



Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History

Steven J. Zipperstein

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Separating historical fact from fantasy, an acclaimed historian retells the story of Kishinev, a riot that transformed the course of twentieth-century Jewish history.

So shattering were the aftereffects of Kishinev, the rampage that broke out in late-Tsarist Russia in April 1903, that one historian remarked that it was “nothing less than a prototype for the Holocaust itself.” In three days of violence, 49 Jews were killed and 600 raped or wounded, while more than 1,000 Jewish-owned houses and stores were ransacked and destroyed. Recounted in lurid detail by newspapers throughout the Western world, and covered sensationally by America’s Hearst press, the pre-Easter attacks seized the imagination of an international public, quickly becoming the prototype for what would become known as a “pogrom,” and providing the impetus for efforts as varied as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the NAACP. Using new evidence culled from Russia, Israel, and Europe, distinguished historian Steven J. Zipperstein’s wide-ranging book brings historical insight and clarity to a much-misunderstood event that would do so much to transform twentieth-century Jewish life and beyond.

Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History Details

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From Reader Review Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History for online ebook

Shirley Revill says

Exceptionally well written and thought provoking book. Very highly recommended. I would give more than five stars if I could.

Kathy Reback says

While I learned so much about this event and the context in which it occurred, I can give it only three stars as the writing and organization of the book were challenging. I gather this was excerpted out of a much longer academic endeavor. Better transitions and clarifications would have been helpful. Also, the footnotes did not contain any information other than where to look. He makes some pretty big claims which we have to take on faith. Still, our coed book club had an excellent discussion on this.

Cheryl says

I had never heard about the riot of Kishinev until reading this book. Mr. Zipperstein has written a well researched book about the anti-Semitic sentiment in Russia. I am grateful to Goodreads Giveaway for being able to learn about this history. It gave me insight into how the stage was being set for the pogroms of Hitler many years later in WWII. We should learn from history and not be nonchalant about history possibly repeating itself, ie) North Korea and Russia today.

Steven Z. says

At a time when American society is confronted with pictures of immigrants incarcerated at the US border with Mexico it is a good time to step back and try and understand why people choose to flee their homelands and come to America. In the case of people arriving on our southern borders their motivations are diverse from economic hardship to fear of death. These reasons are in a sense universal when examined from a historical perspective. Earlier in American history we witnessed a flood of Jewish immigrants, roughly two million from Eastern Europe and Russia between 1890 and 1914. This has had a tremendous impact on our history and growth as a nation. This mass migration was due in large part because of the anti-Semitic policies of the Tsarist government that resulted in years of persecution, and violent acts against Jews. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century these acts, labeled “pogroms” seemed to occur on a regular basis fostering the need for Jewish families to begin a chain of migration to America and other areas of the world. Perhaps the most famous pogrom occurred in 1903 in the provincial city of Kishinev located at the edge of the Russian Empire which is the subject of Steven J. Zipperstein’s fascinating and informative new book POGROM: KISHINEV AND THE TILT OF HISTORY.

The term “pogrom” enters the western lexicon toward the end of the 19th century in Russia as violence and scapegoating of Jews proliferates. It would be invoked in numerous towns and villages reaching a crescendo between 1918 and 1920 as 100,000 Jews may have been victimized as they were thought to be Bolsheviks. Jews were supposed to be wealthy, but the vast majority lived in poverty. They were thought to be well educated and involved in commerce, but what the Russians resented the most was their secrecy and refusal to be absorbed into the larger society.

The accusation against Jews that seems to have been the foundation of many pogroms was that of the “ritual killing of Christian children” during the Passover holiday under government sanction. For an interesting novel that highlights this topic see Bernard Malamud’s *THE FIXER* which presents the major issues that Zipperstein discusses in a fictional format.

