

Rising Beyond Boundaries: The Social Mobility of Belarusian Urban Commoners (1860s – Early 20th Century)*

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Summary. The article analyzes the process of social mobility among the urban commoners (*meshchane*) of Belarusian lands, which was significantly influenced by the socio-economic, political, ethno-confessional, and cultural development in the region in the second half of the 19th to the early 20th centuries. The study examines the trajectories and scope of social mobility, tracing their evolution from the social reforms of the 1860s to the outbreak of the First World War. Vertical social mobility was associated with the transition to more privileged social categories (nobles, clergy, honorary citizens, merchants, etc.) and increased throughout the period. Downward mobility was linked to marginalization, criminalization and, consequently, the loss of all estate rights. Opportunities for horizontal mobility were limited by the passport system, the requirement to obtain permission to leave the estate corporation (*meshchanskoye obshchestvo*), and residence restrictions for Jews within the Jewish Pale of Settlement. The legislative foundations of the estate division of society, which persisted until the end of the Russian Empire, were in contradiction with the emergence of new social groups and the actual stratification of society, which depended on other – primarily economic – factors.

Keywords: social mobility, urban commoners (*meshchane*), Belarus, social stratification, modernization processes, legislation.

Peržengiant ribas: baltarusiškų žemių miestiečių socialinis mobilumas (XIX a. septintas dešimtmetis–XX a. pradžia)

Santrauka. Straipsnyje analizuojamas baltarusiškų žemių miestiečių socialinis mobilumas, kuriam didelę įtaką darė socioekonominė, politinė, etnokonfesinė ir kultūrinė regiono raida XIX a. antroje pusėje–XX a. pradžioje. Studijoje analizuojamas socialinio mobilumo trajektorijos, apimtys ir jų raida nuo XIX a. septintojo dešimtmečio socialinių reformų iki Pirmojo pasaulinio karo pradžios. Vertikalusis socialinis mobilumas, kurio mastai aptariamam laikotarpiui didėjo, buvo susijęs su perėjimu į labiau privilegijuotas visuomenės kategorijas (kilminguosius, dvasininkiją, piliečius, pirklius ir kt.). Priešingas socialinis mobilumas sietinas su marginalizacija ir kriminalizacija, dėl kurių galiausiai būdavo prarandamos visos luominės teisės. Horizontaliojo socialinio mobilumo galimybės buvo ribojamos pasų sistemos, reikalavimo gauti leidimą palikti luominę korporaciją (*meshchanskoye obshchestvo*) ir gyvenimo apribojimų žydams vadinamojoje sėslo riboje. Visuomenės suskirstymo į luomas teisinės nuostatos, išlikusios iki pat Rusijos imperijos panaikinimo, prieštaravo naujų socialinių grupių formavimosi ir faktinės visuomenės stratifikacijos, pagrįstos kitais, visų pirma ekonominiiais, veiksniais, procesams.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: socialinis mobilumas, miestiečiai (*meshchane*), baltarusiškos žemės, socialinė stratifikacija, modernizacijos procesai, įstatymai.

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Introduction

During the 1860s – early 20th century, Belarusian society experienced significant changes, and one of the most important features was the increasing social mobility of the population. The article focuses on examining the social mobility of urban commoners (*meshchane*)¹, encompassing its trajectories, scope, and transformations over the specified period. The methodological basis of the research was an emphasis on the regional features of modernization processes caused by the political position of Belarusian lands, their historical heritage, the level of socio-economic, political and cultural development. The nature of social mobility was elucidated through the exploration of various dimensions of diversity, including estate, ethnic, gender, and other factors.

The research was based on archival and published sources, and historiographical analysis. The social structure of the population of Belarus has been examined in studies by Ina Sorkina (on the phenomenon of Belarusian small towns), Zakhar Shybeka (on cities), Natallia Palyataeva (on merchants), Aliaksandr Kakhanovsky (on modernization processes) and others². The population of the Russian Empire has been analyzed by Boris Mironov (on the social history of the imperial period), Shamil Zainetdinov (on economic factors of social development), Natalia Ivanova and Valentina Zheltova (on estate-class structure), and others³. The aforementioned studies employed a socio-economic historical analysis grounded in modernization theory, which conceptualizes modernization as a transition to an industrial society encompassing all spheres of social life: economic, social, political, legal, and cultural. Processes such as industrialization, urbanization, nation formation, shifts in popular mentality, and the emergence of a hierarchical social structure are directly associated with modernization.

The legislative sources are presented in the “Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire”, the “Code of Laws of the Russian Empire” and other law collections. The record-keeping materials include unpublished administrative and reporting documentation, business correspondence from the collections of the National Historical Archive of Belarus (F. 1: Minsk City Self-Government (*Minskaya gorodskaya uprava*), F. 330: Minsk Urban Commoners’ Self-Government (*Minskaya meshchanskaya uprava*), F. 611: Pinsk City Self-Government (*Pinskaya gorodskaya uprava*), F. 654: Slutsk Urban Commoners’ Self-Government (*Slutskoye meshchanskoye upravleniye*), F. 2099: Mogilev City Self-Government (*Mogilevskaya gorodskaya uprava*), F. 2511: Vitebsk

¹ In accordance with the legislation of the Russian Empire during the period under study, urban commoners (*meshchane*) constituted a component of the estate of urban dwellers (*gorodskiy obyvateli*), within which categories such as estate groups or estate divisions were distinguished. Unlike other categories of urban dwellers—merchants (*kuptsy*) and guild craftspeople (*remeslenniki*)—urban commoners formed an estate group in a narrower sense, membership in which was hereditary and not dependent on the fulfillment of specific conditions. Proof of belonging to the estate of urban commoners generally consisted of an entry in the city book (*gorodovaya kniga*), a certificate of family registration in the city civil book, an extract from the city civil book, or other official documents. Subsequently, a system of documentary affiliation to a distinct group of urban commoners within the estate of urban dwellers was developed, including lists and certificates issued by the local *meshchane* self-governing body (*meshchanskaya uprava*).

