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Physical Anthropology, Medical Ethnography, and Cultural Hierarchies: The Cases of Ukrainians and Eastern European Jews (1890s to 1930)

The turn of the twentieth century in Eastern Europe was marked by the rise of nationalist movements, particularly among non-state ethnic minorities, such as Poles, Ukrainians and Jews, but also, notably, by attempts to nationalize the Russian empire through the assimilation of certain minority groups and the exclusion of others. These nation-building projects developed in competition with each other, with political activists claiming overlapping territories and re-defining the ethnic boundaries of their own and other groups. Historical scholarship in the recent years has demonstrated that the disciplines of physical anthropology and ethnography were highly instrumental for those goals as they helped arbitrate competing political claims with the assistance of allegedly objective and impartial scientific knowledge.¹ A topic much less developed in the historiography is how these respective scientific disciplines² engaged with the context of global imperialism and helped local nationalist projects navigate between the contexts of local imperial rule and the emergent global movement for national self-determination.

I aim to approach this subject through a study of Ukrainian and Jewish physical anthropology and medical ethnography, focusing on the construction of cultural identities

¹ Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013); On Jewish ethnography, see: Jeffrey Veidlinger, ed., *Going to the People. Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse* (Indiana University Press, 2016).

² I am using the term “scientific” as it was (and still is) used in Ukrainian and Russian, by including humanities, social and natural science under one umbrella of reliable knowledge acquired through a set of disciplinary regulated and socially sanctioned procedures. While scholars, around the turn of the twentieth century, engaged in agitated debates about the objective status of particular facts and theories, they raised no doubt that objective knowledge could be achieved through historical investigation, ethnographic observation, or anthropometric measurements, if they were conducted according to commonly accepted rules.

and cultural hierarchies in these disciplines, beginning with the 1890s and ending before the outbreak of World War II. Their differences notwithstanding, both Ukrainian and Jewish anthropology adopted the presumption of cultural inequality between nations inhabiting the world, and both these cases also demonstrated a conceptual link between the group's alleged status as a *Kulturvolk* and the ability of self-rule, as well as the interrelationship between both of these on the one hand and the group's potential as colonizers on the other. Anthropological sciences, as applied to both Ukrainians and Jews, can be thus framed as virtual colonialist projects, at the same time as they served very real political projects on the local level.

My working premises are twofold. First, I approach the Eastern European territories acquired from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Russian empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the prism of the colonial, in which a strategy of national unification only gradually and incompletely replaced practices of differentiating rule by 1914. Such practices were most prominent in the Empire's treatment of two of the largest ethnic minorities in the region, Ukrainians and Jews, and led to a distinct asymmetry in the development of the two respective national movements. The Jewish situation depended on the ebb and flow of official policies that vacillated between inconsistent attempts at Jewish integration into the privileged core of imperial society (that is, the inclusion of Jews into those groups which were ranked according to their social estate but were not subject to any further legal restrictions), and intentional discrimination, based on the idea of protecting the "native" population of the empire from alleged Jewish exploitation. In the last decades of the Empire, a conservative trend

prevailed, and many policies heretofore promoting Jewish integration (for instance, through education in Russian schools and universities) were reversed. The most important institution of differentiated rule was the Pale of Jewish Settlement, which restricted the permanent residence of the majority of Empire's Jews to the western and southern provinces Russia had acquired as a result of its imperial expansion between the 1650s and 1810s, but excluded the "native" Russian territories of the imperial core. The Pale of Settlement survived until 1917.

The situation of Ukrainians in the Empire was, in many ways, diametrically opposite the Jewish one. With the last remnants of the political, legal and ecclesiastical autonomy of the former Cossack Hetmanate eliminated by the 1830s, ethnic Ukrainians enjoyed all the rights and privileges allotted to the "native" Russian population. This asymmetry directly affected the construction of ethnicity in scientific disciplines, concerning Ukrainians and Jews and, as we will see, the reception of universal cultural hierarchies in both cases. Jewish intellectuals, until the very end of the Empire's existence, attempted to advance the status of their own group in imperial society by postulating that Jews had certain cultural advantages over other ethnic groups populating the empire, and continued claiming the special status of Jews as a *Kulturvolk* well into the 1920s.

