the rising importance of Odessa’s port, the Jewish population grew[[33]](#footnote-34) and, by 1897, 165,000 Jews lived in the city, constituting 37 per cent of its population. At the core of the Odessa Jewry’s commercial and cultural elite since the 1820s were emigrants from Galicia – mostly from the city of Brody. Working mainly as intermediaries in the grain trade, some became leading grain exporters.[[34]](#footnote-35) They initially opened their branch offices outside the city, but then moved into Odessa.

As mentioned, Jews came to Odessa as individuals before later forming a community as such. However, by 1794 the community had a synagogue (subsidized by the local Russian authorities), a burial society, a Talmud Torah, a hospice for the poor (*hekdesh*), and an organized Jewish community structure (*kehilah*). Its first rabbi, Itahak Rabinowich, was appointed in 1809. Within a few years of the city’s founding, Jews, who numbered only 135 in 1797, had been elected to municipal office, something unusual in Russia and something that continued until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.[[35]](#footnote-36) Odessa’s Jews were not very religious and it is no wonder that Odessa became one of the most important centers of the *Haskalah* in East Europe.[[36]](#footnote-37) Although Odessa was the most secular Jewish community in the Russian Empire, many of its Jews remained traditional, and Yiddish (not Russian or Hebrew) remained their main spoken language. In 1900, 200 traditional schools (*heders*), still existed and 5,000 young children received traditional religious education in them.[[37]](#footnote-38)

The development of Jewish Odessa was very similar to that of the city more generally. From the very beginning, Odessa was a multinational city, with substantial numbers of Armenians, Turks, Tatars, Poles, Greeks (although their number was much reduced by the end of the nineteenth century), and Jews, as well as some French and English dwelling there. Under the leadership of energetic, tolerant, and economically progressive administrators, some foreign-born, Odessa’s economic foundations became established and its port facilities improved.[[38]](#footnote-39)

Those who helped create Odessa as a Jewish cultural center were members of the city’s Jewish economic elite, and they reflected Odessa’s unique blend of Judaism and cosmopolitanism.[[39]](#footnote-40) The Galician migrants were at the core of the Odessa Jewry’s commercial and cultural elite from the 1820s onward. Wealthy families like the Rafalovichs and Efrusis and a few other families of Galician origin gradually reached the apex of local commercial life. Galician Jews soon assumed communal leadership, overseeing local synagogue life and launching the city’s first modern Jewish school. Its director, Betsal’el Stern, who was appointed in 1829, and many of its first teachers were followers of the Galician *Haskalah*.[[40]](#footnote-41)

Traditionally-minded Jews exerted only limited influence in Odessa. Some Orthodox rabbis tried to build ties between their community and moderate and radical Enlightenment Jews, the most famous beings the German-born Rabbi Schwabacher.[[41]](#footnote-42) By 1903, more lineal rabbis were elected to serve the Odessa community.[[42]](#footnote-43)

**Odessa as a center of Jewish criminality: Facts and myths**

Odessa was and still is known in Russian popular thinking as “sin city” and “the city of thieves,” but this image emerged only during the 1920s and 1930s.[[43]](#footnote-44) However, much of the literature portraying criminal activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is already associated with Jews. Van den Heuvel claims that Jewish writers portrayed ports as sin cities as a way of redefining Jewish identity.[[44]](#footnote-45) However other historical research has shown that Jewish involvement in criminal activity in Odessa was proportionately less than that of the general population. However, this myth persists, [[45]](#footnote-46) largely due to the portrayal of Jews’ deviant activities in the writings of important Jewish authors, most notably Isaac Babel.[[46]](#footnote-47)

The villain protagonist in Babel’s work in *Odessa Tales,* is Benya Krik, also known as “the king,” who is the leader of a group of thugs and smugglers operating in Odessa’s Moldavanka Jewish ghetto.[[47]](#footnote-48) He is based on a real gang leader in Odessa, Moisei Wolfovich Vinnitskiy, commonly known as Mishka or Moyshe Yaponchik, who was born into a family of cartwrights. Vinnitskiy was around four years old when his family moved to Moldavanka. His mother, Doba Zelmanovna, bore five sons and a daughter, while his father died around 1897. At first, Mishka worked as a trainee in a mattress factory while also attending a Jewish school. He later became an electrician in a factory called Anatra.[[48]](#footnote-51)