² I. Соркіна, 2010; З. Шыбека, 1997; Н. Полетаева, 2004; А. Кахановіскі, 2013.

³ Б. Миронов, 2003; Ш. Зайнетдинов, 1999; Н. Иванова et al., 2004; Н. Иванова et al., 2009.

Urban Commoners' Self-Government (*Vitebskaya meshchanskaya uprava*). Publications of the central and provincial statistical committees form the core of demographic statistical materials (“Statistical Tables of the Russian Empire”, “First General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897”, etc.).

Intra-Estate Mobility of the Urban Commoners

In relation to the estate structure of the Russian Empire, social mobility was divided into intra-estate and inter-estate. The intra-estate social mobility of the urban commoners, associated with the transition to another social category within the estate of urban dwellers (*gorodskiye obyvateli*), was both vertical and horizontal. The most significant form of vertical mobility was the movement between the urban commoners and the merchants (*kuptsy*). There was no strict boundary between these population categories. Urban commoners who declared their capital were reclassified as merchants, while merchants who did not renew their guild certificates were transferred to urban commoners.

In the 1860s, with the reforms in trade and industry, the merchant estate was reorganized, and the conditions for conducting entrepreneurial activity changed. The transition of urban commoners to merchants before the 1860s occurred through dismissal from the urban commoners' estate corporation (*meshchanskoye obshchestvo*) upon declaration of guild capital and payment of the corresponding duties to one of the three guilds⁴. With the adoption of the “Regulations on Duties for the Right to Trade and Other Industries” of 1 December 1863, as well as its revision of 9 February 1865, the number of guilds was reduced to two. Trade certificates themselves were divided into merchant or guild (the First Guild for wholesale trade, the Second Guild for retail trade) and industrial certificates. Separate trade certificates for urban commoners and peasants were abolished⁵. Trade and industrial activity, especially large-scale, was legally associated with the merchant estate, and the merchants were the only estate group whose membership was determined by monetary payments⁶.

In the second half of the 19th century, the transition to the merchant estate group was one of the main ways for urban commoners to improve the social and legal status. The vertical mobility between them and merchants is reflected in the available data. The Minsk urban commoners' self-government (*meshchanskaya uprava*) recorded 17 (36.2%) transfers of Minsk urban commoners to the merchants in 1861–1866⁷. According to Natallia Paliatayeva, in the 1870s they accounted for more than half of those transferred to the merchants, but by the beginning of the 20th century this figure had increased to almost three quarters⁸. According to Zakhar Shybeka, among 40 people list-

⁴ *Свод законов Российской империи* (hereafter, *СЗРИ*), т. 9, Санкт-Петербург, 1899, ст. 562.

⁵ *Полное собрание законов Российской Империи* (hereafter, *ПСЗРИ*), 2, т. 38, отд-ние 2, Санкт-Петербург, 1866, № 39118; *ПСЗРИ*, 2, т. 40, отд-ние 1, Санкт-Петербург, 1867, № 41779.

⁶ А. Боханов, 1985, с. 106–118.

⁷ Calculated according to: Нацыянальны гістарычны архіў Беларусі (hereafter, НГАБ), ф. 1, воп. 1, спр. 4834, 4835, 4836, 4837, 4838; НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 17, 21, 25, 32, 33, 44.

⁸ Н. Полетаева, 2004, с. 55–56.

ed as merchants of the Minsk province in 1882–1883, 37 (92.5%) came from the urban commoners; in 1892–1893, among 107 people listed as merchants, 102 (98.1%) came from the urban commoners⁹.

The adoption of the “Regulations on the State Industrial Tax” of 8 June 1898, eliminated the need to obtain guild certificates for commercial and industrial activities. However, the transitions of urban commoners to the merchant estate continued. According to the Minsk urban commoners’ self-government, in 1911–1914, 120 transitions (26.8%) or 469 individuals (36.9%) from the urban commoners were due to join the merchant estate; in Vitebsk, in 1913–1914, the respective figures were 107 transitions (41.8%) and 377 individuals (50.5%); in Pinsk, in 1894–1915, 24 transitions (29.3%) and 106 individuals (43.9%). In Mogilev, in 1915–1916, nine transitions (20.9%) or 31 individuals (26.3%) from the urban commoners were associated with the merchants¹⁰. After the abolition of the poll tax at the end of the 19th century, the introduction of universal military service, and the tax reform of 1898, corporate merchant privileges lost their significance. However, this channel of social mobility retained its significance due to the need to register with a particular estate corporation and the operation of the passport system. According to the Ministry of Finance, “<...> this was the main incentive for the selection of estate certificates for persons of the so-called taxable estates <...>”, which exempted them from the requirement to obtain certificates¹¹.

