

## Semën Frug's *An Admirer of Napoleon*

Brian Cooper\*

*Department of Slavonic Studies, Cambridge University, UK*

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An original English translation of *An Admirer of Napoleon* by Semën Frug (1860–1916) is presented, together with an account of the historical context and creative development of this Jewish writer, who wrote mainly in Russian. In particular Frug's fall into obscurity is examined. Although he was first and foremost a lyric poet, he also wrote stories, mainly lyrical sketches of the type illustrated by *An Admirer of Napoleon*, which portrayed those 'small but at the same time kind people' who lived and worked in the agricultural colonies in the south of Russia. Attention is also paid to his attitude to Zionism, to his literary style, which references nature and the Bible, and to his themes, especially the joys and sufferings of his people.

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The Russian Jewish writer Semën Grigor'evich Frug (1860–1916), or Simeon Samuel (Shimon Shmuel) Frug, though popular during his lifetime, is largely unfamiliar to modern Russian-language (but not Yiddish) readers. In what follows, I sketch out the historical context in which his writing may be understood.

Frug considered his true home to be the southern steppes of *Novorossia* (New Russia), one of the areas to which Jewish residence had been restricted by Catherine's decrees of 1791 and 1794 – which had created in *Novorossia* and the former Polish provinces the Pale of Jewish Settlement (*Cherta osedlosti evreev*). Subsequently, under Nicholas I (emperor from 1825 to 1855), official policy was aimed at pressing the Jews into the existing estates system, which was poorly suited to their social structure. Those who did not fit were moved to agricultural settlements. The aim was the end of Jewish 'separateness'.<sup>1</sup> So-called *kantonisty*, soldiers' sons, were registered from birth for military service, for which they were prepared in special junior military schools in Russia. The Jewish recruitment statute, initiated by Nicholas I in 1827, set the draft age for eligible male Jews at 12 to 25. Adolescent boys aged 12 to 18 were the military cantonists and upon reaching 18 were transferred into regular ranks to serve out their full 25-year term (as referred to in the first paragraph of *An Admirer of Napoleon*).<sup>2</sup>

The era of the great reforms of Alexander II (emperor from 1855 to 1881) was a period of hope for Russian Jewry. The *rekrutchina* (conscription) and other repressive measures ended, and various groups of Jews, such as merchants, artisans and university graduates, were allowed to reside outside the Pale of Settlement. Nonetheless, under the reforms of Alexander, the liberation of the peasantry contrasted strongly with discrimination against the Jews. Jews still had to be 'useful' to the state, but the emphasis was less on repression and more on inducements. The whole programme of settling the Jews in agriculture was stopped and the laws on military recruitment (the cantonist system) disappeared. Antisemitic stereotypes

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\*Email: [v.cooper3@homecall.co.uk](mailto:v.cooper3@homecall.co.uk)

developed during Alexander II's reign and hardened under his successor Alexander III. Emancipation was held out as a promise only if assimilation was achieved, and Jewish opinion grew impatient with this policy.

At the end of the nineteenth century Russia set about overcoming its backwardness by massive industrialization. The Jews became the personification of change, identified as the hated enemy and the embodiment of capitalism, although they in fact suffered great poverty. Some officials deplored the role of Jews in industry, perhaps because they feared that industry might gain the upper hand over agriculture. Only one accusation aimed at the Jews by Russian conservatives – that they were on the side of revolution – was, at least after 1903, not far removed from the truth. Meanwhile, liberal politicians could not come to terms with the Jews' growing national awareness and insistence on Jewish national rights. Equal rights for Jews had not been under consideration because Russian society itself was not yet characterized by equality. Moreover, concessions to Jews under Alexander II were not applied to Jews from the countryside. Alexander II's legacy was ambiguous because he felt that change should not be rapid and hence tried to slow it down. From the Jews' viewpoint the most important failure of his reign was not to expand the Pale of Jewish Settlement. To have given the Jews the right to settle anywhere in the empire would have been decisive in fighting Jewish impoverishment and accelerating their Russification.

On 1 March 1881 Alexander II was assassinated. Six weeks later a wave of pogroms broke out, inflicting suffering and misery on Russian Jewry. There had been warning signs: major pogroms had occurred in Odessa in 1821, 1859 and 1871. The last pogrom in this latest wave was in Nizhniĭ Novgorod in 1884. The waves of pogroms that swept across the Ukraine in 1881–82 greatly shocked the Jewish intelligentsia, which had been confident that Russia and its Jews were following the pathway of enlightenment and emancipation as preached by the Berlin philosopher, writer and critic Moses Mendelssohn. From the nineteenth century the intelligentsia had been fully exposed to Mendelssohn's spirit of modernity, his encouragement of the adoption of western culture by Jews and also a general education for Jewish boys and girls in schools. However, the trauma of the pogroms led *maskilim* (enlighteners) and Russified intellectuals to conclude that emancipation was a lost cause. For many of them the only solution was settlement in a territory of their own, preferably in their ancestral home in Palestine. The 'Lovers of Zion' organization was founded in 1883, with a similar movement developing in central and western Europe a decade later.