In contrast, their Ukrainian counterparts, before the February Revolution of 1917, generally disregarded the notion of cultural hierarchy. With a blurry linguistic and cultural divide between east Slavic populations, nascent Ukrainian nationalist ideology had a much higher stake in emphasizing ethnic boundaries between Ukrainians and Russians (as well as Poles), and did not engage with the issue of the potential cultural

superiority of either group. Only after the final failure of the independent Ukrainian polities that briefly existed between 1917 and 1919, did the question of whether Ukrainians should be considered a culturally advanced nation gain prominence. This came as a direct result of World War I and the post-war redrawing of political borders, with the principle of national self-determination applied in a highly controversial and inconsistent manner. Ukrainian physical anthropology, in particular, reacted sharply to the new realization that self-determination was not a right but a privilege, gained through the membership in an exclusive club of culturally advanced European nations.

As a second theoretical premise, I would like to emphasize disciplinary differences between the construction of culture, ethnicity and race, above and beyond divergent political contexts. A comparison of how these categories operated in physical anthropology, on the one hand, and medical ethnography on the other, is very appropriate here. Physical anthropology, a discipline that investigated morphological differences between individuals as well as human groups (races), and medical ethnography, a discipline that employed ethnographic observations as well as medical statistics to explore and interpret variations of health and disease among various ethnic groups, intersected on several levels. First of all, many physical anthropologists in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were physicians by training (for instance, the Jewish anthropologist Samuel Weissenberg, 1867-1927, most prominent in our case). At the same time, numerous statistical and ethnographic studies related to public health, that came to constitute a body of medical ethnography in the turn-of-the-century Russian empire, were also conducted by physicians. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for the same author to engage both in anthropometric and ethnographic studies, as in the case of

Weissenberg, who established his authority as the leading Jewish physical anthropologist in Eastern Europe and also published numerous studies of Jewish folk customs related to the human life cycle and health, or the Polish anthropologist Julian Talko-Hryniewicz (1850-1930), the author of the most detailed pre-revolutionary study on Ukrainian folk medicine. Moreover, around 1900, physical anthropology was still struggling for the status of a separate scientific discipline, while medical ethnography (a progenitor of modern medical anthropology) did not even claim such a status, its knowledge production dispersed among a variety of disciplines in a spectrum ranging from the humanities to the natural sciences. In the case of Russian Jews, however, between 1910 and the 1930, several attempts were made for the professionalization of medical ethnography, under the title of “Jewish Pathology”, with a specialized journal and a professional association as its necessary disciplinary infrastructure.³ In contrast, there were no endeavors to shape the numerous studies of Ukrainian folk medicine and customs related to health into a separate discipline and they mostly remained under the purview of general ethnography. This, as I will show, also reflected the asymmetrical status of Jews and Ukrainians in the Russian empire and the consequently different strategies of deploying “culture” in the construction of anthropological knowledge.

The origins of both Jewish medical ethnography and physical anthropology in the Russian empire lay within the practices of national homogenization, by which I mean the

³ Publications devoted to the peculiarities of Jewish health, in Russia, emerged in the 1880s, and, by 1910s, professional interest in the topic resulted in the specialized journal *Evreiskii Meditsinskii Golos* (“Jewish Medical Voice,” Odessa, 1908-1912). In the late 1920s, four volumes of the *Issues of the Biology and Pathology of the Jews* were published, combining the contribution of over 60 authors: *Voprosy Biologii I Patologii Evreev*, (Moscow-Leningrad, 1926-1930). From 1912 until 1921, “Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population” operated, with headquarters in St Petersburg and over 50 local branches throughout the Empire.

gradual elimination of differences between the rights and obligation of various social groups. This was pursued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, albeit with multiple setbacks. These practices were predicated on categorizing the population according to criteria of civil fitness (the ability of individuals representing certain groups to perform civil duties, such as military service, as well as to contribute to the well-being of society as a whole, most importantly through economic production). Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, policies of national homogenization generated and perpetuated hierarchical taxonomies of the empire's population. Neither race or ethnicity as such served a basis for such evaluations, which were conducted with purely pragmatic considerations in mind (reflecting the utilitarian approach to citizenship on the part of early modern mercantilist and cameralist states).⁴ The very beginning of ethnography in Russia, for that matter, came about through the import of German scholars trained in *Kameralwissenschaft*, who dominated the discipline in the eighteenth century Russian empire and categorized ethnic groups not only according to their physical distinctions, language, customs, religious practices, but also their utility to the sovereign.⁵ However, this utilitarian approach went side by side with the adoption of a general notion of cultural hierarchies among the peoples of the world, incited by the global colonial encounter and deeply entrenched in the thought of the European Enlightenment.⁶ In ethnic categorizations, therefore, particular folkways and customs, such as those related to hygiene, served as a putative manifestation of the group's position on the civilization

⁴ On the utilitarian approach to Jewish naturalization in Early Modern Europe, see Derek Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Modern Jewish Identity* (University of California Press, 2001), 23-35.