The Kishinev pogrom was seen as shorthand for barbarism, “for the behavior akin to the worst medieval atrocities.” It would become the only “significant event embraced by all sectors of the severely fractured Russian Jewish scene.” However, as the author argues throughout the narrative, though agreement was reached concerning the horrors that took place, it became an agreement wrought with myths, half-truths, and outright distortions. The strength of Zipperstein’s presentation is the dissection of the myths and other components by explaining what occurred in the spring of 1903 in the Kishinev district. The author carefully examines all aspects of the tragedy from its causes, the persons responsible, the victims and survivors, and the implication for Jewish history in the future. Kishinev would become the epitome of evil in the west, a jarring glimpse of what the 20th century would hold in store.

The theme of book rests on how “history is made and remade, what is retained and elided, and why.” The author examines how “one particular moment managed to chisel onto contemporary Jewish history and beyond that it held meaning even for those who never heard of the town, know nothing of its details, and nonetheless draw lessons from it.”

Forgeries and myths surround the history of the pogrom that greatly impacted how people who participated and survived viewed what they experienced, what had actually transpired, as well as how it was perceived years later. For example; there was supposedly a letter from the Russian Minister of the Interior, V.K. Plehve instructing the local authorities not to intercede once the massacre began. This is untrue, no letter existed, though a forgery may have appeared. Another example revolves around who wrote and was responsible for the dissemination of the *PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION* which accused Jews of a worldwide conspiracy to dominate all people and their lives. It was said to have been a creation of the Russian secret police, the Okhrana in 1897, when in fact it was most likely the work of Pavel Krushevan, a publisher, novelist and owner of the newspaper *Bessarabets* which made the scurrilous lies of the *PROTOCOLS* available to the public.

Zipperstein’s sources have been mined thoroughly ranging from the literary works of Alexander Pushkin to Serge S. Urussov, the Governor-General of Bessarabia’s diaries. The two most important sources are Hayyam Nahman Bialik, the Jewish national poet who wrote, “In the City of Killing,” describing the massacre; and Michael Davitt, an Irish revolutionary and a reporter for Randolph Hearst’s *New York American*, who would go on to write *WITHIN THE PALE: THE TRUE STORY OF THE ANTI-SEMITIC PERSECUTIONS IN RUSSIA*, published in 1903. Zipperstein examines the lives of these two important figures, how they went about their research and who they interviewed. Excerpts of their work dot the narrative as Zipperstein dissects what occurred hour by hour and both men reach a controversial conclusion that Jewish men were weak and cowards.

Bialik’s poem, “In the City of Killing” has impacted Jewish history up until today and even Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has referred to it in his speeches. Zipperstein argues that Bialik conflated his entire life experience, particularly his childhood with the plight of Jews – one of helplessness. His “rage leads him to construct the Jews of Kishinev as abject, and in the process to reshape and reconstruct his own identity.” The poem recreates the violence, rape, and plunder perpetrated against the Jews, but the core of the poem is a devastating conclusion concerning Jewish male cowardice. The appearance of the poem would overshadow what had transpired as it focused on the moral failings of Kishinev’s men and soon it became “shorthand for the utter vulnerability of the Jewish people, their devastation of soul and body alike.” Zipperstein examines the poem line by line and concludes that Bialik’s approach is literary poetry, while Davitt’s account is accurate as a whole and is first rate journalism, in addition to being reliable history.

Zipperstein asks why did the pogrom occur in Kishinev, a town that was on the outskirts of the Russian empire. He concludes that a number of events, thought processes, and socio-economic relationships are responsible. First, though day to day relations among the population seemed amiable, the peasants felt exploited by Jews engaging in a significant amount of commerce. Second, in the spring of 1903 agricultural prices were on the decline reducing the supply of money. Third, right wing elements were obsessed with Jewish visibility in the town. Four, the supposed “ritual killings” in Dubossary, a town near Kishinev a few months before the pogrom. Five, the fanning of anti-Semitic flames by Pavel Krusheran and his newspaper. Lastly, Pogroms were seen as a reasonable response to a pariah people as rumors of ritual killing swirled. Keeping in mind that in 1897 the population of the Kishinev district was 280,000 of which 54,910 were Jewish; and of the city’s 39 factories, 29 were owned by Jews could help explain people’s exacerbated feelings reactions once the violence spread.