One cause of hostility to Jews was the nationalism that modernization had brought to the fore. Aggressive nationalism brought about measures in the 1880s and 1890s that increased the authority of the agricultural village commune (*obshchina*) over its members, who did not have full civil rights even after Alexander II's reforms. From the 1800s the context of Jewish policy and antisemitism was the serious rivalry between the Ministry of the Interior, which wanted a strong land-owning class and the retention of traditional social structures, and the Finance Ministry, which wanted a free competitive economy and the industrialization of Russia. Social changes in the wake of industrialization had, it was felt, to be restricted as much as possible. A good example was the reinforcement of the *obshchina*. Clauses on the *obshchina* in Alexander II's Emancipation Act tried to slow down change; under Alexander III (emperor from 1881 to 1894) these were reinforced. Nevertheless rapid economic growth happened and many nobles reacted to it with antisemitism. Complaints arose about new ways of doing business introduced by the Jews, and many local regulations against the Jews were applied; the Jews were seen as an alien element, not least because of their modern economic principles.

Alexander III's Jewish policies were much more retrograde than those of his father and had a negative effect on Jewish life. A programme of 'counter-reforms' favouring the nobility

was devised. Instead of a strong bourgeoisie there emerged a strong intelligentsia, which rejected 'industrialization from above' and desired a socialist-agrarian path for Russia.<sup>3</sup> Instead of integrating the Jews into society and the state, thought turned to separating them. Jews were now banned from moving to rural areas outside the cities and towns of the Pale of Settlement (though those who already lived in the countryside could stay) and were not permitted to buy or rent real estate there. In 1890–92 thousands of Jews, mostly craftsmen, were expelled from Moscow and to some extent from St Petersburg. Jews lost the right to take part in local self-government.

After 1879, when the right to live outside the Settlement region was given to all university graduates, one of the few ways that Jews could free themselves from the most obvious restrictions was to go through secondary school and university. For the first time a considerable number of young Jews enrolled in Russian *gimnazii* (secondary schools) and universities, and sizeable Jewish populations appeared in such Russian cultural centres as Odessa and St Petersburg. However, during 1882–83, quotas were used to restrict the number of Jews in middle schools and higher education. The number of Jewish students in secondary schools in 1892 was thus only 58% of the total six years earlier. As the Jewish historian Dubnov wrote: 'High school graduates of both sexes, finding the doors of the Russian universities and technical colleges barred to them, flocked to universities abroad ... whence many of them returned convinced revolutionaries'.<sup>4</sup>

The 1905 revolution made the regime agree to constitutional reform and dismantling of the *obshchina*, the most important bastion of the pre-capitalist order in the countryside. The estate-owning nobility blocked further measures that should have followed the dissolution of the *obshchina*, such as reform of rural self-government. Thus the Jews achieved civil rights only with the February revolution in 1917. They had with a few exceptions to live inside the Pale of Settlement and even there farming (except for those settled by the government), land acquisition and leasing were largely denied to them by law. In some areas they could not live in the countryside and had to make a meagre living from crafts, trade and inn-keeping. After 1905 some Jews were concerned that more and more of them were moving into big cities, leaving the *shtetl* (little town), the bulwark of Jewish identity and a shield protecting the existence of Jews as a people.

What was Frug's place in this changing landscape? For some he was a Jewish populist; for others a brilliant representative of folk (Yiddish) culture; for Zionist writers he was a hero, but one whose talent did not warrant his popularity.<sup>5</sup> He belonged to the populist poets of the 1880s, an age that Prince Sviatopolk-Mirskii, the author of a standard history of Russian literature, saw as the low point in nineteenth-century Russian poetic culture. He can be compared to his teacher, Semën Nadson, a bridge between the *haskalah* (Enlightenment) poetry in Hebrew of the mid-nineteenth century and the development of a powerful lyric poetry, particularly in Hebrew and Yiddish, after 1900. He was influential as a pioneer of Jewish poetry in Russia who introduced Romantic aesthetics into Jewish literature. Although he was not a Zionist, in the USSR he was officially considered one and his work was never reprinted.

Frug was impressed by the Zionist dream, but it seemed unrealistic, too far away; close by were Russia and Russian Jews. Their experiences, struggles and suffering were the subject of his work. He is probably best remembered as a lyric poet; his epic poetry, based on Jewish history and legend, is weaker, though he also wrote prose, publishing collections of short stories entitled *Vstrechi i vpechatleniia* (Meetings and Impressions) and *Ėskizy i skazki* (Sketches and Stories) (St Petersburg, 1898). These reminiscences or autobiographical sketches are permeated by nostalgia for the recent past. As in his poems, he tries to convey a feeling of the unity of his people's life, past and present. Frug was born in the Jewish agricultural colony of Bobrovyy Kut, in the Kherson province of the Ukraine, and with unfeigned love

paints portraits of his fellow countrymen, whom he describes in the preface to his *Ėskizy* (Sketches), in the 1913 edition of his work, as ‘все маленькие и вместе с тем – милые люди’ (all little and at the same time lovable people), adding later ‘С них можно писать только маленькие, беглые эскизы’ (One can write only small, brief sketches of them).<sup>6</sup> Frug’s father, Moshe Tvi, although a tiller on the land, served also as a clerk to the agricultural colony, apparently because of his fine handwriting. Frug, inheriting the handwriting, himself worked briefly as a clerk in Kherson, where he was sent at 15 years of age and from where he eventually left for St Petersburg.<sup>7</sup>

