

A History of the Jews in Russia

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Since the eighteenth century, Jews comprised a significant minority population in the Russian Empire and eventually the Soviet Union. During the reign of Catherine the Great, for example, the empire acquired lands of present-day eastern Poland and Lithuania that contained a large population of Jews, leading to the emergence of Jews as a major ethnic minority in the empire. Throughout history and not only in Russia, Jews have faced discrimination based on anti-Semitism--sentiments against Jews. In the Tsarist Empire, Jews had numerous rights restricted and were not treated equally before the law as their non-Jewish counterparts. They were only allowed to reside within a large area of land known as the Pale of Settlement, established by Catherine the Great in present-day Ukraine, Belarus, eastern Poland, and Lithuania, and they were required to pay fees in order to reside outside the pale. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish communities faced more violent acts of anti-Semitism in the form of pogroms, organized riots. From the rise of Imperial Russia to the twentieth century, Jewish people in the Russian empire dealt with anti-Semitism in numerous forms, where they were separated from the rest of Russian society with restricted rights and were eventually subject to extreme violence.

As early as the Medieval era, Jews in Europe faced anti-Semitism in numerous forms. In European countries, the majority of anti-Jewish sentiment could be divided into two main types, religious and racist. Religious anti-Semitism referred to discrimination against members of the Jewish faith, which was based on teachings of the Christian church. Anti-Semitic Christians discriminated against Jews based on their faith and the common teaching that the Jews were responsible for the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christians recognize as the messiah. Since this form of anti-Semitic thought was based on religion, religious anti-Semites believed that Jews could be included in the predominantly Christian society through conversion.¹

¹ Eli Weinerman, "Racism, Racial Prejudice and Jews in Late Imperial Russia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17: 3 (1994): 443.

It was different from racist anti-Semitism because religious anti-Semites believed that Jews were inferior due to their faith rather than their race or ethnicity. According to historian Pål Kolstø, the Jews were accused of having killed Christ, and it was commonly believed that their “bloodthirstiness” had continued to the present day. Kolstø described anti-Jewish sentiment when he stated: “proof of this was found in their alleged killing of Christian boys for ritual purposes. This medieval superstition, which in earlier centuries could be heard all over Europe, in Russia lingered on until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”² In the Medieval era, many Europeans believed in the superstition that Jews ritually killed Christian children and used their blood to make matzo, a thin unleavened bread commonly eaten by Jews. Due to the Christian teaching that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus and the medieval superstition that Jews would ritually kill Christian boys, religion served as a basis for a majority of anti-Semitic thought in the Russian empire.

In addition to religious anti-Semitism, racist anti-Semitism began to emerge in Europe during the late nineteenth century. In racist anti-Semitism, it was believed that Jews were inherently different and separate from the Aryan race due to their biological and psychological nature.³ While religious anti-Semites believed that Jews could be integrated into European society through conversion to Christianity, racist anti-Semites believed that since their “inferior” racial qualities could not be changed, Jews could not be included in Aryan society. In the Russian empire, anti-Semitic intellectuals and political officials in the nineteenth century attempted to restrict the rights of Jews based on ethnicity rather than religion. Historian Eli Weinerman points out that “these proposals were aimed at Jews who had converted to the Orthodox faith and who, in contrast to the rest of the Jewish population, had enjoyed the same rights as the Empire's Orthodox peoples.”⁴ As time progressed, Russian anti-Semites began to refer to racist theories to justify prejudice against the Jewish population. Government officials and politicians proposed that rights should be restricted not only for religious Jews, but also for people of Jewish descent who had converted to Orthodox Christianity. Therefore, the nineteenth century saw the

² Pål Kolstø, “Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-century Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 42:4 (2014): 692.

³ Weinerman, “Racism, Racial Prejudice and Jews in Late Imperial Russia,” 443.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 445.

emergence of racist anti-Semitism alongside the longstanding religious anti-Semitic thought.

