

## **Pogrom**

### Definition

Anti-Jewish riots punctuate recorded history, but they came to be referred to as pogroms, which derives from the Russian verb *pogromit'* (to smash or break), only with the waves of anti-Jewish violence that swept through the Russian empire in 1881–1884, 1903–1906, and 1917–1920. The first usage of “pogrom” in Russia described the violence following Holy Week in Odessa in 1871. Even after widespread use of the term following the riots of 1881–1882, *pogrom* still competed with other contemporary descriptions—*demonstratsii* (demonstrations), *draki* (fights), and most commonly in official documents and the press, *besporiadki* (disturbances or riots). Although in Russian the word pogrom ultimately evolved during the Soviet period to include violence against a wide array of ethnic groups, in the West between 1882 and the 1960s the term normally referred to events involving Jewish victims. Historians have subsequently used the term to describe anti-Jewish violence in a wide variety of locations, from ancient Alexandria to medieval and early modern Russian and Ukraine, to 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and Central Europe. [Klier 1992, 13, 34fn; van der Horst 2002). Although pogroms occurred under a variety of circumstances, in all cases the victims have been civilians who were targeted for their ethnicity.

The term pogromists (pogromshchiki in Russian) also entered the political vocabulary during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to denote the implacable and uncaring anti-Semites among whom Jews increasingly believed they lived—it came into common parlance primarily by way of Chaim Nachman Bialik’s Hebrew poem, “In the City of the Slaughter,” written in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and translated into Russian by the Zionist leader Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky. The poem, as noted at the time, mostly ignored the pogromists themselves and focused on the shame of Jewish passivity. Scholars subsequently attempted to characterize the pogromists and now maintain they came from a variety of backgrounds. Historians of Russia have identified transients and the unemployed in some pogroms, railway workers and peasants in others, and even the well to-do as both perpetrators and bystanders.

The outbreak of war and revolution in the Russian borderlands added the military and paramilitary bands to the list of perpetrators. The pogrom waves of 1917–1920 were carried out primarily by marauding White Army units seeking a restoration of the monarchy after the

Russian revolution and Ukrainian soldiers subordinated to Symon Petliura or regional Ukrainian warlords during the civil war. By contrast, it was the civilian neighbors of the victims that committed the pogroms that broke out in formerly Soviet occupied territory in Eastern Europe immediately following the June, 1941 German attack on the Soviet Union. Perpetrators included doctors, lawyers, and even priests [Gross 2001].

Pogroms have varying levels of violence. Historians indicate a steadily rising level of violence in pogroms between 1881 and 1921, with the general pattern moving from large cities in the earlier years to smaller towns in the later years. Pogroms waves generally follow the lines of communication and transportation. For this reason, the pogroms of modern Russia and in the rest of Europe could spread much more quickly than the sporadic and isolated outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in the pre-modern world. The pogroms in Russia during 1881-1884 commonly spread from large cities and towns of the Pale of Settlement to the surrounding smaller towns and villages connected by rail. A similar pattern characterizes the spread of anti-Jewish riots in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and the anti-Jewish riots broke out in Central Europe during the revolutions of 1848 as a response to Jewish emancipation. [Hoffmann, Bergmann, and Smith 2002] . Victims in these pogroms did not exceed several hundred.

Modern newspapers, political parties, radio, and militaries accelerated the potential for the spread of pogroms. The pogroms that occasionally erupted in the interwar period in the multiethnic borderlands of independent Poland created mayhem, but were not particularly deadly [Żyndul 1994]. The 1941 pogrom wave, on the other hand, claimed approximately 25,000 lives. In the Ukrainian and Polish violence following World War I, approximately 60,000 Jews died [Abramson 1999; Gergel 1951].

### Pogrom Causes

Scholars have adduced a variety of reasons why pogroms occur. One factor is political chaos. Today's historians view the pogroms of the late 19th and early 20th century as resulting from the general weakness of the state in many outlying areas of the Russian empire, the small and generally poorly trained internal police forces, large variations in the willingness of local authorities to use force to preserve public order, and important economic, social, and political tensions simmering throughout the empire [Aronson 1990; Judge 1992]. For example, the violence that took place in cities and towns (primarily in the Ukrainian lands) starting in 1881

followed the general disorder in the aftermath of the assassination of Czar Alexander II. The pogroms of 1903–1906 occurred in the context of a weakened absolutist Russian monarchy and a humiliating military loss to Japan in 1905, which led to widespread unrest in the empire’s major cities. The neighbour-on-neighbour violence of 1941 in the eastern Polish borderlands occurred under a condition of general lawlessness once Soviet authorities had withdrawn.

Another factor is state action. Contemporary observers of the first waves of pogroms in the Russian empire (1881–1884 and 1903–1906) often maintained the violence was organized, inspired, or otherwise tolerated by central authorities [Davitt 1903]. Modern historians now dispute the assessment of official pre-meditation but agree that failure by censors to restrict the anti-Semitic press and especially the dissemination of ritual murder accusations during the Easter/Passover holidays stoked the impression of official complicity [Cite].

