



הקתדרה ללימודים רוסיים ע"ש תמרה וסבלי גרינברג Tamara and Saveli Grinberg Chair in Russian Studies

The Department of Russian and Slavic Studies and Tamara and Saveli Grinberg Chair in Russian Studies
(The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

invite you to the lecture

“Factories of Angels”: Stigmatizing Childcare Practices of the Urban Poor in the Late Russian Empire

by

Ekaterina Oleshkevich

(the lecture will be given in Russian)

Wednesday, April 29, 12:30 Jerusalem | 11:30 CET | 13:30 MSK

via Zoom: <https://huji.zoom.us/j/87148733370?pwd=FhmoFoHZO98rLmTXZMwfYN8jBazOmO.1>

Toward the turn of the twentieth century, baby farms—known in the east-European context as “factories of angels”—became a focus of intense moral panic in the Russian Empire. These institutions, which were paid boarding facilities for infants of economically underprivileged, often unmarried mothers, were notorious for high infant mortality rates. In response, Russian and Polish public discourse increasingly depicted baby farms as sites of neglect, cruelty, and even infanticide, crystallized in the figures of the violent caretaker and the indifferent mother. In this lecture, I examine the social and cultural origins of these representations against the backdrop of rapid urbanization, shifting labor patterns, and the consolidation of bourgeois norms of motherhood. I argue that baby farms largely reflected common childcare practices of the poor rather than exceptional violence. High infant mortality stemmed primarily from structural conditions—poverty, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to breastfeeding—rather than deliberate violence. Paradoxically, the reliance on hired care often signaled maternal concern rather than indifference to a child’s fate. By tracing how ordinary working-class women came to be defined as moral and legal threats, I demonstrate how the criminalization of baby farms reinforced class hierarchies and imposed new gendered ideals of family and care in late imperial Russia.



Ekaterina Oleshkevich is a Mandel Postdoctoral Fellow at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She received her Ph.D. from Bar-Ilan University, with the dissertation titled “History, Culture, and the Experience of Jewish Childhood in Late Imperial Russia.” Her research examines childhood, family, and gender in the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Poland within the broader context of the empire’s economic, social, and cultural transformations. Her most recent publications include “Hired Childcare and Changing Maternal Perceptions among the Urban Poor: Baby Farming in the Western Lands of Late Imperial Russia,” *Gender & History* (2025) and “Overlooked Modernization: Traditional Heder and the Educational Ideals of Ordinary Jews in Late Imperial Russia,” *Jewish Social Studies* (forthcoming).