

Monday 15:05 – 16:00

The Cantonist Saga:

Who were the cantonists? What is your connection with them? What is their legacy?

We investigate how Czar Nikolai cruelly and cynically introduced a system of military recruitment that brought the Jewish world to its knees and still provokes nightmares in some Jewish families to this day.

The Czar's Boy Soldiers

Presented by Michael Nicholls
(Nicholaevsky Soldat)



וְהִיא נִשְׁעָמְדָה לְאַבֹּתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ.
שֶׁלֹא אֶחָד בְּלִבָּד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ.
אֶלֹא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ
לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ.
וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מֵיָדָם

And it is this (the Torah) that has stood by our ancestors and for us. For not only one (enemy) has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise up to destroy us. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands.

Who were the
Cantonists?

What is your
connection with
them?

Why should
we learn
about them?

What is their legacy?

Pale of Settlement

Russia had acquired hundreds of thousands of Jews following the **collapse of Poland** (1772) & 3 partitions 1772-1795 (Vitebsk, Polock, Mohyev, **Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus**). Jews were banned from living in the main part of Russia. They were restricted to live in the Pale of Settlement, areas annexed from Poland, between the Black Sea and Baltic Sea.

A New King Rises

Nicholas, one of 10 siblings, ascended the throne unexpectedly when eldest brother, Czar Alexander, died of typhus (Dec 1825) & next in line, Konstantin, refused the title in favour of commanding the Polish army.

Nicholas was an **anti-Semite** who had for years expressed anti-Jewish views. In 1816, aged 16, Nicholas wrote in his diary, “The ruination of the peasants of these provinces is the *Zhids*... They are **regular leeches and suck these unfortunate governments to the point of exhaustion**. It is a matter of surprise that in 1812 they displayed exemplary loyalty to us and assisted us wherever they could at the risk of their lives.”

“Nicholas held an uncompromising vision of a homogeneous Russian nation... He desired all the peoples of Russia to meld under the banner of the Russian Orthodox Church”. “From the onset, Nicholas’ rise to power worsened the circumstances of Russia’s Jews (Domnitch p12).

... It was his personal view that **the Jews must be “corrected”** by stern tutelage and discipline. Over his thirty-year reign, Czar Nicholas enacted hundreds of anti-Jewish measures. For this reason, he was known by the Jews as “Haman the Second”.



The ruination of the peasants of these provinces is the *Zhids*...

The **Cantonist** system had originally been instituted by Peter the Great in 1721 to build a robust military. It was feared by everyone, not just Jews. For many Russians, it was a chance to rise through the social ranks, escape dire poverty and gain useful skills and a profession.

But Nicholas strengthened the system and used it to **single out Jewish children** for persecution. No other group or minority in Russia was expected to serve at such a young age, nor were any other groups tormented in such a way.

Nicholas I worked towards complete **assimilation** of Russian Jewry. In 1826 he instructed his ministers to draft a special **Statute of Military Service** imposing the draft on the Jews. He was determined to weaken the Jews' cohesiveness and force them to adopt Christianity. He would target the very young and use every available means to persuade them to convert. He devised a plan to separate the young by force from the shelter of their homes and families.

On **August 26 1827** he published an edict (*rekrutshina*) calling for the conscription of Jewish boys aged 12-25. Conscripts under 18 would live in preparatory institutions until they were old enough to officially join the army.

The 25 years of army service required of these recruits were to be **counted from the age of 18**, even if they had already spent many years in the military. Bear in mind that at the end of a soldier's term of service, he usually was unable to provide for his family due to the heavy **physical toll** of service. The army provided for the family, thus maintaining its dependence on the Czar.



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.

Czar Nicholas was more ambitious than any other European monarch in his attempts to bring Jews to Christianity. Publicly, he denied that such religious coercion was taking place, since such policies were officially forbidden in Russia, but there is abundant evidence that the policy was deliberate.



70,000 Jews were taken by force from their homes and inducted into the Russian army where most served in non-combat roles.
50,000 were children!

