



# The physical stature of Jewish men in Poland in the second half of the 19th century

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## ABSTRACT

Since 1843 Jews inhabiting the Kingdom of Poland were obliged to serve in the Russian army and therefore were examined by draft boards on a par with Christians. We explore the trends in the height of recruits by religion and place of birth. Basing on samples drawn from 21-year-old conscripts born between 1845 and 1892 we find that Jewish conscripts were shorter than the Christians by 2.5 cm at the beginning of the period under scrutiny and the difference exceeded 4 cm in the 1890s. The height of Jewish conscripts inhabiting provincial towns declined in the late 1880s and in the early 1890s was about the same as in the 1840s, i.e. 161 cm. The socioeconomic crisis of provincial towns caused a massive migration to Warsaw and abroad as well. In the 1870s the stature of Warsaw and provincial Jews was similar, but in the early 1890s men from Warsaw were by 2 cm taller than provincial Jews. The height gap mirrors the difference in the standard of living between Warsaw and provincial towns.

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## 1. Introduction

In the 19th century the military draft was instituted in Europe as the principle means of recruitment into the army. Military service became one of the key criteria defining an individual's national identity, and thus, in turn, legitimized the authority of the state. Previously, ethnic minorities who could not or would not serve were consequently marginalized; Jews (who were banned from carrying weapons since the Middle Ages) were excluded from the military, thereby providing fuel for anti-Semitic claims that they were in fact, second class citizens.

Military policies regarding Jews began to change during the Enlightenment. For instance, Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790), viewed military service as a way of integrating Jews into society – despite the military's claim that Jews were not fit to serve, on account of mental and/or physical deficiencies. His 1789 Patent constrained their obligatory

military service to the supply corp and the artillery's auxiliary troops, but it also allowed them to volunteer for front-line duties. Other states soon followed suit: France permitted Jews to be drafted, Prussian Jews fought in the war of independence, against Napoleon; British Jews had long served in its colonial army, and since 1828 could obtain officer patents.<sup>1</sup> Poland's first Jewish volunteer regiment of cavalry was organized by Colonel Berek Joselewicz during Kościuszko's Insurrection, in 1794. In each of these cases the authorities were addressing the question of how to integrate Jews into the mainstream of society.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since 1809 Austrian Jews could obtain officer patents (Schmidl, 1995, pp. 108–112). For examples of Jews serving as officers in British forces in the American colonies (see: Reiss, 2004, pp. 129–130); for examples of Beni Israel Jews serving in the army of the East India Company (see: Roland, 1998, p. 22).

<sup>2</sup> The integrative function of military service is apparent in Germany, where since 1900 one of the conditions of naturalization was not only a German birth certificate but also the ability to serve in the army (Wertheimer, 1987, p. 55).

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Medical examinations in German and Austrian draft centers indicating that Jewish conscripts were physically inferior to Christians triggered a debate over whether they were fit to serve (Gilman, 1991, pp. 38–59). Claims were made that physical defects such as flat feet and weak eyesight were inherently Jewish afflictions. Those doctors who did not hold to this notion did not take issue with the fact that it was statistically valid, arguing instead that such defects were not genetic but a consequence of their being confined, generation after generation, to overcrowded cities (Gilman, 1991, pp. 48–51). In order to challenge the claim that Jews living in Germany and Austro-Hungary were physically inferior to their Christian compatriots, like minded doctors declared that such defects were not characteristic of Jews generally but distinguished those Jewish immigrating from the East.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Gilman focused on the history of the stereotype of the flatfooted Jew, we examine a more dynamic and context-sensitive feature (Tanner, 1982; Komlos, 1989; Steckel, 1995; Cole, 2003): the stature of Jewish conscripts to the Russian army from the former Kingdom of Poland relative to their Christian counterparts, and as a function of their pre-conscription place of birth.

## 2. Background

The first Polish study of human stature based on military measurements was conducted in 1875 in Galicia (Majer and Kopernicki, 1877). In the Kingdom of Poland interest in the issue begun in the late 1880s with the publication of an official statistical report on the first decade of the 1874 Draft Law containing data on conscripts' height (Syrniew, 1886).