At the time of the pogroms against the Jews in Odessa in October 1905,[[49]](#footnote-52) Vinnitskiy joined in with Jewish self-defense activities. Later, he joined the anarcho-communist group called Molodaia Volya (“Young Will”). It was probably during that time that he received his famous street name, “Yaponchik,” meaning “Japanese” in Yiddish, presumably because his eyes were perceived as slanted.[[50]](#footnote-53)

Alas, fiction never represents real life accurately.[[51]](#footnote-54) Although Jewish criminals, real and fictional, in Odessa were portrayed as running contraband,[[52]](#footnote-55) this was not the main Jewish criminal occupation. By the later nineteenth century, two criminal spheres were run mainly by Jews were immigration-related crime and trafficking and prostitution. These occurred not only in Odessa but in other port cities, like Istanbul, Alexandria, London, Marseille, New York, and, most saliently, Buenos Aires.

**Immigration-related crime**

A large proportion, possibly the majority of emigrants from the Russian Empire between 1870 and 1914 were Jews, with an estimated two million emigrating out of a total Jewish population estimated at 5.5 million in 1880.[[53]](#footnote-56) Most Jewish immigrants came from the Pale of Settlement’s interior territories.[[54]](#footnote-57) Many of them used Odessa to embark for central, west European, and Mediterranean ports.[[55]](#footnote-58)

They needed permits to leave the Russian Empire and assistance to do so in Odessa and other Russian border cities. They also needed temporary housing while waiting to obtain the necessary documents and this created a market for “migration agents,”[[56]](#footnote-59) many of them criminals.[[57]](#footnote-60) Soloducha reported in 1907 that there were “[a]ll kinds of agents. Official, firm owners and covert and helpers of all kinds appear in huge numbers.”[[58]](#footnote-62) Alroey identifies two types of agent: official representatives of shipping companies on the one hand, and criminals and smugglers pretending to act as such on the other.[[59]](#footnote-63) In many cases negotia.[[60]](#footnote-64) Soloducha[[61]](#footnote-65) describes how agents deceived emigrants: for example, Russian law allowed all members of a family to register on a single passport.

This created many problems. Soloducha describes cases of families where some of its members registered on the passport were delayed at the port of departure due to health issues. In some cases, the entire family was delayed; meanwhile, the agent disappeared, and the family could not emigrate at all.[[62]](#footnote-66) In other cases, fictional families were created, the agent registering people who were not relatives as members of a family.[[63]](#footnote-67) The famous Jewish author and immigration activist, Alexander Harkavy reported on many passport-related cases in his diary,[[64]](#footnote-70)–[[65]](#footnote-72) and in 1905, he published a book advising emigrants about how to avoid problems when emigrating.[[66]](#footnote-73) Harkavy was an employee of the Jewish Colonization Association(JCA), an organization established in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch aiding Jewish immigration. In 1912, the JCA published a brochure in Yiddish focusing on the activities of unauthorized agent swindlers, describing many of their activities.[[67]](#footnote-74) Those who were forced to stay in Russia while waiting for permission to emigrate had to find lodgings near the port in cheap, overcrowded hotels run by agents, with people of both sexes sometimes with three or four in a single bed. Criminals drove away the owners of these establishments or buying them out.[[68]](#footnote-75)

Obtaining passports was often a major problem and Ber describes in detail the difficulties a would-be migrant faced in trying to obtain one.[[69]](#footnote-77) Sometimes people were not granted one and had to obtain forgeries, with one report stating that forged passports cost much more than the sum of 15 roubles needed for a legal one.[[70]](#footnote-78) According to Russian law, men could obtain passports, not women. Women wishing to emigrate had to be registered on their father’s or husband’s passport and be accompanied by them or, very often, by the male criminals who had provided their forged passports.[[71]](#footnote-79) In many cases, women were raped while traveling to their destination and, upon reaching their destination, handed over to brothel owners.[[72]](#footnote-80)