By order of 16 March 1859, the transition to the merchants of the First Guild provided an opportunity for wealthy Jewish urban commoners to leave the Pale of Settlement¹². However, data on transfers from among the Minsk and Vitebsk urban commoners indicate that this opportunity was rarely used. The vast majority of transfers to the merchants of the First Guild took place in these provinces. The majority of exits from the urban commoners’ estate corporations and registrations as merchants occurred within the region, although there was a tendency to expand geography in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the first post-reform years, most transitions in Minsk took place within the boundaries of a province.

By the early 20th century, shifts occurred in the territorial pattern of exits. In the Minsk province, in 1910–1914, 97 transitions (80.8%), or 365 individuals (77.8%), from the urban commoners to the merchants took place within the Belarusian provinces (including 88 (73.3%) and 321 (68.4%) within the Minsk province, respectively). 23 transitions (19.2%), or 104 individuals (22.2%), were transferred to other provinces of the Russian Empire (including Ukrainian provinces such as Kherson, Poltava, Ekaterinoslav, Taurida, Chernigov, Kyiv – 18 transitions (15%), or 81 individuals (17.3%))¹³.

⁹ З. Шыбека, 1997, с. 252, Табліца 5.13.

¹⁰ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779. НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, спр. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18, 23, 25, 32, 34, 43, 46, 51; НГАБ, ф. 611, воп. 2, спр. 213; воп. 5, спр. 19, 103, 141, 151, 227; НГАБ, ф. 2099, воп. 1, спр. 309, 359.

¹¹ А. Боханов, 1985, с. 106–118.

¹² *ПСЗРИ*, 2, т. 34, отд-ние 1, Санкт-Петербург, 1861, № 34248.

¹³ НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779.

A similar situation is observed in the Vitebsk province, where, in 1913–1914, 101 transitions (94.4%), or 364 individuals (96.6%), transferred from the local urban commoners to the merchants within the Belarusian provinces (including to the Vitebsk province, respectively—96 transitions (89.7%), or 343 individuals (91%), and six (5.6%) transfers, or 13 (3.4%) people, to other provinces of the Russian Empire¹⁴).

From the Belarusian provinces came the Polyakov dynasty, a family of prominent merchants, railway contractors, major bankers, financiers, and entrepreneurs. The brothers Yakov (1832–1909), Samuil (1837(?)–1888), and Lazar (1843–1914) originated from the town of Dubrovno in the Mogilev province. Their father, Solomon Polyakov—a small entrepreneur engaged in the wine industry—had accumulated the capital by 1860 and obtained the certificate of an Orsha First Guild merchant, which became an impetus for the expansion of the entire family’s economic activities¹⁵. His sons made rapid careers. Their exceptional position (along with the awarding of numerous titles, orders, and ranks) was underscored by the fact that in 1897 Lazar Polyakov, despite his Jewish origin, was elevated to the hereditary nobility¹⁶.

Another opportunity for urban commoners to improve the social status was obtaining honorary citizenship. It was primarily attainable through high educational qualifications and civil service¹⁷. For example, on 11 December 1863, Semyon Tobiy Margolin, a son of a Minsk urban commoner, and a student at one of the imperial universities, was elevated to personal honorary citizenship¹⁸. Since 1832, the granting of honorary citizenship has been administered by the Department of Heraldry of the Senate¹⁹. During the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, honorary citizens remained an exclusive and small category of the population. In the post-reform period the legal status of various categories of urban dwellers was leveled. Features of the legal status of urban commoners associated with the order “On the Introduction of the Titles of Honorary Citizens” of 10 April 1832 and later legislative acts, such as exemption from poll tax, military conscription, corporal punishment, and others, lost their former significance²⁰.

The social movements of urban commoners within the estate of urban dwellers were largely determined by their horizontal mobility, which included geographical movement, that is, relocation to another territory while maintaining the same social status, as well as migration, that is, relocation accompanied by a change in social status. During the second half of the 19th century, both the number and proportion of transfers to urban commoners from other locations increased. As of 1897, they accounted for 24 transfers (28.9%), during which 138 individuals (30.8%) lost their status as Minsk urban commoners²¹. In county towns, horizontal mobility was the predominant form of social

¹⁴ НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, спр. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18, 23, 25, 32, 34, 43, 46, 51.

¹⁵ В. Лиходедов, 2009, с. 63.

¹⁶ В. БОВЬКИН et al., 1994, с. 242–243.

¹⁷ *СЗРИ*, 1899, т. 9, ст. 514–515.

¹⁸ НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 25, арк. 216–217.

¹⁹ *СЗРИ*, 1899, т. 9, ст. 516.

²⁰ *СЗРИ*, т. 9, Санкт-Петербург, 1857, ст. 601.

²¹ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 17, 21, 25, 32, 33, 44.

movement. For example, in Slutsk, in 1885–1894, at least 85 transfers (60.3%) (471 individuals (85.8%)) occurred due to horizontal mobility, while in Pinsk, in 1894–1915, 38 transfers (46%) (110 individuals (45.6%)) were similarly accounted for²².

At the beginning of the 20th century, horizontal mobility remained one of the main forms of social movement among urban commoners. Despite a slight decrease in the percentage of such transitions in the Minsk urban commoners' self-government to 23% (103 transitions), the share of transferred persons remained at the level of the late 19th century, reaching 29.7% (388 individuals)²³. A similar situation was observed in other settlements: in the Vitebsk urban commoners' self-government, in 1913–1914, such transfers accounted for about a fifth of all exits from the urban commoners' estate corporation (56 transfers (21.9%), or 169 individuals (22.6%)); in Pinsk, in 1894–1915, they accounted for nearly half of the exits (38 transfers (46.3%), or 110 people (45.6%)); and in Mogilev, in 1915–1916, also for nearly half of the exits (19 transfers (44.2%), or 65 people (55.1%))²⁴. The territorial aspect of horizontal social mobility among urban commoners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was predominantly southward, mainly toward Ukraine. The relative proportion of transfers outside the Belarusian provinces were higher than that observed for urban commoners transitioning to the merchant estate.