There were numerous factors outside religious discrimination and racist theories that contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism in the Russian empire. As the Tsarist empire began to modernize and transition toward an industrialized country with a growing economy, economic factors began to play a role in anti-Jewish sentiments. Conservatives in the empire associated the Jews with capitalism and feared Jewish economic activity because they believed that it undermined the political power of the landowning elites.⁵ Furthermore, cultural factors led to opposition to Jewish involvement in the arts. Opponents of Jewish inclusion often accused Jewish people, including converts to Christianity, for distorting Russian culture due to their flawed knowledge of the Russian language, national character, and traditions.⁶ In the late nineteenth century, however, a new factor that contributed to increasing anti-Jewish sentiments began to emerge. The last two tsars of the Russian empire were both anti-Semites who actively supported restriction of the rights of Jews. Since his father had been assassinated by a Jewish man in 1881, Tsar Alexander III was both an anti-Semite and a devout reactionary, eager to suppress revolution. According to Pål Kolstø, “Much of the anti-Jewish legislation that was adopted in the last decades before the 1917 revolution clearly was part of a drive to combat left-wing terrorism.”⁷ Since Jews were disproportionately represented in revolutionary parties, often due to the way Jews were treated under the Tsarist empire, Jews were often associated with left-wing radicalism, leading to a political basis for discrimination against the Jews. With the association of Jews with economic activity, limited knowledge of Russian language and culture, and revolutionary involvement, anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century was largely driven by numerous economic, cultural, and political factors.

Anti-Semitism in the Russian empire was originally based on religious discrimination that had existed since the Medieval era, but the nineteenth century saw the rise of a variety of new factors that contributed to anti-Jewish sentiment. Anti-Semites in the empire expressed these sentiments in a variety of ways, including public demonstrations, literature, and bias in the legal system. One of the most

⁵ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 454.

⁷ Pål Kolstø, “Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-century Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, No. 4 (2014): 692.

significant symbols of anti-Semitism in the Tsarist empire was the concept of pogroms, which were violent riots carried out against the Jews. During such riots, crowds of Russians expressed their hatred of Jews, revolutionaries, and the liberalization of the Tsarist government. For instance, historian Victoria Khiterer described that during a pogrom in Nezhin, the crowd of pogrom-makers screamed, “We don’t need Jews and democrats, they torment us, get them out of our city ... If the students don’t give us lists of the democrats, we know ourselves some of them and will make short work of them right now.”⁸ Since Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were connected with revolutionary parties and left-wing radicalism, crowds often expressed their opposition to Jews and liberals together, claiming that such people tainted their society. Aside from the pogroms, Russian anti-Semites frequently expressed their anti-Jewish beliefs through literature. Historian Pål Kolstø points out that they produced an entire library consisting of books, booklets, and articles that discussed the necessity of fighting the Jews and restricting their rights.⁹ Unsurprisingly, many of the most prominent texts within this collection of anti-Semitic works were written by strong believers in Orthodox Christianity who wrote their works in a religious language. This assortment of works dedicated to the spread of anti-Semitic thought reveals that much of the opposition to the Jews in the Tsarist empire stood on religious beliefs as the main foundation.

One of the more unusual expressions of anti-Semitism in the Russian empire was through an extreme bias against Jews in the legal system. The issue of discrimination in the legal system was emphasized in the writing of Mary Antin, a Jewish girl who grew up in the Pale of Settlement and noticed the injustice that Jews suffered in Russia. In her writing, Antin described how Jews were constantly at the mercy of the police, judges, and their non-Jewish neighbors. According to Mary Antin, “If you chased their pigs when they came rooting up your garden, or objected to their children maltreating your children, they might complain against you to the police, stuffing their case with false accusations and false witnesses.”¹⁰ She adds that such cases would be brought to the court if a Jewish individual or family was not well

⁸ Victoria Khiterer, “The October 1905 Pogroms and the Russian Authorities,” *Nationalities Papers* 43, No. 5 (2015): 790.

⁹ Pål Kolstø, “Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-century Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, No. 4 (2014): 704.

¹⁰ “Mary Antin: A Little Jewish Girl in the Russian Pale, 1890,” *Internet History Sourcebooks Project* (November 1998), accessed April 8, 2021. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/>.

acquainted with the police. Furthermore, Jews would lose the trial before it even began because judges in the Russian court system were often anti-Semitic themselves and thus biased against Jews. The exclamations of pogrom-makers, writings of anti-Semitic Russians, and treatment of Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors as well as in the legal system all illustrate the widespread anti-Jewish sentiment in the Tsarist empire.