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⁶ On Enlightenment ethnography in Russia, and its reliance on mores to define the level of civilization advancement among various ethnic groups, see: Yuri Slezkine, "Naturalists versus Nations," *Representations* 47 (1994), 170-95.

ladder, while the perceptions of the latter provided a basis for conclusions regarding the group's usefulness for the state (i.e. civil fitness).⁷

Utilitarianism and the notion of cultural inequality dominated Russian state policies toward Jews, and as a result medical ethnography came to play an important role in the debate about Jewish emancipation. Jewish rituals and customs were habitually evaluated both as a sign of the level of Jewish cultural advancement and as evidence of their ability and willingness to perform civil duties. In this manner, medical ethnography became a medium for a symbolic construction of Jews as savages, in anti-Jewish literature, and as a culturally advanced nation, of great potential utility to the Russian state, among the proponents of Jewish emancipation.

Significantly, however, Jews, in medical-ethnographic discourse, figured not only as objects of Russian imperial rule, playing the role of internal savages who had to undergo a civilizing process, but also as subjects of such rule, bearers of civilization in less developed areas of the Empire. For instance, a 1878 piece in the newspaper "Sibir" (Irkutsk), responding to a polemical article titled "Can Jews become Colonizers of Siberia?"⁸, answered the question positively, arguing that Jewish "vitality and [...] ability to propagate [...] can be explained by [Jewish] fairly rational sanitary regulations."⁹ Despite the article's title, "In Defense of the Jews," this article was consistently Judeophobic, however, its author notably portraying the sanitary habits and customs of the native Russian population unfavorably in comparison to those of Jews and, based on this conclusion, he suggested that Jews receive the right of residency in Siberia (this

⁷ Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 46, 56-7.

⁸ Osibiriachivshyjsia, "Evrei kak kolonizatory Sibiri", *Sibir'*, 1878, no. 18.

⁹ M. P-v, "V zashchitu evreev," *Sibir'*, 1878 no. 26

province was officially prohibited to the majority of Russian Jews from 1830s until 1917). This case sufficiently demonstrates a link between medical ethnography, debates about Jewish legal status, and imperial territoriality, which remained valid through the pre-revolutionary period.

Needless to say, this connection was absent in the case of Ukrainian medical ethnography, which operated within the Romantic paradigm of fascination with the *Volk* and, since the 1870s onward, a positivist program of ethnic description and categorization. Authors writing about Ukrainian folk medicine and hygiene, as a rule, refrained in their evaluations from terms of modern rationality and portrayed folk medicine as a window into popular rationality or even as an unexplored source of general wisdom.¹⁰ More systematic attempts to describe Ukrainian folk medicine introduced a comparative lens, looking for borrowings and the trans-ethnic diffusion of medical knowledge, but they conspicuously lacked the language of cultural hierarchy inherent in Jewish medical ethnography.¹¹ Ethnic Ukrainians, in this body of literature, were presented as peasants, whose culture preserved a significant degree of archaic traits, such as magical thinking, but not as savages. Nonetheless, there is a case in which Ukrainians do figure as savages in medical ethnography, but this concerns the works of a Jewish author, Samuel Weissenberg, who focused primarily on Jewish beliefs and customs.

Remarkably, in the literature of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), an ideology that enjoyed its heyday in Russia in the 1860s, Ukrainian peasants were, at times, portrayed

¹⁰ S. D. Nos, "O narodnosti v meditsine", Arkhiv Institutu Mystetstvoznavstva, fol'klorystyky ta Etnolohii im. M. T. Ryl's'koho (Kyiv), Fond 2; T. Ryl'skyi, "K izucheniiu narodnogo mirovozzreniia," *Kievskaiia Starina*, 1888, No. 11.