**Trafficking and migration**

Jewish criminals, many of them from the Moldavanka Jewish ghetto in Odessa,[[73]](#footnote-83) operated brothels within the Russian Empire[[74]](#footnote-84) and international trafficking networks sending young girls and women from eastern Europe to Turkey and the Middle East via the Black Sea or to central and western Europe and, thereafter, to the Americas,[[75]](#footnote-85) turning Odessa during the late nineteenth century into a center for such international traffic. Police statistics from the Russian Empire,[[76]](#footnote-86) the Polish districts (mainly Warsaw),[[77]](#footnote-87) the Austro-Hungarian Empire,[[78]](#footnote-88) Germany, New York, Istanbul, and Argentina[[79]](#footnote-89) establish that this criminal activity, sometimes referred to as “white slavery,” was very much a Jewish occupation. Jews were prominent in shipping “white slaves” out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire too.[[80]](#footnote-90) For example, research from 1908 by Zionist officials indicates that, in 1907, 104 out of 124 procurers (pimps) tried in Russian courts (84%) were Jews, while 80 out of 93 entering Argentina and Brazil (86%), 68 out of 101 in Hungary (67%), and 38 out of 39 (97%) in Galicia were Jews too.[[81]](#footnote-91) Even most of the vocabulary used in this trade came from Yiddish.[[82]](#footnote-92)

How did the Jewish community in Odessa and in other places[[83]](#footnote-93) react to this particularly Jewish occupation, especially since most of the young victims were Jewish themselves?[[84]](#footnote-94) The Jewish community was very much aware of the phenomenon and the issue was discussed in most exhaustive detail in the Hebrew and Yiddish press,[[85]](#footnote-95) where many stories of young women — in some cases as young as 14 — and their misfortunes were published.[[86]](#footnote-96) Jewish newspapers reported at length on the activities of the men and women running this industry, giving their real and assumed names, the houses they operated from, and so on. Thus, for example, Menahem Sheldorf, (also known as Shlomo Bloom and Shlomo Haimowitz) from Odessa, who took at least 24 young women from eastern Europe to Argentina, was reported on as a warning to young women and their fathers of his malfeasance.[[87]](#footnote-97) Many other reports warned parents about the various ways criminals trafficked their victims[[88]](#footnote-98) and encouraged parents (especially fathers) to protect their daughters from the kidnapping and prostitution in Russia and abroad.[[89]](#footnote-99)

This said, in many places Odessa among them,[[90]](#footnote-100) criminals were also important financial contributors to the Jewish community. In many cases, even community religious leaders were character witnesses for those criminals in court cases, as was also true in other ports such as Buenos Aires,[[91]](#footnote-101) Alexandria,[[92]](#footnote-102) and Rio de Janeiro.[[93]](#footnote-103) Yet pimps, madams, and prostitutes were not allowed to be buried within the central areas of the Jewish cemeteries. According to Jewish tradition, people of dubious character, people who commit religious offenses, and people who commit suicide are buried in special sections on the cemetery outskirts. Most of those engaged in prostitution were buried in these areas or, in some places such as New York and Buenos Aires, in separate graveyards.[[94]](#footnote-104) Double standards were the name of the game, with trafficking regarded as a horrible crime, but other perpetrators of what were deemed less morally threatening crimes were buried right in the centers of communal cemeteries.[[95]](#footnote-105)

Jewish women around the world organized to battle against prostitution and trafficking.[[96]](#footnote-106) The Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women in London (JAPGW),[[97]](#footnote-107) founded by Lady Battersea,[[98]](#footnote-108) and the Jüdischer Frauenbund(The League of Jewish Women; JFB) founded

by Bertha Pappenheim in Germany[[99]](#footnote-109) are just two examples. Pappenheim also formed a similar organization in Eastern Europe based in Warsaw.[[100]](#footnote-111) Women’s organizations were supported in in these aims by other Jewish philanthropic organizations, the Jewish Colonization Association(JCA) being a notable example. The JCA, for example, co-operated with JAPGW in 1912 in aiding 15 young women who had emigrated from Russia and went to work as prostitutes in London.[[101]](#footnote-112)

