

GENDERED VIOLENCE

Jewish Women in the
Pogroms of 1917 to 1921

Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe and Their Legacy

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Jewish Women in the
Pogroms of 1917 to 1921

| **Irina Astashkevich**

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To my mother and grandmother

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	xi
Chapter 1 Chaos in Ukraine: Defining the Context of Anti-Jewish Violence	1
Chapter 2 Carnival of Violence: Development of the Pogrom Script	18
Chapter 3 The Perfect Weapon: Mass Rape as Public Spectacle	38
Chapter 4 Inventing Vengeance: Who and Why Punished the Jews	53
Chapter 5 Describing the Indescribable: Narratives of Gendered Violence	77
Chapter 6 “Wretched Victims of Another Kind”: Making Sense of Rape Trauma	105
Conclusion	126
Bibliography	132
Index	144

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My grandmother Susanna had to walk her daughter, my mother Yulia, to school daily to protect her and her brothers from antisemitic slander. My grandparents wanted to live a normal life; instead, they faced wars, hunger, evacuations, later antisemitism, and all the other big and small hardships that

constituted life in the Soviet Union. Neither of them wanted it, but they survived it. Their unconditional love and their evident and hidden experiences made me who I am today. My grandmother, Susanna Nagy, never talked about anything Jewish in attempt to shield me. My mother, Yulia, encouraged me to study Jewish history. With respect for the most important women in my life, I dedicate this book to my mother and to the loving memory of my grandmother.

Introduction

A POGROM IS A POGROM!

Growing up in Moscow in the 1970s and 1980s, we, the last Soviet generation, learned and told a lot of jokes. One of the jokes that I remember from my childhood appears to still be popular today in Russia:¹

There's a pogrom going on in a shtetl. The gang of hoodlums rush into a Jewish home and start to loot, plunder, and smash anything they do not grab. The owner, an old Jew, begs the assailants: "Take anything you want, just spare my daughter!" The old Jew's daughter hears this and comes out into the room, saying, "No, Dad! A pogrom is a pogrom!"

This joke was considered funny, like many other "Jewish jokes" that were very common and unexceptional. No one judged it to be offensive or humiliating; after all, no foul language was used. I cannot recall having been disturbed by the word "pogrom" either, because I did not feel that it applied to me in any way: no one in my family had ever discussed being Jewish; neither the implication of rape as an inextricable part of a pogrom nor the suggestion of Jewish girls having elevated sexual appetites were considered offensive or degrading.

What I did not know, and what my family never wanted me to know, was that my grandmother had been born in a small town near Balta in 1920, about a year after a wave of anti-Jewish violence had swept through the town and its vicinity, leaving hundreds dead and many more women raped. My grandmother was always uneasy talking about being Jewish, and she urged me not to show or tell anybody that I was Jewish too. She was very concerned that my looks might betray me as a Jewish girl.

¹ Judging from how frequently it appears on many Internet pages. For example: <http://anekdotov.me/evrei/55412-nachalo-veka-v-mestechke-evrejskij-pogrom.html>.

Every joke, as the colloquial wisdom has it, is only “partly a joke,” which illustrates how Soviet popular humor helped people “cope with uncertainties” of life.² Notwithstanding the sophisticated undertones and therapeutic effect of many Soviet jokes, this particular one is problematic for a number of reasons. Looking back at this exceedingly derogatory joke, I can clearly see now that it trivializes the phenomenon of potentially deadly ethnic violence, which integrated into itself the mass rape of Jewish women as a symbolic feature. Rape culture that prevailed and still prevails today in Russia suggested that offensive remarks about sexually assaulting women could and should be laughed at.

Astoundingly, this short anecdote accounts for the crucial and symbolic features of pogrom rape at the time of the Civil War in Ukraine in 1917–21: pogroms were violent, vast numbers of women were raped, and they were raped by groups of assailants, often publicly. What shocked me when I started my research into pogroms, besides the realization of my childish ignorance of the problem, is that over half a century later an enormous tragedy, which left many tens if not hundreds of thousands of Jews dead and an even larger number of women raped, had been turned in the public culture into a dirty joke.