Frug’s story *Poklonnik Napoleona* (An Admirer of Napoleon) is typical of the sketches in which he recreates the ‘colonial’ variant of the Jewish commune that was already vanishing, with its sound, solid and well-balanced social figures, whose natural talents and abilities were at the service of the community and who, as he puts it in *Razdel* (Division), ‘если предупредить беду и не были в силах, ... принимали все сообща ее удары вместе же’ (if they could not prevent misfortune, ... accepted jointly its blows all together). It was not only the earth and toil that gave rise to such people, according to Frug, who saw possibilities in the national culture itself for the creative expression of the people. And so, as N.A. Portnova has it, ‘Frug portrayed the last moment of the wholeness of the people’s life in a nostalgic haze’.<sup>8</sup> What survived for him were traditions, and he ardently supported those traditions in which the continuity of life was expressed: festivals, for example, represented national life both in its eternal and in its changing cultural tradition. In the story translated here, Frug characteristically presents thumbnail sketches of the Jewish village and its different types of people, developed characters and at the same time typological characterizations of popular behaviour, with types from the recent past representing the people’s life in its disappearing ideal form. As Portnova observes,

Traditional roles in the commune are disappearing, the type of the Jewish politician is passing, and knowledge of Jewish ‘laws’ cannot help the ‘jurist’ Reb Moishe to understand why his daughter, a widow with six children, must leave Tula and return after her husband’s death ‘to bedraggled and hungry Goishen’.<sup>9</sup>

This picture is found in Frug’s *Goishenskie ‘zakonniki’* (Jurists of Goishen). The ‘legal eagle’ Sruel-Moishe in *Poklonnik Napoleona* is doubtless based on the same character as Reb Moishe.

Frug was, it can be argued, conservative and his Romanticism mainly rhetorical. He shared this trait with Enlightenment poetry; his poetry seems to come less from the soul than from the mind. In particular he praised Jewish agricultural activity and was proud of the Jews’ potential as farmers in the context of a longstanding half-heartedness in attempts to bring Jews into agriculture. Under the reign of Nicholas I, however, Jews who could not be pressed into the Russian system of estates were moved to agricultural settlements. By the time of Frug’s childhood more Jews than ever (around 40,000) were settled in agricultural colonies.<sup>10</sup>

Frug was a largely self-taught poet and writer of natural talent. In 1869, on leaving the *heder* (religion classes), he spent just four years in one of the Russian government schools set up at about that time in the Jewish colonies. His work, aimed at Russians as well as Jews, soon attracted attention and he was given the wherewithal to move to St Petersburg, where he earned a precarious living as a writer. Many literary types were able to reside in St Petersburg because they were fictitiously registered as, for example, tailors, bookbinders or shoe makers. Frug was likewise registered as a domestic servant in the home of the Jewish banker A.M. Varshavskii.<sup>11</sup> His first poem was published in 1879 in the St Petersburg Jewish

chronicle *Rassvet* (Dawn) and he became a regular contributor to Alfred Landau's newspaper *Voskhod* (Rising). He published his first book of poems in 1885 and his second in 1888. His major work on Zionism, *Sionidy* (Songs of Zion), appeared in 1901. After 1881 he started to express the ideals of those Jews who, following Alexander II's reforms, had hoped to obtain the same civil rights as Russians, only to see this hope dashed when the economic position of Jews declined. After the pogroms of 1881–82 Frug's verses became a mouthpiece for the angry poet who stands up to power and tells the truth about Jewish suffering. He wrote lyrics upholding Jewish dignity and reproaching Russia for mistreating Jews. He supported emigration to Palestine and even admired the Zionist movement, though from a distance. The Jewish historian Shimon Dubnov emphasizes, however, that the force behind Frug's poetry lay 'not in a particular ideology, but in a sort of poetic intuition'.<sup>12</sup>

Growing up in an agricultural community, Frug was close to the natural world. His spiritual culture was taken from two sources: nature and the Bible. His poems have been likened to psalms. He offered a new treatment of biblical themes, using folk motifs, including legends, stories and events from Jewish history, and he managed to unite different political positions on assimilation and Zionism by awaking what S. Ginzburg called 'смутное томление к еврейству' (a vague longing for Jewishness).<sup>13</sup> His contemporary, the Zionist Ben-Ami (Mordechai Rabinovich), meanwhile, expressed his joy on discovering Frug's work: 'There suddenly appeared poems that were saturated with ardent love for Judaism'.<sup>14</sup> Frug's yearning for harmony involved a utopian ideal: Jewish farmers preserving their national traditions and at the same time taking root in the southern Russian steppes. He fostered this image within himself for a long time, writing in the early years of his Petersburg life pen portraits of colonists working on the land. There was a constant call 'home' to the southern steppe, to people he loved, away from the cold and alien city of St Petersburg, even though the *rodnoĭ ugolok* (own dear home) constantly echoed with tragic news. Frug made his peace with Russia by creating in its fields and graveyards an imaginative landscape that preserved the memories of people and experiences that had made him who he was.

