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POGROMS IN RUSSIA UNDER THE CZARS AND DURING THE REVOLUTION

A rise in anti-Semitism in Russia coincided with the shaking off of Mongolian rule and the strengthening of the Orthodox Church in the late Middle Ages. Czar Ivan IV (1530–1584) forced religious conversion on the Jews in the newly conquered territories and severely restricted Jewish trade. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Russia had become a great power in the region and annexed Poland in 1772, lending the “Jewish question,” that is, the question of how to deal with the unpleasant minority, a new urgency. Under pressure from Russian merchants fearful of Jewish competition, Catherine II (1729–1796), who ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796, issued a decree forbidding Jews from living in the Russian interior. Their territory was restricted to the so-called Pale of Settlement—the former territory of Poland and the area north of the Black Sea.

The nineteenth century saw a profound socioeconomic transformation of Russian society that also affected the life and economic activity of Jewish communities. The Jewish population concentrated itself in the cities inside the Pale of Settlement, focusing on trade; skilled trades and the cultivation of the land had become less profitable and therefore lost their appeal for most Jews. Although a small portion of the population established itself in banking and credit, most Jews became impoverished. From this point on Jews attempted to succeed as petty merchants, peddlers, and handicrafts people. They thus found themselves in bitter, destructive competition with their Christian neighbors, which led to a rise in anti-Semitism. The Russian upper classes and nobility also became increasingly anti-Semitic, associating the Jews with modernization and capitalism (i.e., with movements that threatened the traditional social order). Thus anti-Semitism came to be associated with anti-capitalism and antisocialism.

The hostility toward Jews was widespread in the Russian Empire: between 1881 and 1921 there were three devastating waves of pogroms. The first followed the assassination of Czar Alexander II (1818–1881), when anti-Semitic circles blamed his death on the Jews. The rumor spread like wildfire and gave an anti-Semitic mob justification for attacks on the Jewish community. Pogroms regularly ensued until 1884, primarily in southeastern Ukraine, but also in White Russia (later Belarus) and Lithuania. The Ukrainian pogroms were perpetrated primarily by migrant workers and railway employees. The local population, especially in the Ukraine, passively observed the plunder and violence and left the mobs unhindered, seeing these pogroms against an unloved minority as a suitable release for the pressures of unresolved social issues. Czar Alexander III (1845–1894) blamed the pogroms on the Jews themselves and drafted a series of discriminatory edicts against them in order to unite a divided population behind him. In their struggle for legitimacy, the Russian upper classes fanned the flames of already widespread anti-Semitism, misusing it as an ideology of social integration.

The outbreak of the second wave of pogroms, from 1903 to 1906, was linked directly to political developments in the czarist empire. In order to try to contain growing revolutionary sentiment, the government fanned anti-Semitism by inciting the conservative press against the Jewish population. The first pogrom of this era took place at the Jewish holiday of Passover in 1903 in the town of Kishinev, with roughly 1,500 Jewish houses and businesses looted. These pogroms were organized by the so-called Black Hundreds, an association of reactionary monarchist groups. The government instructed local authorities not to proceed against the perpetrators. Representatives of the czarist secret police wrote and disseminated anti-Semitic pamphlets, such as the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which blamed the Jews for all the country's ills. After the Reform Edicts of 1905, which extended suffrage to the Jews and established the Duma (i.e., the Russian parliament), the most devastating pogrom to date occurred involving sixty-four cities and six hundred villages. More than eight hundred Jews fell victim to its violence.

The wave of pogroms from 1917 to 1921 occurred in the context of world war, revolution, and civil war. Even before the end of World War I (1914–1918), deserters committed terrible massacres and robberies of Jewish property in villages near the front. After the Bolshevik October Revolution in 1917, units of the Red Army and more particularly counterrevolutionary forces (the so-called White Russian, anti-Bolshevik armies) fell on the Jewish population in towns and cities. The worst pogroms took place in the Ukrainian Republic. Before the pro-Bolshevik Red Army's victory in 1920, over sixty thousand Jews lost their lives in the violence.

Describe the origin of anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire:

What restrictions did Catherine the Great place on Jews living within the Russian Empire?

Discuss the three waves of devastating Pogroms in Russia lasting from 1881-1921. What event led to the outbreak of the initial Pogrom? Why did the government target the Jews? What is the Russian government trying to contain?

How did World War One effect Jewish populations living throughout the Russian Empire?