The Rise of Russian Jewish Politics: Russian Anti-Semitism, and the Jewish Political Response At the End of the Nineteenth Century

Eric N. Suchman
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses

Part of the History Commons

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation
The Rise of Russian Jewish Politics:
Russian Anti-Semitism, and the Jewish Political Response
At the End of the Nineteenth Century

Eric N. Suchman
Senior History Honors Project
April 29, 1999
The Pale of Jewish Settlement, showing towns mentioned in the text.
Introduction

When, in the late eighteenth century, Catherine II partitioned Poland, a significant population of Jews became incorporated into the Russian Empire. The presence of this large Jewish minority posed a difficult question for Imperial Russia: what roles and rights should the Jews have in Russian society? This question became known as “the Jewish Question,” and it was dealt with differently by different rulers. Catherine II (1762-96) imposed arguably the single most restrictive Jewish policy: the creation of the Pale of Settlement. Jews were only permitted to settle within the boundaries of the Pale, a rather extensive territory that included the annexed land from Poland, as well as the Little Russia and the Crimea. Nicholas I (1825-1855) enforced harsh restrictions on travel and educational opportunities for Jews and also conscripted exceptionally young Jewish boys into his army. Alexander II (1855-1881) relaxed these policies, allowing Jewish students to study at universities as well as more freedom of movement. Alexander II’s policies were designed to integrate the Jews into Russian society, and his policies were met with great enthusiasm by Jewish intellectuals. The reigns of Alexander III (1881-1894) and Nicholas II (1894-1917) were undoubtedly the most difficult for Russian Jewry: a resurgence of restrictive and discriminatory laws—limitations on the number of Jews enrolled in schools and universities and attempts to confine Jewish settlement to urban areas—coincided with a rash of destructive pogroms that threatened the safety and property of Russian Jews. This paper will examine the difficulties facing Russian Jewry during the reign of Alexander III and the first half of Nicholas II’s rule, as well as the manner in which Jews responded intellectually and practically to these difficulties.
Prior to 1881 Russian Jewish politics were confined within the framework of Russian politics. Many Jews had faith that the Russian government would become more liberal, and eventually grant the Jews, and in fact all Russians, civil rights. The political emancipation of the Jews in Western and Central Europe gave these Jews hope that the Jewish people would eventually be able to assimilate into Russian society. Russian Jewish revolutionaries also saw their fate as tied to the Russian people. These Jews hoped to be a part of a social revolution involving all Russians, in which distinction between Jew and gentile would gradually fade away.

By the Revolution of 1905, however, Russian Jewish politics were forever altered. No longer did Jewish intellectuals believe that the Russian government and revolutionary movement hold a place for the Jewish people. Many Jewish intellectuals had turned towards Zionism, a nationalist movement which called for the establishment of a Jewish state. Others joined the Bund (the Russian Jewish Marxist party), which clung to the notion of social and political revolution, but included Jewish interests with class interests in its program. These two movements show the manner in which politically-inclined Jews turned to Jewish rather than Russian solutions for their problems. Why, then, did Jewish politics change so drastically between 1881 and 1905? This paper seeks to answer this question through its investigation into the state of Russian Jewish affairs at the end of the nineteenth century.

This paper first examines the realities facing the Russian Jew on the Eve of the pogroms. From the optimism and liberalism of Jewish intellectuals, the decline of traditional Jewish life, and the socio-economic conditions of Russian Jewry, to the roots of popular anti-Semitism, this section provides valuable insight into the condition of the
Jewish people who were about to experience the destructive and shattering events of 1881.

Next, this paper considers the events of 1881 and the tsarist government’s response to these events. Following the assassination of Alexander II, mobs of angry Russians attacked and looted thousands of Jewish homes and businesses. Historians have traditionally placed the responsibility for the planning and organization of these pogroms upon the Russian central government. Recently, however, revisionist historians have concluded that the pogroms were spontaneous and unorganized, owing more to socio-economic causes than tsarist planning. This paper will consider the controversy surrounding the pogroms, as well as examining the Jewish policy of the tsarist government that followed the events of 1881.

This paper then considers Jewish reactions to the realities facing the Russian Jew during this time period. In general, this time period witnessed three significant responses to the difficulties facing Russian Jews: emigration, Zionism, and socialism. Of the three responses, Zionism and socialism were more organized and intellectually motivated than the mass emigration that took place, therefore this paper focuses primarily on these two responses. It was the advent of Zionism and socialism that marked the beginning of the Jew’s desire to take his political destiny into his own hands, thus beginning the era of a politically self-conscious Jewry.

This paper continues by making several conclusions regarding the manner in which the realities facing the Russian Jew shaped Zionism and Jewish socialism differently. The Zionist ideology was molded and determined by the difficulties facing Russian Jews, most importantly the 1881 pogroms. Prior to these pogroms many proto-
Zionists had been assimilationists, stressing the Jews’ ability to become a functioning part of Russian society. The wave of violence and official anti-Semitism that followed Alexander II’s assassination, however, forced many of these assimilationists to embrace the notion that Jews could never be free unless they formed their own autonomous nation.

The ideology of the Russian Jewish socialists, on the other hand, was molded by the economic conditions facing Russia as whole. Industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of an urban work force led many Jews to turn towards socialism as a solution to these problems. While their ideology remained focused on socialism and Marxism, their methods and practices were inevitably shaped by the realities facing the Russian Jew. Legal discrimination, anti-Semitic violence, and the segregated nature of Jewish society forced Jewish socialists to focus on the problems facing Jews, rather than those facing Russia as a whole. This focus on the Jewish question led to the eventual split between the Bund and the Russian Social Democratic party.

Finally, the paper will examine the 1903-1906 pogroms, and the manner in which these years saw Zionism and Jewish socialism change. The aim of this paper is to show how the realities facing Russian Jews led to the development of a national and political awareness among many of the Jewish people.

**Russian Jewry on the Eve of the Pogroms**

In order to understand the situation of the Russian Jew at the end of the nineteenth century, it is helpful first to take a step back, and examine briefly the broader history of the Jewish people. The history of the Jews has often been viewed as the history of a people in exile. The scattering of the Jewish people throughout the Christian and Muslim
world since their expulsion from Israel in 70 AD by the Romans has been termed the Diaspora. The Diaspora, which many historians argue lasted until the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, meant the Jews were never at home, they were always guests (wanted and unwanted) in another people’s land. In general, the governments of the nations which Jews lived in placed legal restrictions upon the Jews’ rights of settlement, employment, and property ownership. Thus, for most of the Diaspora, the Jews were legally and socially unequal to the Christian or Muslim majority in their areas of settlement.

It was the ideas of the European Enlightenment that found an outlet in the French revolution that began to change the status of the Jew living in Christian and (to a lesser extent) Muslim nations. The French Revolution, at the end of the 18th century, emancipated the Jews, and granted them equal rights. Afterwards there followed a slow, and often inconsistent process of emancipation that spread throughout western and central European countries and saw the legal status of Jews change significantly. The emancipated Jew was now able to participate in European economic, intellectual, and political activities, thus marking the beginning of the era in which the Jewish people could start to determine their political destiny.

While Western European Jewry experienced the gradual relaxation and elimination of legal restrictions throughout the beginning of the 19th century, those Jews living in Eastern Europe (Romania, eastern Prussia, and Russia) were not granted emancipation by their respective governments. During this period, educational, settlement, and occupational restrictions continued to be placed upon the Jewish people in Eastern Europe. Despite these restrictions, the Jews of Eastern Europe looked
Westward hopefully, and optimistically anticipated the prospect of becoming emancipated within their own nations in the near future. This was particularly true in Russia, where the liberal policies of Alexander II provoked an optimistic and liberal attitude in many Russian Jews. The reign of Alexander II convinced many Russian Jews that their time for emancipation was at hand. Many Jews felt that their destiny and identity lay with Russia, and that it was time to shed their Jewish identity and become Russian, in dress, appearance, and in language. They saw Alexander II's policies as welcoming such assimilation, and believed that their years of living under legal and social restrictions were nearly over.

While Jewish intellectuals were increasingly attracted to the secular, Russian world, changes were occurring within the confines of traditional Jewry as well. Gregor Aronson points out that social progress and trends led to the decline of traditional Jewry in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth century. While Jewish life had traditionally been centered around the small town, or shtetl, the trends of urbanization and industrialization led many Jews away from their close-knit communities. The wealthier elements of Jewish society, as well as the younger generation of Jewish youth, were drawn to the cities. The rise of capitalism, too, created class distinctions within the Jewish community, further weakening the unity of the traditional Jewish community.

The move away from the Jewish small town coincided with a gradual decline in the importance of religion in the life of the Russian Jew. Students who had been trained in the traditional teachings of the Torah and Talmud, began to lose interest in religious
orthodoxy, and turned instead to secular studies. Many of these Jews would be drawn into the Zionist and socialist movements.¹

As will be discussed later, one of the many causes of Russian Judeophobia was the claim that in rural settings, the Jewish people exploited and acted against the interests of the Russian peasantry. This belief became the catalyst for many Tsarist decrees restricting Jewish settlement and activities in rural areas. The ‘temporary’ May Laws of 1882 restricted new Jewish settlements in rural areas, culminating a long list of similar decrees such as the expulsion of Jews from the villages of Mogilev, Vitebsk, and Grodno provinces in the 1820s, and an 1845 law prohibiting the sale of liquor by Jews in rural settings.²

These restrictive laws, combined with the general forces of industrialization and modernization that led to the gradual urbanization of Russia as a whole, created a large urban Jewish population by the end of the nineteenth century. Henry Tobias provides statistics that show the extreme urbanization of Jews during this period:

In the most thinly settled area [of the Pale of Settlement], the southern provinces (Bessarabia, Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, and Tauride), the Jews made up only 26.3 per cent of the urban population in 1897. In the more thickly populated southwestern provinces (Volynia, Podolia, Kiev, Chernigov, and Poltava), however, the figure rose to 38.1 per cent; and in the area of densest population, the northwest provinces (Vilna, Grodno, Minsk, Vitebsk, Kovno, and Mogilev), ...the concentration of the Jews was extremely high, the Jews representing 57.9 per cent of the urban population. This at a time when Jews made up only 4 to 5 per cent of the total population of the Empire.³

---

² Ezra Mendelsohn, Class Struggle in the Pale, 3.
³ Tobias, 8.
In general, most urban Jews at the end of the nineteenth century were employed as artisans. This, however, was not a recent trend among Eastern European Jews—as far back as the fifteenth century, Jews had been earning their livings as glass-makers, furriers, painters, leadsmiths, and goldsmiths. The effects of urbanization and industrialization, did, however, have an effect on the number of Jewish artisans in the Pale. By the end of the century, over two-thirds of the artisans within the Pale were Jewish, and 90 per cent of Jewish workers in Belorussia-Lithuanian worked as craftsmen. 4

Though many Jewish artisans were self-employed, a large number worked as journeymen or apprentices for their Jewish employers. For these employees, working conditions were extremely difficult and intolerable. These workers’ greatest complaint was the length of the working day. The work day extended from sunrise to beyond sunset. In 1892, one worker complained in a petition to the Governor of Vilna Province that “…the work in the shop lasts from 7.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m. or 12.00 p.m., and before holidays the employer makes us work all night.”. 5

Wages for the artisans were small and irregular as well. Because many Jewish workers were only employed seasonally, their wages were even less sufficient. Thus, most Jewish workers lived in extreme poverty. Living conditions were terrible—several families often shared poorly ventilated rooms without beds or furniture, and families of Jewish workers often had to rely on charity for adequate clothing and food. 6 Though the working conditions of the Jewish workers were extremely difficult, it must be noted that the gentile worker experienced very similar conditions in Russia as the Jew. Urban life

---

4 Mendelsohn, 6.
5 Ibid, 11.
was difficult for most Russians at the end of the nineteenth century, and though Jews and Christians often lived and worked separately, their conditions were comparable.

While the majority of Jewish workers were artisans, some Jews also found employment in large factories. These factories (usually cigarette or match factories), almost always owned by Jews, employed a labor force made up of mostly women and children. These factories and workers were viewed optimistically by Jewish radicals seeking a ‘factory proletariat’ to mobilize against the Tsarist regime.7

Tied closely to the economic conditions of the Jewish people, are the roots of Russian popular anti-Semitism. As mentioned earlier, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century, with the partition of Poland, that a significant number of Jews found themselves under Russian rule. Ironically, Catherine II’s government initially welcomed the Jews into the Empire. Though the majority of Jews lived in the countryside at the time, a sizable urban population did exist; it was this group that Catherine II viewed favorably. She hoped that these Jews, employed as merchants and craftsmen in towns and cities, would help to add an urban mercantile element to Russia’s largely agrarian society.8

Unfortunately for the Jews, their warm welcome into the Empire was quickly retracted. Two factors prevented the Tsarist government from allowing the Jews to become fully integrated into the Empire: the tradition of anti-Semitism among the Jews’ neighbors in the town and countryside, and the growing belief within the central government that the Jews were not productive, but in fact were “parasitical.” The first factor can be explained by the fact that for centuries, Jews had been viewed as socially

---

6 Ibid. 14.
7 Ibid. 24-26.
inferior by Christians. Therefore the Tsarist government, whose Empire was stratified socially and hierarchically organized, had no desire to antagonize the Christian majority by giving the Jews equal status. The second factor became extremely important for gentile perceptions of the role of Jews in Russia, which were affected by the developing official view that Jewish economic activity was “exploitative” of the Orthodox peasantry.⁹

Because the view that Jews exploited Christians became prevalent not only among government officials, but also among the local population, we must examine the economic roles played by the Jews in the Russian Empire, as well as Russians’ perceptions of these roles. While it was the urban Jews who Catherine had initially viewed with favor, the vast majority of Jews lived in the countryside. Rural Jews labored as carters, porters, and teamsters; they engaged in petty trade, and they also distilled and sold liquor.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century in Russia, a process of industrialization and economic growth occurred, affecting the Jewish population greatly. A small minority of Jews took advantage of the economic changes and prospered as bankers and merchants. These wealthy Jews were often conspicuous in their wealth, and they thereby created hostility towards all Jews among lower class Russians. Jews were viewed, erroneously, as disproportionately successful and privileged by the Russian peasant and worker. In fact, in most cases, Russia’s industrialization made conditions worse for the Jews: “small craftsmen lost business to factory-produced goods, and wagoners, porters, and innkeepers were made superfluous as more and more people and goods traveled by

---

⁹ Ibid.
While many Russians found work in Russia's new factories, the majority of Jewish workers were artisans, and suffered at the hands of new technology and industry. As economic conditions worsened, population within the Pale increased, causing "The Pale [to become] choked by a huge, pauperized mass of unskilled or semi-skilled Jewish laborers".11

The abundance of laborers created a competitive atmosphere in the Pale that drove down prices and, many historians contend, forced the Jews into "exploitative" activities. The need to sell goods inexpensively "resulted in the production of shoddy, poor-quality goods, or in price-fixing and collusion."12 This produced great resentment of the Jew in the Christian community. "Some [Christians] resented their dependence on Jews as employers, moneylenders, and suppliers of articles of basic necessity (including liquor)."13 Because many Jews were involved in the liquor trade, Jews were blamed for the "impoverishment and intoxication of the peasantry" through the sale of liquor. As liquor distiller and tavern owner, the Jew was viewed as a parasite of their Christian neighbors.14 Thus, it is not surprising that many outbreaks of pogroms initially began as confrontations with Jewish tavern-owners.