A number of questions guided my research when I first started to work on pogrom history: Why did raping Jewish women become an integral part of a pogrom? Why did pogrom perpetrators so often perform the rapes in groups? How did the Jewish community of Ukraine respond to rape? Why are insulting jokes and crude songs seemingly the only traces of the mass rape of Jewish women left in the public culture? Are jokes and crude songs the only way to deal with trauma? I endeavored to find answers, but sometimes found only more questions, and so the research of the pogrom history evolved into this first-of-its-kind research of the mass rape of Jewish women. This book is the result of more than a decade of studying the phenomenon of gender violence during pogroms in Ukraine at the time of the Civil War of 1917–21.³ It aspires to establish a new line of inquiry into the strategic employment of rape

2 Anna Shternshis, “Humor and Russian Jewish Identity,” in *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World*, ed. Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel N. Finder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1010–112.

3 The series of military conflicts on the territory of modern Ukraine that ensued during the First World War and the Russian Revolutions of 1917 are commonly known in historiography as the Civil War, the Soviet Ukrainian War, or the Ukrainian War for Independence. In 1921, the military conflict resulted in the victory of the Bolsheviks and the establishment of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. See Chapter 1.

during pogroms, and the repercussions of mass rape for Russian Jewish history throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

The Civil War on the territory of Ukraine had started amid the First World War and continued through 1921, when Bolsheviks established a Soviet republic in Ukraine.⁴ It was a time of absolute chaos, as numerous armies, guerrilla forces, and armed gangs fought one another all over Ukraine. The belligerents—which included the Ukrainian National Army, the former Russian imperial officers united into the Volunteer Army, the Bolsheviks, and a number of guerrilla militant groups—perpetrated anti-Jewish violence and utilized the systematic rape of Jewish women as a strategic weapon to convey that they were superior and to dehumanize the Jewish victims. No definite rape statistics are available, because rape was stigmatized as shameful. However, an estimate based on thorough study of various sources suggests that the mass rape of Jewish women occurred in at least two-thirds of pogroms and often involved the majority of the Jewish female population in the victimized communities. These cautious estimates suggest that tens if not hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian Jewish women were victims of sexual violence and many more Jewish men and women witnessed it. After 1922, when Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union and the violence subsided, the problem of mass rape during the pogroms was never specifically addressed or recognized by either the Soviet government or the Jewish population. The Jewish community in its traditional form ceased to exist, while many Jews, especially those who were young and educated, moved to larger cities outside of former Pale of Settlement. The impact of unresolved and unspoken trauma of mass rape in Ukraine on what has now become known as the post-Soviet Jewry is yet to be evaluated.⁵

The territories where violent pogroms took place in 1917–22 lay in “the border areas between the Russian and Polish heartlands—present-day Ukraine and Belarus.”⁶ Just as it is difficult to determine the exact number of the military and social conflicts that constituted the Civil War, it is also hard to make geographic distinctions. However, my research is primarily based on the materials on pogroms that occurred on the territory of Ukraine and will be focused

4 Some violent outbreaks, however, continued on the territory of Ukraine in 1922.

5 The role of the pogroms in the making of Soviet Jewry is discussed at length by Elissa Bemporad in the first chapter of her book forthcoming from Oxford University Press in May 2019: *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets*.

6 David Engel, *The Assassination of Symon Petliura and the Trial of Scholem Schwarzbard 1926–1927: A Selection of Documents* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co, 2016), 59.

on anti-Jewish violence that happened in Ukraine. I had to exclude from my research the pogroms on the territory of modern Belarus and on some Polish territories that occurred at approximately the same time but under somewhat different circumstances.