¹¹ Julian Talko-Hryncewicz, *Zarys lecznictwa ludowego na Rusi poludniowej* (Kyiv, 1893); S. A. Verkhats'kyi, "Ukraiinskyi medychnyi fol'klor" (typescript), Arkhiv Institutu Mystetstvoznavstva, fol'klorystyky ta Etnolohii im. M. T. Ryl's'koho (Kyiv), Fond 14-3/452. This book draft is dated with 1964 but based in the author's observations conducted in the 1920s and 30s.

as a positive example for Jews in terms of hygiene habits. For instance, a leading author of the Russian Haskalah, Osip Rabinovich, chastised his co-religionists in 1860 for the supposed disregard of personal appearance and housekeeping, which, to him was tantamount to the lack of public decency. As a counterexample of alleged Jewish untidiness, he pointed to “Little Russian” peasants, whom he depicted as adorning their homes in every possible way and keeping them clean, their own indigence notwithstanding.¹²

By the 1910s, the rising ideology of Jewish nationalism (both of Zionist and diaspora varieties) had changed cultural sensibilities and turned this comparison into its diametrical opposite. An essay of Samuel Weissenberg, “Hygiene in the Customs and Mores of the Ancient Hebrews,” published in 1911, went for nothing less than a portrayal of Judaism as a completely rational system of public health regulations. Weissenberg, furthermore, believed that observant, allegedly uneducated shtetl Jews were far more refined in terms of hygiene than their neighbors, Ukrainian peasants. Not only were their hygienic habits allegedly much superior, but also the state of their culture and public welfare as well. As an example, he noted, Jews observing kosher rules, out of necessity could not mix cookware designated for dairy and meat, let alone use either set of dishes for activities unrelated to food. Peasant women, on the other hand, “use their kitchen utensils for other functions, for instance for painting their huts' walls or fixing floors. For the latter, they, not infrequently, mix clay with cow dung.”¹³

12 Osip Rabinovich, untitled editorial in *Rassvet*, 1860, no. 12, 183-4..

13 S. Weissenberg, “Gigiena v obychaiakh i nravakh drevnikh evreev,” *Evreiskii Meditsinskii Golos* no. 1-2, (1911), pp. 41-42. Such remarks should not be treated only as a sign of prejudice and alleged cultural superiority of the author. The described use of dung was a genuine custom, especially in the steppe areas of Ukraine. Weissenberg, as a long-term inhabitant of Elisavetgrad, must have been familiar with the everyday life of Ukrainian peasants from a close distance.

Besides peasants, Weissenberg argued, the hygienic standards of civilized Russian society were also wanting compared to the Jewish population, quoting, for instance the lack of bathrooms and hand-washing facilities in Russian restaurants and other public establishments. Jews, on the contrary, in observance of religious commandments, never went to the table with dirty hands. All in all, it was not that Russian Jews had to go native or learn higher culture from Russian educated classes but, Weissenberg was convinced, that Jews themselves could serve as an example for all classes of Russian society.¹⁴

This affirmation was striking in comparison to an established tradition of depicting Russian Jews as essentially unhealthy, which, in anti-Jewish literature, served both as evidence of Jewish inability to perform civil duties, and their putative inability, and even unwillingness, to maintain their bodies up to the standards required for service to the state and society. The presumption of Jewish military unfitness was particularly widespread and harmful to the cause of Jewish legal emancipation. Military anthropometrical data were habitually used in debates about Jewish civil status and, for decades, occupied a developing field of Jewish physical anthropology.

The introduction of (nearly) universal military conscription, in 1874, was particularly important as it produced a virtual avalanche of anthropometrical statistics on the various groups populating the Empire, which was widely available for comparisons and frequently published in the general press. Conscript medical examination data from sundry parts of the empire demonstrated that young Jewish men, on average, weighed less than their non-Jewish peers. Jews also consistently fell behind according to one

¹⁴ Ibidem, 36-38.

criterion that became the paramount measurement of a conscript's fitness for military service: the ratio of chest circumference to half of the examinee's height.¹⁵

Almost immediately, interpretations for such disparities emerged, quoting the alleged Jewish avoidance of physical labor and, worse, traditional religious education as reasons preventing young Jewish men from optimal physical development. One author in particular blamed Talmudic studies for the proverbial narrow Jewish chests, and this accusation was particularly charged because of the habitual anti-Semitic association of the Talmud with both irrationality and supposed Jewish self-imposed civil separation.¹⁶ Another author claimed that the weak Jewish physique demonstrated their “degeneracy” as a result of racial inbreeding, which, for him, stemmed from Jewish unwillingness to intermix with other groups of the imperial society.¹⁷

All in all, narrow chests became a serious social stigma and Russian Jewish physical anthropologists devoted considerable attention to this topic. The very first dissertation on Jewish physical anthropology focused on this issue, concluding that Jewish men developed physically slower than other ethnic groups, without an explanation of the possible causes, and advocated an older conscription age for Jews.¹⁸ Subsequent anthropological studies, in contrast, emphasized environmental factors. Weissenberg himself addressed chest development among Jews as a central question of his doctoral dissertation. He recorded more favorable anthropometrical statistics among Jewish men who engaged in professions related to physical labor (“blacksmiths”), compared to

15 A. Antonenko, *Kriticheskii obzor sovremennykh russkikh voenno-mediko-statisticheskikh issledovaniĭ otnositelno mirnogo vremeni* (St Petersburg, 1882), 41.

