

The Kishinev Pogroms of 1903

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From the article on Kishinev in Encyclopedia Judaica

The name of Kishinev became known to the world at large as a result of two pogroms. The first, incited and organized by the local and central authorities, took place during Easter on April 6 - 7, 1903. Agents of the Ministry of the Interior and high Russian officials of the administration were involved in its preparation, evidently with the backing of the minister of the interior, V. Plehve. The pogrom was preceded by a poisonous anti-Jewish campaign led by P. Krushevan, director of the Bessarabian newspaper Bessarabets, who incited the population through a constant stream of vicious articles. One of the authors of the most virulent articles was the local police chief, Levendall. In such a heated atmosphere any incident could have dire consequences, and when the body of a Christian child was found, and a young Christian woman patient committed suicide in the Jewish hospital, the mob became violent. A blood libel, circulated by the Bessarabets, spread like wildfire. (It was later proved that the child was murdered by his relatives and that the suicide of the young woman was in no way connected with the Jews.)

According to official statistics, 49 Jews lost their lives and more than 500 were injured, some of them seriously; 700 houses were looted and destroyed and 600 businesses and shops were looted. The material loss amounted to 2,500,000 gold rubles, and about 2,000 families were left homeless. Both Russians and Romanians joined in the riots. Russians were sent in from other towns and the students of the theological seminaries and the secondary schools and colleges played a leading role. The garrison of 5,000 soldiers stationed in the city, which could easily have held back the mob, took no action.

Public outcry throughout the world was aroused by the incident and protest meetings were organized in London, Paris, and New York. A letter of protest written in the United States was handed over to President Theodore Roosevelt to be delivered to the czar, who refused to accept it. Under the pressure of public opinion, some of the perpetrators of the pogrom were brought to justice but they were awarded very lenient sentences. L.N. Tolstoy expressed his sympathy for the victims, condemning the czarist authorities as responsible for the pogrom. The Russian writer Vladimir Korolenko described the pogrom in his story, "House No. 13" as did H.N. Bialik in his poem, "Be-Ir ha-Haregah"("In the Town of Death").

On October 19 - 20, 1905, riots broke out once more. They began as a protest demonstration by the "patriots" against the czar's declaration of August 19, 1905 and deteriorated into an attack on the Jewish quarter in which 19 Jews were killed, 56 were injured, and houses and shops were looted and destroyed: damages amounted to 3,000,000 rubles. On this occasion, some of the Jewish youth organized itself into self-defense units. The two pogroms had a profound effect on the Jews of Kishinev. Between 1902 and 1905 their numbers dropped from around 60,000 to 53,243, many emigrating to the United States and the Americas, while many more left after the second attack. The economic development of town was brought to a standstill.

Additional Information on the Pogrom:

<http://www.wzo.org>.

Nahum Sokolow, the editor of the newspaper, "Hazefera" (Warsaw), reporting from Kishinev after the pogrom in 1903:

"The hangmen of the inquisition belong to high society in comparison to the "men" that kept murdering not only as if possessed, but also with indifference, like in a slaughterhouse."

The Kishinev pogrom was an anti-Jewish riot lasting several days in April 1903, in which 47 Jews were killed and 92 seriously injured. Hundreds of Jewish homes and shops were looted and plundered.

The pogrom began on the eve of the Easter holiday, when an accusation spread through the city that a Christian servant girl had been murdered by Jews. A large mob attacked Jewish homes and property and despite requests by a Jewish delegation, the local authorities refused to intervene claiming that they could only do so on the orders of the Minister of Interior. The following evening instructions were issued and the troops were sent to the streets. Their presence was sufficient to end the rioting but it came too late for the victims.

The impact of the Kishinev pogrom was felt by Jewish communities both inside and outside Russia. Jewish organizations rushed to the aid of the victims and attempted to lobby governments believed to be sensitive to the Jewish question. In Russia itself the pogrom encouraged a greater number of Jews to leave, whilst others discussed the need for Jewish self-defense. The Zionists in particular pressed their case with greater urgency and there is little doubt that the pogrom influenced Herzl to find some place on the globe as a haven for the Jews. Whilst this led him to the "Uganda Option," the majority of Russian Zionists remained committed to the Land of Israel.