Although historians have often explained these "exploitative" activities as a result of the competitive atmosphere of the Pale, government officials and neighboring Christians placed the blame on the teachings of Judaism. It was generally believed that the Talmud (the Jewish book of laws) "preached the undying enmity of Jews towards Gentiles, and encouraged Jews to harm them in any way which would not provoke

11 ibid., 6.
12 ibid., 6.
13 Aronson, Troubled Waters, 113.
retribution." Although this belief was erroneous, many Christians nonetheless believed that through trade and the sale of liquor, the Jews were exploiting Christians, and thus following the law of the Talmud. Ideas such as these also led many Christians to believe that Jews were involved in a plot or conspiracy to weaken and overthrow the authority of Christianity.

This notion of Jews as exploitative was an important aspect of the anti-Semitic sentiments that motivated Christians living in the Pale to participate in pogroms. But what of those Christians who were not accustomed to Jews, who nonetheless also participated in the pogroms? A large number of those involved in the anti-Jewish rioting were migrant workers from interior Russia—many of whom may never have seen a Jew before arriving in the Pale. Despite the fact that many Russians had never encountered a Jew, "there were age-old religious antagonisms and prejudices. For the Great Russians, the Jew was mostly an abstract concept, so it was easier to view him as the devil incarnate."16

Finally, popular anti-Semitism was fueled by the basic fact that Jews were different from their Christian neighbors. Although some Jews found it necessary to speak Russian for business interactions, Jews spoke Yiddish amongst themselves, marking them as unique from the surrounding population. They also dressed differently than the Russians, ate different foods, maintained different fasts, celebrated different holidays, and prayed to a different God. In addition to the social and religious differences, Christians also could not help but notice that the government treated Jews differently. "The laws of

---

15 Ibid.
16 Aronson, Troubled Waters, 221.
the empire marked the Jews as distinctly inferior by discriminating against them even more than against the peasants themselves.17

1881 and Official Response

Since Tsarist acquiesce to and planning of the pogroms has long been alleged, we must begin by considering the facts surrounding the pogroms and then critically examining the arguments linking Tsar and pogrom. Are the pogroms best explained as an attempt on the part of the central government to destroy the Russian Jewish population, as has traditionally been argued by many historians? Or are they better explained as arising out of specific social and economic circumstances that proved conducive to anti-Semitic violence, as has been suggested by contemporary revisionists?

Although the Tsar and his ministers were at times blatantly anti-Semitic, there exists no evidence that the pogroms were planned or organized by the central government or the Tsar. Instead, the pogroms are best explained as resulting from socio-economic conditions stimulated by larger crises of the times. Though the central government cannot be held responsible for the planning of the pogroms, government leaders and officials were open hostile towards the Jews—not in terms of race and religion, but instead as a social and economic force of change and revolution. Just as many Tsarist policies during this period can be linked to reactionary attitudes, so can the central government’s policy and attitude towards the Jews.

In 1881, Liberalism within the tsarist government as well as the Jewish intellectuals received a crushing blow, from which it would never recover. On March 1, 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by the dynamite bombs of a terrorist group, The

17 Ibid., 121.
People’s Will. Among the terrorists there existed one Jewish member, a woman named Hesia Helfman. Helfman played only a minor role in the assassination (she assisted in the housing of the terrorists), but her involvement, combined with the anti-Jewish sentiments of the time, led many Russians to believe that Jews had played a crucial role in the Tsar’s assassination.\(^\text{18}\)

Rumors began to spread throughout Russia that not only linked the Jews to Alexander II’s assassination, but also maintained that the new Tsar had instructed Russians to attack and punish the Jews for the murder of his father.\(^\text{19}\) The press played an important role in spreading these rumors as well as in nourishing anti-Semitic sentiments. Several newspapers were especially antagonistic towards the Jews. While anti-Semitic articles had been published since the 1870s, such articles increased in number and hostility following the death of Alexander II. Nevertheless, no articles advocated anti-Semitic violence, and according to Michael Aronson, the press was not even aware of the possibility of the eruption of anti-Jewish pogroms.\(^\text{20}\)

The first pogroms in Russia took place in Odessa. Odessa experienced pogroms in 1821, 1839, and 1871, in which Jews and their homes were attacked by mobs of angry Russians. While these pogroms undoubtedly affected the Jewish community in Odessa considerably, they did not approach the violence and destruction of the pogroms of 1881 and 1903-6. In addition, unlike the later pogroms, the Odessa pogroms occurring prior to

\(^\text{18}\) S.M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, volume II, 244.
\(^\text{20}\) ibid., 45-6.
1881 were not part of a wave of anti-Semitic attacks occurring throughout the Jewish Pale of Settlement.\(^1\)

The first pogrom of 1881 occurred in the town of Elizavetgrad (located in Kerson province) on April 15. As in the rest of Russia, rumors and anti-Jewish attacks by the press had already created a hostile environment toward Jews. Due to this sentiment, the Jewish community had already made several pleas to the police chief, I.P. Bogdanovich, to protect them against possible violence. It should be noted that Bogdanovich was known for his fair and equal treatment of non-Russians and non-Orthodox Christians. In preparation for Easter (during which anti-Jewish attacks had traditionally occurred), Bogdanovich had brought extra troops into Elizavetgrad to supplement the inadequate local police force.\(^2\)

Although anti-Semitic rumors continued to spread during the first days of Easter (April 12-15), no violent outbursts occurred, and Bogdanovich, believing the situation to be calm, relaxed his precautions and dismissed his military reinforcements. But during the afternoon of April 15, a Christian was kicked out of a tavern by the Jewish owner, and this incident served as the catalyst for anti-Jewish rioting and attacks. The police attempted to restore order, but could not. Jewish stores and taverns were attacked by angry mobs, and Jewish homes and property fell to looting and attacks. Bogdanovich recalled the military reinforcements in order to disperse the mobs, but the rioting continued on the outskirts of town.\(^3\)


\(^2\) Michael Aronson, Troubled Waters, 47.

\(^3\) Ibid., 47.
The next morning, peasants from the surrounding countryside joined the rioters. Soldiers and police had not been given specific instructions, except for a general order to restore peace, and in general refrained from acting against the rioters. Attacks and rioting continued throughout the day, but the arrival of rain on the evening of April 16, and fresh troops on the morning of April 17, put an end to the disturbances.24

Although order had been restored in Elizavetgrad, the pogroms of 1881 were just beginning. Those peasants who had taken part in or witnessed the riots in Elizavetgrad, returned to their villages with rumors and reports of anti-Semitic attacks. And by April 21, anti-Jewish violence had spread to over thirty villages in the vicinity of Elizavetgrad. Pogroms continued to spread throughout the Pale of Settlement (only a couple isolated pogroms occurred outside of the Pale) and by August, violence had reached over 240 communities, killed up to 40 Jews, and destroyed millions of roubles in Jewish property.25 Several more pogroms occurred between 1882 and 1884, but these did not approach the 1881 pogroms in either number or extent.

One of the most basic uses of history is to identify the causes of important events. Historians examining the pogroms of 1881 therefore are faced with a difficult question: to whom or to what should one attribute the rash of anti-Jewish violence that swept Russia during the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II? This discussion is not confined to historians, however, and members of the central government asked themselves this question following the anti-Jewish violence. Immediately following the pogroms of 1881, the first impulse of the Tsar and his ministers was to blame the rioting on socialist revolutionaries. Political terrorists had killed Alexander III's father just

24 ibid., 57-8.
25 ibid., 61.
months earlier, and it seemed logical that the anti-Jewish rioting was an extension of this terrorism. This explanation was soon abandoned, however, as no evidence surfaced linking the revolutionaries and the pogroms. The central government now blamed the Jews' economic activity for having exacerbated Christian-Jewish tensions, and thus for inciting the pogroms. It was this explanation that led the government to pursue an anti-Semitic policy.

Historians, however, have blamed neither the socialists nor the Jews, and traditionally have found the Tsar and the central government responsible for the anti-Jewish attacks. This notion, known as "the conspiracy theory," accuses the central government of having organized and supported the pogroms in an attempt to weaken the Jewish community. The clearest articulation of the conspiracy theory, which can be found in S. M. Dubnow's *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, points to the similar and simultaneous manner in which the pogroms took place as evidence of the advance planning and organization of them. In addition, Dubnow and other historians blamed the central government for several of the immediate causes of the pogroms: the anti-Semitic rumors spread in newspapers and pamphlets and the conspicuous inaction of police and military forces that could have prevented the rioting from ever occurring.

Louis Greenberg, a supporter of the conspiratorial explanation, emphasizes the conspicuously similar pattern of events in all the pogroms as evidence of advance planning and organization. Prior to the outbreak of violence, rumors would spread throughout a town that anti-Jewish violence would take place on a specific date. Jews would then ask the police and local officials for protection, and they would be assured that precautions were being taken. On the day of the pogrom, a "band of out-of-town
hooligans" would arrive in town with a list of Jewish homes and businesses. These drunken hooligans would then go to the Jewish quarter and begin the looting and pillaging. At first the local population would not participate, but merely watch, but after the authorities failed to repress the rioting, locals would join. After two or three days, policemen and troops would assert their authority, and the rioting would end. In addition to the common pattern of the rioting, conspiracy theory historians argue that the fact that this violence occurred in various locations nearly simultaneously indicates that it was planned from above.

The press and other avenues of anti-Semitic rumors (pamphlets and posters) arguably played an important role in inciting the pogroms, and conspiracy theorists see the central government as the source of these rumors. For example, Dubnow asserts that the anti-Semitic campaigns in the press that followed the assassination of Alexander II were instigated and influenced by the Tsar and his ministers. He also shows that the anti-Semitic newspaper, Bessarrabets received special funding from the central government and was "favored by the powers that be." Greenberg supports Dubnow's analysis by arguing that the Minister of Interior, Plehve, was so pleased with Bessarrabets that he established a special subsidy for a similar paper to be printed in St. Petersburg.

Proponents of the conspiracy theory argue that the anti-Semitic campaign in the press set the stage for the pogroms, but it was not until the arrival of "mysterious emissaries" in the Pale that the rioting would begin. These visitors from out-of-town

---

27 Dubnow, II, 247.
28 Dubnow, III, 70.
29 Greenberg, 50-51.
were important not only because they instigated the violence, but also because they ensured that the local authorities would not attempt to repress the rioting. These figures "entered into secret negotiations with the highest police authorities" to ensure that the rioters would go unmolested. These individuals, argue the conspiracy theory, were undoubtedly sent by the central government in order to instigate the pogroms.30

Recently, however, revisionist historians have called into question Dubnow's hypothesis that the Imperial government was responsible for the pogroms of 1881. These historians argue that there exists no evidence showing that the government organized the pogroms. Although it appears that Alexander III, as well as several important ministers (Ignatev, Pobedonostsev, and Plehve), held anti-Semitic sentiments, it was not in the government's interest to promote rioting and unrest. Following both the assassination of Alexander II, the government sought to avoid future disorder and chaos.

The first argument that purportedly shows that the central government was responsible for the pogroms argues that it engineered the anti-Semitic campaign in the press that preceded the outbreak of the pogroms. In "The Russian Press and the Anti-Jewish Pogroms of 1881," John D. Klier examines articles published by various anti-Semitic newspapers prior to the pogroms, and concludes that the role of the press in the 1881 pogroms has been exaggerated. His study reveals that while the Jews were targets of hostility in these press organs, the newspapers never advocated anti-Semitic violence, and even hoped to prevent such attacks.31

Dubnow's other argument points to the simultaneous eruption of violence in 1881 as well as the uniform inaction of authorities to demonstrate the organized nature of the

---

30 Dubnow, II, 248.
pogroms. In "Unraveling of the Conspiracy Theory," Klier points out that the pogroms were not, in fact, simultaneous, but rather that they spread rapidly, "from large towns to nearby villages" and, furthermore, that the pogroms spread "along railway lines, major highways and rivers."\(^{32}\) For example, it was not until the pogrom at Elizavetgrad was over, and eyewitnesses had spread the word of the events there, that the rioting began in nearby villages.\(^{33}\) Had the government planned these pogroms, Klier continues, it is likely they would have begun simultaneously in the various locations. Moreover, while Dubnow blames the inaction of the authorities on a nationwide conspiracy headed by the Tsar, Klier explains that there were more practical reasons for the police and troops to be reluctant to intervene in the rioting. In terms of crowd control, the Russian army was primarily familiar with handling rural unrest in the event of a peasant uprising. As a consequence, the army was unprepared to subdue rioting that occurred in urban settings.\(^{34}\) It is also logical to suppose that Russian troops would have been reluctant to attack Christians in order to save Jews, fearing that "severe repressive measures could evoke antigovernment passions."\(^{35}\) Nevertheless, Michael Aronson shows that in some cases the police did act firmly against the pogromists. For example, he cites an instance when police informed workers that the "governor had issued an order specifically forbidding attacks on Jews."\(^{36}\) These revisionist arguments successfully undermine the theory that police and military inaction was either uniform or the result of official orders. When


\(^{34}\) Klier, "Unraveling the Conspiracy Theory: A New Look at the Pogroms," 84.


\(^{36}\) ibid., 80.
coupled with the new evidence concerning the role of the press, it becomes evident that the conspiracy theory does not hold for the 1881 pogroms.

In *Troubled Waters*, Michael Aronson considers the motivations of historians who have subscribed to the conspiracy theory. Aronson points out that those historians who wrote about Russian Jewish history have, “for the most part, been liberal, rationalistic humanists in orientation who adopted Enlightenment views to a greater or lesser degree.” For such people, it was the government’s responsibility to ensure the existence of an enlightened, educated population. Therefore, the people’s brutality toward the Jews was understood to be the result of a brutal and unenlightened government. The Russian autocracy was seen by these historians as the antithesis of an enlightened government which “would foster a liberal and tolerant populace.” In searching for a scapegoat for the pogroms, the Tsar and his ministers were the obvious choice.

In addition, historical events that occurred in the years following the pogroms may have influenced the manner in which these historians traditionally viewed the anti-Semitic violence of 1881. Although Dubnow published his *History of The Jews in Russia and Poland* in 1918, many historians researching the pogroms did so in the wake of the Holocaust. Because the Holocaust was clearly planned and organized by the Nazi government, it seemed logical to these historians that the pogroms were a result of similar government planning.

And finally, on a more general level, the very notion of a conspiracy is an attractive explanation for those seeking to place blame. Difficult and complex issues can be tied up neatly by the idea of a conspiracy while clear notions of good and evil are retained. From the Jewish perspective it is easy to see how Tsarism can be viewed as
Jews had lived under tsarist rule for nearly one hundred and fifty years, and with the lone exception of Alexander II, each Tsar had systematically persecuted the Jews through limiting and restrictive policies. The theory of a conspiracy liking Tsar and pogrom was extremely attractive because it offered a clear explanation of the roots and causes of the pogrom while retaining the notion of Tsarism as an evil force seeking to destroy Russian Jewry.