16 I. Verevkin, “Fizicheskoe zdorovie khristian i evreev Iampolskogo uezda Podol'skoi gubernii,” (St. Petersburg, 1876).

17 I. I. Pantiukhov, “O vyrozhdaiushchikhsia tipakh semitov,” *Trudy Russkogo Anntropologicheskogo Obshchestva*, 1888.

18 Bernhard Blechmann, *Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie der Juden* (Dorpat, 1882).

artisans who led a more sedentary lifestyle (“tailors”). Above all, however, Weissenberg attributed poor physical development among Jews to low standards of school hygiene, arguing therefore both for Jewish occupational restructuring and for the modernization of educational institutions.¹⁹ Another prominent Jewish anthropologist, Arkadii Elkind (1869-1918), in his dissertation based on the measurements of Jewish factory workers from Warsaw, attributed narrow Jewish chests to “degeneracy,” but insisted that such degeneracy resulted from the same factors affecting other culturally advanced nations of Europe: the low standards of living on the part of urban working classes.²⁰

For both Elkind and Weissenberg, in their polemics against anti-Semitic applications of physical anthropology, it was paramount to maintain the status of Jews as a *Kulturvolk* and counteract the portrayal of Jews as savages unfit to fully participate in civilized society. For Weissenberg, moreover, Jewish culture was not only a claim for higher social status, but also the most important marker of Jewish national identity, superseding the racial and linguistic diversity of various Jewish populations all over the globe. Significantly, in his assessment of causes affecting Jewish military fitness, he did not directly accuse Jewish primary and secondary education, in either its form or content. Instead, he argued that non-Jewish schools, with their current disregard for hygiene and physical exercise, were equally harmful to the youth and implied that only a relatively higher number of people who went to school put Jews in a disadvantaged position

¹⁹ S. Weissenberg, *Die Suedrussische Jueden. Eine anthropometrische Studie mit Beruecksichtigung der allgemeine Entwicklungsgesetze* (Braunschweig, 1895).

²⁰ A. Elkind, *Evrei (sravnitel'no-antropologicheskoe issledovanie preimushchestvenno nad pol'skimi evreiami)* (Moscow, 1903).

compared to Gentiles. In other words, it was precisely the higher Jewish cultural standards that made them physically weak.²¹

Remarkably, however, what Weissenberg meant by the highly advanced Jewish culture was Judaism, a system of traditional religious commandments and ethical values contained in sacred texts and commentaries. As for actual everyday habits, the beliefs and customs of East European Jews, a culture in the understanding of modern anthropology, Weissenberg and his colleagues, Russian-Jewish physicians, displayed a much more ambivalent attitude. What Weissenberg described in his ethnographic studies was a world populated by spirits and people taking for granted the ubiquity of harmful and protective magic. His Jewish objects of observation widely believed in the evil eye and resorted to amulets, and other means of engaging supernatural powers, in order to protect their lives and health. In fact, such beliefs and practices differed very little from those of Ukrainian peasants. The only distinguishing “rational” attitude that Weissenberg identified, in terms of health and hygiene, was that, besides magical devices, Jews, unlike the Gentile peasantry, also readily sought help from modern medical practitioners.²² Otherwise, Jewish and Ukrainian medical observers practically dealt with the same kind of ethnographic material, which is not surprising in view of the centuries-long cohabitation of these groups in the same geographic and social settings.

All the more remarkable was the fact that Weissenberg published his numerous studies of Jewish customs in the German journal “Globus,” a popular periodical, devoted to geography, ethnography and exploration. One can say that, in the early twentieth century, this journal served as a medium of mass-market aspirational colonialism. Even

²¹ Weissenberg, *Die Suedrussische Jueden*, 67-71.