This story (*An Admirer of Napoleon*), typically for Frug, presents vivid and acutely observed scenes from village life, and was written in the 1890s in a prose style somewhat characteristic of a lyric poet; as Portnova has remarked, 'this prose is not entirely prosaic ... it is in fact lyrical'.<sup>15</sup> It has the *zhivopisnost'* (picturesqueness) that is inherent in all his sketches. The style is imbued with Frug's Romanticism and recalls the romantic image of the hero he created in his poetry, the *Pevets* (Bard) who spoke for and belonged to his people: 'я эолова арфа доли народной' (I am an Aeolian harp of the people's fate).<sup>16</sup> Frug moved away from an Enlightenment emphasis on reason and appealed instead to feeling. This culminated in a new idea of the Jewish poet as a romantic individual, who appeared as sufferer, prophet and representative of the people.<sup>17</sup> His poems often have an underlying melancholy and plaintiveness, and thematize the hard lot of the people, their sorrows and misfortunes.

The one theme that stands out in all Frug's work is that of suffering. In his magnum opus, the long narrative poem *Sionidy*, he gives full voice to his ideas of Zionism, the *Galut* (Exile), Jewish history and identity, and poetry. The poem has 24 parts with such titles as the Western Wall, the Golden Calf, *Pesach* (Passover) and a Hymn of Zion. The poem opens with Credo, in which Frug claims that Zionism 'is equally beautiful and short-lived'; after a short time 'it will burn out in the darkness of the night'.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the suffering, he also depicts the quiet happiness of a family during Passover, the joy of the spring in the festival of *Purim*. Besides these depictions of ritual in family life, the only other optimistic moments are linked with Theodor Herzl and the Zionist movement. In *Sionidy*, Frug chiefly describes the diaspora, its suffering, joy and purpose. While the different parts of the poem do not fit easily together they are unified by the image of the Jew that Frug invents in the poem. Aware

of his origins, this Jew understands that identity is linked to history, rituals, memories and the values Jews have shared for centuries. Many of these memories touch on raw pain. Palestine, for example, was just another locus of pain. Frug called his elegiac tone *grobovoi* (coffin-like): ‘Как ненавистна ты, мучительная доля/Певца-гробовщика!’ (How hateful you are, agonizing fate/Of the coffin-maker Bard).<sup>19</sup>

Just as Karamzin brought the new aesthetics of Sentimentalism to Russian literature at the end of the eighteenth century, so Frug brought the aesthetics of the age of Pushkin to Jewish literature in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time Frug wrote political poems in the spirit of Nekrasov. Though it may seem paradoxical that he was influenced by both Romanticism and Realism, the 1880s were characterized by a marked eclecticism. At his best as the *Pevets evreĭstva* (Bard of Jewishness), Frug’s dreams include universal ideals: ‘Придет пора – исчезнет злоба;/Одной ликующей семьей/Под знамя света и свободы/Стекутся мирные народы’ (There will come a time – malice will disappear;/Peaceful peoples will gather/Under the banner of light and liberty/In one exultant family).<sup>20</sup>

The Russian Populist critic Aleksandr Skabichevskii, who liked Frug’s non-didactic poems, deemed him ‘one of the most sympathetic, genuine and, more importantly, true poets’.<sup>21</sup> In the 1890s, as Zionism gained the support of a younger generation, Frug was criticized for staying true to his vision and ignoring the ‘чудо народного возрождения’ (miracle of the people’s rebirth), but he did contribute to *Lira Siona* (Lyre of Zion) (1900) and publish a new collection entitled *Sionidy i drugie stikhotvoreniia* (Songs of Zion and Other Poems) (1902); the latter in particular contains poems of strength and inspiration.<sup>22</sup> Zionists liked him for many reasons. In his pride and love for the Jewish people he showed himself a comrade. The early Zionists explained Jewish suffering in *Galut* (exile) as inevitable; any national group living under the physical and spiritual yoke of a foreign power was bound to suffer. Such pain would vanish when Jews lived in their own country. Suffering in *Galut* thus had a positive aspect, because it reminded Jews that they were not at home, but only guests. Frug’s cries of pain conformed to this pattern.

Jewish literature in Russia during the nineteenth century existed in three languages: Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. Frug wrote not only in Russian, the language of the majority of his poems, but also in both of the Jewish languages. He wrote poems in Yiddish for European and American journals and expanded its poetic possibilities, but he wrote a scathing criticism of Yiddish in 1899, arguing that it was a jargon and an unworthy vehicle for real literature. The Zionist Mordechai Spector responded angrily that 1899 was not 1860 and Yiddish had come a long way since then and given rise to a literature of quality.<sup>23</sup> However Hebrew, ‘the language of the prophets’, particularly moved Frug, as did the Bible:

Я имел счастье пристраститься к древнееврейскому языку; я полюбил пророков всеми силами молодой души; ... Я уверенно могу сказать, что первой возможностью чувствовать и мыслить, чего далеко не мог развить в хедере, я обязан исключительно той глубокой ... поэзии, которой изобилуют пророки: Исая, Иезекииль и проч.