Inter-Estate Social Mobility of the Urban Commoners

Inter-estate social mobility of urban commoners was associated with transitions to other estates (peasants, clergy, nobles). The most privileged category of the population – the nobility – remained a closed social group until the beginning of the 20th century. Increased requirements for approval to enter the nobility, state-imposed obstacles, and the desire to keep the population within taxable categories made it practically impossible for urban commoners to achieve noble status. According to the Minsk local urban commoners' self-government, in the first post-reform years, individual cases of transitions from Christian urban commoners to the nobility were recorded, including Stepan Marsant with his sons Anton and Alexander (Herman), as well as Anton Bartashevich. These transitions did not reflect an increase in the social status of urban commoners, but rather the restoration of rights they had previously held by birth. The Department of Heraldry confirmed the noble status of individuals who had earlier been transferred to the taxable categories of the population²⁵.

Such transfers were especially noticeable in the 1860s and 1870s. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, they had become scarce and continued until the First World War. On 9 August 1913, in connection with his confirmation as a noble,

²² Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 654, воп. 1, спр. 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, 20, 21; воп. 2, спр. 6, 10, 18, 19. НГАБ, ф. 611, воп. 2, спр. 213; воп. 5, спр. 19, 103, 141, 151, 227.

²³ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779.

²⁴ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, спр. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18, 23, 25, 32, 34, 43, 46, 51; НГАБ, ф. 611, воп. 2, спр. 213; воп. 5, спр. 19, 103, 141, 151, 227; НГАБ, ф. 2099, воп. 1, спр. 309, 359.

²⁵ НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 33, арк. 1192–1193, 1256–1257.

the Treasury Chamber dismissed Pavel Sukhorsky and his family from the Vitebsk urban commoners, and on 10 June 1914, the Treasury Chamber dismissed Nikolai Minakovsky and his family from the Minsk urban commoners as they were recognized as nobles²⁶. The enrollment of representatives of the former gentry into the nobility took several decades. For instance, Vikentsiy Shavkovsky and his family, who lived in the Chernyakov folwark in Minsk County and were enrolled as Minsk urban commoners on 16 July 1877, received permission to be dismissed from the estate only on 26 August 1913²⁷.

The increase in social mobility of urban commoners occurred as a result of their transition to the clergy. Citizens of the Belarusian provinces studied at Catholic educational institutions and joined the Roman Catholic clergy. Among the students of the Minsk Roman Catholic Theological Seminary were Mikhal Aliakhnovich (ca. 1833–1901) and Yan Lipnitski (born 1835), both urban commoners from Minsk, Francisk Mikhalevich (born 1832) from Drogichin (in the Grodno province), and others²⁸. Famous representatives of the Orthodox clergy emerged from the urban commoners; some of them were repressed after the establishment of the Soviet regime. Among the priests of the Minsk Diocese who were declared martyrs for their faith and canonized by the Holy Synod of the Belarusian Orthodox Church are Aliaksei Lechatski (born Mahilnitski, 1870–1937), Piotr Hrudzinski (1877–1930), Aliaksandr Shalai (1879–1937), and others²⁹.

Many renowned rabbis and spiritual leaders of Judaism originated from Belarusian lands. Public (state) rabbis were elected by their co-religionists every three years from Jews who had graduated from former rabbinical schools or Jewish teacher-training institutes, as well as general higher or secondary educational institutions, and then were approved by the provincial authorities. Traditional (spiritual) rabbis, who were not recognized by the authorities, were regarded as learned advisers to the official rabbis, but in fact they were the spiritual leaders of the Jewish communities³⁰. Moshe Avigdor Amiel (1882, Porazovo, Grodno province – 1946, Tel Aviv, Mandatory Palestine) was born into the family of rabbi Yaakov Yosef Amiel. In 1905–1913, he served as rabbi in Švenčionys (Sventsiany), Vilnius province, in 1920, he was elected Chief Rabbi of Antwerp, and in 1936, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. Amiel gained wide recognition as a proponent and ideologist of religious Zionism, a writer whose bibliography consists of more than three hundred titles³¹. Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (1878, Kosovo, Grodno province–1953, Bnei Brak, Israel) came from the family of the rabbi of Kosovo Shmaryahu Yosef Karelitz. In 1911, the first volume of his work, titled “Hazon Ish” (“Vision of a Man”), was published and received acclaim from the (unofficial) chief rabbi of Vilnius, Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (1863, Iwye, Vilnius province–1940, Vilnius, Lithuania). In Lithuania and Belarus, Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz is known primarily as an expert on the Torah,

²⁶ НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1779, арк. 23; НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, спр. 23, арк. 121–123 адв.

²⁷ НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1731, арк. 22–27.

²⁸ Р. Зянюк, 2017, с. 218, 237, 239.

²⁹ *Синодик за веру*, 1996, с. 47, 59; А. Лопушанский, 2010, с. 11.

³⁰ *СЗРИ*, т. 11, ч. 1, Санкт-Петербург, 1896, ст. 1322.