Having criticized the traditional interpretation of the pogroms, and concluded that the government was not responsible for the pogroms of 1881, we must ask: what, then, were the real causes of the pogroms? In *Troubled Waters*, Michael Aronson argues that the 1881 pogroms resulted from various socio-economic factors. He points to the rapid industrialization and economic growth that was occurring within the Pale of Settlement in the twenty years following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. This period saw the emergence of new towns and industrial regions, increased industrial production, and steady construction of new railroads connecting the Pale with central Russia. This increase in industry created a demand for workers and, consequently, the urban workforce grew rapidly. Workers were especially in demand during the spring and summer, which meant that migrant laborers from both the Pale and Russia sought seasonal work in the Pale. In 1881, however, industrial depression in the central provinces led to the arrival of more workers than usual, which caused increased competition for jobs. Moreover, local crop failures within the Pale produced a decreased number of available jobs. The result was a large number of unemployed, dissatisfied

---

laborers in the Pale during the spring of 1881. According to Aronson, this situation was a major cause of the pogroms.

If the case is to be made that industrialization and the influx and subsequent unemployment of migrant laborers into the Pale’s urban areas were responsible for the outbreak of the pogroms, then the pogroms must be described as an urban phenomenon. As described earlier, in 1881 the violence did in fact spread from city to village, usually along railroads, roads, and rivers. This is not to say that the peasantry did not play an important role in the anti-Jewish violence, only that the pogroms in rural areas occurred as a consequence of the violence that had first originated in cities and towns.

While the revisionist historians succeed in exonerating the central government of planning the pogroms, and showing the flaws in the conspiracy theory, they nonetheless do not hold the Tsarist government sufficiently accountable for their active and passive roles in allowing the pogroms to occur. Despite the fact that the Tsar and his ministers did not plan or organize the pogroms of 1881, they must nevertheless be held responsible for their failure to prevent or quickly suppress the anti-Jewish violence. In addition, they must also be held responsible for pursuing policies that put the Jewish population in a situation that made the pogroms seem acceptable to the Christian majority. The government’s failure to restrain the pogromists has already been observed, but what was the central government’s political response to the pogroms?

The most conspicuous of the government’s anti-Semitic policies were the May Laws of 1882, which were issued on May 3, 1882 as temporary measures, yet like the rest of Alexander III’s “temporary” legislation designed to roll back his father’s Great Reforms, the May Laws remained in force until February 1917. The May Laws imposed
two important restrictions on Jews: first, they forbade “Jews to settle outside the cities and townships” of the Pale; and second, they forbade “Jews to engage in commerce on Sundays and Christian holidays.” 39 Ironically, the ostensive purpose of these laws was to prevent further anti-Jewish violence. This motivation probably did not arise out of a desire to protect the Jewish people; Alexander III simply wanted to avoid further popular unrest. The idea that the new restrictions were necessary to prevent future pogroms was justified by a historical analysis of government policy towards the Jews. Alexander III’s advisors noted that prior to Alexander II, imperial policy was generally hostile toward and repressive of the Jews. Alexander II relaxed these laws and, according to the advisors, this relaxation brought about the pogroms. Thus, it was concluded that restrictions on Jews should be reestablished in order to prevent further pogroms.40

Although the logic was convoluted, the May Laws can indeed be seen as a measure that was intended to prevent anti-Semitic violence. Because the majority of pogroms occurred in villages, they were assumed to be a rural phenomenon. The government therefore felt that by limiting Jewish settlement to the cities, it could prevent future pogroms. However, the identification of pogroms as a rural phenomenon was inaccurate. In fact, the pogroms spread from urban areas to rural areas, and because of the larger scale of the urban pogroms, the majority of the damage and violence occurred in cities and towns.41 Therefore, restricting Jewish residence to urban areas was not an effective way to avoid future pogroms. In addition, because the outbreak initially occurred during Easter, it was thought that violence could be averted by preventing Jewish shops and taverns from operating during Christian holidays, including the

---

40 Dubnow, II, 309.
Sundays. This prohibition made it extremely difficult for Jewish shops to compete with Christian shops because Jewish businesses were of course also closed for the Jewish Sabbath on Saturdays.

In a memorandum to Alexander III, Count Nikolai Ignatev justified the imposition of the May Laws by appealing to the myth of Jewish exploitation of their Christian neighbors.

Having adopted strict measures to suppress the earlier disturbances and mob rule and to protect Jews against violence, the government feels justified in pursuing speedily an equally energetic course in order to remove the existing abnormal relations between the original inhabitants and the Jews. It must protect the Russian people against the Jews' injurious activities which, according to local reports, were responsible for the disorders.\(^2\)

Ignatev’s analysis of the pogroms was far from accurate, yet his understanding of the pogrom was correct, however, in that he recognized that social and economic tensions between Jews and Christians played an important role in the anti-Semitic violence of 1881. Unfortunately, the May Laws did not reduce this tension, and anti-Jewish violence erupted on an even greater scale just over twenty years after the May Laws were enacted.

The May Laws were followed by a series of new restrictive laws on Jewish opportunities, reminiscent of the restrictions placed on Jews during the reign of Nicholas I. Under the premise that education had helped to further the revolutionary movement within the Jewish population, in 1887, the government placed restrictions on the number of Jews allowed to study in institutes of higher learning: a quota of 10 percent of the student body was placed on universities within the Pale; 5 percent outside the Pale’s

\(^{41}\) Michael Aronson, “The Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia in 1881”, 47.

\(^{42}\) Ignatiev in S.W. Baron, The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets, 46.
borders; and 3 percent for universities in St. Petersburg and Moscow. These quotas would later be reduced, a clear attempt by the government to restrict Jewish educational opportunities. In 1889, restrictions were also imposed on Jewish admission to the bar, and even following their admission, Jewish lawyers were subject to additional special restrictions and limitations. These laws restricting educational and professional opportunities for Jews were motivated by the supposed rise in revolutionary activities among Jews. It was thought that higher education was contributing to the spread of radical ideologies among the Jews.43

Such oppressive lawmaking was continued in 1891, when on the first day of the Jewish holiday of Passover, the government banished the Jews from Moscow. This banishment resulted in the closing of several Jewish-owned factories (the silk industry was especially affected) and the consequent loss of thousands of jobs, held mostly by Christians, who were employed in the factories.44 This action is significant because it showed clearly that the government no longer adhered to the previously-held notion that a small minority of economically "productive" Jews could hold an important place in Russian society. Previously, populations of economically productive Jews such as merchants and professionals had been allowed to settle outside of the in Moscow and St. Petersburg. By banishing such "productive" Jews from Moscow, the government showed it was no longer distinguishing between impoverished and prosperous Jews.

This paper must now question the personalities and the motivations behind Russia's Jewish policy. The logical place to begin this examination is with the Tsars themselves. Unfortunately, while we can learn a great deal about the attitudes and beliefs

43 Baron, 48.
44 ibid., 49
of many Russian officials through their participation in the legislative process, the Tsars “did not take part in the major governmental debates of the Jewish question and gave no instructions how it was to be resolved.”\textsuperscript{45} The available evidence shows us, however, that Alexander III and Nicholas II both held anti-Semitic beliefs, which they did not keep a secret, and that they both supported policies restricting Jewish rights while rejecting liberal policies in regard to the Jews. Furthermore, they both believed the pogroms to be “understandable outbursts of popular wrath against the Jews.” Nevertheless, the two Tsars’ attitudes were not identical. While Alexander III saw the rioting as a dangerous threat to public order, Nicholas II was more ambivalent towards the pogroms and may have seen them as a display of loyalty for his government.

When examining the attitudes towards Jews held by members of the central government, it is important to note that the Tsarist government maintained a unified position with regard to the Jews. Therefore, this examination will be limited to three officials who had the greatest influence on Russian policy toward the Jews: Ignatiev, Pobedonostsev, and Plehve. Count Ignatiev, Alexander III’s first Minister of the Interior, was largely responsibility for the creation of the May Laws of 1882. He saw the pogroms as retribution for the economic injury committed by Jews against Christians, and he hoped to limit such harmful economic activities by restricting the Jews’ economic and residential opportunities. This would consequently prevent further attacks on the Jews by the exploited peasantry. In fact, Ignatiev supported a proposal that would have restricted the Jews even more than the May Laws did by prohibiting “the ownership, administration, or exploitation of lands in any form in rural districts of the Pale, as well as

\textsuperscript{45} Hans Rogger. \textit{Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Imperial Russia}, 57.
the sale of liquor in its villages." This proposal was rejected by the Committee of Ministers for being too harsh on the victims of the pogroms, "even if they were Jews."\(^{46}\)

The director of the Holy Synod, K.P. Pobedonostsev, was an extremely reactionary public figure with respect to a variety of issues as well as a rabid anti-Semite. Pobedonostsev once stated that, "the only solution for the Jewish question in Russia was that one-third should emigrate, one-third become Christianized, and one-third should perish."\(^{47}\) Pobedonostsev favored policies that placed restrictions and quotas on Jews in schools and universities on the premise that if Jews were not so restricted, they would become a radical political and social force. In addition, as many critics have pointed out, he was responsible for the publishing and the support of anti-Semitic literature and newspapers.\(^{48}\) At the same time, Pobedonostsev did not approve of anti-Jewish violence and rioting, for he feared mobs and saw the unrest as a threat to the government’s power.

V. K. Plehve, Director of the police department (1881-84) and Minister of the Interior (1902-4), has been accused by conspiracy theorists of being responsible for both the pogroms of 1881 and the pogrom at Kishinev in 1903. Although Plehve indeed did support various anti-Semitic policies, he also recognized the lack of justice inherent in Russia’s economic policy towards the Jews. Plehve felt that because of its restrictive policies, "the government was to blame" for the Jews’ unfortunate economic condition. Nevertheless, he also believed that the government had a legitimate right to discriminate against Jews because of their economic status as ‘exploiters.’\(^{49}\) Consequently, Plehve supported the legislation barring Jews from local government in 1890, expelling the Jews

\(^{46}\) Rogger, 61.

\(^{47}\) Baron, 50.

\(^{48}\) Rogger, 67.
from Moscow in 1891, and preventing Jews from participating in local elections in 1892.50

While later anti-Jewish attacks in Nazi Germany would be stimulated by claims of racial inferiority, it is important to note the absence of such sentiments in the central government of Imperial Russia. In fact, if any comparative racial notions were held, the general impression was that the Jews were economically more able than the Russian peasant. Thus the laws restricting Jewish economic and residential rights were sometimes seen as an attempt to level the playing ground, to prevent the Jew from economically dominating the Russian. Pobedonostsev (who had a strong influence on both Alexander III and Nicholas II) was known to hold such “reverse” racist views: “He was simply afraid of them, of their superior talents and intelligence, their abstemiousness and industry—qualities that most Russians lacked. The state was obliged, therefore, to redress the balance” in the Russians’ favor.51

Thus, it becomes clear that many in the central government perceived the Jews as a threat. This threat was perceived to exist on two levels. Jews were an economic threat to Russian citizens, and a revolutionary threat to the autocratic state. It was thought that through their economic activities—as merchants, bankers, and tavern owners—the wily Jews could enslave the simple Russian peasant.52

The government’s fear of the Jews’ radical political views was connected to their overall apprehension about the economic changes occurring within Russia at the time. Russian officials were engaged in an ongoing debate about how to bring industrialization

50 Lambroza, “Plevye, Kishinev and the Jewish Question: A Reappraisal,” 118.
51 Rogger, 67.
to “backward” Russia without destroying the traditional social and political fabric of the nation. Two schools of thought helped to define the view of Russian government officials at the time: the mercantilist and the organic schools. Mercantilism stressed that in order to remain a world power, Russia should industrialize rapidly, with the help of foreign capital and private investments. The organic school hoped to achieve a more gradual industrialization by creating light industry with the capital already existing in the Russian economy. They feared rapid industrialization, and believed that the capitalist, modern society that would come with it would destroy traditional Russian values and undermine the traditional societal structure, upon which tsarist authority was based. Thus, the organic school saw Jewish activity as a threat: they “deplored the conspicuous role played by Jews, mainly Jewish financiers—whether Russian subjects or foreigners—in Russia’s industrialization.”

These fears of an ambiguous and multi-faceted Jewish threat culminated in the notion of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. It was widely believed at the turn of the century that because the Jews were separate and different from the majority of Russians, they could not be loyal Russian citizens. Therefore, the theory went, their loyalties must lie elsewhere—namely with the worldwide Jewish conspiracy. This was the basis for Serge Nilus’s publication, The Great and the Small (1903-05), an essay that “contained the full concretization of the Jewish conspiracy thesis wherein revolutionaries were themselves in the pay of Jewish capitalists and worked toward a common objective, that being the overthrow of the established Christian world order.” This conspiracy theory

51 Rogger, 59.
52 Gutwein, 211.
helped to satisfy two needs for anti-Semites and defenders of the state: it discredited both the Jews and the revolutionaries. By linking the revolutionaries with the Jews, this theory demeaned the revolutionary movement as being part of a Jewish plot, rather than being for the benefit of the Russian people. In addition, Jews (even those who supported the social and political status quo) were viewed as enemies of the state because of the Jewish conspiracy, and could be persecuted more easily and more justifiably.

Thus, it is clear that although Alexander II and Nicholas II were anti-Semites, they did not organize or plan the pogroms. Instead, socio-economic and cultural conditions, when stimulated by a crisis (local or national), proved conducive to anti-Semitic violence. Nonetheless, the central government cannot be absolved of the responsibility for its policies of further discriminating against Jews, and treating them as economic and political enemies. Ironically, the anti-Jewish policies discussed above—designed to protect traditional Russia—may have instead aggravated existing differences between Jew and gentile, thus further alienating the Jews and destabilizing society.

Jewish Responses

Prior to the middle of the 19th century, most Russian Jewish intellectuals confined themselves to Jewish affairs. Educated Jews studied the Torah and the Talmud, rather than secular subjects such as the sciences. While a modernist movement, known as the Haskalah or Enlightenment, had reached Western Europe by the late eighteenth century, bridging the intellectual gap between Jewish and Gentile affairs, this movement was slow to reach Russia. The Haskalah did not fully come into its own in Russia until the reign of
The followers of the Haskalah, known as *maskilim*, hoped to enter the secular world, but found resistance, not only from the Gentile world, but also from within the traditional Jewish community. Jewish traditionalists feared that the concern with the outside world would weaken the Jewish community, and lead to conversion and heresy.56

The reforms of Alexander II facilitated the spread of the Haskalah movement to Russia, and his reign saw many young Jews enter Russian schools and attempt to join Russian society. The events following the assassination of Alexander II, however, shattered the hopes of many Jewish intellectuals, and the May Laws of 1882 placed severe restrictions of the number of Jews allowed to study in Russian schools and universities. Thus, many Jews, who sought a secular education were now faced with the harsh restrictions imposed by Alexander III, and they began to question the tenants of the Haskalah.

Denied access to the secular world, these Jews were forced to reevaluate their beliefs about assimilation and gentile society. At the same time, they found themselves alienated from the traditional world of Russian Jewry. As the ideals of the Haskalah and the possibility of assimilation became further and further removed from the Russian realities facing these Jews, many began to look for favorably on more radical solutions to the problems facing Russian Jewry. The two most significant of these solutions were Zionism and Jewish socialism.