[I had the good fortune to take to ancient Hebrew; I fell in love with the prophets with all my young heart; ... I can confidently say that, for the first possibility of feeling and thinking, which I was far from being able to develop in the heder, I am exclusively indebted to that deep ... poetry in which the prophets, Isaiah, Ezekiel etc., abound].<sup>24</sup>

According to the Jewish poet Bialik, moreover, Frug’s Russian had the sound and intonation of Hebrew.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that Frug preceded Bialik in adopting the persona of the poet-prophet. This partly comes from the nineteenth-century Russian poetic tradition in

poems like Pushkin's and Lermontov's 'The Prophet', Tiutchev's 'The Vision' and Nadson's 'The Dreams of Our Times'. Frug employed the persona and diction of the prophet because it fitted his idea of the poet as a messianic figure and messenger to the people.

The relationship between poet and people was deepened by Frug's use of Jewish legends, Midrashic stories, Talmudic disputations and Jewish history. He was a pioneer in using Jewish folklore for secular, aesthetic purposes. He wrote in Hebrew at the beginning and end of his creative life but his Hebrew poems remained only experimental. He aimed at the Russian reader and, as he became better known, began to publish in mainstream Russian journals like *Vestnik Evropy* (Messenger of Europe), *Russkaia mysl'* (Russian Thought) and *Nedelia* (The Week), not just Russian-Jewish journals like *Rassvet* (Dawn). He inculcated Jewish pride in the minds of a Russified elite that was growing estranged from Jewish religious and ethnic identity. Thus, through stylizing Jewish folk culture and reworking it into a poetry of high culture, he enjoyed popularity and critical success.

However, Frug was continually short of money, had to contribute to many different sorts of Russian publications, and from about 1901 also wrote for the popular press, such as *Peterburgskii listok* (Petersburg Leaflet) and *Peterburgskaia gazeta* (Petersburg Gazette), a great deal of less serious work under pen names such as *Ieronim Dobryi* (Hieronymus the Good): 'Еврейская муза не могла обеспечить меня даже куском хлеба ... Вот я взялся за эту грязную работу, – однако [...] снова возьмусь за настоящую работу' (The Jewish muse could not provide me with even a piece of bread ... So I set about this dirty work, – but ... I shall undertake real work again).<sup>26</sup> Horowitz considers that he 'sold his talents to the Russian gutter press in the years before his death, prostituting his talent and ideals out of economic need'.<sup>27</sup> From 1909 until his death from kidney disease on 6 September 1916, Frug lived in Odessa, where life was easier than in the capital, among Jewish poets, writers and translators who formed a sort of 'literary colony', speaking in Russian and writing in Hebrew.

For the historian Dubnov, Frug expressed the voice of diaspora Jewry: '[He] dressed his poetry of the people's pain in a foreign language that had become the language of one of the greatest centres of the Jewish diaspora'.<sup>28</sup> Dubnov took the view that Jews in Russia could contribute to Russian culture to the same degree that Jews in Muslim Spain, such as Moses ibn Ezra, had contributed to Spanish culture. For Yiddish critics, Frug merited high praise for stylistic modernization and cultural advance, invigorating Yiddish poetry with his European aesthetics and contributing to the victory of syllabo-tonic prosody in Yiddish poetics – even though perhaps not intentionally, since he had simply adopted the syllabo-tonic metres that he borrowed from Russian. At the time of Frug's death, Dubnov wrongly predicted that he would be read by generations to come. Similarly, the diaspora Jewish nation in Russia, which Dubnov predicted would form and celebrate Frug as a national poet, never took shape. Despite several republications of his works in recent years, there is still a huge gap between Frug's popularity in his own time and his nearly total eclipse today. Despite his role in developing Jewish literature in Russia, his writing remains bound to a particular time.

The image of Napoleon, or rather the Napoleonic legend, in Frug's *An Admirer of Napoleon* continues a long fascination in Russian literature with the man. The three key Russian poets of the nineteenth century, Pushkin, Lermontov and Tiutchev, all wrote poems concerning Napoleon, and major prose writers like Gogol', Dostoevskii and Tolstoi also approach his image. Admiration of Napoleon was an important part of Russian cultural life in the first half of the nineteenth century, and echoes of the romantic aura surrounding him continued until much later, yet even in the second half of that century it was still rather risky to praise Napoleon and not the tsar. Tolstoi had nothing but contempt for the man, and in *Crime and Punishment*, part V, chapter IV, Dostoevskii makes Raskol'nikov use Napoleon's superman

image to try to justify his own crime. Yet, as regards the Jews, Napoleon had a relatively enlightened policy. In 1799 he had thought of establishing a Jewish state in the ancient lands of Israel. He was a man of the eighteenth century, the last of the ‘enlightened despots’, demonstrating tolerance by releasing French Jews from the ghettos. In 1806 he called together an Assembly of Notables (representing communities under French dominion) to deal with questions arising from the dissolution of the old status of the Jews and their naturalization as individuals in the new national states. Decisions of the Assembly that involved questions of Jewish law were subsequently submitted to a Grand Sanhedrin called into being by Napoleon to provide some sort of Halakhic justification for the acts required of the Jewish communities by the French imperial government. However, Napoleon’s policy also had negative effects on Jews. For example, his so-called ‘Infamous Decree’ of 17 March 1808, whose terms were unequivocally harsh, prohibited the Jews of Alsace and Lorraine from borrowing or lending money for 10 years, suspended debts owed to the Jews of Alsace for 10 years and forbade Jews to immigrate to Alsace. It had a great effect on the economic well-being of these Jews, driving many who had depended on commerce and money-lending into poverty.<sup>29</sup>