³¹ Э. Иоффе, 2000.

and after moving to Mandatory Palestine in 1933, he became one of the activists of Orthodox Judaism³².

The Chief Rabbi of Vilnius Chaim Oizer Gradzinski (1871, Uzda, Igumen district, Minsk province – 1934, Riga, Latvia) was born in the Grodno province into the family of a Jewish rabbi, and studied at the Volozhin yeshiva under rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik. In 1885, the Vilnius Jewish community invited Gradzinski to serve as a *dayan* (a judge of the Jewish religious court). In 1912, he took an active part in the founding conference of “Agudat Israel” (“Union of Israel”), an organization of Orthodox Jews which purpose was to preserve the foundations of Judaism and the traditions of Jewish society on the basis of Halakha (the normative part of Judaism, the set of laws contained in the Torah, the Talmud and rabbinical literature); he subsequently participated in its congresses³³.

During the 1860s and early 1900s, the most significant direction of social mobility among the urban commoners was the transition into the peasant estate. By the end of the 19th century, a tendency toward an increase in both the number and share of these transitions had emerged. According to the data from the Minsk urban commoners’ self-government for 1861–1866, transfers to the peasant estate accounted for 10.6% (5) of all transitions and 9.8% (5) of individuals who left the urban commoners estate, while by the end of the 19th century, although the percentage of transitions remained at a similar level – 13.3% (11) – the scale of transitions increased, reaching 57.6% (258 individuals) as of 1897. Transitions into the peasant estate continued before and during the First World War. However, they no longer played a fundamental role in the structure of social mobility of urban commoners. The overwhelming majority of transitions to the peasant estate, in comparison with the intra-estate mobility of the urban commoners, occurred within the region³⁴. At the same time, an increasing number of peasants, while migrating from rural areas to cities, retained their former estate affiliation. Peasants not only actively integrated into urban life but also differed little from urban dwellers in terms of appearance. As the ethnographer Fiadot Kudrinsky noted, “<...> in large towns and cities, peasants, in terms of clothing, are completely similar to the urban commoners”³⁵.

Professional Specialization and Inter-Confessional Transitions

Changes in the social status of the urban commoners occurred through the declaration of capital (transition to the merchant estate), the obtaining of education, entry into the civil or military service, marriage (for women), and conversion to another religion (from Judaism to Christianity). Exits from the urban commoners’ estate corporations were connected with rising levels of education and professional specialization. These were the

³² Sh. Finkelman, 1989.

³³ H. H. Ben-Sasson, 2007, p. 91–92; R. Eisenberg, 2014, p. 241–242.

³⁴ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, сгр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779; НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, сгр. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18, 23, 25, 32, 34, 43, 46, 51.

³⁵ Ф. Кудринский, 1904, с. 116–128.

main factors of the vertical social mobility among the urban commoners. However, the literacy rate of the urban dwellers in the Belarusian lands at the end of the 19th century remained low, at approximately 40%³⁶.

A higher level of education opened opportunities for vertical social mobility among the urban commoners through classification as honorary citizens, entry into the civil service, and the acquisition of certain professions. In the first post-reform years, transfers from the urban commoners driven by the educational factor were scarce. According to the data of the Minsk urban commoners' self-government, the proportion of transferred persons was 17.6%, with 12.8% (six cases) of transfers connected to obtaining education in the medical field, that is, acquiring the qualifications of doctors, paramedics, or pharmacist assistants. A similar situation was observed in Slutsk in 1885–1894: there were 28 transfers (19.9%), of which 13 (9.2%) were related to acquiring qualification in the medical field³⁷. By the end of the 19th century, the importance of education had increased: in 1897 alone, no less than 34 cases (41%) of exits from the Minsk urban commoners were associated with the educational factor, especially with the enrollment in or graduation from higher educational institutions, gymnasiums, military academies and schools (21 (25.3%)). A significant proportion of transitions from the urban commoners estate corporation was also linked to obtaining or advancing education in the medical field (13 cases (15.7%))³⁸.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the role of education in social mobility expanded further: in 1910–1914, out of 447 transfers from the urban commoners, 154 (34.5%) were due to an increase in the educational level, which accounted for 11.8% of all transfers. Namely, 15 (3.4%) transitions were associated with graduation from commercial schools; 13 (2.9%) with obtaining qualifications as engineers, technologists, and technicians; eight (1.8%) with enrollment in or graduation from higher educational institutions. Education and employment in medical specialties accounted for 118 (26.4%) cases, including 46 (10.3%) midwives, 38 (8.5%) dentists, 28 (6.3%) pharmacist assistants, six (1.3%) doctors³⁹.

During the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, both the number and the proportion of urban commoners among students of medical educational institutions increased. Religious affiliation of students at medical institutions was not strictly regulated. For example, at the Mogilev Central Paramedic School, more than half of the students from the urban commoners were Jews. In the Minsk Private Dental School and the Gutzeit Paramedic and Obstetrics School, Jews constituted an absolute majority, as

³⁶ *Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской империи, 1897 г., 1900 – 1904*, Кн. 4, тетр. 3: Виленская губерния, с. 29; Кн. 5, тетр. 3: Витебская губерния, с. 34; Кн. 11: Гродненская губерния, с. 59; Кн. 22: Минская губерния, с. 53; Кн. 23: Могилевская губерния, с. 54.

³⁷ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 1, воп. 1, спр. 4834, 4835, 4836, 4837, 4838; НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 17, 21, 25, 32, 33, 44; НГАБ, ф. 654, воп. 1, спр. 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, 20, 21; воп. 2, спр. 6, 10, 18, 19.