The decline of traditional Jewish life—due to the urbanization and the secularization of many Jews—greatly effected the younger generation of Jewish

---

intellectuals. While the events of 1881-1882 had shattered much of their optimism about assimilation into Russian society, the possibility of returning to the close-knit life of the shtetl appeared to be equally impossible. With no place to turn, many of these Jews turned to radical ideas—rejecting both traditional Russian and Jewish society. The Zionists saw hope for Jewish society, but felt that it must be completely transformed and relocated. The Jewish socialists found hope within the Russian world, but they too felt that this society must be radically changed in order to end the abnormal difficulties facing the Jewish people.

The Turn to Zionism

The most immediate and widespread Jewish response to the events of 1881-1882 was mass emigration. The years that followed the crisis of the early 1880s saw a mass exodus of Jews from the Russian Empire. At first hundreds of thousands—and eventually millions—of Jews left for Western Europe and America in the hope of finding a more tolerant environment. It was from this process of emigration from Russia that Zionism found its roots. Jews were leaving Russia in large numbers because it appeared that the Jewish community could never be prosperous or even safe within the Russian empire. This notion was an essential foundation for the tenants of Zionism. But while many Jews hoped to find civil rights and a less hostile government in the West, other Jews began to embrace the idea that the Jewish people could never be free in a Gentile nation. These proto-Zionists argued that the only solution to “the Jewish problem” was the establishment of a Jewish state. It was not necessary that this state be located in Israel, but it was only logical that many Jews looked to Palestine as their future

57 Jonathan Frankel, Prophesy and Politics, 1.
homeland. While the Zionist movement was slow in relocating large numbers of Jews to Palestine, the Zionist movement gained large followings in several regions of the Pale.

Joseph Goldstein points out that the Zionist movement found its greatest support in the southern Russian provinces (Yekaterinoslav, Kherson, and Taurida), and in the northwest provinces (Kovno, Vilna, Grodno, and Minsk). Goldstein shows that in Southern Russia—the location of the majority of pogroms—the Zionist movement was made up almost entirely of the middle class, for whom the cultural bonds of traditional Jewry held less authority. The Zionists from northwest Russia also included members of the middle class as well as merchants and small traders, while a minority came from yeshiva students. Also included among Zionists from the northwest was a minority of members of the intelligentsia and the growing urban working class. Later, this paper will show that the Bund initially drew almost all of its support from the northwest provinces, and Goldstein’s findings show that a majority of the northwest Jewish proletariat sided with the Bund rather than the Zionists. Thus, the Zionist movement was largely a middle class movement, though it nevertheless received some support from nearly every element in Jewish society. The intellectuals who joined the Zionist movement were extremely important in forming the movement’s ideology, and Leo Pinsker and Moshe Lilienblum were two of the more passionate and influential of these thinkers.

Leo Pinsker (1821-1891) grew up in Odessa speaking Russian and German, but little Yiddish. His father helped found a modern Jewish school which placed special emphasis on secular subjects, and consequently Pinsker was educated more as a Russian than as a Jew. Pinsker was one of the first Russian Jews to attend a university, and he

---

went on to receive a law degree in 1844. Later he would attend medical school at the University of Moscow, and by the 1850s worked as respected physician in his home town of Odessa. Odessa, a city on the Black Sea with a large Jewish population (approximately 50,000), was noted for “the laxity of religious observance, the relative pervasiveness of free thought, and the degree to which the processes of cultural assimilation into the fairly heterogeneous local population were at work.”

Pinsker's success in assimilating in the Russian middle class undoubtedly effected his views of Jewish-Gentile relations. Pinsker believed that both Russia and Jewry were changing, and that it would soon be possible for Jews to fully assimilate into Russian society. In order for this to happen, however, Pinsker believed that the Jewish people had to adopt the Russian language as their own. This would help to weaken and eventually eliminate the distinction between Jew and Russian. It is no coincidence that Pinsker's occupational successes occurred at the height of Russian liberalism (during the reign of Alexander II). His views reflected the optimism that many Russian Jews felt, believing that their time for emancipation was at hand.

In 1881, however, Pinsker's optimism was shattered. Following the assassination of Alexander II, and the pogroms that followed, Pinsker traveled to western and central Europe, seeking “new remedies, new ways.” It had become apparent to Pinsker that the Russian state and people would never allow the Jews to become equal or to assimilate. Pinsker's despair became so great that he needed medical treatment. He returned to

---

60 ibid, 113.
61 ibid, 123-125.
Russia in 1882 and published his opinions anonymously in the pamphlet, *Auto-Emancipation*.  

*Auto-Emancipation* begins with a quote from Hillel, stating, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if not now, when?" His pamphlet primarily attacked the notion (one that he had previously embraced) that the Jewish people need only wait and prepare themselves for the Russian government to grant them emancipated status.

Pinsker argued that his former belief that social progress and universal liberalism will inevitably lead the Jews to freedom has been shown by recent events to be false.

The source of the problem, argued Pinsker, was that the Jewish people could not be viewed as a nation. While it is possible for nations to relate peacefully and equally with one another, the Jewish people were treated with hostility and inequality because of their lack of a national status:

[The Jewish people] lacks most of these attributes which are the hallmark of a nation. It lacks that characteristic nation life which is inconceivable without a common language, common customs, and a common land. The Jewish people has no fatherland of its own, though many motherlands; it has no rallying point, no center of gravity, no government of its own, no accredited representatives. It is everywhere a guest, and nowhere at home.

Throughout the Diaspora, and especially since the rise of the Haskalah, the Jews had adapted and assimilated the best they could to the customs of the natives of the lands in which they settled. Through this process of adaptation, the Jewish people had lost the traits and unique customs that could have made them a nation of their own. They renounced their nationality, argues Pinsker, in an attempt to assimilate, but never "did

---

they succeed in obtaining recognition from their neighbors as native-born citizens of equal rank." Because the Jewish people were never allowed to assimilate, their presence stirred superstitious fear among their gentile neighbors. This fear, which evolved into hatred, argued Pinsker, has been passed on from generation to generation in every nation in which Jews have resided throughout the Diaspora. Whether a result of libel or superstition, this Judeophobia was both inevitable and incurable as long as the Jews remain aliens in another people's land.

Pinsker went on to question even the successes of the emancipated Jewish people in Western Europe: "The legal emancipation of the Jews is the crowning achievement of our century. But legal emancipation is not social emancipation, and with the proclamation of the former, the Jews are still far from being emancipated from their exceptional social position." Pinsker saw the social position of the Jews as unenviable. The nature of the legal emancipation requires that the Jews view their civil rights as a gift, as charity, rather than a natural right. The Jews are therefore dependent upon the liberalism of their gentile neighbors for their legal rights. Beyond this, legal emancipation does nothing to remove from the Jews the stigma of being an alien people in a foreign nation.

Thus, the Jews must no longer rely on the prospect of emancipation as their salvation for a better life. "We are no more justified in leaving our national fortune entirely in the hands of the other peoples than we are in making them responsible for our national misfortune." Because other peoples and nations are not capable of or willing to emancipate them, the Jews must instead focus on an auto-emancipation. The time has

---

64 ibid.
65 ibid, 187.
come, argued Pinsker, to end the Diaspora, and for the Jews to once again become a nation. But this can only happen if the Jewish people are to gain a homeland of their own. For Pinsker, this homeland needed not be Israel; it could be any territory large and productive enough to support millions of Jews seeking refuge.67

While Pinsker had been imbued with the importance of the secular world since childhood, Moshe Lilienblum (1843-1910) grew up surrounded by the world of traditional Jewry. Lilienblum was born in Kaidan, Lithuania, and began the traditional study of the Torah at age five, and the study of the Talmud at seven. His father, a cooper, had Moshe betrothed at thirteen and married by sixteen. All of this fell into the traditional framework of a boy studying to become a man of rabbinic learning. After marrying he moved to his father-in-law's town, Vilkomir, where he continued his education, becoming extremely well versed in Talmudic studies. However, it was at this time that he began to tire of his traditional studies, and his views on the Talmud began to change.

He began to question the usefulness of Talmudic law, which had been created during the Middle Ages, for modern Jewish life. As larger society began to enter the modern world, he feared that outdated laws and traditions would lead to the stagnation of the Jewish culture. Unlike Pinsker, whose views on Jewish-Gentile relations evolved from his relationship with the secular world, Lilienblum's ideas arose from within the very fabric of traditional Jewry. Though Lilienblum had spent little time involved in

64 ibid, 191.
67 ibid, 181-198.
secular or Gentile affairs, he believed optimistically that the outside world “would indeed accept, or was already accepting, a reborn and reformed Jew.” 68

Lilienblum’s ideas were generally unaccepted in the small traditional community of Vilkomir, and in 1869, he left his wife and children and moved to cosmopolitan, secular Odessa. Here he was introduced first hand to the larger context of Jewish-Gentile relations. Though Lilienblum remained hopeful that the policies of Alexander II would bring liberal change to the Jews’ role in Russia, in general, his time in Odessa sapped his earlier hope that the internal reform of Jewish life would be sufficient to ease the assimilation process. Instead, he was confronted both by the ignorance and brutality of the Gentile world, as well as the extreme poverty and difficulties of the Jewish people. He now began to doubt the utility of intellectual pursuits and reform for improving the lives of the Jewish masses.

As with Pinsker, the events of 1881-1882 shook and altered Lilienblum’s convictions deeply. “The local periodical reported that the masses are ready to attack the Jews during the approaching Easter holiday,” Lilienblum wrote in his diary on March 20, 1881, “Apparently the anti-Semites....are inciting the masses to loot and pillage. But why do they labor in vain to bring back their beloved Middle Ages, for that age will never return!” Lilienblum’s confidence in the Gentile world was not yet destroyed, however, and on April 10 he wrote, “If any one tries to disturb the peace and order of the city, he, the governor himself, will immediately cut off all services and have the agitators court-martialed.” But on April 17 his mood was different, “Shocking reports from the city of Elizabethgrad. Riots, pillaging—the heart fails. What is this?” And on May 5:

68 Vital, 113.
"Terrible! The situation is terrible and frightening! We are virtually under siege....What does the future have in store for us? Will they have mercy on the youngsters—who don’t even know yet that they are Jews, that they are wretches—and not harm them? Terrible, terrible! How long, O God of Israel?"

And on May 7, “I am glad I have suffered. At least once in my life I have had the opportunity of feeling what my ancestors felt every day of their lives.”

A diary entry from the fall of 1881 shows the profound impact of the pogroms on Lilienblum’s convictions:

In 1877 I thought: ‘My life is meaningless; for I cannot live like a human being if I lack high culture and formal education.’ At the end of 1881 I was inspired by a sublime ideal, and I became a different man, full of a sense of purpose and spiritual satisfaction, even without secular schooling. When I became convinced that it was not a lack of high culture that was the cause of our tragedy—for aliens we are and aliens we shall remain even if we become full to the brim with culture....All my life I had grieved over the decline of Jewish nationality and the thought that Jewry’s existence as a nation was doomed. And now there lies before me a straight and sure path to the everlasting salvation of our people and its nationhood.

That path was Zionism. Lilienblum saw that the route of assimilation and the accruement of secular knowledge was doomed. Like Pinsker, Lilienblum came to believe that the crux of the Jewish problem lay in the fact that the Jews were aliens in Russian society, and that they would never be accepted as anything other than aliens, no matter how cultured and assimilated they became.

While Lilienblum had lost faith in the advantages of culture and the goal of assimilation, it appears that he gained a new faith: that a new era of Jewry was at hand.

---

70 Ibid, 170.
Following the events of 1881, Lilienblum devoted his life to the Zionist cause. He believed that by establishing a Jewish nation, where the Jews would be at home rather than unwanted guests, future generations of Jewry would finally escape the trials and difficulties facing the Jew living in the Diaspora.

In his essay, “The Future of Our People,” published in 1883, Lilienblum offers three possible paths for the Jewish people:

1. To remain in our present state, to be oppressed forever, to be gypsies, to face the prospect of various pogroms and not be safe even against a major holocaust.
2. To assimilate, not merely externally but completely within the nations among whom we dwell: to forsake Judaism for the religions of the gentiles, but nonetheless be despised for many, many years, until some far-off day when descendants of ours who no longer retain any trace of their Jewish origins will be entirely assimilated among the Aryans.
3. To initiate our efforts for the renaissance of Israel in the land of its forefathers, where the next few generations may attain, to the fullest extent, a normal national life.

In his rendering of the three options, we can see that Lilienblum has completely abandoned the hope of assimilation. Such a process would result in the eventual death of the Jews as a people, for all national and religious identity would be lost to the surrounding culture. Instead, Lilienblum embraced the vision of a return to Israel, to a land where the Jews would no longer be strangers or aliens.

The Turn to Social Revolution

While the Zionists saw nationalism as the solution to the difficulties facing the Russian Jew, another group of radical Jews felt that only social revolution could solve the

---

71 Hertzberg, 168.
Jewish people's problems. These revolutionaries, like the Zionists, were disheartened by the events of 1881, and agreed that contemporary Russia was not a safe or hospitable home for the Jewish people. Jewish socialists, however, did not see the Zionist solution as particularly useful or hopeful for the Jewish problem. These revolutionaries believed class oppression to be root of the difficulties facing Russian Jews, and argued that such oppression would continue in a Zionist state. The majority of Jewish workers were currently being oppressed by Jewish employers—this would not be solved through the creation of a Jewish state. The Jewish socialists that would eventually found the Bund instead believed that the Jew could only be free when and if class distinctions could be obliterated.

The roots of the Jewish labor movement can be traced geographically to the Northwestern provinces of the Pale, and more specifically to the town of Vilna. Though the Bund was not officially founded until 1897, the Jewish Social Democratic Group that began meeting in Vilna (known as the Vilna Group) in the early 1890s was largely responsible for the development and character of the Bund. In *The Jewish Bund in Russia*, Henry Tobias comments on the remarkable similarity in background of the pioneers of the Vilna Group:

All of them came from middle- or lower-middle class families; all were strongly influenced by the Haskalah movement, that intellectual bridge for adaptation to modern life; and all were educated in secular Russian schools. The future Bundists received, at most, a smattering of teaching in traditional Jewish subjects, so minimal in fact that only a few of them were able to write Yiddish readily in the early 1890's. All the Vilna pioneer-intellectuals were born between 1864 and 1873. They grew up in the northwest provinces and so did not experience the pogroms of the early 1880's directly. 73

---

73 Tobias, 11-12.
These radicals often idealized the world beyond the Pale, and they found justification for this idealism in Russian literature. The admired and found hope in the Russian literary renaissance occurring at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the repression since 1881 had caused them to turn to more radical solutions than those of the Haskalah, they still carried with them the idea that the Jewish future was intrinsically tied to that of Russia. In fact, the pioneers of the Vilna group believed that the problems facing the Jewish people were the same problems facing Russia and even mankind as a whole. Therefore the Bundist, unlike the Zionists, believed that the solutions to these problems, as opposed to the Zionist solution, could not be found entirely within the Jewish world. A number of the future Bundists, including Arkady Kremer, known as “Father of the Bund,” had spent time in Tsarist jails for participating in radical circles (kruzhki) and reading forbidden literature during their schooling. Others had been expelled from institutions of learning for their radical activities and beliefs.74 Thus, many of these pioneers of the Vilna group were themselves alienated from Russian society because of their radical ideas, rather than because of their Jewishness.