In his poem *Napoleon*, Pushkin regards the man as a destructive force:

*Всё пало с шумом пред тобой:  
Европа гнила; сон могильный  
Носился над ее главой ...  
Европа свой расторгла плен;  
Вослед тирану полетело,  
Как гром, проклятие племен.  
[Everything fell noisily before you:  
Europe was perishing; the sleep of the grave  
Floated above her head ...  
Europe put an end to its captivity;  
After the tyrant there flew  
Like thunder the curse of the peoples.]*

Here, Napoleon appears as a tyrant from whom Europe escaped and whom its peoples cursed. In contrast, Lermontov in his poem *Napoleon* sees the emperor as a superhuman figure standing above praise, fame and other people:

*Умолкни, о певец! – спеши отсюда прочь, –  
С хвалой иль язвою упреха:  
Мне все равно; в могиле вечно ночь,  
Там нет ни почестей, ни счастья, ни рока!  
Пускай историю страстей  
И дел моих хранят далекие потомки:  
Я презрю песнопенья громки;*



*Я выше и похвал, и славы, и людей!*

[Be silent, O bard! – Hurry away from here, –  
 With praise or with the ulcer of reproach,  
 I care not; in the grave it is eternally night,  
 There there are no honours, no happiness, no fate!  
 Let distant descendants preserve  
 The history of my passions and deeds:  
 I will disdain loud songs;  
 I am higher than praises and fame and people!]

Tiutchev's poem *Napoleon*, on the other hand, distinguishes two sides to the emperor: on the one hand the victorious soldier who soars on the wings of eagles, and on the other hand a cunning serpent:

*Два демона ему служили,  
 Две силы чудно в нем слились:  
 В его главе – орлы парили,  
 В его груди – змии вились...  
 Ширококрылых вдохновений  
 Орлиный, дерзостный полет,  
 И в самом буйстве дерзновений  
 Змииной мудрости расчет.*

[Two demons served him,  
 Two forces marvellously blended in him:  
 In his head – eagles soared,  
 In his breast – serpents writhed...  
 The eagle's audacious flight  
 Of broad-winged inspirations,  
 And in the very unruliness of the audacities  
 The calculation of a serpent's wisdom.]

Although Frug lacked the genius of the golden age of Russian literature of the first half of the nineteenth century, he had a certain talent for poetry and prose at a time when poetry was no longer in the ascendant, and in his story about the admirer of Napoleon he managed to write what is virtually a poem in prose. It might stand as his own contribution to the assessment of Napoleon's legacy.

Frug did not find easy answers to the problems of his day. For him, the paradoxical state of the Russian Jew who had left the village commune but not been fully accepted by civil

society, and who lived in fear of pogroms, had no political solution. Favoured by what Landau called a 'sad muse',<sup>30</sup> he strove to unify the people and draw together those driven to leave Russia for the United States and those disposed to remain in the hope of better times: 'Живем-то мы каждый сам по себе, в своем углу, даже поплакать вместе не умеем, вместе, целым народом' (We each live for ourselves, in our own corner; we can't even weep together, together, as a whole people) (*Itogi* – Sum Totals). Frug's Jewish patriotism had no hint of boastfulness. His love for the Jewish nation is reflected in sorrow at the misfortunes that have befallen it, mixed with faith in a better future or, as Portnova puts it, 'the combination of romantic hope with brutal realism'.<sup>31</sup>

*An admirer of Napoleon (Poklonnik Napoleona) (translated by Brian Cooper)*

There is the tombstone which bears the inscription: 'Here lies Israel-Moses, son of Yehuda, a Levite'. Israel Moses, or Sruel-Moishe, came into the world in one of the unattractive little houses of the colony. For 63 years he trod life's path and covered only some 300–400 sazhen<sup>32</sup> – precisely the distance between the log-house where he was born and the knoll beneath which he lay to rest after his long arduous journey. Sruel-Moishe was a squat, rotund little man with a thick jet-black beard and a broad muscular face, who stammered slightly when he grew excited. He was married three times, first at 13 years of age and for the last time at 36. He served for 30 years as the village policeman attached to the rural district office, safely survived the scurvy and cholera that raged in the region (in 1847–48 and 1853), cut and threshed with his own hands during his lifetime, by his own reckoning, about 500 desyatins<sup>33</sup> of wheat, rye etc. and died in the firm belief that there was and would be no one wiser, mightier and nobler than the emperor Napoleon I. Nobody knows where Sruel-Moishe picked up his information about the French emperor and on what he actually based his belief about his wisdom, might and nobility. Perhaps he would not have been able to answer that sort of question himself, but this did not in the least prevent him from defending his belief on every conceivable occasion. Sruel-Moishe had, in fact, an extremely vague conception of the road that his beloved emperor travelled, of the events that are closely associated with his name, and of the sad fate that befell him at the end of his celebrated epic journey. In the chronicle which Sruel-Moishe maintained, the French emperor appeared in all manner of situations of aggressive and defensive politics, quite often performing feats of an utterly legendary nature, but always remaining unfailingly mighty and impeccably noble. I could not help recalling this strange inclination of Sruel-Moishe's for 'politics' precisely because of its strangeness. As he had been born in the colony and been a policeman since the age of 33, Sruel-Moishe was a direct, natural product of that walk of life which, in the 80 years that the agricultural colonies had existed in Novorossia, had produced a certain type of Jewish farmer, very far removed from any philosophizing on abstract subjects in general and especially political ones.<sup>34</sup> The press-gang, the soldiers' sons owing military service, and the birch, these were the only terms around which all tales of a recruit's life revolved in this environment and to which all notions of 'politics' were effectively confined. As regards the manifestations of ordinary everyday life the Jewish colonist is a copy of his peasant neighbour. The land and the tools with which it is worked, the 'beasts' and the constant concern for them, these are the main items to which the thoughts and attention of the colonist are directed and which are the source of all his joys and sorrows. True, his 'bond' with the land is not yet as firmly established as that of his peasant neighbour. Two or three years of crop failure in succession and the general loss of cattle from disease that usually follows them disturb the Jewish farmer's routine and shake him to his foundations to a considerably greater extent than is apparent in the peasant milieu. However, this is fostered by reasons that lie, not

