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Struggle for Land: Settling Jews on Ukrainian Soil, 1924–1927

In the mid-1920s, the Soviet government initiated a campaign to settle impoverished Jews from the overcrowded *Shtetlakh* of the old Pale of Settlement on the countryside, hoping to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, disenfranchised former petty traders and artisans were to be integrated into local agriculture and transformed into productive elements of the new society. On the other, the Soviet settlement campaign held out the prospect of national autonomy for the Jews in their new homes, mostly located in southern Ukraine and northern Crimea, thus solving the Jewish question in the Soviet Union for good. But the Jewish settlement programme in the Western borderlands failed: in a nutshell, the preferential treatment the Jews received alienated other nationalities among the local peasantry, and pitted Party and state officials of different ethnicities against each other.

The Soviet nationalities policy of the first decade after the October revolution was based on the imagined binary of oppressors and oppressed. At first, Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks had not expected to see popular nationalist movements striving for independence in the imperial periphery after the revolution: had not Marx postulated that the worker had no country? In order to undo the long decades and centuries of Tsarist oppression, regain the national minorities' trust, and entrench Soviet power in the borderlands, the Bolsheviks launched a large-scale programme of affirmative action, promoting non-Russian locals into power and adopting vernaculars as official languages (*korenizatsiia*). The Jewish settlement campaign was a typical case of this policy: it offered preferential conditions to Jews in order to make up for their very limited access to farmland under Tsarist rule. Hence, the campaign's failure in Ukraine in 1927 shed light on more general problems of the early Soviet nationalities policy, and anticipated its gradual reversal in the 1930s.

Although designed to achieve the opposite, the Soviet state programme of affirmative action exacerbated ethnic tensions and created new frictions between nationalities. Under the conditions of a shortage economy, the overemphasis of nationality and heterogeneity turned economic hardship and political competition into ethnic strife. Ukrainian peasant reaction of Jewish settlers was not predominantly anti-Semitic, but a perfectly normal reaction to group-based economic competition. Likewise, Soviet pri-

mordialism made the scarcity of land and funding inevitably result in conflict between Ukrainian and Jewish officials. Speaking more generally, it was for reasons like these, too, that the Soviet *korenizatsiia* policy was partially halted and eventually revised during the 1930s.