The Marxist ideology of the Vilna group did not simply emerge naturally from the radical ideals of the future Bundists. The beliefs of the Vilna-pioneers was shaped to a large extent by the Populist ideology of their fathers. Russian and Russian-Jewish Populism centered on the idea that physical labor, generally agricultural labor, was Russia’s true social wealth. These intellectuals felt indebted to the Russian peasant, and hoped to pay off that debt by going “to the people” to educate the masses. They idealized the peasant commune, which they believed could become the framework for the future

social order. Populists were optimistic about human nature, and believed that moral truth could be found in the Russian peasant.\textsuperscript{75} Because only a tiny minority of Jews worked in agriculture, the Jewish masses were not idealized by the Populists in the same manner as the Russian masses.\textsuperscript{76}

By the end of the 1880s, the Russian radical intelligentsia began to embrace Marxism in favor of Populism. While some intellectuals remained loyal to Populism, the majority found Plekhanov’s Marxism to be more fulfilling and applicable to the Russian situation—, and this was also the case with the Vilna pioneers. There were several reasons why Marxism proved more attractive to the Vilna intellectuals. First, the Populists had failed in their earlier attempt to educate and liberate the masses in their ‘going to the people’ movement of 1873-4. Also, the future-Bundists were urbanites, so it was only natural that the proletariat would seem closer to these intellectuals than the distant peasantry. Populism also was only a Russian solution, and many of the Vilna intellectuals were more interested in a cosmopolitan or international solution that would apply to all people regardless of nation. Finally, in their studies, these intellectuals had been imbued with positivism and the primacy of science, and Marxism fulfilled these ideals.\textsuperscript{77}

However, whether Populist or Marxist, the organizational unit of these radicals was the same: the circle or \textit{kruzhok}. The purpose of the circle was to produce a ‘worker-intelligentsia’ through propaganda and education of the worker elite. These educated

\textsuperscript{75} Nicholas V. Riasnovsky, \textit{A History of Russia}, 382-383.
\textsuperscript{77} Tobias, 15.
workers were to be relied upon later to rally the masses and lead in the future revolution.\footnote{Mendelsohn, 30-32.}

Although the members of the Vilna group were interested in the larger Russian revolutionary movement, the Vilna circles were largely made up of Jewish workers. The Vilna pioneer, S. Gozhanskii, answered the question of:

*Why we began to work among Jewish laborers. Weren’t there other workers in Vilna? Certainly, there were artisans...among the Poles, Lithuanians, and Belorussians. Why were we shut up in our own world? That, comrades, is impossible to understand if one fails to recall the nature of the Jewish ghetto. The nationalities were separated by an impenetrable wall; each lived its own life, and had no contact with the other.*\footnote{Mendelsohn, 30-32.}

This theme—that the segregated reality of Russian Jewish life overcame the desire of the Jewish intellectuals to engage in a more general, Russian movement—was a recurring theme in the history of the Bund. In fact, the role of the Jewish reality in shaping Bundist ideology helps explain why the Vilna leaders—who saw the Jewish fate as intrinsically tied to that of Russia as a whole—eventually turned to nationalism and an emphasis on the Jewish question instead of holding a more internationalist approach to socialism.

The Jewish nationalism that would later be found in Bundist ideology and practice was not yet evident, however, in the ideas and actions of the Vilna pioneers. Despite the fact that the Vilna circles were predominantly Jewish, their focus in the late 1880s was nonetheless on the Russian language and secular subjects. The average Jewish worker was primarily Yiddish speaking and could speak and write little Russian. So, the future ‘worker-intelligentsia’ were taught to read and write Russian in the circles in order that they might read literature, political science, economics, and the works of Darwin and
Thus, while the circles targeted the Jewish workers, the education that they received there was intended to allow them to participate, not in a separate Jewish movement, but in the larger Russian socialist movement that was to eventually lead to a Marxist-inspired uprising in the towns and factories throughout Russia.

By the early 1890s, however, members of the recently founded Vilna group noticed that the circle movement was failing. Rather than serving as a link between the intellectuals and the masses, the circles seemed to alienating the newly educated 'worker-intelligentsia' from their fellow workers. For as they gained a knowledge of Russian, the circle members began to develop a distaste for Yiddish and a condescending attitude towards the Yiddish-speaking masses, from which, it became clear, they were hoping to escape. In fact, many of the participants saw the circle as an opportunity to facilitate their own upwardly mobility rather than revolution. It was not uncommon for the circle-members to leave the movement once they had attained sufficient education to allow them to enter schools and universities. In addition, many recently-educated workers emigrated to America. The leaders of the Vilna group therefore began to accept the idea that a new strategy was needed.\(^{81}\)

The new strategy, known as “agitation,” was intended to bring the leaders of the Vilna group closer to the workers themselves, and to begin to unite the worker masses so that they could begin to improve working conditions via collective action. The new strategy of agitating among the masses instead of educating a small, elite minority had developed from various sources. One was the Polish labor movement. By the late 1880s, the Union of Polish Workers had begun a policy of inciting and funding worker strikes.

\(^{79}\) Mendelsohn, 32.
\(^{80}\) Ibid, 35.
The members of the Vilna Group were in close contact with many Polish revolutionaries, and the strategy of the Poles did not go unnoticed. Years later, Gozhansky noted the influence of the Poles on Vilna’s policy: “Our acquaintance with the Polish workers’ movement showed us that a real revolutionary movement must have its roots...in its own environment.” 82

Possibly even more important than the Polish roots of the new strategy, was Marxism, and specifically the ideas of Georgii Plekhanov. Marxism supported the idea that the interests of individuals and elites must give way to those of the proletarian masses. Educating a small elite could only go so far, progress must be made with the masses of wage-laborers. In 1892 Plekhanov explained the distinction between propaganda, by which he meant education for a political purpose, and agitation, “A sect can be satisfied with propaganda in the narrow sense of the word; a political party never....A propagandist gives many ideas to one or a few people but an agitator gives only one or only a few ideas to a mass of people....History is made by the masses.” 83

As agitators, rather than propagandists, the Vilna group would now have a new role, they were to become organizers of a labor movement that would improve the condition of the proletariat. The first condition the Vilna group sought to improve was the poorly defined and extremely lengthy working day of the Jewish worker. Gozhansky was able to discover an law dating back to Catherine II’s reign that limited the workday to a maximum of twelve hours. This proved immensely useful to the Vilna group, who found the Jewish workers much more eager to fight for a shorter workday when they had the law on their side. Soon large numbers of Jewish workers began to petition the tsarist

---

81 Mendelsohn, 46.
82 Tobias, 24.
government to enforce the one hundred year-old law. It was the (correct) assumption, of the Vilna Marxists that though the workers were using legal means to achieve their goals, when the authorities failed to grant the workers their demands, illegal means (strikes) would follow. By 1893, a wave of strikes swept Vilna, culminating in a tailors' strike in which many workers were arrested. The Vilna group was extremely impressed with the mass unrest they had helped produce, and the circle movement was consequently abandoned. While the earlier worker-intelligentsia had used the circles to facilitate their own agenda, now the Vilna group was using the workers to fulfill their goals.84

One of the most important effects of the new agitation policy was the move from Russian to Yiddish. The language of the Jewish masses was Yiddish, and thus in order to gain the support of, and organize the workers, the Vilna socialists were forced to turn to Yiddish as the language of agitation. Because many of the Vilna intellectuals had difficulty communicating in Yiddish, a new group of Jews came to the forefront of the revolutionary movement: yeshiva (school for advanced study of the Talmud) and ex-yeshiva students.85 These new members of the revolutionary movement made it possible for the Vilna socialists to produce revolutionary literature in Yiddish. Yiddish pamphlets were published, an underground Yiddish publication was founded, the *Arbeiter Shtime* ("Worker's Voice), and Jewish writers, such as Dovid Pinsky and I.L. Peretz, began writing pro-labor movement works in Yiddish, aimed at the popular masses.86

As the Vilna intellectuals turned towards the masses and away from small and exclusive circles, the movement gradually turned towards the one element that linked all

84 Mendelsohn, 49-52.
85 Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 173.
of the targeted workers: Judaism. Although many of the Vilna leaders made no
distinction between the Jewish movement and the Russian, the fact that they were using
Yiddish to agitate the Jewish masses focussed their attention on specifically Jewish
matters. Iulii Martov, a member of the Vilna group since 1893, and a leading Menshevik
in 1917, recognized, in a 1900 lecture, the importance of the agitation strategy on the
increasingly Jewish character of the movement:

(Previously), relegating the Jewish working-class
movement to second place, we tended to scorn the realities
of its existence, and this attitude found expression in the
fact that we conducted our work in the Russian
language....[But] life has forced us to change our
tactics....While we tied all our hopes to the general Russian
movement we—without even noticing it ourselves—raised
the Jewish movement to a height not yet attained by the
Russian one....Having placed the mass movement in the
center of our program we had to adapt our propaganda and
education to the mass, that is make it more Jewish. 87

Though the agitation policy proved to be a fairly successful strategy for
organizing the masses, it did not go without opposition within the Vilna group.
Opposition was most evident among workers who had been members of the old
"propaganda" circles. To them, the Vilna movement was an opportunity to gain useful
skills and to learn the revolutionary texts, not to attempt to provoke rebellion among the
uneducated worker masses.

Avram Gordon, the leader of the Vilna Opposition, felt that the intelligentsia had
betrayed the interests of the workers. An educated engraver, Gordon believed that the
masses must be first educated before they could succeed in fighting class oppression.

Aronson, Jacob Frumkin, and Alexis Goldenweiser, 153.
87 Frankel, Prophecy, 174.
While some members of the worker circles were undoubtedly angered at the loss of their privileged position as members of an elite, Gordon’s Opposition was backed by both practical and ideological considerations.

The Vilna Opposition saw Yiddish as an uncultured language that was unworthy of serving as the revolutionary language, and lamented the decline of the Russian language among the revolutionaries. Gordon also felt that the switch to agitation would widen, rather than lessen the gap between leaders and workers. Because the Vilna leaders were now more interested in agitating among the workers than in educating them, Gordon feared that “the intellectuals will know Marx, Plekhanov, etc., they will be completely educated. And we workers? We won’t know anything, because only agitation will be carried on among us.”

Gordon also questioned whether agitation would really improve working conditions for Jewish workers. In 1891, Gordon delivered a speech that pointed to the status of most Jewish workers as artisans, as opposed to factory workers. While strikes could be an effective tool against wealthy factory owners, Gordon saw the program of agitation among artisans as the struggle of “pauper against pauper.” And finally, Gordon feared that the move to abandon the Russian language in favor of Yiddish, along with the new focus on the worker masses, would make the Vilna group “nationalist” instead of “internationalist”: “Would the movement remain a solid and powerful socialist movement for Russia as a whole, or would it become an empty swindle confined to the cramped Jewish street with pogroms and disgrace...”

According to Gordon, the new policy of agitation threatened to turn

---

54 Mendelsohn, 57.
55 Ibid, 59.
56 Frankel, Prophesy, 188.
the Vilna movement from part of the broad international socialist movement to a narrow movement that confined itself to the Jewish working class.

But the policy of agitation had gone too far. The Jewish masses were becoming restless and willing to strike if their demands for a shorter workday were not met. The masses saw the Vilna group’s new strategy as an opportunity to actually improve their working conditions and they were not willing to return to the former circle strategy. Without the support of either the Vilna intellectuals or the worker masses, Gordon’s Opposition was doomed to failure.91

But Gordon’s fears that the Vilna group would become “nationalist” instead of “internationalist” were well founded. From the mid 1890s, nationalist elements in the Vilna group became more and more powerful, and as a result, specifically Jewish interests became more and more important to the movement, although the importance of class interests was never denied.

As discussed earlier, the general attitude of the founders of the Vilna group were internationalists—they saw the terrible conditions facing the Jewish workers as tied intrinsically with those facing the Russian workers. They subscribed to the Marxist view that the socialist revolution be part of a world-wide movement not bound by national or ethnic borders. The Vilna intelligentsia felt no particular attachment to the religious or traditional elements of Judaism, and were confronting the Jewish workers primarily because of the segregated nature of Russian society.

The Jewish worker-socialist, as well as the intelligentsia, also felt few ties to the traditional Jewish world. In fact the Jewish worker’s very commitment to socialism

91 Mendelsohn, 61-62.
represented a profound break with tradition and religion. S.A. An-sky commented on the international inclination of the Jewish socialist worker:

Apart from their ignorance of our national culture...there are many other reasons why our Jewish working masses...so willingly adopt an internationalist point of view....One must not forget that the Jewish worker...has to break the fetters of religious tradition, has to fight in a sphere where religion is the only form and expression of nationalism, has to bear...the abuse—'Goy! Convert! Traitor!'....Thus...he carries with him...a deep hostility to those foundations which in his mind are intimately linked to nationalism. 92

But, if the Marxist intelligentsia who founded the movement and the workers who embraced the movement both saw themselves as part of an international, class-based movement, what led to the very Jewish character of the Bund (which succeeded the Vilna group at the turn of the century)? While the agitation program undoubtedly produced a national character within the Vilna movement—through the use of Yiddish and the focus on the masses—it alone is not sufficient to fully explain the rise of nationalism within the Vilna movement. Of equal, or perhaps greater, significance than the policy of agitation, was the policy of anti-Jewish discrimination practiced by the Tsarist government, and the distrust among Jews of the Russian revolutionary movement following the 1881-2 pogroms.

Restrictions confining Jews to the Pale of settlement, limiting rural settlement, and employment restrictions all served to alienate the Jewish people from gentile society. Perhaps most significantly for the socialist movement, however, were the restrictions placed on educational opportunities for Jewish students. The rise of the Haskalah in Russia, and the liberal policies of Alexander II, had given many young Jews the hope that

92 Frankel, Prophesy, 180.
a secular education could free them from the strict religion and cultural traditions of Jewish society. But the 1887 limitations on Jews studying in schools of higher learning, and the 1889 restrictions on the number of Jews admitted to the bar left many educationally-minded Jews both alienated and angered at the Tsarist regime. Thus, while many educated Jews felt that the oppression they experienced was due to their class status, they also recognized that their status as Jews was oppressive as well. The dual foundations of discrimination were the impetus for the movement in the Bund calling for equal rights for the Jewish people.

In addition to legal discrimination of the Jews, many Jews distrusted the Russian socialist movements as anti-Semitic. A large reason for this distrust was the acceptance of the 1881-2 pogroms by the populist revolutionary group, The People’s Will. On August 30, 1881, the executive committee of The People’s Will issued a proclamation “To the Ukrainian People” that sympathized strongly with the pogromists:

It is difficult for people to live in the Ukraine and, as time passes, the harder it becomes....The people in the Ukraine suffer worst of all from the Jews. Who takes the land, the woods, the tavern from out of your hands? The Jews....Wherever you look, wherever you go—the Jews are everywhere. The Jew curses you, cheats you, drinks your blood....You have begun to rebel against the Jews. You have done well. Soon the revolt will be taken up across all of Russia against the tsar, the pany, the Jews.93

These revolutionaries saw the pogroms as a spontaneous revolt of the impoverished masses against their economic oppressors, the Jews. Thus, it is no surprise that the Jewish people would feel alienated from and generally distrustful of the Russian socialist movement. This distrust of the general Russian movement undoubtedly allowed many Jewish socialists to embrace a more Jewish-oriented program.
However, by the mid 1890s, these nationalist forces within the proto-Bund had yet to dominate or even significantly influence the party ideology, and the Vilna group remained largely "international" on the surface. The Vilna leaders wanted their movement to become one constituent element in the larger Russian Social Democratic movement. In fact, it was this consideration that led the Bund to be formally established as a party in September 1897.