²² S. Weissenberg, “Krankheit und Tot bei den suedrussischen Jueden,” *Globus* (1907) No. 23, 357-63.

though Weissenberg's descriptions were conspicuously neutral, his articles, supplied with photographs of Jewish charms, handwritten in Hebrew, and amulets made with wolf teeth and pottery shards, certainly looked exotic for a Western European reader, all the more so as they were published along with ethnographic reports from Central Africa and other far-flung parts of the world, then seen as legitimate objects of imperialist scramble.²³ This said, Weissenberg evidently saw little danger in portraying East European Jews as savages for an external audience. It was the domestic, Russian audience that was of most political concern, and not surprisingly, while a number of Weissenberg's anthropological studies and laudatory texts about Jewish health customs were published in Russian-Jewish press, none of his studies on Jewish popular magic appeared in the Russian language.

In Russian-Jewish medical discourse, Jewish popular masses continued to be represented as fundamentally rational and culturally advanced, even though particular practices were considered irrational and culturally backward. Before 1917, physicians attributed this ambivalence to the downtrodden status of Jews in Russian imperial society. After the Bolshevik Revolution, this interpretation did not lose value and became reinforced by new anti-imperialist rhetoric. In 1928, a special collection of studies on Jewish medical anthropology (second out of the four such volumes published in the USSR) insisted that the population of the Bolshevik state fell into two categories, the culturally advanced nations of the former Empire's European core, and "backward" ethnic groups populating its periphery. Supporting a state-led modernization campaign that was supposed to especially benefit the second category, the author admonished

²³ See, in particular, S. Weissenberg, "Krankheit und Tod"; Idem, "Neugeborene Kind bei den suedrussischen Jueden," *Globus* (1908), No. 6, 85-8; Idem, "Kindfreud und -Leid bei den suedrussischen Jueden," *Globus* (1903) No. , 314-20.

health bureaucrats to pay attention to the Jewish masses as well, because, in his opinion, they occupied a unique position among the core nations. Drawing parallels with ancient *Kulturvölker* of South Asia and the Far and Middle East, who had been reduced to backwardness by their colonizers, the author argued that Jews, like those peoples, were an old *Kulturvolk*, but, unlike them, they had not lost their national culture and had also successfully adopted modern European culture. Even as religious and ethnic discrimination had been eliminated with the fall of the tsarist regime, cultural hierarchies continued playing a role in the politics of Jewish citizenship (in those times, concerning not so much legal status as access to welfare).²⁴

The peculiarities of Jewish status in an imperial society put a clear imprint on the deployment of “culture” in both physical anthropology and medical ethnography. These fields of knowledge served to prove that Jews constituted a *Kulturvolk* on par or even above other ethnic groups populating the Empire’s core and therefore deserving civil equality (and, conversely, to dismiss the portrayal of Jews as savages). Jewish advocates engaging with those disciplines accepted the notions of civilization and savagery as universal, but the political ramifications of those concepts were distinctly domestic. Jewish diaspora nationalism, an ideology that demanded for Jews both national rights and their civil equality in host societies, adopted this conceptual hierarchy from the knowledge/practices of Russian imperial differentiating rule and also, largely, preserved its domestic character. Only in the 1920s did a Bolshevik version of universal anti-colonialism start to affect the discourse about Jewish peculiarities in medicine and physical anthropology, but this impact was very limited. Similar texts of a Zionist

²⁴ M. Gran, “K voprosu o metodologii biologicheskogo izucheniia rasy i natsii,” *Voprosy biologii i patologii evreev*. Vol 2 (1928), 7.

orientation, from the turn of the twentieth century on, were, in contrast, much more integrated into the intellectual culture of international high colonialism, but, unlike in the German-speaking world, such texts were marginal in what can be termed as Russian-Jewish socio-biological thought. Hence I will omit the Zionist perspective here, besides pointing at the validity of cultural hierarchies in this case as well.

As noted above, Ukrainian medical ethnography developed out of different cultural and political concerns than its Russian-Jewish counterpart and largely elided the opposition between purportedly advanced and backward cultural practices. The case of Ukrainian physical anthropology, on the other hand, was quite different.

Before 1917, studies on physical peculiarities of the ethnic Ukrainian population revolved around the question of whether Ukrainians constituted a separate ethnic unity, distinct from other east Slavic peoples. The most prominent Ukrainian physical anthropologist of the time, Khvedir Vovk (1847-1918), dedicated decades of research, both in the Russian empire and Austria-Hungary, to demonstrate that Ukrainians constituted a more-or-less uniform racial type, which allegedly both distinguished them from (Great) Russians, and proved the autochthonous (indigenous) origins of this people on the lands of contemporary Ukraine. Vovk mapped his collected data on the geography of Ukrainian dialects and supported anthropometric research with the study of Ukrainian folkways and rites, all toward one goal: the objectification of Ukrainian ethnicity. However, he did not compare folk cultures racial types in terms of the alleged superiority of some over others.²⁵

In contrast, the later years of revolutionary turmoil and failed attempts to establish an independent Ukrainian state pushed the issue of cultural hierarchies high up on

25 Khvedir Vovk, *Studii z antropologii Ukrainy* (Kyiv, 2010), pp. 66-115.

researchers' agenda. The work of Vovk's disciple Ivan Rakovs'kyi (1874-1949) demonstrates this turn clearly.