³⁸ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 770, 796, 797, 798, 805.

³⁹ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779.

individuals of the Christian faith showed less interest in studying at private institutions⁴⁰. Medical specialties were in high demand among the urban commoners. Access to these professions was provided, including to representatives of the taxable estates, under the conditions of dismissal from urban commoners' estate corporations and exit from the taxable estate, or obtaining permission from estate corporations to continue their studies or to take up employment.

One of the founders of ophthalmology in the Russian Empire, Professor of Medicine at Kazan University, Emilian Adamyuk (1839, Bielsk, Grodno province – 1906, Kazan, Kazan province), came from an urban commoners family engaged in agriculture in Bielsk, Grodno province. In 1857, as the most successful student of Bielsk Gymnasium, he received a scholarship from the Vilnius Educational District and entered the Faculty of History and Philology at Kazan University. He later transferred to the Medical Faculty and successfully defended his dissertation, “Doctrine of Intraocular Blood Circulation and Pressure”. In the 1870s, he was elected an ordinary professor in the Department of Ophthalmology and established a separate ophthalmological clinic. His scientific legacy consisted of approximately a hundred medical works, the most famous of which are “Guide to the Study of Eye Diseases”, “On Glaucoma”, and “On Myopia”⁴¹.

Fyodor Grigorovich (1853, Vitebsk, Vitebsk province – 1918, Vitebsk, Vitebsk province), a Doctor of Medicine, was a native urban commoner of Vitebsk province⁴². Iosif Ravich (born Moshe Girshovich; 1822, Slutsk, Minsk province – 1875, Saint Petersburg), a prominent scientist in veterinary medicine, one of the founders of veterinary education in the Russian Empire, privy councilor, and ordinary professor of the Saint Petersburg Medical and Surgical Academy, came from a Jewish urban commoners family of Slutsk. Among his most important published studies are “General Zoopathology”, “Course of Learning about Epidemic and Infectious Diseases of Domestic Animals”, “Complete Course of Hippology”, and others⁴³.

In general, legislation regarding medical education and healthcare provision was largely non-estate-based and aimed at eliminating discriminatory attitudes towards underprivileged segments of the population⁴⁴. Doctors and midwives were obligated to provide assistance to individuals regardless of their origin and social status and did not have the right to refuse necessary medical care to lower-class individuals in favor of those of higher social status⁴⁵. At the same time, the significance of the religious factor remained throughout the 19th century. Jews preferred to receive medical care separately from Christians and used Jewish medical institutions.

In the post-reform period, thanks to education, representatives of the intelligentsia and the “free professions” emerged from the ranks of urban commoners. One of the pioneers of Belarusian ethnography, archaeologist, folklorist, local historian and publicist

⁴⁰ Н. Новік, 2008, с. 61–62.

⁴¹ А. Нугуманова, 2010, с. 713–715.

⁴² В. Горидовец, 2005, с. 12–13; К. Прошаев et al., 2009, с. 37–40.

⁴³ С. Шимукович, 2024, с. 81–82.

⁴⁴ *СЗПИ*, т. 13, Санкт-Петербург, 1857, ст. 106, 172, 437, 442.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ст. 114, 174.

Yevdokim Romanov (1855–1922), originated from the urban commoners of Novo-Belitsa, Gomel district, Mogilev province⁴⁶. A number of world-famous artists of Jewish origin came from the Belarusian provinces: Leon Bakst (born Leyb-Khaim; 1866, Grodno – 1924, Paris, France), Marc Chagall (born Moishe Shagal; 1887, Liozna, Vitebsk province – 1985, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France), and others⁴⁷.

In the second half of the 19th century, urban commoners, as a taxable category of the population, were still barred from becoming civil servants, but due to the government's distrust of the local nobility in relation to the urban commoners of the Western provinces, this restriction was lifted⁴⁸. In the 1860s and early 1900s, the number of local urban commoners among civil servants increased. Urban commoners of the Belarusian provinces mainly occupied lower administrative positions without receiving ranks, while individuals from privileged circles or officials from the internal provinces of the Russian Empire were appointed to more important positions. According to the legislative act of 5 October 1906, the requirement to leave the urban commoners' estate corporations upon entering study or civil service was abolished, which indicated the state's desire to preserve the estate structure⁴⁹. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, urban commoners were still primarily appointed to low-level positions, such as minor bureaucrats, college inspectors, registrars, and others. Military service also was an important channel of social mobility for the urban commoners.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, inter-confessional conversions began to play a significant role in the social mobility of the urban commoners. Jews, with the permission of the Minister of Internal Affairs, could convert to Orthodoxy or to any of the Christian denominations tolerated in the Russian Empire⁵⁰. Data on inter-ethnic conversions is provided by the 1897 census which reflects the distribution of the population by religion and language. Thus, it is possible to calculate that among the Orthodox and Catholic population of the Belarusian lands who reported Yiddish as their native language, the largest number was found in the Minsk province: 72 and 109 persons accordingly⁵¹. According to data from the Slutsk, Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Pinsk urban commoners' self-governments at the end of the 19 and the beginning of the 20th century, between 10.5% and 13.4% of dismissals from the urban commoners estate corporations were associated with the religious conversion of Jewish urban commoners. As of 1885–1894, about 7.1% of transitions from the Slutsk urban commoners were associated with the conversion of Jews, in Pinsk (1894–1915), 13.4%, in Minsk (1910–1914), 13.4%, in Vitebsk (1913–1914), 10.5%, in Mogilev (1915–1916), 11.6%⁵².