One of the most visible symbols of discrimination against the Jews on a political level in Russia was the Pale of Settlement. The area of land known as the Pale of Settlement was established in 1791 under Catherine the Great in order to restrict the movements of the Jewish people in present-day Belarus, who had become subjects of the tsar following the first partition of Poland in 1772.¹¹ When the Tsarist empire acquired new land in present-day Poland and Lithuania, the pale was expanded to the western and southern boundaries of the empire. According to Pål Kolstø, the purpose of the establishment of the Pale of Settlement was to limit the permitted area of residence for Jews, in which the government sought to ensure the growth of a non-Jewish middle class outside the pale.¹² Jewish people were not allowed to reside outside the pale unless they paid fees and were granted special permission. Even so, Jews were constantly at the mercy of local authorities who made decisions regarding the restrictions of activities of the Jews, which included the eviction of Jews from their respective towns or cities. For example, Kolstø pointed out that “in 1891, some thirty-thousand Jews, mostly artisans, were expelled from Moscow and sent back to the Pale. This constituted more than eighty-five percent of the Jews living in the city.”¹³ Although Jewish people could pay fees and receive permission from the authorities to settle outside the Pale of Settlement, they could have this permission taken away at any time and for no reason at all. The pale served as a reminder that the Jews would always be treated as second-class citizens inferior to their non-Jewish counterparts, and they were always living at the mercy of the Tsarist authorities.

In her personal narrative, Mary Antin described the conditions of Jews living in the Pale of Settlement in Russia, emphasizing the constant fear of the tsar.

¹¹ Pål Kolstø, “Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-century Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, No. 4 (2014): 698.

¹² *Ibid.*, 698.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 699.

According to Antin, many Jews hung portraits of the tsar Alexander III in their homes because it looked well when police or government officials visited the village on business. For example, she wrote, "The czar was a cruel tyrant – oh, it was whispered when doors were locked and shutters tightly barred, at night – he was a Titus, a Haman, a sworn foe of all Jews – and yet his portrait was seen in a place of honor in your father's house."¹⁴ Even though many of the Jews secretly resented the tsar as much as he resented them, they never spoke of such sentiments outside their homes. Instead, they hung portraits of the tsar in their homes and appeared to show support for the monarchy so that they would not be suspected of being revolutionaries. It was expected that every Jewish congregation say a prayer for the health of the tsar, and the chief of police would close any synagogue that refused to do so. Similarly, all houses were expected to fly flags of the Russian empire on royal birthdays, and failure to do so would result in being dragged to the nearest police station and a fine of twenty-five rubles.¹⁵ Mary Antin explained the wrath of the authorities on royal birthdays when she stated, "a decrepit old woman, who lived all alone in a tumble-down shanty, supported by the charity of the neighborhood, crossed her paralyzed hands one day when flags were ordered up, and waited for her doom, because she had no flag."¹⁶ Antin narrated that the policeman broke down the door, sold every item found in the old woman's house, and finally hung a flag above the roof of the dilapidated house. Since Jews were often associated with revolutionary parties and radicalism, they were expected to show loyalty to the tsar, and these expectations were often stricter for the Jews than their non-Jewish neighbors. Even if an elderly individual with poor health could not afford to purchase a flag, the authorities often showed no mercy but arrested the individual without remorse.

The establishment of the Pale of Settlement, despite its purpose to restrict the activity and advancement of the Jewish people in Russia, had some positive effects on the Jewish communities due to their confinement. Through a geographical and statistical analysis, historian Richard Rowland arrived at the conclusion that due to the restriction of Jewish settlement, Jews comprised a highly urbanized community in the Tsarist Empire. According to Rowland, nearly one-half of the Jewish population

¹⁴ "Mary Antin," *Internet History Sourcebooks Project*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

in the pale resided in urban centers, in comparison to only one-tenth of the non-Jewish population.¹⁷ While only ten percent of the non-Jewish population in Russia lived in urban centers, the Jews were highly concentrated in urban centers with nearly fifty percent residing in cities. Rowland also reported that although Jewish people comprised just over one-tenth of the population of the Tsarist empire, they comprised nearly two-fifths of the urban populations. In eight of the twenty-five provinces, the majority of the urban population consisted of Jews.¹⁸ The large proportion of the Jewish population residing in cities may have been advantageous because due to their residence in cities, Jews were closer to large markets and industrial centers with factories, which provided them with nearby opportunities for work. Thus, the one potential advantage of the Pale of Settlement was that much of the Jewish population was highly concentrated in urban centers where they were close to job opportunities rather than small, isolated villages.

Aside from the Pale of Settlement, the Tsarist government sought to restrict multiple rights of Jews in the empire in order to keep them at a second-class status in Russian society. While the pale limited where Jews were permitted to reside, other regulations were passed to oppress Jewish people in education and professional fields. For example, Jews were highly discouraged from becoming lawyers, an influential occupation in politics and justice, in order to keep Jewish influence out of the legal system.¹⁹ Russian society actively sought to keep Jews from advancing into the higher classes of society, which led to violent conflicts over the social status of Jews.