A third set of factors involves the characteristics of perpetrators and victims. By the 1870s economic competition between non-Jewish and Jewish workers and merchants within the Pale of Settlement could not be attenuated by further restrictions on Jewish residency and employment. The Jewish enlightenment and government policy increased participation in secular educational institutions, which in turn created expectations for increased social status, mobility, and demands for citizenship rights. Non-Jews often understood these demands as a challenge to the ethnic power structure. For example, official Russian explanations of the early pogroms stressed Jewish “exploitation” of the population, self-imposed separatism, and a Jewish monopoly over the rural liquor trade as the primary causes of pogrom violence. Non-Jewish liberal intellectuals blamed the low cultural level of the non-Jewish masses [Klier 1992, 34]. For Kopstein and Wittenberg [2011] the 1941 pogroms in Poland were an attempt by those threatened by the prospect of Jewish equality to put Jews back in their inferior position in the social and political hierarchy.

The rituals of pogroms tell us a great deal about their causes and the motives of the perpetrators. Pogroms in Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century frequently built upon much older traditions of anti-Jewish violence during Easter as punishment for having supposedly crucified Jesus. These pogroms often involved vandalizing synagogues, Jewish-owned businesses, and taverns as punishment for Jewish religious “fanaticism” and economic “exploitation.” The violence commonly went beyond property damage and involved mutilation, humiliation, and rape. The pogroms at the outset of World War II sometimes combined rituals of religious and political humiliation. This included groups of Jews being frog-marched by their

neighbors and paramilitary forces to Jewish cemeteries, where they were made to perform “mock funerals” for Lenin while carrying Torah scrolls and singing the Zionist anthem ha'tikvah. In both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pogrom perpetrators often extorted money from Jewish communities or looted their property after driving them away or killing them.

### Consequences

The consequences of pogroms are as variegated as their causes. The 1881–1884 pogroms in Russia produced the first modern wave of immigration to Palestine, and was a crucial event spurring the founding of a Zionist movement. The next wave, in 1903–1906, led directly to large scale emigration of Jews to North America. For those who remained in Russia, the widespread sense of vulnerability diminished the appeal of integration and acculturation and led to the creation of Jewish “self-defense” units in some cities. These deterred violence in some circumstances and increased it in others [Lambroza 1992]. Russian pogroms rendered the soil especially fertile for various forms of Jewish nationalism, whether in its Zionist or Yiddishist versions, and enhanced the attraction of revolutionary socialism. Internationally, the era of pogroms solidified Jewish and non-Jewish consensus regarding the discriminatory nature of Russian imperial policies toward the country’s Jews, and confirmed for many the dim prospects for Jewish life in the region. The impact of the pogroms of June and July 1941, in the wake of Operation Barbarossa, was to inure local populations to anti-Jewish violence, thus facilitating collaboration in the “final solution” when the Nazi government turned its full attention to the destruction of East European Jewry.

Although the nature and causes of anti-Jewish violence in other times and places may be different, such outbreaks have often been understood by Jews and non-Jews through the category of pogroms [Levitt/Shaffir 1985; van der Horst 2002]. Scholars and journalists now refer to inter-communal violence and ethnic riots as “pogroms” in regions as different as Armenia, Indonesia, and India [Sidel 2006].

### **Bibliography**

H. Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government. Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times 1917–1920*, Cambridge (MA) 1999.

- I. M. Aronson, *Troubled Waters. The Origins of the 1881 Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia*, Pittsburgh 1990.
- M. Davitt, *Within the Pale. The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecutions in Russia*, New York 1903 (1975).
- N. Gergel, *The Pogroms in the Ukraine in 1918–1921*, in: *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 6 (1951), 237–252.
- J. T. Gross, *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2001.
- C. Hoffmann, W. Bergmann, and H.W. Smith, *Exclusionary Violence: Antisemitic Riots in Modern German History*, Ann Arbor 2002.
- E. H. Judge, *Easter in Kishinev. Anatomy of a Pogrom*, New York 1992.
- J. D. Klier, *The Pogrom Paradigm in Modern History*, in: J. D. Klier/S. Lambroza (eds.), *Pogroms. Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge 1992, 13–38.
- J. S. Kopstein/J. Wittenberg, *Deadly Communities. Local Political Milieus and the Persecution of Jews in Occupied Poland*, in: *Comparative Political Studies* 44 (2001) 3, 259–283.
- S. Lambroza, *The Pogroms of 1903–1906*, in: J. D. Klier/S. Lambroza (eds.), *Pogroms. Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge 2002, 195–247.
- C. H. Levitt/W. Saffir, *The Riot at Christie Pitts*, Toronto 1987.
- J. T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad. Religious Violence in Indonesia*, Ithaca 2006.
- P. van der Horst, *The First Pogrom. Alexandria 38 CE*, in: *European Review* 10 (2002) 4, 469–484.
- J. Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935–1937 (Anti-Jewish Outbreaks in Poland 1935- 1937)*, Warsaw 1994.