In previous chapters, we have explored the secularization of Hebrew in a long-term framework including medieval Spain and the French Enlightenment. This chapter considers in greater detail a narrower and in some ways more striking change: the point at which modern Hebrew literature emerged as art, between the outbreak of the pogroms in 1881 and the 1917 revolution. This renascence is arguably the most important development in Jewish culture since the Bible. Hebrew literature was the main cultural spur to the rise of modern Jewish nationalism. The Russian Jewish population prior to 1881 had been moving toward increased acculturation within the Tsarist empire and had hopes of emancipation and civil rights. They were deeply wounded, psychologically as well as economically, by Russian government policies legislated in a futile reactionary struggle to adapt to major changes in socio-economic conditions and the international balance of power.

In common with other creative groups of Hebrew artists prior to 1948 – the prophets, the Tannaim, the poets of the “golden age” in medieval Muslim Spain – artistic breakthrough in the 1881–1917 may be shown to coincide and to be connected with a turning point in the dominant empire. The literature of 1881–1917 continued the pattern of these earlier periods. Crisis in the Tsarist empire led to heightened Jewish national identity. As in the earlier periods, Hebrew literature is, among other things, a record of imperial upheaval, social and cultural metamorphosis, and wanton violence. The very fact of writing Hebrew itself expressed, or implied, a strong current of religious-nationalist feeling. The main difference between Hebrew literature in the Tsarist empire and its antecedents is its predominantly secular character.
This chapter sets out the historical and literary background to Hebrew literature of 1881–1917, describes some of its salient qualities and influences, particularly in Russian literature, and interprets reasons for its artistic distinctiveness. It will be argued that this literature, in common with contemporary Russian literature of the pre-1881 era, might be interpreted *ipso facto* as an act of subversion. It represents on one level a rejection of Tsarist authority, an assertion of Jewish national feeling and a declaration of independence from the empire. In doing so, it engaged in a dynamic relationship with the dominant literary culture, adapting and assimilating many of its features while aiming at a distinctively Jewish mode of expression. Hebrew grew both as an ethnic branch of Russian literature and as a counterculture.¹

Historians are generally agreed that the Jewish problem in Tsarist Russia was inseparable from the general weaknesses of the empire. In a psychological sense, furthermore, the image of the Jew in Russian society and culture betrayed Russia’s distorted self-image under the pressure of the need for rapid change. For to see the pogroms as isolated anti-Semitic outbursts is historically incorrect. They were, in fact, only a small fraction of the general unrest in Russia during the period, a symptom of the breakdown of Tsarist authority (Fuller 1985, Klier and Lambroza 1992). Challenged by the intelligentsia and the working masses alike, the government created the first modern police state, with extensive use of spying, repression, and terror. In its dying days, despite an improving economy, the Tsarist empire had trouble feeding its large and growing population. It had the largest standing army in the world – about two and a half million – but to a degree unprecedented in history, the army was used to control and crush the internal opposition. In 1903, when the second wave of pogroms began, about one-third of its infantry and two-thirds of its cavalry were used against its own citizens (Fuller 1985).

Nevertheless, the Jews more than most other ethnic groups suffered under Tsarist rule. Even prior to 1881 the Russian Jews were burdened with countless laws and restrictions. Most prominent was their confinement within the so-called Pale of Settlement on the western frontier of the empire. The pogroms brought about an “ideological metamorphosis” away from adaptation and merging with Russia and in favor of mass emigration: “spontaneously in almost every town of any size societies were founded for the colonization of Palestine” (Frankel 1981, p. 49). The May Laws, passed in May 1882, which officially blamed the Jews for bringing the pogroms on their own heads, accentuated further their exclusion from Russian society. From then on, they were subjected to