Zipperstein also dissects the political implications of the pogrom. He explores how it was used by different political factions for their own ends be they Zionists, socialists, Labor, Bundists etc. Many saw the pogrom as an opportunity to foster immigration to Palestine, others were resigned to trying to survive in Russia as they hoped the violence was spent. The pogrom also touched off a nasty debate in American politics as the pogrom was compared to the lynchings of blacks in the south. The American left used Kishinev as vehicle to make Americans aware of the treatment of blacks. This also created a schism within the black communities because of its response to Kishinev and dealing with their own issues. Interestingly, as Zipperstein describes at the end of the book, the uproar in the United States and its link to lynching’s helped push for the creation of the NAACP in 1909.

Overall the book is quite comprehensive and incorporates a great deal of information that is new, i.e., Zipperstein’s acquisition of Krusheran’s teenage diaries among other sources. If you would like to try and understand what occurred in Kishinev, with its historical implications, **POGROM: KISHINEV AND THE TILT OF HISTORY** is an excellent resource.

Margaret Heller says

Reviewed for Library Journal. Looks grim, but the actual rape and murder part takes up relatively little of the book, the cultural history part is can't put it down.

Elaine says

This is the review I wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle:<https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/P...>

Judy G says

I am a jewish woman and I read many books about our history.

I think this book has a select audience of readers. It is about an event in 1900 in Russia where the men in a place there named Kishinev set out to destroy the jewish people in every way possible. Mass destruction

It is also about writers from that time who traveled there to record what had happened.

Pogroms were forerunners of the Nazi regime's destruction of the jewish people these were in Russia.

It is very interesting I think that the writers who wrote "about" this time during that time blamed the jewish men more than the non Jews who raped killed attacked stormed them.

Pogrom is a storm and acts of destruction the purpose being one of violence

Steven Zipperstein is an expert on this subject of Jewish history and I just realized my other book The Rich Brew about the cafe live and the Jewish culture is his writing

Judy

Mary Allen says

I won the book thru a GOODREADS giveaway. A good story of what man is willing to do to another, disturbing but I finished it. Glad I did, Good Read/

James Crabtree says

The pogrom that took place in Kishinev in what was in 1903 the Russian province of Bessarabia was not the first nor the last nor even the worst of the pogroms which periodically rocked the Jewish population living in the Pale of Settlement but it was one which, for the first time, touched the imagination of people around the world to the plight of Jews living in the shadow of the Russian eagle, assuring the entry of the word "pogrom" into the English language. Zipperstein gives the reader an account of the attacks launched against the Jewish population of Kishinev, the acts of rape, murder and physical assault, the arbitrariness of the violence by the local Moldovan population and the seeming inability or unwillingness of the local police and military to get involved. Zipperstein also looks at the way the incident was captured by journalists and how it has effected the way we look at pre-revolutionary Russia to this day. Includes black and white photos and helpful maps. Recieved an advance copy of this book through a Goodreads Giveaway.

Mal Warwick says

It was the event that introduced the word "pogrom" to the world outside Russia.

Its name is little known elsewhere today, but among generations of Israelis and in the homes of many older Jews around the world, the murderous rampage that took place in the Eastern European city of Kishinev on April 19 and 20, 1903, is a household word. Four decades before the worst days of the Holocaust, the pogrom in the city now known as Chişinău epitomized the violence directed at the Jewish people in the Russian Empire. Forty-nine Jews were savagely murdered during those two days and at least forty Jewish women raped. While those numbers seem insignificant when compared to the millions who died under Nazi terror, the Kishinev pogrom shocked the world at the time and for years afterward.