Historian Heinz-Dietrich Löwe explained the reason for such oppression when he stated, “Because of their being restricted to a position of poverty and low social status, many people might have felt the need to look down on somebody lower still on the social ladder—the Jews.”²⁰ Many of the non-Jewish peasants in the Tsarist empire were bitter about their social status, confined in a state of poverty. Consequently, they needed another group of people to look down upon and frequently chose the Jews as a target of social and economic oppression, keeping them lower on the social ladder.

¹⁷ Richard Rowland, “Geographical Patterns of the Jewish Population in the Pale of Settlement in Late Nineteenth Century Russia,” *Jewish Social Studies* 48, No. 3 (1986): 218.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁹ Pål Kolstø, “Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-century Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, No. 4 (2014): 700.

²⁰ Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, “Pogroms in Russia,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, No. 1 (2004): 19.

As a result of social and economic oppression of Jewish people, Russian elitists and officials sought to keep Jews out of a variety of fields, especially academics. Jews faced vicious discrimination in education, often with quotas that prevented Jews from comprising more than a certain low percentage of the student body at many schools. The pursuit of secondary education was common among Jewish people due to the economic situation in the Pale of Settlement. The pale was already excessively crowded with tradesmen such as goldsmiths, cobblers, artisans, and shopkeepers. Since a higher education created new opportunities, Jews often pursued education and academics as an alternative path of life.²¹ In her personal narrative of life as a Jew in the Pale of Settlement, Mary Antin described the harsh conditions of Jewish children seeking an education. Jewish children desiring admission to schools had to face physical examinations, where Antin pointed out that “the brightest Jewish children were turned down if the examining officers did not like the turn of their noses.”²² Examining officers were very hostile toward Jewish children, judging them on shallow details such as the look of their noses, based on a common stereotype of Jewish physical features.

According to Antin, Jewish candidates had to take a separate examination in which nine-year-old Jewish children were expected to answer questions that not even thirteen-year-old Gentile children were expected to answer.²³ Even if Jewish children answered questions correctly and confidently, they often received a low grade with no opportunity for appeal. Mary Antin added that the conditions did not improve for Jews who entered universities, for the school life for Jews was a “struggle against injustice from instructors, spiteful treatment from fellow students, and insults from everybody.”²⁴ Similarly to secondary schools, Jewish children seeking to attend universities faced excessively challenging examinations, dishonest marking, and blunt bias against Jewish candidates. Jewish children were heavily oppressed and discouraged from receiving higher education not only due to the desire to keep them at a second-class status, but also because Jews in the nineteenth century were often associated with revolutionary ideals. Therefore, officials in the Tsarist empire sought

²¹ Pål Kolstø, “Competing with Entrepreneurial Diasporians: Origins of Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-century Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 42, No. 4 (2014): 700.

²² “Mary Antin: A Little Jewish Girl in the Russian Pale, 1890,” *Internet History Sourcebooks Project*, November 1998, accessed April 1, 2021. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

that keeping Jews out of secondary schools and universities not only kept them at their respective social status, but also prevented them from becoming highly educated and exposed to radical ideas.

Anti-Jewish sentiments in education were felt not only at the local level, but also at the political level, where even the tsar was fully aware of the issue and openly supported the restriction of Jewish children in schools. Historian Alex Valdman explained political discussions of Jewish children and education when he stated, “Suggestions to limit Jewish students’ enrollment were discussed in some circles even in the days of Alexander II, and after his assassination these ideas found firm support among government officials, including the new tsar, Alexander III.”²⁵ Tsarist officials considered limitations on the number of Jews accepted into schools as early as during the reign of Alexander II, a tsar responsible for many progressive reforms in the nineteenth century. However, after he was assassinated by a Jewish man and his son Alexander III rose to the throne, the Tsarist government gave full support of restrictions on Jews receiving higher education as well as other rights among the Jewish population.

School administrators at the local level also freely expressed their anti-Jewish sentiments, which were based on both religious and racist anti-Semitism. According to Alex Valdman, the principal of the Vitebsk Gymnasium bluntly declared that the typical characteristics and traits of the “Jewish race” were clearly notable among Jewish children, including those attending Russian schools. Valdman added that among other school principals and administrators, “The principal from Vitebsk did not hesitate to attribute a whole range of stereotypes to his Jewish students, including uncleanness, an inclination toward anti-Christian and anti-Russian conspiracy, greed, immorality, and even the smell of garlic, which Jews allegedly brought with them into classes.”²⁶ Anti-Semitic thought among Russian school administrators included a combination of both religious and racist beliefs. Jews, including Jewish children, were accused of anti-Christian and anti-Russian conspiracy, and they were stereotypically associated with uncleanness, greed, and immorality. School

²⁵ Alex Valdman, “A Miracle in Minsk: Secondary Education and Social Mobility in the Pale of Settlement before 1887,” *Jewish Social Studies* 24, No. 2 (2019): 145.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

principals also commonly agreed with stereotypes portraying Jewish physical attributes, including large noses and the smell of garlic.