Arkady Kremer, the leader of the Bund, had stalled the transition of the Vilna group into an established political party, not only until the agitation program had evolved sufficiently, but also to prevent the Jewish movement from moving separately or too far ahead of the general Russian movement. "Alone, the Jewish movement could not act as a powerful political force. As an autonomous unit in an all-Russian party it could serve both the particular and the general interest to the maximal degree."

By 1897, it became clear to the Vilna leaders that the Russian Social Democratic movement was almost ready to declare itself a political entity, and thus Kremer was prompted to unite the Jewish movement by organizing a founding congress for the Bund. John Mill, a member of the Vilna group, wrote in his memoirs:

The fear that our organization would come disunited—with separate plans, without a general program—to the foundation [congress] of the Russian party had forced Arkadii to rethink the question and to conclude that it was especially important to call our own congress first.

The founding congress of the Bund in Vilna was attended largely by delegates who were familiar with the Vilna movement—of the thirteen delegates, only one or two were not either residents of Vilna or original members of the Vilna group. At the

93 Frankel, Prophesy, 98.
94 Ibid., 203.
congress the delegates formally decided upon a name for their party—the General Jewish Labor Union in Russia and Poland—as well as officially declaring their desire to unify with the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad (led by Plekhanov). Finally, the delegates formed the central committee of the Bund—made up of three members of the Vilna group: Kremer, Kosovsky, and Mutnikovich.

The founding of the Bund came none too soon, as the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDRP) held its founding congress in Minsk in March 1898. Of the nine delegates at the RSDRP’s founding congress, three were from the Vilna group (Kremer, Mutnikovich, and Taras). The congress was a huge success for the Vilna group, as the RSDRP Provisional Constitution recognized the Bund as both an autonomous part of and integral to the larger Russian movement: “The General Jewish Labor Union in Russia and Poland enters the party as an autonomous organization, independent only in questions which specifically concern the Jewish proletariat.”

Following the RSDRP congress the Bund published an article, “Our Goals,” which displayed the party’s growing nationalism. The article explained that the tsarist discrimination and persecution of the Jewish people had made it necessary for a Jewish socialist organization to exist. Because of the persecution, the Jewish working class had interests to defend that were outside of the general interests of the working class. The Bund would remain an obedient section of the Russian party in spheres that applied to the working class as a whole, but in Jewish matters, the Bund would be responsible for developing its own strategies and defending Jewish interests. The article posed an

---

95 Ibid. 206.
96 Ibid, 208.
97 Tobias, 67.
98 Frankel, Prophesy, 208-209.
important question: "does the [Russian] party have the strength to undertake this [task of defending Jewish interests] unless it can rely on a special organization of the Jewish proletariat?...No it does not have the strength...[it] cannot give the necessary attention to the special interests of the workers in the oppressed nationalities."99

While the spring of 1898 brought great optimism to the members of the Bund, the summer brought chaos and decimation to the Bund’s leadership. Agents of S.V. Zubatov, head of the Moscow secret police, followed the movements of several members of the Bund in early summer, and on July 26, 1898 struck out against the Jewish workers’ movement. All three members of the central committee—Kremer, Kosovsky, and Mutnikovich—were arrested, and Bund printing presses were confiscated. 100

It would be an easy solution for the historian if it could be said that the new leaders that rose to power following these arrests brought with them the nationalist ideas that would inevitably lead the Jewish movement away from the Russian movement. But in fact this is the opposite of what actually happened. Kosovsky, one of the arrested Vilna leaders had been one of the greatest advocates of a national program within the Bund. In addition, the new leaders of the Bund, “Dovid Kats (Taras), Leon Goldman, Pavel (Piney) Rozental, and Zeldov (Nemansky), who emerged as the most articulate and powerful spokesmen in the period from mid-1898 to early 1900, all belonged to the ‘internationalist’ wing of the Bund.” These new leaders hoped to continue the integration of the Bund into the general Russian movement, and saw Jewish matters as non-essential to their cause. 101

100 Tobias, 80-83.
101 Frankel, Prophesy, 219.
One nationalist voice within the Bund did arise during this period, that of John Mill. Mill, a member of the Bund who lived and pursued Bundist interests in Western Europe, used his role as editor of the Bundist publication, Der yidisher arbeter, to proclaim his nationalist views. Mill’s first issue of this publication, no.6, was concerned almost entirely with national and Jewish issues. Mill’s highly controversial editorial in this issue argued that “all nations—including the Jewish—must have equal political, economic, and national rights.” Mill continued to publish nationalist views and articles in following issues, and in December 1899, he arrived in Russia (confident that his nationalist views were shared by the other Bundists) to attend the Third Congress of the Bund. 102

Mill was extremely disappointed, however, with the results of the congress, in which his nationalist proposals were almost unanimously defeated. The climax of the Third Congress was a debate on the national question, brought about by none other than Mill. Mill proposed that the Bund demand equal national rights for Jews in addition to equal civil rights. Civil rights were insufficient—Mill pointed to the Poles in Germany who had equal civil rights, but were forced to speak German, not Polish, at meetings. Shouldn’t the Jews be allowed to speak Yiddish, if they chose, at their meetings?

Mill’s proposal was strongly rejected. The other delegates at the congress feared that national demands would distract the proletariat from their class interests. The most important goal, argued Mill’s opponents, were the Bund’s political demands and the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy. Mill’s proposal and his concern with national interests, they argued, would only weaken the Bund’s ability to achieve its political goals.

102 Frankel, Prophesy, 215-219.
Mill’s proposal failed, but the congress did allow that *Der Yidisher Arbeter* would remain a forum to discuss the national question.\textsuperscript{103}

Just over a year later, at its Fourth Congress in April 1901, the Bund completely overturned its rejection of Mill’s nationalist proposal at the Third Congress. The Bundist congress recognized the Jewish people as a nation, and also condemned national oppression, in addition to class oppression. The congress officially proclaimed:

\begin{quote}
The congress recognizes that the Social Democratic program condemns not only the oppression of one class by another; not only that of citizens by the government; but also the oppression of one nationality by another, and imposition of one language upon another. The congress recognizes that a state such as Russia, which is composed of many different nationalities, must in the future develop into a federation of nationalities in which every nationality enjoys full national autonomy, regardless of the territory which it occupies.

The congress recognizes that the term “nationality” is applicable also to the Jews.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

The congress did, however, state that the Bund was not yet ready to demand national autonomy for the Jews in the future federation, and was content at this juncture to struggle merely for the end to legal discrimination against the Jews.\textsuperscript{105} This statement, however, was insufficient to prevent the Fourth Congress from being a major turning point in the Bund’s national policy. Even though the call for Jewish autonomy had not been introduced to the Bund’s program, it had entered Bundist ideology. By calling the Jews a “nation,” and by demanding an end to national oppression, the Fourth Congress moved away from the assimilationist and internationalist ideology of the Vilna pioneers. But why did Bundist policy shift so drastically at the Third and Fourth Congresses?

\textsuperscript{103} Tobias, 106-107.
\textsuperscript{104} Frankel, *Prophecy*, 220.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
The answer to this question does not lie in any social or economic factors that might have pushed the Bund towards a more national ideology, but rather in a simple change in party leadership. The most important figure by April 1901 in the Bund, was Noah Portnoy. Portnoy, an old pioneer of the Vilna movement, had been arrested along with other Bund leaders in the summer of 1898. In 1899, however, he had escaped from Siberia. In 1900 he had returned to the Bund, and almost immediately became the undisputed leader of the Jewish Social Democratic movement. Portnoy’s organizational and leadership skills made him the most effective leader the Bund had had since Kremer’s arrest in 1898. Portnoy is generally given much of the credit for the proclamations of the Fourth Congress, as he (unlike the leaders of the past) was willing to embrace a new destiny for the Bund: a sovereign party, concerned with both class and national interests.

Perhaps the most important reason that Portnoy embraced a more national stance for the Bund was the desire to make a “transition from an ‘economically’ to a ‘politically’ oriented strategy.” This desire arose in part from pressure from the RSDRP, most importantly the publication, Iskra (The Spark), led by Lenin, Martov, and Potresov. Iskra was extremely critical of the economic element of the socialist struggle, and preferred to focus instead on political agitation. Lenin was strongly opposed to what he termed “Economism”—the fight for economic gain as the final goal of the socialist movement, as opposed to the political aims of Lenin’s program.

106 Tobias, 115.  
107 Frankel, Prophesy, 224-227.  
108 Ibid, 224.  
109 Tobias, 135.  
110 Ibid, 112.
But pressure was also mounting within the Bund itself to turn to a more political program. A decline in the Russian economy had by 1899 made the Bund's economic aims more difficult to attain. In addition, Zubatov was attempting to establish a legal (police-run) trade union organization to compete with the Bund among workers. In addition, a revival in political terrorism—depicted by the assassination of Bogolepov, the Minister of Education—made a political program more attractive. Consequently, the official report of the Fourth Congress stated that: “not one voice was raised at the Congress against the view that at the present time it is essential to go over to more intensive political agitation.”

But what does a political strategy have to do with the national program that emerged at the Fourth congress? The key lay in the need to recruit students and intellectuals into the party in order to produce the revolutionary literature, and to lead the classes on Marxist theory that would be necessary for a political program. In 1900, Rozental wrote a brochure, *A Call to the Jewish Intelligentsia*, in which he criticized the Jewish intellectuals for failing to join in the socialist opposition to Tsarist oppression.

Portnoy believed that while the Bund's program had been attractive to workers because of its policy of economic agitation, its political image was insufficient to attract the necessary students and intellectuals. These educated radical Jews had generally sided with Zionism because it rejected assimilation as a solution to the Jewish problem. One such student, who later rose to power in the Bund, Zasalavky, wrote: “The fact that the national question was presented so radically in Zionism had the advantage of provoking thought. We were not Zionists—on that we were clear. But the assimilationist ideology

---

which was in essence nihilistic also could not satisfy us....About the Bund we [in 1899-1900] knew little. Rather we knew nothing."\textsuperscript{112}

In order to attract the much desired students and intellectuals, Portnoy realized that the Bund would have to distinguish itself from the internationalist socialist program that had been so attractive to most of the original Vilna pioneers. Thus Portnoy pushed for the transition to a more national program that was to be seen in the Fourth Congress.

But this growing nationalism within the Bund did not go unnoticed by the general Russian movement, and most importantly by \textit{Iskra}'s editors. Tension arose between \textit{Iskra} and the Bund surrounding the national issue, which threatened the Bund's previously secure place within the Russian Social Democratic movement. Much of the initial criticism of the Bund from \textit{Iskra} came from Plekhanov. At first Lenin and the other leaders of \textit{Iskra} resisted Plekhanov's attacks on the Bund—just as they had resisted Plekhanov's proposal to "throw this Bund out of the party" in August 1900—but soon they too would join in the assault on the Bund.

In general, from 1901-1902, \textit{Iskra} all but ignored the Bund. Only one article, by Martov, attacking the resolutions of the Fourth congress, focussed on the Jewish movement. Martov's article attacked the notion of national autonomy as nonsensical, but focussed primarily on the Bund’s desire for the Russian movement to become a federation, in which the Bund would enter as a national unit. Martov saw this as meaning that the "Bund is leaving the party as it was constituted at the congress of 1898. An organization can only enter a party if it is first outside it." \textit{Iskra} continued its assault on the Jewish movement by threatening, in 1901, to expel the Bundist committee abroad.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 226.
Bundist leaders understood these statements to be little veiled threats; it was becoming increasingly evident that the Bund would have to choose between their emergent nationalism, and the ideology of *Iskra*.

During this period, *Iskra* began to consolidate its authority and its role at the center of the general Russian movement. *Iskra* saw its authority as originating in its hold on the tenants of orthodox Marxism, and in order to secure its leadership role, it began to struggle against all threats to its authority.\(^\text{114}\)

The leaders of the Bund appeared, for a time, to be willing to concede to the hegemony of the *Iskra* group. *Der yidisher arbeter*, no.13, released early in 1902, contained an article by Plekhanov attacking the previous Bundist policy of economic agitation as mere “Economism.” In addition, this issue included two articles by the orthodox, and Jewish, German internationalist, Rosa Luxemburg. The Bund continued to accept *Iskra*’s authority of when at a conference of the RSDRP in March 1902, the central committee of the Bund (represented by Portnoy and Rozenthal) voted with *Iskra* on nearly every issue. In those rare cases when they did not support *Iskra*, the Bundists abstained from voting.\(^\text{115}\) The Bund clearly was not interested in losing its place as an integral part of the Russian movement, and it was apparently interested in supporting *Iskra* even at the cost of some of its ideological views.

Lenin, however, seemed to feel that despite the Bund’s attempt to side with *Iskra*, it still represented a threat to his authority. When preparing for the Second Congress of the RSDRP, Lenin proposed that the issue of the Bund be first on the agenda. Lenin hoped that by attacking the Bund, his followers would gain a sense of unity, and if the

---


\(^{114}\) Ibid, 232.
Bund were outraged enough to walk out of the meeting, then any possibility of successful opposition to his authority would be almost completely destroyed. Lenin wrote:

It is essential to be correct and loyal with the Bund (not to knock its teeth in directly), but at the same time icily cold, buttoned up completely, and on a legal basis to drive it into a corner implacably and unremittingly—going fearlessly to the very end. Let them leave if they want..."\(^{16}\)

By early 1903, however, the Bundists were no longer unified in their desire to appease Iskra. Kosovsky, who had been released from prison and working for the Bundist cause from abroad since 1900, began attacking Iskra's hegemony and supporting Jewish nationalism in the Bund's paper. Kosovsky accused Iskra of striving to destroy the Bund, and argued that the Bund "did not exist for the general-Russian movement but for the Jewish proletariat."\(^{17}\)

Thus, by the time of the Fifth Congress of Bund, in June 1903, the Bundists were sharply divided on the national issue, and the consequent role of the Bund in the general Russian movement. The congress met abroad, in Zurich, which assisted the nationalist faction of the party, because nationalism had traditionally found its greatest support among émigré Bundists. The congress was so divided that a schism could very possibly have developed, but the Bund had traditionally chosen compromise over disunity, and the Fifth congress was no exception. The supporters for a national program (Liber, Medem, Kosovsky, and Hurvich) sought to achieve complete national autonomy for the Bund and the right for the Bund to work with the Jewish workers throughout the Russian empire, with no geographical constraints. It is important to note that this congress occurred almost immediately following the 1903 pogrom at Kishinev, and national elements in the

\(^{15}\) Frankel, *Prophecy*, 236.
\(^{16}\) Ibid, 239.
party were fueled by the reports of the anti-Jewish acts of terror and brutality. Their opponents, Aizenshtat and Grishin (two Vilna pioneers), argued that a national program was counter-productive, as one of the goals of the revolution would be to eliminate all differences between Russian and Jew. These internationalists feared a split between the Bund and the Russian Social Democratic movement, and hoped not to anger *Iskra* through unnecessary national demands.118

The most important concern of the Bundists at the Fifth Congress was the preparation for the Second Congress of the RSDRP, scheduled for late July 1903 in Brussels. What, if any, national proposals would the Bund make to the general Russian movement? The final decision was a compromise: a set of essential and non-essential national demands prepared for the Second Congress. Among the non-essential, or maximal, demands was that the RSDRP be re-organized as a federation. Another non-essential goal was that the Bund be allowed to work along side other party organizations where general proletarian interests were at stake. The Bund was prepared to back away from these demands if it appeared that they would provoke difficulties at the Second Congress. The issues that the Bund was not prepared to negotiate on or give up were, first, the provision that the Bund be the “sole and unrestricted representative of the Jewish proletariat” and, second, that the Bund be given access to the Jewish workers without geographical restrictions. Thus the Bund delegates (Medem, Kosovsky, Aizenshtat, Liber, Portnoy, and Kremer) arrived in Brussels for the Second Congress, prepared to compromise on all but a few fundamental issues.119

117 Ibid, 240.
118 Ibid, 24-241.
119 Tobias, 204.
The Second Congress of the RSDRP represented a culmination of the split that had emerged between the Bundists and the Iskraites. The Bund’s goal (a federation and autonomy on Jewish matters) was a threat to the authority and control of Iskra, and the congress was the occasion of the Bund’s withdrawal from the RSDRP.