Rakovs'kyi was born in the then Austrian part of Ukraine, and trained as a physician in Lemberg (Lviv) University. Between 1904 and the beginning of World War I, he closely cooperated with Khvedir Vovk, who supervised his anthropological studies in the Carpathians, St Petersburg, and Paris.²⁶ Initially, Rakovs'kyi supported Vovk's premise of Ukrainian racial uniformity, all the more so as this theory was meant to support Ukrainian claims for a sovereign statehood in revolutionary times.

In 1917, Rakovs'kyi published a popular brochure in which he argued that Ukrainians, both those populating the defunct Russian Empire and the still extant Habsburg Monarchy, constituted one nation. Besides their allegedly common historical experience, and the Ukrainian language ("an independent one and separate from other Slavic languages"), this unity, according to Rakovs'kyi, resulted from geography, climate, economic particularities, and psychology ("our people has its peculiar character, which separates it sharply from its neighbors"). To this proof of Ukrainian national existence, he added anthropological data, concluding:

Numerous studies conducted by our own and foreign scientists [testify]: *from the river Vislok²⁷ to Kuban', and from the upper current of Dnieper to the Black Sea, all our Ukrainian people constitutes a basically uniform anthropological type.*²⁸

This statement is exemplary of both the "Wilsonian moment" in Ukrainian physical anthropology and of the political implications of Ukrainian social-scientific discourse

26 See the biography: Ivan Holovats'kyi, *Ivan Rakovs'kyi, 1874-1949: zhyttiepysno-biografichnyi narys* (Lviv, 2004).

27 A tributary of the San in the Western Carpathians.

28 Ivan Rakovs'kyi, *Rasovist' ukraiintsiv* (Kyiv, 1917); re-published in and quoted by: Ivan Holovats'kyi, *Ivan Rakovs'kyi, 1874-1949: zhyttiepysno-biografichnyi narys*, pp. 110-116. Emphasis in the original.

from the 1890s onward. But, in contrast to Vovk and as a sign of recent political currents, Rakovs'kyi did envision racial and cultural diversity of the East Slavic population in hierarchical terms. In particular, he claimed that Russians, almost uniformly, belonged to the Finnish race, as did a majority of Poles. As for Ukrainians, according to Rakovs'kyi, they belonged to an Adriatic race (along with Serbians and Croats). This race, which Rakovs'kyi identified with proto-Slavs, purportedly advanced from around the Mediterranean up to the Baltics in ancient times, where they “quickly conquered those [Finnish] less culturally advanced peoples, and, as victors, imposed their language and culture on them, creating in this manner a substrate for the emergence of the Russian people.”²⁹ Rakovs'kyi, thus, imagined ancient proto-Ukrainians as a nation of colonizers, whose anthropological distinctions from Russians (and Poles) signified their relatively more advanced cultural status. “Our people,” he emphatically concluded, “constitutes a separate anthropological type of ancient descent and culture, a people that has all the rights to independent life and a duty to achieve it.”³⁰

In the 1920s, Rakov'skyi eventually departed from his teacher's theory and published a study that denied the racial uniformity of the Ukrainian people.³¹ The concept of culture, however, gained even greater prominence in his work. The growing relevance of culture in Ukrainian physical anthropology, at that time, partly stemmed from the fact that the correspondence of ethnicity to racial types had been largely disproved in European anthropology. The Ukrainian project, therefore, could no longer rely on

29 Ibidem, p. 116.

30 Item. In the original, the quote is in bold script.

31 Ivan Rakov'skyi, Serhii Rudenko, “Pohliad na antropolohichni vidnosyny v ukraiins'koho narodu,” *Zbirnyk matematychno-pryrodopysno-likars'koi sektsii Naukovoho Tovarystva imeni Shevchenka*, 1927, Vol. XXVI.

biological (or quasi-biological) certainties, at the same time as the right of national self-determination, as had been demonstrated with all clarity, could not be taken for granted.