Although nearly one-half of the Jewish population in the Tsarist empire resided in urban centers, the remainder of the population resided in small villages known as shtetls. Shtetls were small towns largely segregated between Jews and non-Jews where Jewish residents mostly spoke a dialect known as Yiddish, a combination of mostly Hebrew and German along with influences from Eastern European languages as well. In the shtetl, Hebrew was the language of the educated, as Jewish boys were all expected to learn Hebrew and study the Torah, the holy book in the Jewish faith. According to historian Ben Pinchuk, "Yiddish as the language and the basis of shtetl popular culture included significant Slavic influences, as did the shtetl's folklore, music and cooking."²⁷ Although the Jews in the diaspora maintained their connection to the Hebrew language and the Jewish faith and culture, they were influenced by various customs in Eastern Europe such as music, folklore, and cooking. Jewish immigrants from shtetls in Eastern Europe brought with them these culture influences and as a result, formed their own unique Jewish identity. Ben-Cion Pinchuk mentioned that Jews in the shtetl were physically distinguishable from their non-Jewish Slavic neighbors, often possessing a darker skin complexion, for example. Pinchuk described the common physical appearance of Jews in shtetls when he stated, "During most of the nineteenth century, the men had beards and side-locks (peyes), that set them further apart from the Slavic peasant."²⁸ Since it was a Jewish custom that men not shave their facial hair or the sides of their heads, Jewish men were easy to distinguish from their non-Jewish counterparts due to their bears and sideburns. As descendants of Israelites who had migrated into Europe during the diaspora, Jewish people continued to follow cultural traditions that made them stand out from non-Jews in Europe.

Shtetl culture in the Tsarist empire was largely driven not only by the Yiddish language and Slavic influences, but also by the holy book known as the Torah. Nearly every aspect of individual, family, and community life in the shtetl were determined by the Torah in these small Jewish communities.²⁹ Historian Ben-Cion

²⁷ Ben Pinchuk, "Jewish Discourse and the Shtetl," *Jewish History* 15, No. 2 (2001): 170.

²⁸ Ben-Cion Pinchuk, "The Shtetl," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 41, No. 4 (2000): 503.

²⁹ Ben Pinchuk, "Jewish Discourse and the Shtetl," 173.

Pinchuk pointed out that Judaic law had the most significant influence on the nature of the shtetl, in which working hours were affected by daily prayer, and all business came to a halt on the Shabbat, the weekly day of rest in Judaism. Pinchuk also mentioned that "Preparing for the Shabbat occupied an important part of the week and could be noticed in the stores, at the marketplace and in the street."³⁰ In the Jewish faith, the Shabbat was not only a weekly day of rest, but a day dedicated to prayer, devotion to God, and worship in synagogues. Furthermore, the observance of Jewish holy days such as Pesakh, Sukot, and Purim all highlighted the Jewish culture of the shtetl. Similar to the weekly Shabbat, all closed and everyday work came to a complete halt in these villages. Customs observed on each holiday were visible in the streets, illustrating the importance of Jewish faith and traditions in the shtetl.

In addition to markings of Jewish culture, shtetls were often recognized for their appearance, which was different from that of other towns in Eastern Europe. Shtetls were often described by travelers as dull and rundown, reflecting extreme poverty and neglect, and having squalid conditions even in comparison to dull Russian provincial towns.³¹ Sanitation was extremely poor in these villages, often dubbed worse than in the poorest of Russian towns, with refuse simply thrown into the street.³² The *shtetl* generally consisted of a central marketplace and a few brick buildings surrounded by dilapidated wooden huts, generally lacking gardening or decorations unlike those in non-Jewish villages. Ben-Cion Pinchuk described the conditions of life in the *shtetl* when he stated, "The houses were crowded, the streets without pavement or adequate drainage, the stores with little merchandise."³³ The squalid conditions of the houses in the village revealed the restriction of Jews in the Tsarist empire to a lower social status. Lack of attention to gardening, painting, and decoration in comparison to non-Jewish neighbors also reflected the reservation for external beauty often found in traditional Judaism.³⁴ Therefore, houses in the shtetl were often built mostly of wood, straw, and clay, which were the most cheap and readily available building materials in the region.