in any particular characteristics inherent in the Jewish colonist, but in certain economic and administrative conditions which, from the very first moments when the class of Jewish farmers came into being in Novorossia, placed the Jewish farmer in an exceptional and far from advantageous position. Yet in ordinary everyday life, as I have already said, the Jewish colonist is in no way different from his peasant neighbour.

Such a colonist was Sruel-Moishe. The position of policeman could not harm his interests as a farmer, because it did not deprive him of virtually a single hour of his work in the fields. This will become clear if I say that during ploughing and reaping almost no council meetings usually take place at which the work of the policeman, as the tax collector and guardian of law and order, is overridingly in evidence. As for internal work on the tasks of village self-government, although it is carried out constantly by the *shultse*<sup>35</sup> or one of his two *beisits-ern*<sup>36</sup>, it is of a sort that in no way requires the obligatory presence of the policeman. The *shultse* or his *beisiter* would just sit there of a hot summer's noonday and tap away at the beads of a large, ink-stained abacus, working out the totals for tax assessments or checking the figures for revenue from quit-rent account items. The office room, decorated with portraits of members of the Imperial family and two or three ministers of state, and with various 'tables', 'charts' and written lists covered with long, narrow columns of numbers, was quiet and fairly cool thanks to the curtains drawn at the windows on its sunny side. The bead-tapping 'boss' would raise his head at times and, turning to the door into the hall, would yell: 'Mendl, ho Mendl!' 'What is it?' would come the reply in a child's voice, and Mendl, Sruel-Moishe's son, would emerge from the hall with a sleepy face and dishevelled hair. 'What?' 'Did you fall asleep again?' the 'boss' would say to him. 'Go and fetch some cold water to quench my thirst, go to the well and draw some fresh ... What a thirst I have!' or he would say: 'Go to my house, Mendl, and find out whether our people are back from the fields, and ask how many sheaves there are still left in the cornfield that's beside Tiaginskaia road. Oh, and ask them at the same time to hang out to dry the breast-band and reins that I tarred yesterday'.

And the 'boss' would become absorbed again in his abacus and calculations. In this way matters were managed without the presence of Sruel-Moishe, who was at that time in the field doing his work, as were the other residents. He did not differ in any way from any of his fellow-villagers, unless one counts his incomprehensible inclination to politics, with its total and unswerving admiration for the political genius of Napoleon I, and then his minor passion for the reputation of a jurist or 'legal eagle', as residents of the colony jocularly nicknamed him. 'The law says' – that was the usual device to which Sruel-Moishe resorted whenever he had occasion to argue about some problem or other concerning the colony's self-government, and to the policeman's credit it should be noted that, as he had long years of experience behind him and, furthermore, knew the personal characteristics of the most immediate authorities who controlled the colonists' destinies, he was rarely ever wrong. To make up for it, Sruel-Moishe would become inimitably comic in the matter of his other weakness, Napoleon I.

For example, once in an argument with Reb Gersh, a man of the strictest devotion and piety, he ventured to express the opinion that, if Napoleon and not Nebuchadnezzar had been the king of ancient Babylon, the temple of Zion might still exist today, because Napoleon was too wise and noble to bring himself to destroy such a mighty building.

'What!', exclaimed the indignant Reb Gersh, 'you've taken leave of your senses, Sruel-Moishe! I like that, the temple would not have been destroyed! So in your opinion it comes to this, that the Ninth of Av,<sup>37</sup> when even the Eternal One Himself weeps, could have been eliminated by Napoleon and... and... But what can one say to such an ignoramus and atheist as you!' And Reb Gersh waved his hand and turned away, unable to control his emotion.

Reb Gersh's indignation was entirely natural, for he profoundly believed that all the wisdom and might of all earthly rulers were pitiful and insignificant compared with the 'hand of God' alone, and that consequently the point was not who was at war with Israel, but that the temple of Zion *had* to be destroyed, and no Napoleons or even Alexanders of Macedonia would have been able to preserve it.