For 30 years, the Jewish community was in an unrelieved state of panic. Parents lived in perpetual fear that their children would be the next to fill the quota.

The Sea of Tears (Yaakov Lipshitz)

A child could be snatched away from any place at any time.

When a child left for cheder

When they settled him to sleep.

They never knew when they would have to fend him from the *chapper*.

Attempts to Avoid the Draft

- Hiding in the woods;
- Hiding in the back alleys;
- Hiding in cellars;
- Escape to another province / travel abroad;
- Smuggle to Poland (until 1844)
- Live as vagrants;
- Conceal identity;
- Avoid reporting a child's birth;
- Boys dressed as girls / talk to speak as girls;
- Bribe officials (if rich enough);
- Poor begged for money to redeem their children;
- Got surgeons to cripple their child – break arms or legs;
- Mutilation: trigger finger or eye;
- Marry the child off;
- Yeshiva student exempt;
- Join low rank trade e.g. factory mechanic.

The Kahal decides who to recruit

- They must meet the quotas;
- Government would punish by increasing the quota;
- (e.g. Berditchev, 45 short were forced to give 135 recruits instead);
- Conscribed the very young as they had no dependents;
- Resorted to **chappers**;
- A fee for each child abducted;
- Chappers very effective as they knew the community;
- Used **Dilaturia** paid informers;
- **Kahal's Dilemma** – they were at the mercy of the Czar.
- Some viewed it as temporary;
- Some received personal gain

November 27, 1838

Czar Nicholas approves a law:

“Jews who incite their fellow Jews to escape military service or help them hide shall be turned in as recruits themselves by order of the Provincial Government”

Children Press-ganged into the Army

A Doctor's Account

The head doctor in the military hospital in Kiev was asked to explain the large number of sick and dead among the Cantonist children as early as 1829.

"From the 1600 Cantonists that were brought in 1828, more than a half were brought from distant areas. In the lists that accompanied them was stated that they were 10 years old, but when the first 10 dropped, it was clear that they were not more than 8 years old. There were no monetary means to send them back to their parents (in the distant areas), so the battalion had to keep them and accept the age that was officially listed".

(Ginzburg cited in Ofek p279)

SM Dubnov (Historian) collected accounts from ex-cantonists (Friedberg, Kotik, Berman, Itzkowitz, Shpiegel, Chaim Merimzon. They were all kidnapped between 7-10 years old toward the end of the Cantonist period. According to Lewin (1934) "... **these memoirs have the character and quality of a people's triumph**. They are not just individual stories, but rather tales based on historic events that they themselves have lived through, 100% truth, and in this lies their colossal value".

Once abducted, the children were put in a local prison to wait for enlistment procedures. Sometimes, they were kept for weeks before being taken away, while their families tried to reach them and keep in touch. An integral part of the official procedure included... an oath to the czar... to be sworn in Hebrew with hands on the Torah. The rabbi who officiated the oath would sign the document ... and take upon himself a curse and punishment should this oath turn out to be false. **Ofek**

As their children were being taken off, parents and relatives would follow the convoys through several cities in hope of freeing the children or simply to be with them a little longer, and would then give up. The long and dreadful journey, with children dying of exhaustion, exposure and hunger... Many of the writers recall the last words of their mother being a warning and a plea **not to convert**, to remember the Jewish laws, and to pray every day. **Ofek**

Officer leading Cantonist Boys

8-10 year old children standing pale and exhausted:

"... the most awful sight I have ever seen. These sick children, without care or kindness, exposed to the raw wind from the Arctic ocean, were going to their graves".

Folk Song

... Tears are pouring in the streets,
One can bathe in children's blood.
Help! What a disaster!
Will there never be an end to it?
Little children are torn *cheyder*
And dressed with *Yevanische* (Greek) cloths
Our leader, our *rabbonim*
Help to hand them over as *Yevonim*
(soldiers);
Zushe Rakover has seven sons,
But the only son of Lea the widow is taken,
He is the *kapora* (expiation) for the *kahal's* sin.