Kishinev was the subject of sensational news stories worldwide; several widely read books about the event were written, along with an epic poem taught in Israeli schools for decades. Stanford University history professor Steven J. Zipperstein recalls this tragic event and its historic consequences in his splendid new book, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History*. "No Jewish event of the time," he writes, "would be as extensively documented. None in Russian Jewish life would leave a comparable imprint" despite the fact that the Kishinev pogrom was "by no means worse than many others at more or less the same time." In fact, the 1903 massacre remained a symbol of the plight of the Jewish people even after the ferocity of the Russian Revolution more than a decade later. For example, Zipperstein notes, "it seems clear that no fewer than one hundred thousand Jews were murdered . . . and at least that many girls and women raped and countless maimed between 1918 and 1920" in the White Terror that followed the Bolshevik coup. Yet Kishinev endured as the epitome of anti-Semitism.

Today, Chişinău houses a population of nearly 700,000. It's the capital of the Republic of Moldova, a country of some three million people tucked between Ukraine and Romania in southeastern Europe. In 1903, the town was on the southwestern fringe of the Russian Empire. The city was the fifth most populous urban center in the Russian Empire at the time, even larger than Kiev. It held a population of nearly 110,000, of which well over one-third were Jews. (Some polls placed the proportion as high as forty-seven percent, according to Zipperstein.) "Jewish stores lined its streets, their stalls filled its marketplaces, and they were spread throughout the city in neighborhoods both poor and rich," the author notes.

The Kishinev pogrom, and the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion that followed it closely, were long thought to have been the work of the secret service of the Russian imperial government. Zipperstein's research reveals that this was almost certainly not the case. "Sufficient evidence exists," he writes, "to point to a clutch of local activists—not the imperial government—closely linked to [a rabidly anti-Semitic newspaper]; it was they who, with the help of right-wing student radicals, likely managed to stir up the riot's start . . ." The man Zipperstein identifies as "the key inspiration" behind the pogrom was a Russian newspaper publisher named Pavel Krushevan. This man "would become, soon after Kishinev's pogrom, the publisher—and almost certainly among the authors—of the first version of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. None of the effects of the Kishinev massacre would prove nearly so consequential as this bizarre and spectacularly influential forgery." As Zipperstein explains, "nearly the entire document was lifted [verbatim] from a book [written in French] that had nothing at all to do with Jews." Henry Ford famously paid for the printing of 500,000 copies of a later version that was circulated throughout the United States.

Zipperstein largely centers his book on four individuals. Krushevan was one of them, of course, but two outsiders also played pivotal roles through their written accounts based on extensive research conducted in the wake of the event. An Irish nationalist named Michael Davitt, working as a journalist, wrote a series of sensational articles for William Randolph Hearst's *New York American* that Zipperstein finds remarkably accurate; a book followed under the title *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecution in Russia*. A Hebrew poet named Hayyim Nahman Bialik's epic, "In the City of Killing," is "widely considered the most influential poetic work written in a Jewish language since the Middle Ages." (Bialik spent five weeks in Kishinev, most of it interviewing victims.) And a local Jewish community leader named Jacob

Bernstein-Kogan was responsible for contacting newspapers throughout the world. Immediately after the pogrom, he rushed around town collecting money to pay for the telegrams that brought Davitt and Bialik to the city and brought the massacre to the attention of readers all around the globe.

One of the most consequential after-effects of the Kishinev pogrom was the role it played in the founding of the NAACP (originally the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The outrage caused in the United States by the news of the massacre triggered widespread discussion comparing the murder of Jews in Russia to the lynching of African-Americans. A public campaign to highlight the similarity was promoted by "a remarkable now-little-known couple, William English Walling and [Russian-born and Yiddish-speaking] Anna Strunsky . . . The Wallings were the first to champion the cause of treating black lynching no less seriously than Russia's anti-Jewish pogroms. The founding meeting for what soon would emerge as the NAACP took place in 1909 in their New York City apartment." Walling became the first chairman of the organization.