Further stimulus was provided by the work of provincial physicians who personally participated in the medical examinations of conscripts in two southeastern counties of the Kingdom of Poland (Tołwiński, 1902; Kosieradzki, 1905). Their research indicated that the mean height of Polish conscripts was increasing significantly, whereas that of Jews was declining. A decade later, the anthropologists Walenty Miklaszewski and Jan Czekanowski maintained that race largely accounted for a given population's mean height, but they conceded that poverty could be a contributing factor (Miklaszewski, 1912; Czekanowski, 1916). Years later, in his handbook of Polish anthropology, Czekanowski, referring to draft-board data, declared, "Not only anthropologists or sociologists but also economic historians should insist on publishing these materials" (Czekanowski, 1930, pp. 136–137). Jan Mydlarski heeded this advice, but unfortunately the outbreak of the Second World War prevented him from giving final form to his substantial research (Mydlarski, 1925, 1933; Bielicki et al., 1989, pp. 9–10).

Since then, the evolution of mean height among Polish Jews prior to the Second World War has received scant attention, since anthropologists are primarily interested in

current issues. We are thus left with three unresolved issues: whether the hypothesis of the secular height decline among the Jewish population of Poland is valid and its geographic aspects.

Few contemporary researchers have thrown further light on secular changes in height among Jewish populations. Among the exceptions are Komlos (1992), who found that while Jewish conscripts born in Vienna between 1860 and 1900 were about 1 cm shorter than their Christian peers, they were taller than those Christians who had immigrated to Vienna from rural regions of Lower Austria; and Aschoff and Hiermeyer (2009), who showed that the average height of Jews in the Principality of Salm (Germany) in the beginning of the 19th century was only 155.4 cm, indicating that they had endured severe malnutrition during their growth years.

## 3. Data and methods

The best way to address the issues itemized above is to bypass the summary statistics recorded by Russian draft-board officials – since they were limited to those conscripts who qualified to serve and did not include their ethnicity – and go straight to the individual files. However, many of the series of individual-file data proved to be incomplete, and so we have limited our study to conscripts born in the following six periods: 1844–1846 (the draft of 1866), 1861 (the draft of 1882), 1871 (draft of 1892), 1881 (the draft of 1902), 1887 (the draft of 1908), and 1890–1893 (the drafts of 1911–1914).<sup>4</sup> In addition, we have summary data for the birth year 1854 (the 1875 draft) that is exceptional in that it includes the conscripts' ethnic background (Snigiriew, 1878).<sup>5</sup> Our sample represents rural regions inhabited by peasants of Polish origin and small towns inhabited by both Christians and Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Warsaw is the only major city in the former Kingdom of Poland for which any draft records from the period under study are extant: those for the 1867 and 1891 birth cohorts.<sup>7</sup> The latter data were extracted from the complete 1912 draft records<sup>8</sup>; but the 1867 data (that is, the records of the 1888 draft) were preserved thanks only to a published article (Zakrzewski, 1896), to which the author appended a table of measurements that included the conscript's ethnic origin and district of residence, as well. It

<sup>4</sup> The next to last of these samples disrupts the scheme of ten-year intervals, but we include it for sake of completeness. Moreover, the birth year of 1887 is of particular significance, since it marked the beginning of an agrarian crisis that devastated the Kingdom of Poland (Łukasiewicz, 1968; Kopczyński, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Snigiriew conducted his research during the second draft, after the 1874 Draft Law had been enacted, because the authorities wanted to provide draft-board medical personnel with information about the health conditions of various ethnic groups in order to prevent conscripts from evading military service.

<sup>6</sup> The term "small town" signifies district capitals and other towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

<sup>7</sup> In 1910 Warsaw had 781,000 inhabitants and was the third city of the Russian Empire, after St. Petersburg and Moscow, in terms of population.

<sup>8</sup> Archiwum Miasta Stołecznego Warszawy, ekspozycja w Nidzicy, Warszawski Miejski Urząd ds. Powinności Wojskowej (1912, vols. 1–6).

<sup>3</sup> Gilman (1991, pp. 58–59). More on the critical attitude of German Jews towards East-European Jews (see: Aschheim, 1999).

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