Why did trafficking take hold in port and border cities more than in other urban centers? Theories around urban networks provide possible explanations. Tilly, for example, has claimed that social networks played a major role in urbanization,[[102]](#footnote-113) and Lee has added his contention that port cities, with their international networks, played an essential part in the urbanization process, especially in Europe.[[103]](#footnote-114) Trafficking needs networks and port cities like Odessa provided such network operations.[[104]](#footnote-115)

The phenomenon discussed here coincided with the huge waves of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrations and the role of port cities in them was very significant. In the case of prostitution, networks spread, as already noted, from the ports of origin to ports of destination, such as Odessa and Buenos Aires. In some cases, the networks were family-based, as described in many reports in Hebrew newspapers. For example, Joseph Bord and Yehuda Banda, who smuggled women from Eastern Europe to Argentina, were brothers-in-law. Bord’s assistant was one Napoleon Dikfaden, whose wife Sara served as a brothel madam in Buenos Aires.[[105]](#footnote-116) Hungarian Jew Anton Hirschfeld and his wife sent young women from Budapest to Odessa.[[106]](#footnote-117)

Young girls were “harvested” in small East European cities as well as metropolises like Odessa. They were promised husbands, lodgings, and jobs in their new home countries.[[107]](#footnote-118) They arrived at ports in western and central Europe accompanied by young men.[[108]](#footnote-119) Sometimes traffickers were intercepted. David Herman (also known as Hermann Roder), assisted by his wife, for example, tried to smuggle six young women, but was spotted by police in the port of Hamburg and sent back to Russia. According to the report in *Ha-Tzfira*, Herman had been successful in smuggling young women from Odessa and Warsaw via Hamburg to Argentina at least twice before.[[109]](#footnote-120)

Young men as well as older women were very instrumental in recruiting prostitutes. Men seduced young women in various ways to entrap them.[[110]](#footnote-121) Older women also served as intermediaries, offering the young women from villages and small cities the chance to live in the big city of Odessa and various ways to adjust to life within it. Those women, known in Yiddish as *Reiferke*, provided the young girls with work and lodging.[[111]](#footnote-122) Young men were introduced – sometimes by females working in the trafficking industry – to such young women, recruiting them to work as prostitutes.[[112]](#footnote-123) In some cases, young women were drugged and raped in the process, enabling brothel owners to exert control over them.[[113]](#footnote-124) Drugged and humiliated, these women were sent from Odessa to serve as prostitutes in port cities in Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas.

Some women were tricked into prostitution in other ways. During their stays in Odessa and other origin cities, these women were treated with respect and were persuaded to sail to other countries. They were promised work and or husbands in the new country.[[114]](#footnote-125) Since women were not granted their own passports, as already noted, they had to travel registered, often falsely, on the passports of men.[[115]](#footnote-126) On board, they were raped, beaten, and, upon arrival, handed over to local brothel owners. Sometimes they were auctioned to competing brothel owners.[[116]](#footnote-127) Being in unfamiliar surroundings, they were unable to resist or escape.[[117]](#footnote-128)

Why did trafficking and prostitution become a unique Jewish occupation in the late nineteenth century? Abraham Stahl claimed that prostitution was the by-product of the transition from traditional to modern society and between cultures, but what follows provides a different explanation.

**Discussion**

In this paper I tried to analyze Jewish criminal activities in the port city of Odessa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I claim that during nineteenth-century, not only did East European Jewish society undergo an immense change from a traditional homogeneous society to a modern diversified one, but that life under Russian rule differed considerably form that under the Polish regime. This process of modernization created a social, political, and cultural crisis within the Jewish society.

Historians agree that criminality is much more common in port and border cities, where many Jews have resided.[[118]](#footnote-130) The paper has characterized Jewish criminal activity in Odessa, the main port city of the Russian Empire,[[119]](#footnote-131) although such activities were not unique to Odessa.[[120]](#footnote-132)It also describes how engaging in criminal activities was one of the responses to the new situation of Jews.