The anti-Jewish violence during pogroms, which took lives of approximately tens or even hundreds of thousands of Jews⁷ in over a thousand pogroms in about five hundred localities, constitutes genocide.⁸ The impact of this assertion on the research of pogrom violence, and particularly gender violence, is crucial, as it transfers the previously understudied history of pogroms in Ukraine into the realm of genocide studies. At the same time, it also furthers those studies that have already been actively redefining their methods, while the range of research has grown geographically and chronologically. The genocidal violence during the pogroms can thus be treated as a precursor to the Holocaust, and until recently the latter overshadowed the significance of pogrom violence and research regarding it in the East European Jewish historiography. Similarly, the mass rape of Jewish women during pogroms has never been considered as a subject for in-depth research, because it was never considered within the framework of genocidal rape, a flourishing field of study of gender violence as a strategic weapon of war and genocide.

Existing historiography of the pogroms in Ukraine during the Civil War, while rich and extensive,⁹ has so far been missing two key elements. On the one hand, the pogroms during Civil War were either subsumed into the historiography of the previous pogrom waves of 1881–82, or of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903; or were discussed as a backdrop to the dramatic events of the Civil War in Ukraine and the First World War. Scholarship on the pogroms has never broached the subject of gendered experience of violence and rape as an

7 All casualty estimates are based on a number of various sources, but no confirmed data exists. Since the number of casualties is employed for illustrative purposes, I chose the median number. For in-depth assessment of the accounts for victims of pogroms see Engel, *The Assassination of Symon Petliura*, 59–60.

8 See Jeffrey Veidlinger's upcoming book and also his public presentations. For example, video record of Jeffrey Veidlinger, "A Forgotten Genocide: The Pogroms in Ukraine, 1918–19," program of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (2016), organized by Elissa Bemporad.

9 The most acknowledged works on the subject include John Klier and Shlomo Lambroza, *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

independent line of inquiry. My book is the first study to evaluate the traumatic impact of rape on both Jewish women and men through scrupulous analysis of the gendered narrative of pogrom rape. This gendered form of violence shaped the experience of the victims and the narration of the events, which largely followed normative gendered scripts and but also deviated from them in important ways.

The bulk of the sources for this research originates in the archival collection of Elias Tcherikower (YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in New York).¹⁰ A renowned historian, Tcherikower came to Kiev (Kyiv) from the United States in order to participate in Jewish politics, which blossomed after the democratic reforms of the Ukrainian parliament. Little did he know that he would become a witness of the enormous humanitarian tragedy of the Jewish people. After pogroms surged, Tcherikower with his collaborators established the Editorial Board that began to assemble documents about anti-Jewish violence, and also sent out a call for Jews to contribute to the project. The Editorial Board interviewed the refugees and victims when assessing the damage inflicted by the pogroms. After the material was collected, it was sorted, cataloged and summarized by Tcherikower and his wife Rivka. Laura Jockusch placed this massive effort within the framework of *Khurbn-Forshung*¹¹—a tradition of history writing, as fitting the Jewish response to catastrophe. Tcherikower's and his collaborators' efforts toward creating an inclusive collection of documents that would explicitly describe pogroms in Ukraine resulted in a vast archive that contains unique documents as well as materials from various relief organizations that provided help for victims of pogroms and conducted their own research. Tcherikower moved his archive to Berlin in the early twenties, where he began to publish a series of books about pogroms, and later to Paris, where Tcherikower used the archival materials for the defense of S. Shwarzbard, who assassinated General Petliura¹²—the man admittedly responsible for the pogroms.

Some copies of the documents from Tcherikower's archive have been published as part of the Russian State Archive volume on pogroms,¹³ but not all of the materials in the archival collections were identical to each other, and the volume contains some unique archival material. Other collections utilized

10 YIVO Archive, Elias Tcherikower Archive 1903–63, Rg 80–89 (Mk 470).

11 Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28–30.

12 Leader of the Ukrainian Government—Directory in 1919.

13 L. V. Miljakova, ed., *Kniga Pogromov: Pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i Evropejskoj Chasti Rossii v Period Grazhdanskoj Vojny 1918–1922 gg.; Sbornik Dokumentov* (ROSSPĖN, 2007).

for the purposes of this research include the Kiev Regional Archive¹⁴ and the archive of Poalei Zion Party.¹⁵ The source base was supplemented with variously assembled secondary sources and a number of memoirs.

THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE POGROM AND ITS SCRIPT

“The dam of inhibition broke,”¹⁶ wrote Helmut Smith, describing the changing pattern of the anti-Jewish violence in modern history. “In incidence and intensity, the anti-Jewish violence was something new, even if in form it represented an archaic form of protest,”¹⁷ Smith continued, describing the murderous turn of the new violence in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century that was no longer curbed by the state and army, and often employed by them. Smith based his observations primarily on the pogrom waves in Russia that occurred in 1881–83 and in 1903–6, which, compared to the relatively undisturbed existence of European and Russian Jews in the previous century or centuries, appeared to represent a significant surge of anti-Jewish violence. The following pogrom wave of 1917–21 surpassed any violence previously experienced by Jews anywhere, and yet retained the name and the form of pogrom.

Searching for the exhaustive definition of pogrom, David Engel asks the crucial question: What is gained by defining a multitude of violent ethnic, usually urban, riots as pogroms?¹⁸ Or, in other words, what distinguishes pogrom violence from any other forms of ethnic violence, considering that notion of pogrom is more and more applied to the events outside of the Jewish realm?¹⁹ In response to his own question, Engel identifies the necessary conditions that lead to pogroms.²⁰ First, victims are easily identified as a group, religious or ethnic, which is considered lower in stature than the group of perpetrators

14 Jewish Pogroms in Ukraine, 1918–24. Documents of the Kiev Oblast’ Commission for Relief to Victims of Pogroms (Obshetskom) (Fond 3050), years covered by document are 1918–21.

15 World Socialist Union of Jewish Workers—Poalei, Zion (Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei, istorii: [Poalei Zion archive] : [on microfiche] IDC, Harvard Library, 1998).

16 Ibid., 117.

17 Ibid.

18 David Engel, “What’s in a Pogrom? European Jews in the Age of Violence,” in *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, ed. Jonathan Dekel-Chen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 21.

19 For example, see Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

20 Engel, “What’s in a Pogrom?,” 24.

of violence. Secondly, the offending group claims collective injury or offense committed by the victimized group. The proclaimed offense or injury can be righted and the “injured” high-ranking group can be made whole only through immediate application of violence against the victimized group. “In the perpetrators’ hierarchy of values the transgressions of the lower-ranking group were of such magnitude that the legitimate order of things could be restored only when either they themselves took the law into their own hands or— as in Pinsk in 1919, Ukraine during the Russian Civil War, Kristallnacht, or Iaqui in 1941— instruments of the state or claimants to state power bypassed normal political and legal channels in favor of direct action against the offenders.”²¹ The process of restoration of corrupt social norms through violence, according to Edward Thompson, represented the “moral economy” of the crowd.²²

The act of restoring the right and punishing the wrong is a symbolic one, and is exercised best through ritualized violent theater, not unlike Foucauldian “public punishment.”²³ The pogrom, as a social ritual, utilized a combination of specific semantically laden patterns and rites played by the rioters, and to a certain extent by their victims. This performance brought not only symbolic restoration of justice, but moral satisfaction to the aggressive crowd. As a result the violent theater of pogrom played out over and over coalesced into a recognizable pattern or pogrom script.

Pogrom as a form of repair of broken social norms has permeated Jewish history. David Nirenberg has applied this concept to medieval Jewish history and classified such violent outbreaks as systematic violence,²⁴ the purpose of which was to punish the Jews and emphasize their inferior position in the society. By the beginning of the twentieth century not only the pogrom phenomenon became an unexceptional part of life,²⁵ but also the pogrom script itself became part of everyday reality. The increase of anti-Jewish violence was facilitated by the growing “visibility” of Jews in relation to European society and a weakening of state power at the same time.²⁶ The latter is unanimously recognized as a necessary condition that promotes pogrom violence.

21 Ibid.

22 Edward P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & present*, no. 50 (1971).

23 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

24 David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

25 Klier and Lambroza, *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence*, 33.

26 Engel, “What’s in a Pogrom?,” 30–31.