

# Pogroms

## Between practices of exclusion and the violence of extermination

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### ABSTRACT

Pogroms, which were emblematic of the persecution of Jews in the Russian Empire up through the early twentieth century, underwent a major transformation during the Great War. This urban popular violence became militarized, and after 1917 formed the core of the most terrible anti-Semitic violence perpetrated before the Holocaust in Ukraine and Belorussia. Supported by the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, it spread through Europe before being used by authoritarian states during the interwar period and Second World War, then reemerging in the wake of Nazi Germany's defeat, in Poland in particular.



Bodies in the street after the Kishinev Pogrom (modern-day Moldavia), 1903.

Source : [wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kishinev_pogrom)

Since the early nineteenth century, Central and Eastern Europe had been the scene of urban anti-Semitic riots collectively referred to by the term “pogrom,” a Russian word indicating an explosion of violence. Two major waves of pogroms struck the modern-day territories of Ukraine and Moldavia, following the assassination of the tsar in 1881 and around the 1905 Russian Revolution. They spread to the edges of Poland, Russia, and Belorussia, and throughout the entire Pale of Settlement designated for the five million Jews of the Russian Empire. Pogroms have always been connected to moments of political crisis. Tolerated and sometimes encouraged by authorities, albeit never officially decreed, they aggressively framed a coexistence of domination within the multiethnic empire, and

represented a spontaneous form of popular violence that was ritualized through characteristic targets such as shop windows, commercial streets, and Jewish neighborhoods.

### **When pogroms became military violence (1914-1922)**

Pogroms underwent a radical transformation in 1914. They were no longer the acts of crowds, but of armies pillaging Jewish residences. Already in 1914 and mostly during their withdrawal in 1915, as part of the major forced displacement of minorities accused of treason and spying, Russian soldiers increased the level of violence against Jewish civilian populations, under the supervision of their officers. Committed by armies on campaign, anti-Semitic violence grew in intensity and scope, sweeping across entire regions. The practice of plundering inherited from the pre-1914 period was at the heart of these pogroms, which were also marked by rape and murder.

With the events of 1917, anti-Semitism took on an unprecedented political tenor. Since 1914, Jews had been suspected of treachery and accused of threatening the Empire's interests by sabotaging its army, and were now subject to the even more deadly accusation of Judeo-Bolshevism. This new anti-Semitism fueled a thousand pogroms, chiefly in Ukraine and southern Belorussia, affecting half of the Jewish population and leading to 120,000 deaths, an equal number of rapes, and half a million refugees. This persecution was perpetrated by all of the armies present, but was firstly the doing of White anti-Bolshevik troops, Ukrainian and Polish nationalists, along with their supporters.

Peasants directed the militarized pogrom against their neighbors. It was not so much maintaining the balance between nationalities but of eradicating Bolshevism from the countryside, and even engaging in some cases in ethnic cleansing by terrorizing the Jewish population. This violence resulted in forced displacements, and in a dozen cases in the extermination of entire communities. The victory of Soviet power ended this cycle of violence. Primarily driven by its enemies and combatted within its own ranks due to its counter-revolutionary nature, anti-Semitism was seen as belonging to the past, and was hence incompatible with the new socialist order.

### **State use of pogroms (1933-1941)**

The fear of revolution and the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism became international, marking an initial Europeanization of the phenomenon. In the aftermath of the Great War, the affirmation of new authorities over now-independent territories was marked by anti-Semitic violence, for instance in Poland, Romania, and Hungary, countries with large Jewish minorities. Similarly, the rise of anti-Semitism and authoritarian powers in Central and Eastern Europe was accompanied by scattered popular pogroms during the interwar period.

The Nazi party tried to import and manipulate this practice. During the night of November 9-10, 1938, a national campaign sparked an outbreak of violence and fires that the Nazis called "*Kristallnacht*" (Night of the Broken Glass). The event was immediately qualified as a pogrom due to its demonstrative aspect and the ferocity unleashed on the shop windows. However, "*Kristallnacht*," which was initiated from above, clearly distinguished itself from the violence in Russia, which in spite of its recurrence remained the acts of the crowd or troops.

Nazi authorities once again used pogroms during the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. The macabre spectacle—used for propaganda purposes—of mass-graves stacked with the bodies of people executed by the Soviet political police, in addition to the reactivation of the accusation of Judeo-Bolshevisms in territories annexed in 1939 and marked by brutal Sovietization, led to pogroms that resulted in dozens of deaths as the streets of Lviv, Kaunas, and Riga filled with local nationalist groups. The chaos sparked by this popular violence, and the small number of victims in view of Nazi plans, prompted the SS to abandon these initiatives and take direct charge of both anti-Semitic policy and the extermination of Soviets Jews.

Further removed from Nazi attempts to use them, pogroms in the countryside took a genocidal turn in 1941, in

these very same regions that shifted from Soviet to Nazi occupation. On July 10, the inhabitants of the village of Jedwabne in Poland massacred 1,600 of their Jewish neighbors; there were similar cases in the area of Bialystok, as well as in Western Ukraine and Moldavia.

Unlike Nazi Germany, Marshall Antonescu's Romania successfully combined pogroms and the systematic extermination of Jews in 1941. In early 1941, after six months of smaller-scale massacres, the Iron Guard launched a major pogrom in Bucharest. When it entered the war against the USSR, the pogroms committed by the regular army, gendarmerie, and local populations increased along the entire front line. In Jassy, the pogrom that lasted from June 28 to July 6, 1941, claimed 13,000 victims, followed by others in Bessarabia and Bukovina. This violence was combined with the deportation of Jewish populations toward the East.

## Postwar legacy

Upon their return after the defeat of Nazi Germany, Holocaust survivors had to face a new wave of anti-Semitism, demonstrating the tensions that grew out of the war. Following accusations of cowardice during fighting, a hundred Jews of Kiev—returning from evacuation or being demobilized—were beaten during a pogrom initiated by Red Army soldiers. This anti-Semitic violence was suppressed in the USSR by the re-establishment of Soviet power, but was not similarly hindered in Poland, where part of the population intended to complete the resolution of the “Jewish problem,” as many survivors or evacuees attempted to return home. The Kielce Pogrom of July 4, 1946 broadly accelerated the departure of survivors and Jews who had returned to Poland, claiming 42 victims and representing the peak of two years of violence in cities, the countryside, and along transportation routes. Only 45,000 Jews still lived in Poland in 1950, as the others preferred joining the displaced person camps located in the West.

Pogroms were therefore the manifestation of a series of anti-Semitic tensions that marked twentieth-century Europe: the fragility of societies at war, fear of Bolshevism, Nazi policies of extermination, and the reshaping of populations. They have come to symbolize the split between Jewish populations and their former neighbors after centuries of turbulent cohabitation.

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