³⁰ Ben-Cion Pinchuk, "The Shtetl," 503.

³¹ Ibid., 499.

³² Ibid., 500.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 501.

Since shtetls were too small to have a need for government buildings, the majority of public buildings in these villages were devoted to the Jewish population. Near the center of the villages were the synagogues, Jewish houses of prayer and assembly. The number and appearance of synagogues reflected both the size of the community and material well-being.³⁵ The central synagogue was always built large enough to accommodate the entire community for both religious and social purposes. Synagogues served the Jewish community not only as houses of worship, but also as assembly halls and places of study. According to historian Ben-Cion Pinchuk, "Small places of worship were to be found all over town. They carried different names, Beit-midrash, Shtibl, Kloiz, and served different sections of the community. Besides being places of worship, the synagogues were also centers of learning of the scriptures and their commentaries."³⁶ The most significant place of study and instruction in the shtetl, however, was the Kheder, meaning "room," located in the private residence of a teacher who provided children with basic education. Thus, both synagogues and "rooms" were places where children learned the Hebrew language and studied the Torah along with its important teachings. These small school rooms could be found all over the shtetl where children would gather to receive a basic elementary education. Aside from the synagogue and the Kheder, *shtetls* in the Tsarist empire also consisted of a Jewish cemetery, a kosher slaughterhouse and butcher shop, and a ritual bath known as the *Mikveh*.³⁷ To a travelling outsider, the cemetery was one of the first signs that a Jewish community resided nearby. The buildings within the shtetl village reflected the importance of the Jewish faith and customs, as each village contained several buildings dedicated to the Jewish community, either for worship, education, ritual bath, or kosher food preparation.

Although everyday life in the shtetl may have been relatively peaceful, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews in all corners of the Pale of Settlement were faced with violence in the form of riots known as pogroms. While anti-Semitism had existed in Europe since the Medieval era, a new form of anti-Semitism emerged in the Tsarist empire, which involved political reasons. Partially since they were tired of being oppressed as second-class citizens, Jews in the empire

³⁵ Ibid., 502.

³⁶ Ibid., 502.

³⁷ Ibid., 502.

were often associated with revolutionary parties along with many of the non-Jewish peasants. Jews were largely represented in Russian revolutionary parties, especially in the Pale of Settlement where the first Marxist party in the empire, known as the Bund, grew and prospered.³⁸ The Bund worked to create a modern socialist future free of conflict between ethnic groups, and also to protect Jews from pogrom violence as anti-Jewish violence increased. A growing Zionist movement in the Pale of Settlement, along with other Marxist socialist parties, defended Jewish communities and stood up against pogrom violence for the first time between 1903 and 1905.³⁹ This was a pivotal moment in the history of Jews in the Russian empire because socialist parties such as Marxists, Zionists, and the Bund actively defended the Jewish population by standing up against anti-Semitic violence.

The treatment of Jews as second-class citizens and emergence of pogroms in the empire led many Jews to resent the Tsarist authorities. Many Jewish individuals such as a young man named Grigorii Aronson chose to fight back by joining revolutionary socialist parties. Among many other Jews in the Pale of Settlement, Aronson was eager to spread revolutionary ideals that opposed the oppressive Tsarist government. Between 1909 and 1914, for example, he worked as an editor for a democratically oriented newspaper in Minsk and joined the Bund. Grigorii Aronson enjoyed working openly and above ground as a newspaperman, public figure, and activist for the Jewish workers' party.⁴⁰ Historian Gerald D. Surh described Aronson's contribution to the revolutionary effort by declaring, "He wrote several books on Russian revolutionary politics, Russian Jewish history and even a book of verse. Aronson also wrote prolifically for the Yiddish press on topics of concern to the American Jewish community of his generation."⁴¹ Grigorii Aronson was a confident individual who courageously expressed opposition to the Tsarist government, writing several works on both revolutionary politics and the history of Jews in Russia. He was one of many individuals, especially in the Jewish community, who were tired of being oppressed under the tsar and openly joined revolutionary parties that advocated for reform.

³⁸ Gerald D. Surh, "Russian Jewish Socialists and Antisemitism: The Case of Grigorii Aronson," *Patterns of Prejudice* 51, No. 3-4 (2017): 253.

³⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 256.

⁴¹ Ibid., 257.