⁴⁶ В. Бандарчык, 1961, с. 66.

⁴⁷ И. Пружан, 1975, с. 9, 207; И. Холодова, 2008, с. 11, 19.

⁴⁸ *СЗРИ*, т. 3, Санкт-Петербург, 1857, ст. 4–5; *Свод уставов о службе гражданской*, т. 1, Москва, 1895, ст. 4–6.

⁴⁹ *ПСЗРИ*, 3, т. 26, отд-ние 1, Санкт-Петербург, 1909, № 28392.

⁵⁰ *СЗРИ*, т. 11, ч. 1, Санкт-Петербург, 1896, ст. 7, доп. 1.

⁵¹ *Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской империи*, 1897 г., кн. 22, с. 84–87.

⁵² Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779; НГАБ, ф. 654, воп. 1, спр. 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, 20, 21; воп. 2, спр. 6, 10, 18, 19; НГАБ, ф. 611, воп. 2, спр. 213; воп. 5, спр. 19, 103, 141, 151, 227; НГАБ, ф. 2099, воп. 1, спр. 309, 359.

Parental permission was not required for the conversion of minor children from Judaism to Christianity⁵³. For example, in 1860, Aleksandra Ivanova Gilerova (formerly Riva-Reiza Gilerova) from the town of Chavusy (Mogilev province), who converted to Orthodoxy in the Nicholas Church of Bobruisk, petitioned the Minsk Treasury Chamber to be included among the Bobruisk urban commoners (“<...> in the event of renouncing my parents, I cannot return to my homeland, precisely because my parents, as they are in Jewish law, could cause me various troubles; they could even do me harm <...>”). In the same petition, Gilerova emphasized that “<...> having had an unwavering desire to adopt the Orthodox faith from an early age <...>”, she converted to Orthodoxy on her own and did not receive her parents’ consent to do so⁵⁴. At the beginning of the 20th century, conversions to Protestantism (particularly Lutheranism) began to spread, rather than to Orthodoxy, which is especially noticeable in the Vitebsk province. In general, Jews in the Russian Empire gradually preferred Lutheranism due to the fact that in this case, urban commoners were allowed to marry individuals of the Jewish faith and raise children within that faith⁵⁵.

There were some peculiarities in relation to women. One of the channels of social mobility for them was marriage. According to the legislation, a man of the upper estate could transfer his estate status to his wife with all associated rights and privileges (unless she was deprived of all estate rights by a court). However, a woman of the upper estate could not transfer her status to her husband or children, although she retained her rights in marriage and did not move to the lower estates⁵⁶. The decline in a person’s social status without a change in legal status occurred through marginalization. The so-called *soldatki*, women whose husbands were conscripted or drafted into the army, occupied a borderline socio-legal position. The departure of the husband to the army sharply worsened the wife’s situation, forcing her to adapt to new economic and legal conditions⁵⁷.

Downward social mobility in an estate-based society was associated with the transition to a less privileged social group or the complete loss of estate rights. The forced loss of estate status occurred either through a transition to another estate group or estate or as a result of forced judicial sentence associated with the deprivation of all estate rights⁵⁸. The most important channels of downward mobility for the urban commoners remained their disintegration and lumpenisation, which according to the law, did not entail a change in estate affiliation. In the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, an extensive system of social assistance to the population developed in the Russian Empire, which also covered the urban commoners of the Belarusian provinces. Social assistance was provided by state, semi-state, church and private charities⁵⁹.

⁵³ *СЗПИ*, 1896, т. 11, ч. 1, ст. 7, доп. 3.

⁵⁴ НГАБ, ф. 333, воп. 4, спр. 3188, арк. 26–26 адв.

⁵⁵ *СЗПИ*, 1896, т. 11, ч. 1, ст. 328.

⁵⁶ *СЗПИ*, 1899, т. 9, ст. 3; *СЗПИ*, 1857, т. 9, ст. 5.

⁵⁷ П. Щербинин, 2004, с. 79.

⁵⁸ Я. Канторович, 1901, ст. 571; *СЗПИ*, 1857, т. 9, ст. 465–467.

⁵⁹ О. Кныш, 2009, с. 269–276.

Trends of the Emigration Movement

In the 1860s and early 1900s, following the liberal reforms of the 1860s and 1870s, as well as changes in the economic sphere, the urban commoners had more opportunities to change their social status and place of residence. The most important factors contributing to upward social mobility were education, professional specialization, and the accumulation of capital. Territorial mobility among the urban commoners expanded significantly. The geographic direction of migration among the local urban commoners was determined by both economic conditions and the legislative framework. During the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a trend toward emigration beyond the borders of the Russian Empire, with the vast majority of emigrants settling in the United States of America⁶⁰.

The vast majority of migration movements were not related to leaving the urban commoners estate, but involved changes of residence through the acquisition of passports or passport books. The Russian Empire population's right to choose a place of residence and to migrate was limited by the passport system and the boundaries of Jewish settlement areas. The issuance of passports to urban commoners fell under the jurisdiction of the urban commoners' self-government (*meshchanskaya uprava*), urban commoners' headman (*meshchanskiy starosta*), city council (*gorodskaya дума*), or a simplified administrative body, depending on the status of the settlement⁶¹.