Rakovs'kyi's writings from the 1920s (especially prominently as regards his popular works) demonstrate a curious combination of colonialist presumptions and anti-colonial rhetoric, which meant that he both supported the notion of cultural and racial hierarchies and challenged the subordinated positions of Ukrainians within such pecking orders. In a popular brochure on races of the Earth, published in 1921, he argued that while not all human races had an equal potential for cultural development, many of them, potentially or actually, were on an equal cultural standing with Europeans. For instance, he claimed the Australian aboriginal population was totally unfit for education and culture. Yet other races, such as the black population of the African deserts, or the “Mongoloid” people of Northern Siberia, did have great potential, but they were hindered by adverse external circumstances. On the other hand, he argued, there existed some races, including the Japanese and the Chinese, the Arabs and the Jews, whose cultures were highly developed since ancient times. These cultures, Rakovs'kyi maintained, were very different from the European one, and therefore had been misunderstood and underrated. Still, he concluded his passage with a passionate call to recognize cultural equality of European peoples (only):

*All peoples of Europe are of equal worth, and equally capable of education and culture, if only they possess freedom and independence!*³²

Similar to experts on “Jewish pathology” in Soviet Russia, Rakovs'kyi attempted to simultaneously portray his nation – a loser in the race for self-determination – as both a culturally advanced group and a victim of colonial oppression. Ukrainians, according to

32 Ivan Rakovskyyi, *Iaki liudy zhyvut' na nashij zemli?* (Lviv, 1921), p. 22. Emphasis in the original.

Rakovskiy, had suffered tremendous cultural losses because of foreign occupation (Russian and Austrian, but also presumably Polish, in the post-1920 arrangement), but, he was convinced, as an independent nation they could achieve their rightful place among the most gifted peoples of Europe.³³ Still, Ukrainians, in his interpretation, had the right to national independence not because colonialism was wrong or because self-determination necessarily superseded the right of conquest. On the contrary, Ukrainians deserved independence because they, unlike the colonized peoples of Africa and Asia, belonged to the race of conquerors and colonizers. Rakovskiy imbued a sense of cultural superiority into his audience by juxtaposing the white European races (“better mentally developed, smarter and braver”), to the (racially inferior) rest of humanity. Ukrainians, in his depiction, clearly belonged to the former. As an example of European colonialism, which, in its turn, was supposed to testify to European racial superiority, Rakovskiy mentioned Ukrainian “colonies” in South and North America, and the Russian Far East. (In fact, these were settlements of ethnic Ukrainians, forced to emigrate by poverty and land shortages, from both the Russian and the Austrian empires).³⁴ Along with their high intellectual and cultural talents, Ukrainians, therefore, could rightly claim a place among independent European nations. And since these qualities lay in blood, no foreign domination could efface them and nullify this claim.

The deployment of cultural hierarchies in Ukrainian and Jewish medical ethnography and physical anthropology took place in an asymmetric manner, due to the different position of both groups in Russian imperial society and the different course each

33 Item.

34 Rakovskiy, *Liudyna* (Lviv, 1919), 37-38.

respective national movement took in the decades before and after the 1917 Revolution. This does not mean that intellectual disciplines can or should be reduced to the political contexts they were responding to. On the contrary, a comparison between medical ethnography and physical anthropology demonstrates that knowledge produced within the framework of a particular discipline imbues subsequent knowledge production with a certain inertia, if not path dependence. As a result, facts and theories can be recycled to react to political changes, although their flexibility, as well as the possibility of absorbing new facts and theories into accepted disciplinary knowledge, is not endless. The fact that the notion of cultural hierarchies permeated Russian-Jewish medical ethnography and physical anthropology both before and after the rise of Jewish nationalist ideologies, and survived the establishment of the Bolshevik regime, indicates a disciplinary traction, but also the continuing validity of this notion for the politics of Jewish citizenship. In the Ukrainian case, the idea of cultural inequality between “advanced” nations of Europe and the rest of the world became relevant only at the time when its national self-determination movement was articulated, in the wake of the Empire’s dissolution. However, the fact that, after 1917, this idea overturned a disciplinary tradition of Ukrainian physical anthropology, heretofore refraining from hierarchical cultural comparisons, testifies to its considerable significance for the Ukrainian national movement. Above all, both the Ukrainian and Jewish cases demonstrate the complex interrelation between the intellectual cultures of domestic and international colonialism, and between imperial rule and ideologies of national self-determination.