Russia’s 1905 Era Pogroms Reexamined

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The great bulk of the pogroms in the period 1903-1906 occurred in the weeks following the Manifesto of October 17, 1905, announced simultaneously throughout Russia. They have been viewed as a reaction to the Manifesto by patriotic Russians who felt their loyalty to the tsar and autocracy had been betrayed, but also as a recurrence of an older pattern of blaming and attacking social elements deemed alien to Russian life, above all Jews, but also liberals, radicals, Poles, and other non-Russians. The specific historical circumstances of 1905 have thus been combined with the seemingly eternal theme of Russian anti-Semitism to explain the pogroms.

Of the two terms, the role of the specific circumstances in which they occurred bear closer examination. In Russia, as in Europe as a whole, it is not anti-Jewish animus that is new and or lacks efforts at explanation, but the circumstances that have set off its expression, none more dramatically than those that precipitated the pogroms of late Imperial Russia’s history. The term “pogrom” has been applied to three great waves of murder and mayhem directed against Jews and others – those of 1881-1882, 1903-1906, and 1919-1920. The use of a common term itself has perhaps emphasized what the three waves had in common – i.e., attacks on Jews – rather than the very

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2) All dates in this article are give in Old Style [OS] dating, which in the twentieth century lagged 13 days behind the calendar used elsewhere in Europe and, after February 1918, in Russia. The pogroms that followed the Manifesto of October 17 [OS] thus took place in November, New Style [NS].
different circumstances in which each of them occurred. Terms like “black hundreds,” “gromila,” or even “hooligans”, applied to all pogroms, seem to emphasize common features and mark the entire pogrom crowd with the motives of its most violent element. Narratives of pogroms have stressed the particulars of their origin and unfolding, to be sure, though the structure of the pogrom crowd, the feelings and motives of the perpetrators, or the role of those not directly involved have seldom been explored or explained beyond a superficial level.

This article seeks to add balance to the picture by specifying the precise circumstances and the key variables that obtained in a number of Russian and Ukrainian pogroms in the era of the 1905 Revolution. Drawing on the somewhat larger fund of information available about pogroms confined to that period, it argues that they emerged directly from many months of revolutionary upheaval, which molded and reshaped popular feelings, and it suggests that the decisive factor in transforming the widespread, open acknowledgment of anti-Jewish sentiment into its less common expression as anti-Jewish action was the precise circumstances that structured the action. Whether that approach would be as compelling for other pogrom waves, or even for pogroms that occurred in the two years or so before October 1905 remains to be seen. It emphasizes only that the particularities of the three pogrom waves should be integrated into the larger picture of what was occurring in Russia as a whole at the time of each of them. At the same time, pogroms might be better understood if they are treated less as exceptional occurrences than as an integral part of the social and political history of the of late Imperial Russia.

Most accounts of the 1905-era pogroms are confined to single towns. Those that study the pogroms more generally amount to compilations of