The reasons for criminal activities by Jews in Odessa were investigated applying Simmel’s theory on urbanization and other theories on marginalization. The paper’s principal claim is that migration, both within the Russian Empire and internationally, was the main reason for the two major criminal occupations of Jews in Odessa: immigration-related crime as well as prostitution and trafficking.

Many of the Jews emigrating from the Russian Empire traveled via Odessa and many, especially women, became dependent on agents for passports and visas. The fact that women were not granted their own passports, added to the existing need for such agents, and many of those agents took advantage of the emigrants’ plights.[[121]](#footnote-133)

Trafficking was a Jewish specialty, and not only in Odessa. Running prostitution establishments within the Russian Empire, but also internationally, was also a predominantly Jewish activity. Indeed, Jews were much more prominent in international trafficking than in running local brothels. Many young women were trafficked from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, the Middle East (especially Turkey,[[122]](#footnote-134) Egypt and Palestine), and the Americas.

Women suffered great hardship upon entering the general workforce *en masse* due to the terrible conditions accompanying the industrial revolution. Given the growing urbanization of east European Jewry, many young Jewish women migrated from the *shtetls* to cities such as Warsaw, Lodz, and Odessa. Migration from villages to cities caused difficulties in adapting to a new way of life and a loss of direction in many cases, and this particularly affected vulnerable women who had no work or prospect of marriage in the city.[[123]](#footnote-135) Yiddish-speaking men approached many of these women to recruit them into prostitution and many sent to other port cities in both the Old and New Worlds.[[124]](#footnote-136)

It was almost impossible to work as a prostitute in the traditional small towns and *shtetls*, where everyone knew everybody else and prostitutes would be ostracized. In large cities, prostitution occurred in certain quarters controlled by the Jewish underworld, to which the authorities largely turned a blind eye. In 1908, the U.S. consul in Odessa reported that “[a]ll the business of prostitution in the city is in the hands of the Jews.”[[125]](#footnote-137)

In addition to the general causes of prostitution — economic distress, loss of parental authority, and the weakening of the family because of poverty, — the restrictions imposed under the Pale of Settlement[[126]](#footnote-138) caused overcrowding, poverty, and unemployment, creating even more fertile terrain for crime among unemployed men, while several young Jewish women sought economic alleviation through prostitution.

However, the increase in prostitution among Jews was mainly related to the waves of large-scale emigration from Eastern Europe. The migration of young men from Europe to the New World, the Middle East, and western and central Europe created large concentrations of males and increased demand for prostitutes.[[127]](#footnote-139) Furthermore, the marriage of middle-class men was often delayed until they had sufficient resources to support a family and, in many cases, because they were waiting for a bride to arrive from Europe.[[128]](#footnote-140) Because the gender norms of bourgeois society did not permit for sexual relations outside marriage with women of their own class, single young bourgeois males turned to prostitutes. Thus, young women were trafficked to those new population centers.[[129]](#footnote-141)

Relating trafficking to migration and migration network theories[[130]](#footnote-142) explains the role of Jews in the international prostitution industry. Leman and Janssens identify human trafficking networks as chiefly comprising both rational and cultural components.[[131]](#footnote-143) The rational component of the network is building a business; the cultural component, in our example, is based on Yiddish. The network operated in Yiddish,[[132]](#footnote-144) not in Polish or Russian, keeping it within the Jewish realm. During the late-nineteenth century, Odessa became an important hub for these migration networks,[[133]](#footnote-145) as was Warsaw and other heavily Jewish-populated metropolises.[[134]](#footnote-146)

The case of Odessa is distinctive, but not entirely unique. Similar criminal activities, migration networks and international trafficking organizations were to be found in other Jewish major urban centers within the Russian Empire and beyond. Nonetheless, Odessa had its special characteristics, being a new settlement and one of a very few ports in the Russian Empire, and having a cosmopolitan population. All those factors exacerbated the general processes that occurred in the Jewish society within the Russian Empire.