While Jewish revolutionary parties such as the Bund and the Zionists aimed to stand up to anti-Semitic violence and protect the Jewish communities from pogroms, the violence did not stop. Pogroms began to occur in the Tsarist empire in the late nineteenth century in 1881, and as time progressed toward the early twentieth century, these riots became more violent and deadly. For instance, on May 2, 1881, a telegram was sent in St. Petersburg regarding a pogrom that involved the destruction of Jewish property. According to the author of the telegram, "One hundred houses were pillaged, a quantity of furniture being thrown into the streets. Two hundred people were injured during the riots."⁴² In this pogrom, rioters pillaged and vandalized some one-hundred houses in the Jewish community, throwing furniture and belongings into the street. Two-hundred people were wounded in the process. A similar pogrom occurred on an unknown date in 1881, during which the author of a telegram described that "the rioters, aided by an influx of peasants from the surrounding villages to join in the general melee, sacked the houses of the Jews, destroyed their furniture, and stole or spoiled their wares."⁴³ Since no Jews were killed during these early pogroms in 1881, it can be concluded that the goal of these pogroms was not to kill anyone, but rather to destroy Jewish property and create fear and intimidation.

Statistics regarding fatalities and injuries illustrate a change in the nature of pogroms between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, historian Stefan Wiese concluded that the pogroms between 1881 and 1882 resulted in a total of twenty-five Jewish fatalities, some of which seemed accidental rather than intentional.⁴⁴ The pogroms in the late nineteenth century revealed no evidence that rioters used forms of violence to ensure victim's deaths, such as the mutilation of bodies. Thus, it is likely that the earlier pogroms were carried out to create fear and intimidation rather than to deliberately murder members of the Jewish community. On the contrary, pogroms in the twentieth century yielded higher numbers of casualties, demonstrating a more violent nature of the riots. Historian Victoria Khiterer reported that roughly six-hundred ninety pogroms took place between

⁴² "The Jewish Chronicle: Outrages Upon Jews in Russia, May 6, 1881," *Internet History Sourcebooks Project*, January 1999, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Stefan Wiese, "'Spit Back with Bullets!' Emotions in Russia's Jewish Pogroms, 1881 — 1905," *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 39, No. 4 (2013): 475.

October 18 and 29 in 1905 alone, most of which occurred in the land of present-day Ukraine where the majority of the Jewish population resided.⁴⁵ Khiterer stated that in the later pogroms, some three-thousand one-hundred Jews were killed, some two-thousand severely injured, and more than fifteen-thousand wounded.⁴⁶ Unlike the earlier pogroms, statistics reveal that the later pogroms in the twentieth century, which were most frequent and severe in 1905, were more violent, widespread, and deadly.

Pogroms in the Tsarist empire were planned and executed largely in response to the growing revolutionary movement, which was extremely prominent among Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement. Ironically, the vast majority of pogrom victims were peaceful Jewish residents who were not involved in the revolutionary movement. According to historian Victoria Khiterer, Russian authorities claimed that the pogroms in October 1905 had occurred spontaneously against Jews and radical members of the intelligentsia.⁴⁷ However, Khiterer explained the involvement of the authorities in these riots when she stated, “Clearly these pogroms were well prepared in advance by anti-Semitic monarchist organizations, usually with the connivance or active support of local authorities, for the suppression of revolutionary activities.”⁴⁸ The similarity of pogroms throughout the empire in October 1905 reveals that they were not spontaneous, but deliberately carried out by anti-Semitic organizations, often with the active support of local authorities. Therefore, planning and preparations for the riots were no secret to the authorities. Khiterer added that the police in Odesa and Simferopol expressed their satisfaction with the upcoming pogroms as acts of revenge against the Jews for their alleged involvement with revolutionary activities. Instead of being mere spontaneous acts of violence, pogroms in 1905 were deliberately planned and often approved by the local authorities in their respective towns and cities.