Pressure to undergo baptism

Ofek writes that "... among those who survived, more cantonists agreed to baptism than resisted it. Lev Izkovitz... tells about the officer of their battalion, a converted Jew named Yagref Gulavitch, who declared, that as long as he would remain alive not a single cantonist would come out of his battalion as a Jew...

Each night before they went to bed he would call several cantonists and place them in front of his bed on their knees. He then forced them with the *Chumash* in hand to declare that "Jews live in error and that Jesus was the true Messiah". As he went on, his tone became threatening and he demanded that the children agree to be baptized on the spot. Those who refused were kept kneeling on the floor all night long and would not get any food...

... The cantonists who were between 12-15 years old held out longer, but even they gave in when stories were told about this one and that one who died under their beatings. The whole battalion was indeed baptized except for one 17 year old cantonist. For a long time he resisted and was beaten every day, nearly bleeding to death. In 1856 the order came to disband the cantonist battalion, and our *kadosh* who had turned 18 was enlisted into the regular army. So the officer kept his word, no Jew remained in the whole battalion."

Every memoir of a former cantonist includes the final farewell words:
"Never forget the God of Israel; remember that you are a Jew! Do not disregard the laws of the Torah!"

To our former son Chaim, [...] We are sending you a ruble so you can buy yourself a rope and hang yourself, or tie it around your neck and drown. [...] from now on never mention our name, and never send us your phony letters. You have new parents now, [...] We hope to die before you do so we can bother you from the next world because you have disgraced our name. you murderer, you shamed our whole family. Children are chasing us on the street calling after us: "Your Chaim is a *mushumad*! **Ofek**

In 1845 a group of 800 cantonist soldiers who were baptized at one time to the tune of trumpets. Two boys would not convert and drowned themselves.

Resistance and Reaction to the Kahal

Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (C19th)

Called the era *"The Sins of the Kahal"*

"This was an unprecedented time of trouble in Jewish history, when the best of the people, whose job and responsibility was to supervise the welfare of the nation and to prevent injustice in the community, ruled and lowered themselves to doing wickedness to their brothers. And the animal-like cruel regime attacked, like lions and tigers, without any human feeling and with no mercy or justice. This was an era whose evil, wickedness, and cruelty reached until the furthest firmament. The land shook and the skies trembled, mountains and valleys cried, and rivers and streams were filled with tears" (25 p18 Domnitz)

Yehudah Leib Levin (Hebrew Writer) Wrote of the **hypocrisy** of the Kahal leadership.

"The question depressed me to the point where I began to be afraid of Jews, of my Jewish brothers. One day I saw the head of the community... was he not steeped in Torah? ... how honourable and pleasant it was to see a learned, eminent man, staying up the whole of Thursday night... studying until the morning... Yet he is the very head of the Kahal! He is the governor and commander, and at his command infants are plucked from their mother's laps, fathers are taken from their children, and he would go in person to seek out people without papers, to abduct them and deliver them to the army with his holy hands! I went crazy from what I saw" (26 p18 Domnitz)

Dr Max Lilienthal (1813-1882)

An important figure amongst the *maskilim*, a German Jew who came to Russia as director of the 'enlightened' Jewish School of Riga. Appointed by Nicholas I government to be Minister of Jewish Education. He made it his mission to convince the Jews of the Pale of Settlement of the Czar's 'benign intent' in establishing a new educational system (Spiro p323). He ended up heading a US reform community.

The mothers who were robbed of their children by the Egyptians, the Romans and the Spanish priests had, at least, the sad comfort of knowing that their little ones were spared from long and great sufferings – by a quick death. The bereaved mothers in the days of Nicholas I had not even that much 'comfort'. Their young were snatched away from them, scattered in the faraway snow fields of Siberia, or in the steppes of the Caucasus (Eliyakum Zunser, folk poet and former Cantonist soldier)

Rabbi Joseph Baer

Soloveitchik from Slutsk

Once broke down a fence to rescue a boy. He was driven out of town for this act.

