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Project: Jewish self-government in the Polish lands: evolution, structures, mechanism

General audience summary

The aim of the project is to examine the changes that the Jewish self-government in the Polish lands underwent from the Middle Ages to 1939. This long period, separated by the turning points of the partitions (1772-1795) and the regaining of independence (1918), makes it possible to observe the processes and factors causing changes. The main assumption is to study Jewish self-governance from two perspectives, Jewish and non-Jewish - focused on issues of political and social modernization, primarily related to the development of a modern state with its bureaucratic apparatus.

Questions will be asked about where the system models were taken from, how they moved from place to place and how they were modified, to what extent they were local, and to what extent they were the adaptation of foreign solutions. The internal complexity of the Jewish self-government will be examined (communal authorities, rabbinate, brotherhoods and associations, collegial bodies), how its individual elements interacted and how long-lasting they were. We will also be interested in the methods of exercising power: the main lines of legislation, mechanisms protecting against abuses, the control system, applied penalties, as well as the extent to which the system was democratic and oligarchic. We will also consider how the Jewish self-government changed in the period when a large part of its competences were taken over by municipal and state authorities, as well as in relation to various social phenomena (secularization, division into various religious trends, assimilation, anti-Semitism) and economic (urbanization, industrialization).

The proposed approach is innovative, mainly due to its geographical and chronological scope. The project assumes - which is also a new approach - to place research on Jewish self-government in the broader context of political and social changes in Europe and internal changes of the Jewish community. In this context, the study of Jewish self-government touches upon a much broader problem of the autonomy of minority groups in a modern state and society.

The topic itself has never been studied to the extent that it is proposed. Although the issues concerning the functioning of the Jewish self-government are of key importance to the history of Jews, including Polish Jews, there is a lack of analyzes that cross chronological boundaries, and present the dynamics and directions of changes, and the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish self-government.

The research will be in the area of social history, institutional history and political history. The research will be conducted by a team of five specialists in the archives and libraries of Poland, Israel, Russia, Austria, Germany, Lithuania, Ukraine and the United States. Various methods of historical, legal and social analysis will be used, including a comparative method, both applied vertically (comparing the structures and functioning of Jewish self-government institutions in different epochs) and horizontally (comparing Jewish and non-Jewish structures).

The project will result in four scientific articles published in English in leading journals in the field of Jewish studies and a co-author book. The results of the project will significantly contribute to the development of research on the history of Polish Jews, also in the broader context of the European diaspora, as well as research in the area of social history and the history of administrative culture in Central and Eastern Europe from the Middle Ages to the 20th century.