Jeff Francis says

I remember considering whether to read Steven Zipperstein's "Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History," which I'd heard was good, when I saw that the main blurb came from Philip Roth. That sealed it. Roth had died two days earlier, and I was kind-of perturbed at how little attention his passing received. So at that moment it seemed like the universe was telling me to go ahead.

After reading "Pogrom" I was torn on whether to rate it 3/5 or 4/5, but in the end I decided on the later.

The dilemma was thus: while the subject was fascinating, Zipperstein's research impressive and his prose compelling, the structure seemed choppy (definitely a subjective take, I know, but the chapter breakdown just didn't say 'cohesive narrative' to me).

Also, "Pogrom" featured one of my pet peeves re: popular history books: it seemed to presuppose an acquaintance with the subject matter. Perhaps authors think that anyone who would read these books would already know the basic facts, but I for one had never heard of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom before seeing this book.

But, yeah, apart from some trips to the titular event's Wikipedia page throughout the book, I thought highly of "Pogrom."

P.S.

Nothing to do with the review, but I couldn't help but note two back-to-back passages that struck me as unintentionally (?) funny: [writing of anti-Semite Pavel Krushevan]

Krushevan acknowledged having overpowering obsessions: despair over his poverty; envy of the rich; nightmares of crabs devouring humans. (P. 154)

From the start, however, his favored themes [as a Russian writer] were financial decline, family humiliation, and above all the terrible, mysterious forces that undermine the best of intentions. (P. 155)

Mary-Helen says

A concise but thorough telling of an atrocity and its ripple effect through history. The story of Kishinev's Jews could be any oppressed people (as the author mentions throughout) treated as an 'other', made less than human, and then attacked because of perceived wrongs. Hence how the ripples of this event on the other side of the world leads to the founding of the NAACP. I read this because I am interested in how people can convince themselves so completely that another race or ethnicity or religious sect is literally evil that they deserve to be maligned, assaulted, and murdered. How do we get there and how do we recover (if we do)? This book is just one telling of countless massacres but the story is usually the same. Conspiracy theories, otherism and dehumanization, and a beautiful day that turns tragic.

James says

The book is a must read for people with a serious interest in Jewish or Russian history. The book eloquently describes how the world fell apart for what had, at the time, been probably the largest concentration of world Jewry. A combination of envy, greed and hatred boiled over and resulted in anti-Jewish riots that in many ways foreshadowed the Holocaust, or Shoah.

I have major disagreements with some aspects of the book. The author takes issue with the a poem that popularized the view that the Jews did not resist in general, and that the males did little to protect their wives from the gang rapes of the rioters. Unfortunately the Jews were historically scholarly and not focused on combat.

The riot and the poem, I believe, galvanized Jewry into a more pro-active stance. The book is sure to provoke thought and debate.

Ruth Adar says

In April, 1903, 49 Jews were murdered in the small city of Kishinev, the capital of Moldova, in the Pale of Settlement section of the Russian Empire. 600 Jews were raped or wounded, and over 1000 homes and businesses were ransacked.

Unlike previous such incidents (which have precedents going all the way back to the First Crusade and before) this time the Western press mobilized public opinion against the Russian Empire for allowing the carnage. Hearst Newspapers carried one lurid photo after another. Reporters and Jewish relief workers mobilized to document what had happened and to help the survivors.

Stephen J. Zipperstein has written a gripping and fascinating account of the events leading up to the pogrom and its aftermath. It had a cacophony of effects that would echo through the 20th century and beyond.

What do the founding of the NAACP, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the rise of Zionism, the "New Jew," and the Hebrew poem "In the City of Slaughter" have in common? It's Kishinev.

If you think you already know all about Kishinev, you probably don't. If you think you know who write the Protocols, you might be surprised. If you are dreading an account of violence and gore, know that Zipperstien is more interested in causes and effects than in a salacious or bloody-minded account of the matter.

This book gave me a great deal to think about, especially about the power of publicity and its unintended outcomes. I heartily recommend it.

Ruth says

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