During the 1905 pogroms, acts of violence against Jewish individuals were much more extreme than they were during the earlier pogroms in the 1880’s. For example, on April 25, 1905 in the city of Zhitomir, a man named Doctor Valknovskii

⁴⁵ Victoria Khiterer, “The October 1905 Pogroms and the Russian Authorities,” *Nationalities Papers* 43, No. 5 (2015): 788.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 788.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 789.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 790.

claimed to have witnessed seven young men chasing a group of roughly twenty Jews, beating them on their backs with sticks and clubs.⁴⁹ Rather than simply inflicting fear, rioters in the 1905 pogroms sought to create serious pain and suffering for their victims. Historian Victoria Khiterer described another scene of violence during a demonstration in Kyiv, in which “the crowd beat all Jews which it met on the street. If after a few minutes an injured Jew tried to stand up or crawl away, they beat him again.”⁵⁰ Khiterer added that policemen often actively participated in the violence in which they broke into city apartments and houses, often killing all the occupants regardless of age. She illustrated a particularly disturbing scene during one pogrom when she stated, “The rioters threw Jews from the top floor of multistory buildings, raped girls and women before killing them, and tore babies to pieces in front of their mothers.”⁵¹ Rioters, including policemen who actively supported the violence, would mercilessly injure, murder, and torture innocent Jews of all ages, raping young girls and forcing mothers to watch their babies be killed at their hands. While the pogroms between 1881 and 1882 served the purpose of keeping the Jews and other revolutionaries in line under the Tsarist rule, the 1905 pogroms proved to be much more extreme. Rioters took pleasure in killing, harming, and torturing the innocent.

Non-Jewish bystanders expressed a wide range of reactions to the anti-Jewish violence spreading throughout the Russian empire in the twentieth century. Most of the gentile population was indifferent to the brutal fate of the Jews, while only the most courageous gentiles hid or defended Jewish victims. Rioters who found Jews in the residence of a Christian family not only killed the Jews, but also the Christians who attempted to protect the Jews from the violence.⁵² For instance, a young Christian student named Veneroky attempted to defend the Jews in the pogrom, but was killed in front of the police.⁵³ As riots began to spread through cities and towns with significant Jewish populations, many Jews attempted to leave their homes and find safety elsewhere. However, pogrom-makers organized gangs who attacked and killed Jews at railway stations, on trains, and near river ports, ensuring that the Jews

⁴⁹ Stefan Wiese, “‘Spit Back with Bullets!’ Emotions in Russia's Jewish Pogroms, 1881 — 1905,” *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 39, No. 4 (2013): 472.

⁵⁰ Victoria Khiterer, “The October 1905 Pogroms and the Russian Authorities,” *Nationalities Papers* 43, No. 5 (2015): 791.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 793.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 794.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 794.

would not escape from their “revenge.”⁵⁴ Even Jews who attempted to escape the violence would find themselves at the mercy of travelling gangs of pogrom-makers. While some gentiles opposed the extreme violence against the Jewish communities, others proudly took part in the riots and joined the pogrom-makers. Historian Stefan Wiese described the attitude of many rioters during the demonstrations when he stated, “One of the first elements to catch the eye when studying contemporary accounts of the pogrom is the festive mood noted among the non-Jews.”⁵⁵ Observers of the atrocities often remembered the rioters’ excited facial expressions and laughter while carrying out acts of violence against their victims. Onlookers also reported that the pogrom-makers shouted degrading and insulting words and also sang disturbing songs in the midst of the demonstrations. Some gentiles were horrified by the violence and courageously attempted to defend the Jews or hide Jewish families in their homes, jeopardizing their own safety. Meanwhile, rioters and their followers joined in the celebratory feeling of the pogroms, taking pleasure in harming, killing, and torturing the Jews they encountered in the streets.

From the beginning of Imperial Russia to the twentieth century, Jews in the Russian empire faced anti-Semitism in the form of social and economic oppression, restriction of rights, and extreme violence through pogroms. Anti-Semitic discrimination had existed in Europe since the Medieval era, with the notable superstition that Jews ritually killed Christian children and used their blood to make matzo. In the Russian empire, the Pale of Settlement was established under the reign of Catherine the Great to confine the settlement of Jews to an area of land on the western and southern boundaries of the empire. Jews faced discrimination in education and universities as well as the legal system. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, anti-Jewish sentiment led to the execution of pogroms that became increasingly violent and deadly as time progressed into the twentieth century. These acts of discrimination, oppression, and violence against Jewish communities were driven by numerous factors including religious beliefs, racist theories, Jewish stereotypes, and the association of Jews with revolutionary activity. Generations of anti-Semitism pushed hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate from the Russian

⁵⁴ Ibid., 795.

⁵⁵ Stefan Wiese, “‘Spit Back with Bullets!’ Emotions in Russia’s Jewish Pogroms, 1881 — 1905,” *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 39, No. 4 (2013): 477.

empire to other countries in western Europe as well as the United States of America. The Jewish people in the Tsarist empire spent centuries living within a society that needed a group to look down upon, leading the government to oppress them by restricting their rights and keeping them in at a lower social status.