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    Russians 198,233 (49.09%); Jews 124,511 (30.83%); Ukrainians 37,925 (9.39%); Poles 17,395 (4.31%); Germans 10,248 (2.54%); 5,086 (1.26%); Tatars 1,437 (0.36%); Armenians 1,401 (0.35%); Belarussians 1,267 (0.31%); French 1,137 (0.28%). *First General Population Census of the Russian Empire* - [Первая Всеобщая перепись населения Российской Империи], http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\_lan\_97\_uezd.php?reg=1665 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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114. Vincent, 2005; Glickman, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
115. Alroey, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
116. Vincent, 2005; Mirlman, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
117. Y"L, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
118. Lee, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
119. On Jewish communal activities and organizations in Odessa around 1900, see Alexis Hofmeister, *Selbstorganisation und Bürgerlichkeit: Jüdisches Vereinswesen in Odessa um 1900*, (“Self-organization and Bourgeois Society: Jewish Associations in Odessa around 1900”) (in German), (Leipzig: Series: Schriften des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts, Vol. 8, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
120. Marianna Hakkarainen, “Jewish Tradition Faces the Soviet Economy: Moral Dilemma of ‘Shadow’ Entrepreneurship in the Former Pale of Settlement, Ukraine,” *East European Jewish Affairs*, 43(2), (2013), 190–205. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
121. Alroey, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
122. Istanbul was the nearest port to Odessa and many young girls were sent via Odessa. Some of them were transferred to other ports under Ottoman rule: see Rifat N. Bali, *The Jews and Prostitution in Constantinople, 1854–1922*, (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
123. A report in *Ha-Tzfira,* 30 January 1890 tells the story of a young woman aged 19 who migrated from her *shtetl* to Warsaw and found work in a tobacco industry and lodgings with a Jewish widow. A local gang of pimps tried to recruit her as a prostitute, offering her many temptations but, unlike in many other cases, they failed. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
124. Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, (Lincoln, NE & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 5–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
125. Bristow, 1982, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
126. Richard H. Rowlands, “Geographical Patterns of the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement of late 19th century Russia,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 48(3–4), (1986), 207–234; see also Hakkarainen, “Jewish Tradition Faces the Soviet Economy,” 190–205, wherein she also discusses pre-Soviet times. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
127. See, for example, Francesco Cordasco & Thomas Monroe Pitkin, *The White Slave Trade and the Immigrants: A Chapter in American Social History,* (Detroit, MI: Blaine Ethridge Books, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
128. Maureen E. Montgomery, *“Gilded Prostitution”: Status, Money, and Transatlantic Marriages, 1870–1914*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1989). Though her research concentrates on a higher social class, some of Montgomery’s conclusions also apply to our concerns here. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
129. Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
130. Here I follow Dirk Hoerder in “Segmented Macrosystems and Networking Individuals: The Balancing Functions of Migration Processes,” in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (eds.), *Migration, Migration History, History. Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, (Bern: Lang, 1997), 73–84; see also Clé Lesger, Leo Lucassen, & Marlou Schrover, “Is There Life Outside the Migrant Network? German Immigrants in 19th Century Netherlands and the Need for a More Balanced Migration Typology,” *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 104, (2) (2002): 29–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
131. Leman & Janssens, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
132. Albert Londres, who worked as a doorman in a brothel in Buenos Aires, wrote a memoir demonstrating that Yiddish was the language medium for the whole prostitution operation : Albert Londres*, Der ̣Weg ̣eyn Buenos-Ayres [Sic!]: Di Soydes̀ fun Froyenhandl*, (“The way to Buenos Aires: The Secrets of Trading Women”), (in Yiddish), (Warsaw: A. Shklyar, 1928). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
133. Keely Stauter-Halsted & Nancy M. Wingfield, “Introduction: The Construction of Sexual Deviance in Late Imperial Eastern Europe,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20(2), (2011), 215–224. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
134. James O. Finckenauer & Elin J. Waring, *Russian Mafia in America: Immigration, Culture and Crime*, (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1998), especially 49–51; this was also the case regarding migration to other places: see Tobias Brinkmann, “Points of Passage: Reexamining Jewish Migrations from Eastern Europe after 1880,” in Tobias Brinkmann (ed.), *Points of Passage: Jewish Transmigrants from Eastern Europe in Scandinavia, Germany and Britain 1880–1914*, (New York, NY & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), especially 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)