Rabbi Samuel, Grodno

rabbinical judge

Hid children destined for the draft in his home, protecting and feeding them.

Israel Meir Ha-Kohen (Chofetz Chayim) (1838-1933)

Wrote Machaneh Yisrael offering guidance to Jewish soldiers serving in the Russian army

Rabbi Aharon Isaac Epstein of Minsk

Granted permission to a mob to use whatever force was necessary to free captive children. He was tried for this act but was acquitted.

Yom Kippur

Once a group of illiterate Cantonists who had become regular soldiers were quartered in a Jewish city on Yom Kippur. They came to the synagogue to pray.

When the time for *neilah* (concluding) service arrived, one of the Cantonists was sent to the front of the Synagogue to lead the prayers. Since he had been drafted in early childhood and had nearly completed his twenty five years of service, he was unmarried and had no family.

The Cantonist stood before the congregation and cried out, “Father in Heaven, for what shall I pray? I cannot pray for children because I never married and now have no hpe of raising a family. I am too old to start anew. I cannot pray for life, for of what value is such a life? It would be preferable to die. I cannot pray for a livelihood because Nicholas provides for my daily bread. The only thing I can pray for is *Yisgadal V’yiskadadash Shmei Rabbah* (May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified; the first line of the mourner’s prayer).”

The congregation heard this heartfelt prayer and burst into tears.

Encounter with the Chafetz Chaim

The great luminary the Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaCohen of Radin) often travelled among cities. Once at an inn in Vilna, he saw a burly Jew sitting at a table and ordering the serving girl to bring him a portion of roast goose and a glass of whisky. Without first making the blessing, he devoured the meal. He spoke coarsely to the serving girl. The Chafetz Chaim observed him from a corner and was about to approach the man and rebuke him for his behavior. The innkeeper rushed over to prevent the Chafetz Chaim from approaching the fellow. He feared that the man, a simple and uneducated individual, a former soldier for Tsar Nicholas, might be rude to the sainted rabbi or even strike him.

“Please, Rabbi, leave him alone. You cannot talk to this type of person. He is very crude. He is a true boor who know no other way. When he was seven years old, he was abducted with other child Cantonists and dragged off to Siberia. Until the age of eighteen, he lived among farmers, and then he served in the army of Nicholas for 25 years. In schools like those, could he have learned anything better? Is it any wonder that he is crude, wild, and base? He was out of a Jewish environment for over 30 years. He didn’t learn one letter of Torah. Judaism was alien to him. It would be best if you did not start with him. I value your honour too much.”

A calm, affectionate smile radiated from the face of the Chafetz Chaim. “Such a Jew! Don’t worry. I know how to speak to him. I just hope good will come of the conversation.

The Chafetz Chaim approached the man and greeted him. “*Shalom Aleichem* (peace be upon you). Is what I heard about you true – that as a boy you were kidnapped and dragged off to Siberia? That you grew up among the gentiles and did not learn even one letter of the Torah? You went through hell in this world. You endured nightmares, persecution, and torture. The eveil ones tried more than once to get you to leave your faith. They forced you to eat pig and non-kosher food. Nonetheless you remained a Jew. You did not convert.

“How fortunate I would be,” he continued, “if I had merits like yours that entitled me to the rewards of the next world as yours do. Your place in the world-to-come will be among the greatest and most pious Torah scholars. Your sacrifice and devotion is no trivial matter. You suffered for over 30 years for the sake of Judaism and heaven. This was a greater trial than that of Chanania, Mishael and Azaria.”

Tears welled up in the former soldier’s eyes. He was moved by the warm and good-hearted outpourings from this pure living wellspring who words had refreshed his weary spirit. When he realized who was speaking to him, he broke into tears and kissed the hands of the Chafetz Chaim.

