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Ethnicity and small/itinerant trade

Jews and Tatars as traders in Finland, 1880–1910

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Tatars and Jews were engaged in peddling and petty trade on the fairs and markets in the Grand Duchy of Finland. The heavily regulated small trade and peddling as an activity thus offered an arena for cultural encounter between local society and these two ethnic groups, the presence in Finland of which is explained by the incorporation of Finland into the multi-ethnic Russian Empire in 1809. The (partly) itinerant groups were often ascribed the role of "the other" in a non-itinerant society, a tendency which was strengthened towards the late 19th century as a picture of a unified and ethnically homogeneous nation was being constructed as part of the Finnish nation-building-process. Jews and the Tatars not only represented ethnic groups which had been relatively unknown in Finland prior to the 1860's, but were furthermore perceived as "the other" due to their religion.

This paper examines the interaction between Jewish and Tatar small traders and the local communities on fairs and markets in the Finnish Grand Duchy in the late 19th and early 20th century. Focus lies on how the two ethnic groups utilized itinerant trade as a means of livelihood and on how they interacted with the local and regional consumer on the market arena. The paper also examines how the Finnish authorities tried to regulate and control the trading activities of the two groups and how the and their activities were viewed by the majority population in the local communities.