The theme of Jews & Empires covered several thousand years of history in much of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. To add to its diversity, the Institute attracted a highly interdisciplinary group of scholars of rabbinics, literature, history, religion, politics, cultural, and medieval studies. Yet certain principles helped to organize this cornucopia of possibilities. For one, Institute Fellows all recognized two basic divisions among the many empires under consideration: land versus sea. While not absolute, land empires — such as the Persian and Russian empires — often created governing structures that differed from sea empires — such as the Roman and British empires. Other differences followed, relating to cultural and religious exchanges, political conflict, textual borrowings, and interpretations. Over the course of the year, Fellows developed a common core of shared knowledge and an ability to speak to issues across centuries and geographies. This year's Annual reflects that range and inherent dialogue. Organized around the basic land /sea difference, the essays bring to bear distinctive perspectives that illuminate multifaceted views of Jews’ relationship to empire.

Mikhail Krutikov, a scholar of Slavic Studies and Jewish Studies, a man who has lived in three 20th century empires — Russian, British, and American — brought his impressive erudition and knowledge of literatures written in many languages to shape the weekly workshops. Joining him were other scholars of literature, Eitan Bar-Yosef, Jindřich Toman, and postdoctoral fellow Sara Feldman, from Israel and the University of Michigan. A strong and vigorous cohort of rabbinics scholars, Mira Balberg, Alexei Sivertsev, Gil Klein, and Reuven Kiperwasser, from Israel and the United States, introduced exciting new approaches to studying Jewish religious practices. From explorations of Roman city planning’s impact on rabbis to the semiotics of Byzantine religious art, these scholars opened enriching interpretations of late antiquity. Historians Joshua Cole and Jeffrey Veidlinger undertook far darker analyses, focusing respectively on anti-Jewish violence in Algeria and Ukraine, while Devi Mays chose to explore Constantinople as it emerged from the empire-shattering years of World War I. Deborah Yalen and Zvi Gitelman shared a common fascination with Soviet empire, looking at its reach into realms of ethnography and post-1991 Jewish communal organization. Claude Stuczynski from Israel added yet another empire for consideration, the Spanish empire; and another time period, the early modern era.

Given this rich diversity, several colloquiums highlighted opportunities for Fellows to engage faculty and students from the University of Michigan. A spectacular public lecture series during four freezing February evenings at the JCC of Metropolitan Detroit in West Bloomfield introduced enthusiastic audiences to ramifications of the theme of Jews and Empires. In this mode, the essays in the Annual present the fruits of a lively year at the Institute.

We invite you to join the conversation.

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