The argument occurred on one of those fine July evenings, on the stone steps by the doors of the synagogue, where the *minyan*<sup>38</sup> had begun to gather for evening prayer. Along the wide street, which was in places overgrown with grass, the cows and goats that were returning from pasture toiled along, filling the air with their lowing and bleating, and among them noisily bustled the lads, who were puffing and panting from their running and the heat, most of them barefoot and in short tattered trousers. Directly opposite the synagogue building, a dramatic scene of sorts was being enacted in Tevi Khaikin's homestead: a brindled cow, as she crossed the yard, sank her teeth into a child's short-tailed shirt that had been hung out to dry on the garden fence and, chewing inanely, dragged it along with her in the direction of the stalls. Tevi's wife, who was standing at the door, busy at the time putting a bag of curd under the press, was about to rush to recover the shirt, but at that same moment a calf broke loose from its tether, ran up to its mother and began to suckle ravenously, which plunged the thoroughly flustered mistress of the house into despair. Moti Khaliper's cart piled high with sheaves was trundling along the same street, and the driver's shouts of reprimand at the weary horses were mingled with the lowing of the cows and the voices of the youths scurrying round and about. Some young lad was clambering up the wall of the public barn built inside the synagogue fence in an attempt to reach his hand into a nest of house-martins nestling right under the eaves. Twice already he had contrived to fall to the ground and badly bruise his shoulder, but each time he set to work again with increasing vigour. A lively flock of sparrows moved busily about the yard, one minute descending and hopping around on the grass, the next soaring suddenly up into the air with a song. From somewhere to the left came the thud-thud of the threshing stone, and from the other direction the hum of the winnowing fan. The dying rays of the sun illumined this whole motley scene, tingeing with gold the long grey beard of Reb Gersh and leaving their reflection on the badly crumpled yet still shining cap-peak of Sruel-Moishe, – those two who were arguing at the time about the might and nobility of Napoleon I.

Which of them was right they simply failed to establish, either then or on subsequent occasions, as was the case also with many other questions, to which they found a single common answer, each beneath one of the tombstones that dot the small cheerless graveyard.

### Notes on contributor

Brian Cooper is a translator and an Affiliated Lecturer in the Department of Slavonic Studies of Cambridge University specializing in teaching Russian language translation.

### Notes

1. Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, *The Tsars and the Jews: Reform, Reaction and Anti-Semitism in Imperial Russia, 1772–1917* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1993), 2, 34.
2. Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jews* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3.
3. Löwe, *The Tsars and the Jews*, 6, 62.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.74–5.
5. Brian Horowitz, 'Poet and Nation: Fame and Suffering in Shimon Frug's Life and Works' (paper presented at conference in Moscow, 2005), 4–5.

6. S.G. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa: Vospominaniia, ocherki, fel'etony* [Judaic fig-tree: Recollections, sketches, feuilletons], compiled with an introductory article and commentary by N.A. Portnova (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995), 21.
7. *Ibid.*, 9; also *Ėntsiklopedičeskii slovar'* [Encyclopaedic dictionary], ed. I. Andreevskii (St Petersburg: I.A. Efron, 1890–; reprinted 1990–), vol. 72, 824.
8. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 29.
10. Horowitz, 'Poet and Nation', 12–13; also Löwe, *The Tsars and the Jews*, 34, 37.
11. Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002), 105.
12. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 12.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Ben-Ami, 'Frug (*Vospominaniia* [Recollections])', *Rassvet* [Dawn], 10–11, September 20, 1917, 16.
15. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 20.
16. *Ibid.*, 14.
17. D. Miron, 'Introduction', *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik*, ed. and trans. Adar Hadari (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xvii.
18. Horowitz, 'Poet and Nation', 14.
19. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 13–14.
20. *Ėntsiklopedičeskii slovar'*, 825.
21. A.M. Skabichevskii, *Istoriia novejšeĭ russkoĭ literatury 1848–1903 gg.* [History of the latest Russian literature 1848–1903], 5th ed. (St Petersburg: F. Pavlenkova, 1903), 499.
22. *Ėntsiklopedičeskii slovar'*, 825.
23. Horowitz, 'Poet and Nation', 21 and 3–4.
24. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 19.
25. Horowitz, 'Poet and Nation', 9.
26. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 18. Also see *Ėntsiklopedičeskii slovar'*, 824–5.
27. Horowitz, 'Poet and Nation', 19.
28. *Ibid.*, 20.
29. Richard S. Levy, *Anti-Semitism*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 345.
30. Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 20.
31. *Ibid.*, 30.
32. 700–933 yards, 639–852 metres. The *sazhen'* is equal to 2.13 metres.
33. 1350 acres, 545 hectares. The *desyatina* is equal to 2.7 acres.
34. Portnova observes of Frug: 'Unlike the theoreticians of "spiritual Zionism", Frug, the poet and man of letters, takes account of all the unpredictable complexity and spontaneity of the people's life and is far from theorizing' (Frug, *Iudeiškaia smokovnitsa*, 30).
35. The *shultse* [village headman] is rather on a par with the Russian *starosta*.
36. Assessors
37. This is the saddest day of the Jewish year, marked by a fast commemorating the destruction of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.
38. The *minyān* (number) is a quorum of 10 Jewish males over the age of 13, who constitute a community necessary for public acts of worship.