First on the Congress’ agenda was the discussion of the Bund’s place in the RSDRP. This discussion generally took the form of a debate on the issues of centralism versus federalism, and national unity versus national separation. From the beginning, the Iskraites, who had organized the congress, had the numerical support that the Bund lacked. The Iskraites saw the Bund’s call for a federation as an attempt to destroy the unity of the Russian Social Democratic movement. Trotsky, a fellow Jew, attacked the Bund on this very point: “The statute [you] proposed to us has as its goal...to raise a wall between us and the Bund....Against that wall the congress must come out in total unanimity.” And the party was nearly unanimous in its assault on the Bund. Attacks came from Jewish leaders (Martov, Trotsky, Levin), Georgians, representatives from southern Russia, and of course Lenin and Plekhanov.120

Liber, defending the Bund, insisted that the autonomy granted by the First Congress had placed no geographical restrictions on Bundist activity. He agreed with the Iskraites that the difficulties facing the Jewish worker were related and linked to the difficulties facing all Russians, but he argued that a federated party would enable the Jewish proletariat to see themselves as a part of the greater Russian movement: “the proletariat of a given nationality has centralistic tendencies only when it sees the solution of all its problems and its special national needs in particular at the center.” 121

120 Frankel, Prophesy, 242.
121 Tobias, 208-209.
The Congress seemed decidedly against the Bund, and the Bundists were now thrust onto the defensive. Without ever presenting their federalist proposal, the leaders of the Bund abandoned the non-essential aspects of their program and fell back on their minimal program. The Jewish socialists were obviously fearful and aware that the attitude of the RSDRP had turned against them, and consequently presented a much more moderate (and less national) proposal than had been agreed upon at their Fifth Congress.¹²²

But this was to no avail. The Iskraites were determined to limit all aspects of national autonomy within the Bund in order to preserve their own central authority. Martov's proposal that the Bund's autonomy be restricted only to "everything that concerns those particular problems of agitation among the Jewish population which are the result of its special language and particular living conditions," was passed, 46 to 5. The minimal Bundists proposals—which were not actually voted on until weeks later, after the congress had moved to London to avoid arrest—were defeated terribly. The most significant proposal, which defined the Bund as the "sole representative of the Jewish proletariat," without geographic limitations, was defeated, 41 to 5. The Bundists delegates, after seeing their most moderate position defeated soundly, walked out of the congress, and the Bund became separated from the RSDRP.¹²³

Though the Bund would later rejoin the RSDRP in 1906, the two congresses of 1903 show the profound changes that occurred within the Bund since the Vilna pioneers began their propaganda campaign in the late 1880s. As discussed earlier, the causes of the Bund's transition to national orientation were varied and diverse. External factors in

¹²² Tobias, 209.
¹²³ Frankel, Prophesy, 245.
the nationalization of Bundist ideology included the segregation between the Jewish and Gentile worlds, the legal discrimination against students and intellectuals, and the attacks by *Iskra* on the Bund. The Bund's nationalism was furthered internally by changes in the party leadership, and the changes in strategy first to economic agitation, and next to a more political program. While the Vilna pioneers had been interested only in mobilizing the Jewish proletariat in order to join the general Russian movement, the Bundists who walked out of the Second Congress of the RSDRP were interested in national rights, and in preserving the autonomy of their party in Jewish matters.

**Kishinev and Beyond**

While the 1881 pogroms destroyed large amounts of Jewish property and had an important effect on the attitudes and actions of the Russian Jewish population, the 1903-1906 pogroms proved to be even more destructive, both in terms of property and Jewish lives. The first pogrom of this period took place in Kishinev, a town of 150,000 people (50,000 of them Jewish), located in the South-West province of Bessarabia.\(^{124}\) The immediate catalyst for the Kishinev pogrom was the murder of a young Christian boy, Mikhail Rybachenko, in the nearby town of Dubossary, in February 1903. But the circumstance that transformed this murder into the pretext for anti-Jewish violence was the re-emergence of the legend of Jewish ritual murder. This false and superstitious myth, which stated that Jews needed the blood of a Christian child to make their Passover matzoh, was circulated widely among the local peasantry and clergy. In the past, in Russia and other parts of Europe, anti-Jewish violence had arisen in response to this

myth, and now the murder of Rybachenko was interpreted to be a ritual murder of a Christian by a Jew.\textsuperscript{125}

Much of the responsibility for the spread of anti-Semitic rumors lies with the anti-Semitic newspaper, \textit{Bessarabets}. Prior to the murder of Rybachenko, articles titled “Death to the Jews!” and “Crusade against the Hated Race!” were featured in \textit{Bessarabets}, and the newspaper seized upon the murder as proof that the Jewish ritual murder legend was true.\textsuperscript{126} Although neither the police report nor the physicians report contained any evidence of ritual murder, the Christian population of Kishinev believed the accusations made in \textit{Bessarabets}.\textsuperscript{127}

The Kishinev pogrom began on Easter Sunday (April 19) when young boys began to throw stones at Jewish homes and shops. Soon bands of workers walked through the Jewish quarter attacking shops and taverns. The pogrom turned violent when Jewish merchants and workers attempted to defend their homes and shops. By the end of the first day, twelve Jews were dead, and almost a hundred were wounded.\textsuperscript{128}

The Governor of Bessarabia, R. S. Von Raaben, had under his command 8,000 troops and 350 policemen, yet he failed to give any order to suppress the rioting. The next morning command of these troops was transferred to the commander of the military garrison, General V. A. Beckman, whose order to end the disturbances reached the troops by 7 pm.\textsuperscript{129} During the 36 hours that passed from when the pogrom began until these orders reached the troops, police were forced to make their own decision about whether


\textsuperscript{126} Michael Davitt, \textit{Within the Pale}, 98-9.

\textsuperscript{127} Lambroza, “The Pogroms of 1903-1906,” 197.

\textsuperscript{128} ibid., 199.

\textsuperscript{129} ibid., 199.
to defend Jewish citizens. Accounts of the pogrom differ—some blame the police for cooperating with the rioters while others maintain that the police offered protection to the Jewish population. In any case, the efforts of the policemen clearly were not sufficient to prevent or even significantly to limit the damage done by the rioters.

Rioting continued on April 20, when peasants and vandals from nearby villages and towns arrived in Kishinev, forming a mob that was significantly more violent than that of the day before. Reports of the violence show the mob to have been particularly brutal:

The Jews were slain in most barbarous fashion. Many of them were not killed at once, but were left writhing in pre-mortal agonies. Some had nails driven into their heads or had their eyes put out. Little children were thrown from garrets to the pavement, and their brains dashed out upon the stones. Women had their stomachs ripped open or their breasts cut off. Many of them became the victims of rape.... The drunken hordes broke into the synagogue, and, getting hold of the Torah scrolls, tore them to shreds, defiled them, and trampled upon them. In one synagogue, the old Shammes (beadle), arrayed in his prayer-shawl, and shielding with his body the Ark containing the sacred scrolls, was savagely murdered by the desecrators on the threshold of the sanctuary.

By the end of the day, “47 Jews had been murdered, 424 wounded, 700 houses burned, 600 shops looted. Damage was estimated at 3 million roubles.” With the arrival of troops in the evening of April 20, the mob rapidly dispersed, ending the Kishinev pogrom.
The Kishinev pogrom is remarkable both because of the cruelties visited upon the Jewish people, but also because of the failure of the Jews to fight back against their assailants. A large number of Jewish writers and intellectuals began to speak out emphatically in favor of Jewish self-defense units. An appeal to the Jewish people, co-written by Simon Dubnow, concluded that the Jews could no longer watch passively as their homes and families were destroyed by the pogromists:

It is shameful that thousands of souls should rely on others, meekly putting their heads under the headman's axe, begging for mercy, without even testing their strength to defend their property, their honour, and life itself.

The Zionists were the first to answer the call of these writers, and were prepared for the only other major pogrom of 1903 that occurred in September in Gomel. There, rioting erupted following a fight between a Jewish fishmonger and a Christian peasant. A mob of rioters began to attack Jewish homes and shops, but in Gomel, a city of 40,000 inhabitants, Jewish self-defense proved effective. The Christian mob was met with several hundred armed Jewish defense members, mostly organized by the Zionist organization, Poalei-Zion. Although several homes and shops were destroyed, and ten Jews were killed (along with eight Christians), the damage did not compare to that of Kishinev. Two factors helped to control and limit the damage: first, in Gomel, unlike Kishinev, over half of the city's inhabitants were Jewish—among whom many had been organized into self-defense units; second, the chief of police quickly issued clear orders for his troops to disperse the mob, and the rioting ended the day after it started.

The Zionist movement was extremely effective in creating Jewish defense units—Zionist defense organizations were established in Kiev, Odessa, Ekaterinoslav, Elizavetgrad, Nikolayev, Minsk, and Warsaw. Following Kishinev, the Bundists also began to realize the necessity for a Jewish self-defense program, marking a change in policy. Prior to 1903, the Bund officially viewed Jewish defense units as a bourgeois undertaking, but Bundist defense groups played an increasingly important role in the subsequent pogroms, especially during the Revolution of 1905. 137

Though the pogroms of 1903 are often grouped together with those of 1904-1905 (perhaps because both had high levels of brutality), an important distinction in fact separates them. The two pogroms of 1903 found their catalysts in local incidents—the murder of a Christian boy and a fight between Jew and Christian in the marketplace—while those occurring in 1904-1905 were incited by national events: the Russo-Japanese war and the 1905 Revolution.

The Russo-Japanese war began on January 27, 1904 when the Japanese attacked Port Arthur, a Russian naval base on the Yellow Sea. Initially, many Russians supported the war, and a wave of patriotism spread throughout Russia. Within months, however, the Russian war effort faced difficulties and setbacks, and “discontented peasants and workers who had temporarily put aside anti-government protests renewed them with greater vigor.” 138 The war made conditions worse at home and the government’s ineptitude in the conflict weakened many Russians’ faith in the government. For Jews, the most important effect of the war was the large number of unwilling conscripts that were mobilized for military service in Manchuria.

137 Praisman, 73.
Again, the anti-Semitic press actively exacerbated existing anti-Jewish attitudes, thereby contributing significantly to the pogroms of 1904. Bessarabets accused the Russian Jewish population of having conspired with the Japanese. Jews were reported to have assisted in supplying the Japanese with financial aid, supplies, and information concerning Russia's military capabilities. In addition, Bessarabets accused Jewish troops of deserting the front in order to bring about a Russian defeat. Finally, the anti-Semitic press reported that the Tsar himself supported attacks on the Jewish enemy at home. In fact, while an American Jewish banker had supplied the Japanese with loans, the Russian war effort was funded with help from French Jewish sources, and some 30,000 Jews fought bravely in the Russian army against the Japanese.\footnote{ibid., 214-5.}

While anti-Jewish sentiments were thus being heightened, tens of thousands of Christian conscripts were mobilized in cities and towns prior to their departure for the front. The combination of dissatisfied conscripts, anti-Jewish rumors, and pamphlets and newspapers agitating for attacks of Jews led to the outbreak of many of the 1904 pogroms. Of the forty-three pogroms that occurred during 1904, the majority involved rioting by mobilized conscripts.\footnote{ibid., 213-5.} For various reasons—rumors connecting the Jews and the Japanese, the mobilization of thousands of unwilling soldiers, and the increase in economic tension—the pogroms of 1904 can be linked to factors caused by the Russo-Japanese war. In 1903-1904 Russian Jews were targeted in forty-five separate pogroms. During these riots, ninety-three Jews lost their lives, over 4,000 Jews were wounded, and damages were reported at over 5 million roubles. In only five cases were charges brought

\footnote{ibid., 214-5.}

\footnote{ibid., 213-5.}
against participants of the pogroms and in no cases were charges brought against members of the police, military, or government officials.\textsuperscript{141}

In December 1904, the Russians surrendered to the Japanese, helping to incite the urban unrest that would characterize both the Revolution and the pogroms of 1905. By January 1905, tens of thousands of Russians were on strike, closing down some 300 factories.\textsuperscript{142} Following the initial urban disorders, peasants too joined the protests, along with national minorities seeking equal rights and political freedoms under a new constitutional government. Jews were among the national minorities seeking an improvement in their status. Jewish involvement in the revolutionary movement was significant, but far from central. Of the four million Jews then living within the Russian empire, no more than 100,000 were members of left-wing groups such as the Social Democrats, the Workers of Zion, and the Bund.\textsuperscript{143}

Unfortunately for the Jews, Jewish participation in the revolutionary movement was exaggerated by government officials and right-wing groups who sought a scapegoat for the nation’s unrest. In 1902, the Minister of the Interior, Vyacheslav von Plehve had stated: “There is no revolutionary movement in Russia, there are only Jews who are the true enemies of the government.”\textsuperscript{144} Sentiments such as these would prove vital in mobilizing supporters of the status quo against the Jewish population.

Between January and October 1905, when the 1905 revolution reached its climax, there were fifty-four pogroms within the Russian empire. Many pogroms were simply

\textsuperscript{141} ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{142} ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{143} ibid., 220-1.
\textsuperscript{144} ibid., 221.
part of the overall rebellion in which police and troops attacked demonstrators (including Jews), while other pogroms were traditional attacks targeting the Jewish population.

One of these ‘traditional’ pogroms occurred in the town of Zhitomir on May 11, 1905. The pogrom was incited by rumors accusing the Jews of using a portrait of Nicholas II for target practice as well as their planning a massacre of the Christians of Zhitomir. In Zhitomir, anti-Semitic mobs were bravely fought back by Jewish self-defense units, making the pogrom in Zhitomir less like a riot and more like a battle. The strength of the Jewish self-defense led the government to claim that the pogrom had been the result of a Jewish attack on Christians, despite the fact that nearly 30 Jews were killed and 150 wounded in Zhitomir.\(^{145}\)

One of the most important aspects of the Zhitomir pogrom was the role and participation of right-wing, counter-revolutionary vigilantes. The Russian right-wing opposed liberalism and capitalism, while supporting nationalism, Orthodoxy, and autocracy. Anti-Semitism was integral to their world-view. These vigilantes formed groups, called “the Black Hundreds,” intended to prevent and limit the effects of revolution. “The Black Hundreds” does not refer to a specific group or movement, but rather “became a generic name for the many small right-wing groups that instigated attacks against Jews.”\(^{146}\) The actions and pogroms carried out by the Black Hundreds would become even more important and extensive following the October Manifesto of 1905.