The system of strictly regulated passport issuance, with some reorganization, persisted until the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1860s–1890s, the main types of temporary relocation were tickets (for one, two, and three months) allowing travel to work more than thirty versts from the place of residence, and printed passports (for a period of more than six months) for travel beyond thirty versts⁶². From the end of the 19th century, passports (valid for a period of no more than a year) and passport books (valid for five years) were issued for leaving the place of residence⁶³. Permanent passport books, granting the right to freely choose a place of residence, were issued to officials dismissed from service, their families, and also, according to relevant military regulations, to lower land and naval officers dismissed before 25 June 1867⁶⁴. By the decree of Nicholas II of 11 August 1904 “On Some Changes in the Current Regulations on the Rights of Residence of Jews in Various Parts of the Empire”, in addition to merchants of the First Guild and members of their families, Jews who graduated from higher educational institutions, commerce or manufactories advisors, this right was extended to retired lower-ranking servicemen who entered the service under the conscript statute, for participation in hostilities in the Far East⁶⁵. Thus, Tanhel Yudov Perlshtein from Vitebsk

⁶⁰ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 330, воп. 1, спр. 1559, 1560, 1562, 1593, 1594, 1610, 1611, 1615, 1650, 1651, 1653, 1654, 1672, 1673, 1711, 1712, 1714, 1727, 1728, 1730, 1731, 1764, 1765, 1767, 1768, 1778, 1779.

⁶¹ *СЗПИ*, т. 14, Санкт-Петербург, 1890, ст. 105.

⁶² *Ibid.*, ст. 85–86.

⁶³ *СЗПИ*, т. 14, Санкт-Петербург, 1903, ст. 44, 46, 64.

⁶⁴ *СЗПИ*, 1890, т. 14, ст. 27.

⁶⁵ *ПСЗПИ* 3, т. 24, отд-ние 1, Санкт-Петербург, 1907, № 25016.

petitioned to be issued such a passport book without a restrictive entry about Jewish settlement for his service in the 85th Vyborg Infantry Regiment during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)⁶⁶.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the main direction of migration were the southern provinces of the Russian Empire⁶⁷. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emigration from the Russian Empire became a socially significant phenomenon. Russian legislation sought to preserve the ban on permanent departure from the Russian Empire to other countries and to prevent the naturalization of its subjects abroad. Therefore, emigration was largely illegal. Renunciation of Russian citizenship and emigration were not permitted; only temporary departure abroad upon receipt of an appropriate passport was allowed. The bulk of emigrants from among the urban commoners were Jews. Jewish emigration from the Russian Empire in the specified period included political, labor, religious, national immigration which were interconnected. In the early 1880s, reactionary developments in socio-political life caused significant changes in the legal status of Jews. The “Temporary Rules” (1882) for the residence of Jews in rural areas prohibited them from living outside cities, purchasing real estate or renting land there. In 1886–1887, restrictions were imposed on their rights to education in gymnasiums and real schools⁶⁸.

Legal and economic factors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, combined with the wave of Jewish pogroms, led to an expansion of Jewish emigration. There were virtually no re-emigrants among the Jews, which reflected the difficult socio-legal and economic conditions, as well as the desire to permanently change their place of residence. According to Nikolai Tudoryanu, re-emigration of Jews in general to the Russian Empire did not exceed 8%⁶⁹. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, despite the legislative ban on emigration, some regulation of population movement occurred, primarily concerning the Jewish population. On 8 May 1892, Emperor Alexander III signed the “Rules for the Operation in Russia of the Joint-Stock Jewish Colonization Society Approved in England”, which allowed the creation of committees in Russia to organize the resettlement of Jews to foreign countries, without the right to return. At the same time, Jews who left the Russian Empire through the committees of the “Jewish Colonization Society” were exempted from military and other state obligations and received free exit certificates⁷⁰.

Conclusion

The reforms initiated by the adoption of the Manifesto of 19 February 1861, brought significant changes to the legal status of various categories of the population, including the urban commoners. In general, the development of legislation in the post-reform period

⁶⁶ НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, спр. 7, арк. 59–60 адв.

⁶⁷ Calculated according to: НГАБ, ф. 2511, воп. 1, спр. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18.

⁶⁸ *ПСЗРИ*, 3, т. 2, Санкт-Петербург, 1886, № 834.

⁶⁹ Н. Тудоряну, 1988, с. 24.

⁷⁰ *ПСЗРИ*, 3, т. 12, Санкт-Петербург, 1895, № 8602.

indicated a decrease in the role of the factor of the estate origin and the erosion of the boundaries between an individual's estate, which opened up opportunities for moving away from the estate stratification of society. As a result, two contrasting processes unfolded in the Belarusian society in the 1860s and early 1900s. The first was traditionalist, which was associated with government policy and the protective course of Russian legislation aimed at supporting the integrity of the estate structure of society (the placement of representatives of the former nobility, not approved by the Department of Heraldry, in the nobility, persons obliged to choose a lifestyle, and others), restrictive legislation in relation to various ethno-confessional groups, the existence of a passport system within the state. The second was modernization, driven by the desire of certain segments of the population to improve their legal status, social position, place of residence, increase the educational level and professionalization.

The geographical direction of mobility was shaped by both economic conditions and the legal framework. During the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the territorial scope of migration among the Belarusian urban commoners expanded significantly. Among the main directions were the southern provinces of the Russian Empire. By the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, while the ban on permanent departure from the Russian Empire to other countries remained in place, authorities introduced changes to the legislation in relation to Jews, who were allowed to resettle in foreign countries without the right to return.

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