The Chafetz Chaim continued. “A man like you deserves to be amidst those holy Jews who gave their lives to sanctify God’s name. if you be an observant Jew for the remainder of your life, no one would be more fortunate than you.” This man remained with the Chafetz Chaim until he became a fully observant Jew.

The Aftermath

February 19th 1855, Czar Nicholas died. Significantly, the **Eve of Purim**.

Shortly after his coronation, Alexander II, ordered the end of conscription of underage recruits & reduced the quota of Jewish recruits to an equal proportion as the rest of the population. In 1874 the decree was fully abolished and military service reduced to 5 years.

Heroic Jewish Soldiers

Thousands of Jews participated in the Crimean War. A memorial was erected in Sebastopol in 1864 for 500 Jews who were killed and buried in that Black Sea town. (Slotzki)

Herzl Yankel Tsam

One of only eight recorded exceptions in the Russian army in the 19th century of Jewish cantonists who rose to the rank of officer without first converting to Christianity. Drafted as a 17-year-old cantonist, he became an officer in 1873. He was not allowed any promotions beyond captain until his retirement after 41 years of service, when he was given rank and pension of a colonel. In spite of pressures, he never converted



(above) Woolf & Clara Nicholaevsky, children of Cantonists. (Below) relatives who were musicians in the Czar's army

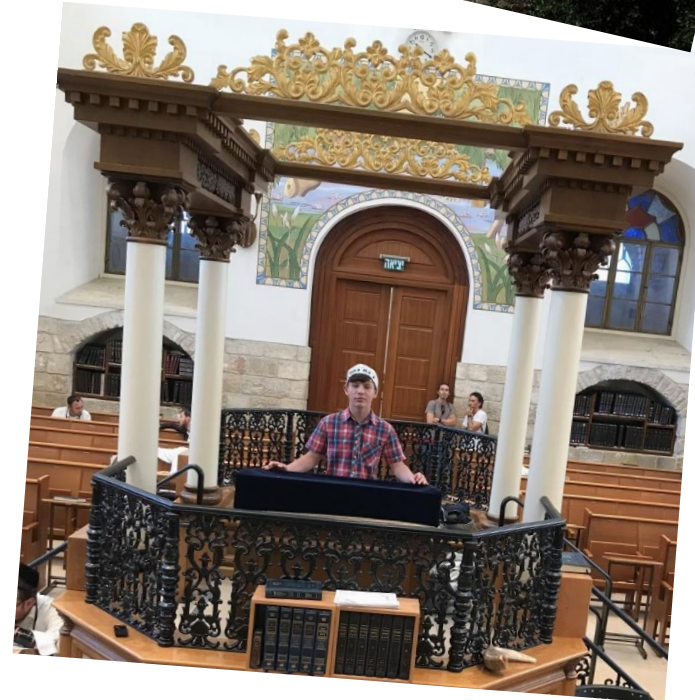


Passover with the Subbotniks by Chaim Merimzon (p114 Domnitch)

It was the day before Passover. The two Jews walked and grieved; tomorrow their parents would sit at the Seder, while they would have to eat *chometz* on the Volga. They reminisced about their lost childhoods and wept.

The glasses were filled with wine, and the butcher placed his glass upon his right palm and recited the Kiddush... Then he invited the soldiers to recite the Kiddush. Merimzon remembered how he used to do it at home and he chanted the words with joy... Two little boys who had memorized the Four Questions rattled them off fluently...

Hurvah Synagogue, Jerusalem



Torah Ark had the capacity to house 50 Torah scrolls and was built on two levels. It was flanked by four Corinthian columns surrounded by baroque woodcuts depicting flowers and birds. The Ark, together with its ornamental gates, were taken from the **Nikolayevsky Synagogue** in Kherson, Russia, which had been used by **Russian Jewish conscripts** forced to spend 25 years in the Imperial Russian Army.

Cantonist Soldiers' Shul in Tomsk



<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/nyUYarH2RfY>

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/siberian-synagogue-built-by-former-child-soldiers-returned-to-jewish-community/>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyC_ycBWXd0