Throughout 1905, the revolutionary movement had grown steadily and reached its pinnacle in the ten-day nationwide general strike of October. Millions of citizens

\(^{145}\) ibid., 223.
\(^{146}\) ibid., 225.
throughout Russia struck, virtually paralyzing the Russian economy. Prior to the outbreak of the general strike, it appears that the government felt it could ride out the revolutionary movement, but the events of October convinced the Tsar that some changes had to be introduced. These changes—the creation of a consultative legislative body (the Duma), the introduction of a constitution, and the establishment of civil rights—were promised by the Tsar in his October Manifesto, issued on October 30, 1905.

Immediately following the issuing of the Manifesto, liberals throughout Russia celebrated. Parades were held, and Jews participated in them, believing that the first step to their emancipation had been achieved. The demonstrations that followed the Manifesto were neither repressed nor controlled by the central government. Members of the Black Hundreds, watching the government fail to defend itself, believed they must take matters into their own hands. Thus followed the most destructive wave of pogroms in Russian history.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of pogroms that followed the issuing of the October Manifesto, but it is certain that they were numerous: estimates range from 650 pogroms occurring from November 1905 until September 1906, to 690 pogroms occurring within two weeks of the issuing of the Manifesto. In this massive wave of violence, Jewish self-defense units were overwhelmed and failed to protect the Jewish population from extensive damage. This wave of pogroms brought unprecedented destruction upon the Jews: over 3,000 Jews were killed, over 15,000 were wounded, and nearly 60 million roubles in Jewish property was destroyed.

147 ibid., 226-7.
148 ibid., 231.
The most destructive of the 1905 pogroms occurred in Odessa. Odessa was Russia’s fourth largest city, containing 403,000 people, of which 138,000 were Jewish. On October 31, immediately after the October Manifesto was decreed by the Tsar, liberals and revolutionaries—many of them Jewish—celebrated the downfall of Russian autocracy in the streets. These demonstrations started out peacefully, but soon people began carrying anti-government banners and tearing down and defacing portraits of the Tsar. Several policemen were beaten and disarmed, and by the end of the day, the demonstrators had killed two policemen, and wounded several more. Supporters of the Tsar and of autocracy, angered by the Manifesto and the celebration that had followed, now turned on the Jews, who they saw as the source of the problem. Russians also attacked Jewish homes and stores, as well as the police and troops who tried to suppress the disorder.

The next morning, hundreds of Russians (many of them laborers) marched in the streets to show their loyalty to the Tsar, shouting anti-Jewish slogans. At one point during these anti-Semitic, but relatively peaceful demonstrations, a young Christian boy was shot, probably from a nearby building. There is no positive evidence as to the identity of the attacker, but it was probably a revolutionary or a member of a Jewish self-defense unit. The crowd panicked, and Jews and other revolutionaries threw bombs at the crowd from nearby buildings. Unlike previous pogroms, the mob in Odessa was strongly provoked by Jews and other revolutionaries, who appear to have been seeking a confrontation.

150 Ibid., 260.
151 Ibid., 262-3.
By the afternoon, the pogrom had attained full force, with mobs brutally attacking Jews in a manner reminiscent of the Kishinev pogrom. Christians hung icons on their doors to identify their homes as Christian, while nearby Jewish families were beaten and murdered. Police and troops were embittered by the earlier attacks on them during the celebratory demonstrations. They therefore initially failed to protect the Jews, and occasionally even assisted the Christian mob. Only on November 4 did military forces act to restore order, thereby finally putting an end to the five days of murderous rioting. 152 Eight hundred Jews had been killed, and 5,000 wounded. 153

Dubnow links the Tsar and his government to the terrible pogrom at Kishinev in 1903 as well as to the pogroms of 1905. He argues that the failure of the police to respond to the rioting in Kishinev was a result of a conspiracy linking the editor of Bessarabets, Krushevan, with the deputy governor of Kishinev, Ustrugov, and an emissary of the political police, Levandahl. The alleged conspiracy involved the spread of rumors linking Jews to the 'ritual murder' and the planned inaction of troops and police who could have easily prevented the pogrom. 154 Dubnow places the blame for the pogroms of 1905 on "the criminal pogrom organization, which led from the palaces of the Tsar and the highest dignitaries of state, by way of the Police Department, to the slums of murderers and hooligans." 155

In addition to the work of historians seeking the causes of the pogroms, we have access to the opinion of Prince Urussov, who was appointed governor of Bessarabia shortly following the Kishinev massacre. His memoirs tend to support Dubnow's
conspiracy theory, for they place much of the blame for the pogroms on the local and central government. In his memoirs, Urussov notes that both the press and the police played a significant role in allowing the pogroms to occur through, respectively, their anti-Semitic rumor campaign, and their unwillingness and inability to suppress the anti-Jewish violence. Urussov concludes that "the central government cannot shake off its moral responsibility for the slaughter and plunder that went on at Kishinev."\(^\text{156}\)

The revisionist historians face a more difficult challenge in debunking the conspiracy theory for the pogroms of 1903-06 than they do for those of 1881. While Alexander III evidently did hold anti-Semitic opinions, Tsar Nicholas II nevertheless proves a much more satisfying villain for those wishing to indict the Tsar for having organized the pogroms. The following letter written by Nicholas II to his mother just ten days after issuing the October Manifesto is telling:

> In the first days after the Manifesto, the bad elements boldly raised their heads, but then a strong reaction set in and the whole mass of loyal people took heart. The result, as is natural and usual with us, was that the people became enraged by the insolence and audacity of the revolutionaries and socialists; and because nine-tenths of them are Yids [Jews], people's whole wrath has turned against them. That is how the pogroms happened.\(^\text{157}\)

In this letter, Nicholas II seems to view the pogroms as a popular display of loyalty and support for autocracy that justly punished the Jews for their revolutionary proclivities and activities. The October Manifesto had been a concession to the revolutionary movement, but right-wing groups used anti-Semitic violence to show that the traditional elements in Russian society were not going to tolerate such drastic change and reform in the


\(^{157}\) Hans Rogger, "Conclusion and Overview," in Klier and Lambroza, 344.
autocratic system. Nicholas II’s initial reaction to the pogroms is thus wholly different from Alexander III’s: whereas the former saw pogromists as supporters of himself and of Russian tradition, the latter associated the pogromists with the revolutionary terrorists who had just assassinated his father.

Nevertheless, while Nicholas II proved to be a more willing accomplice in the anti-Semitic violence than his father had been, there still exists no evidence that the pogroms of 1903-1906 were planned or organized by the central government. In “The Tsarist Government and the Pogroms of 1903-1906,” Shlomo Lambroza points out that “Had the government pursued a pogrom policy, it would have likely been carried out by the Ministry of the Interior.”\textsuperscript{158} Yet he goes on to point out that the Minister of the Interior, V. K. Plehve (1902-04), was neither informed of the pogroms nor was he supportive of anti-Jewish violence. In a 1903 memorandum to the Director of Police, Plehve wrote, “there is a great animosity between Jews and non-Jews, all necessary measures must be taken to repress disorders.”\textsuperscript{159} Moreover, it is clear from this and other evidence concerning Plehve that the minister considered it to his own and the government’s interest to eliminate “all forms of mass demonstrations and popular uprisings, including pogroms.”\textsuperscript{160}

The pogroms of 1903-06 are not as easily explained as those of 1881. However, we have shown that these early twentieth century pogroms were caused by similar factors: the incitement of the masses by the anti-Semitic press (notably the Bessarabets), anti-Semitic sentiments long held by the local population, and the failure of the local and

\textsuperscript{159} ibid., 290.
\textsuperscript{160} ibid., 291.
central governments to act decisively to prevent the anti-Jewish violence. In addition to these factors, there also existed specific catalysts for the outbreak of the pogroms. The 1903 pogrom in Kishinev was preceded by the death of a Christian boy and ritual murder accusations against the Jews. In 1904, the Russo-Japanese war served as a catalyst for the pogroms—because of both the discontent produced by the war among the general population and the large numbers of unwilling conscripts mobilized in cities and towns. In 1905-06 the pogroms were largely the reaction of right-wing vigilantes against the liberal revolutionary movement (among which Jews were singled out), the climax coming immediately following the October Manifesto. The pogroms of 1903-06 thus can be explained satisfactorily without recourse to the conspiracy theory.

Conclusion

Though the pogroms of 1881 and 1903-06 were devoid of planning and organization by the central tsarist government, the traditional interpretation has indeed placed the blame on the Tsar and his ministers. Jewish intellectuals, many of whom had been assimilationists prior to the events of 1881, by the end of the nineteenth century saw the Tsar, the government, and even (in some cases) the Russian people as incurably hostile towards the Jewish people. Thus it is no surprise that the pogroms would be interpreted as a blatant attempt on the part of the Tsar and government officials to make the Jewish people feel unwelcome in the Russian empire. This distrust and hatred of the tsarist government not only effected the way history has been written, but also shaped and molded the Jewish intellectual movements occurring at the close of the nineteenth century.
Thus, this study of the character and causes of legal and violent anti-Semitism, in addition to the Jewish radical movements that emerged during this period, begs the question: What did Jewish intellectuals learn from the pogroms and the legal discrimination that followed? Though the Zionists and the Jewish Socialists prescribed extremely different solutions for the Russian Jewish people, their assessment of the problem was remarkably similar. For the Zionists, it took the pogroms of 1881 and the failure of the central government to respond to the violence, that convinced them that there was no place for the Jewish people in Russia. For the Jewish Socialists, it was a more complex process that involved the history of anti-Semitic legislation that led to the segregation of the Jews from the Russian people by geography, education, language, and economic activity, as well as the changing economic and social conditions which proscribed social and political revolution with a national character. Both groups, however, saw the current conditions in Russia to unacceptable and unsafe for the Jewish people. In addition, the 1903 pogroms impressed upon both Zionists and Bundists the need for Jewish self-defense units in order to protect themselves from the cruelty of the pogroms. The traditional "conspiracy theory" of the pogroms depicts the manner in which Jewish intellectuals had lost faith in the tsarist government and the Russian nation.

This paper has examined the realities facing the Russian Jew at the end of the nineteenth century, and focussed on two of their radical responses to those realities. By the 1880s, the world was changing rapidly for the Russian Jew. The traditional world of his parents and grandparents was declining. Modernization, urbanization, and industrialization were changing the way Jews lived and earned a living. Less than a century earlier, the world of the Jew was confined to the small community in which he
lived, while intellectual endeavors were limited to the study of the Torah and Talmud. But by the end of the nineteenth century, many Jews were moving to cities to work in factories or to study secular subjects, leaving the traditional world of the shtetl behind. Many of these Jews were confident that Russia’s autocracy was evolving towards the liberal governmental models of Western Europe, while others saw populist and later, Marxist solutions in Russia’s future. These ideas would be forever altered by the rash of pogroms and anti-Semitic laws that followed the assassination of Alexander II.

The pogroms that destroyed so many Jewish homes and lives, were a result of the same socio-economic factors that were causing the decline of the traditional Jewish community. This paper has shown that the pogroms were an urban phenomenon, brought about by the painful modernization of Russia’s economy, and the consequent growth of an urban and seasonal work force. In addition to these long term causes, the pogroms were often instigated by short term causes—the assassination of Alexander II, the mysterious murder of a Christian boy, the Russo-Japanese War, and the 1905 Revolution—that served as a catalyst for the tradition of anti-Semitism. Finally, the pogroms were instigated by an anti-Semitic press, and a hostile and discriminatory government. These causes all led many Russian peasants and workers to blame their economic and political troubles on the most available scapegoat: the Jewish people.

The reactionary government of Alexander III and Nicholas II feared the Jewish people as a dangerous economic and political force, and used this fear as a pretext for the promulgation of discriminatory laws and the failure to act out firmly against the pogromists. Nevertheless, the notion that the Tsarist government organized and planned
the pogroms in a calculated attack against the Jewish people, which previously was widely accepted, has been showed to be unfounded.

Regardless of the causes of the pogroms and the restrictive legislation, the generation of Jews coming of age in the 1880s and 1890s found themselves drawn to radical politics. Traditional Jewry was neither an attractive or viable option for many of these increasingly secular and "enlightened" Jews, but the pogroms and subsequent discriminatory laws made it clear that Russian society was also closed to these Jews. With both the traditional Jewish and the liberal reformist options seen as unviable, these Jews turned to radical solutions.

Zionism arose directly from the violence of the 1881 pogroms. Jews who had previously seen assimilation and emancipation as the future now turned away from such solutions. It was clear to thinkers like Pinsker and Lilienblum that the Jewish people could never be free within Russia. In fact, no gentile nation—no matter how liberal or "enlightened"—could ever offer the Jews what they desperately needed: a homeland. Thus, the Zionist ideology was shaped and molded directly by the events of 1881-1882.

The ideology of Jewish socialism, and specifically the Bund, was not effected by the 1881 pogroms in the same manner as was the ideology of Zionism. While the pogroms undoubtedly shook the entire Russian Jewish world, the root of the Bund were in the northwest, which did not experience the pogroms. The pioneers of the Bund were intellectuals who saw the problems of the Jewish proletariat as connected naturally to that of the Russian worker. Anti-Semitism was not the real problem, it was merely the symptom of the root problem: class oppression. Thus, in theory, by working towards an
all-Russian revolution, the proto-Bundists would be indirectly solving the Jewish problem.

In practice, however, the Vilna pioneers could not prevent nationalism from entering into their program. The segregated nature of Russian society required that the proto-Bundists work almost exclusively with Jewish workers, and when the Vilna intellectuals sought to make the transition to practical agitation on issues of vital concern to the workers, it became necessary to use Yiddish instead of Russian in order to organize the masses. Legal discrimination, the transition to political agitation, and a change in party leadership all led to the growth of national awareness in the Bund and led to its split with the RSDRP in 1903. It was not so much the events of 1881 that nationalized the Bund, the realities of Russian Jewish life which could not be adequately addressed from the internationalist perspective that had originally characterized the Vilna group.

The face of Jewish politics changed dramatically between the assassination of Alexander II and the 1905 Revolution. For the most part, politically inclined Jews prior to 1881 saw Jewish politics as but a dimension of Russian politics. Liberals were optimistic that reforms would better allow the Jewish people to be integrated into Russian society, while radicals hoped for a social revolution that would unite all workers, regardless of religion or ethnicity. By 1905, both of these groups had come to embrace the idea that the Jewish people had their own unique political destiny, separate from that of the Russian people. Though both Zionist and Bundist had been effected differently by the anti-Semitic violence and policies of this era, they both felt betrayed by the tsarist government, the Russian people, and the Russian politics that Jewish intellectuals had looked to so optimistically only twenty-five years before. It was this feeling of
betrayal—evident in the traditional interpretation of the pogroms—that led to the emergence of a politically self-conscious Russian Jewry.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


