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Sexual violence, rape, and pogroms, 1903–1920

Gur Alroey

Department of Israel Studies, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT
The article examines the pogroms from a gender perspective, with the focus on violence against Jewish women and especially rape and divided into four sections. The first part comes a critical examination of the primary documents and a consideration of several ethical questions that arise when addressing the phenomenon. The second part is a short review of the pogroms, from the start of the twentieth century through the end of the Russian Civil War. The third part looks at the violence and assaults against Jewish women. The fourth considers why the Jewish society muted discussion of these rapes in the years after the pogroms.

They lifted me off the floor, like a brimful sack, and tied me to the foot of my mother's bed. Mamma! Only now did I remember her. She jumped off the bed, evidently to rush to my assistance. But they dragged her back to the bed to which I was shackled. I hardly recognized her. She was dressed only in her nightgown. Her broad and chiseled bones. Her grey hair, loosed in terror, and her sparkling eyes. Her teeth gritted and her mouth mute. They threw her on to the bed, right opposite me. (Lamed Shapiro, 'The Crucifix,' 22)

Pity, have mercy, dear sir. You too, certainly, have children. … I offer my life in place of her. … Kill me. … Do whatever you want to me, … For another long moment the huge hand still grasped Devorah'le's arm, and then suddenly let go of her, and then, and then … Something terrible and strange was happening, very strange. What is he doing to her? […] Why did he throw her on the ground? Oh, and is he really going to strangle her, to kill her? … Devorah'le wants to scream but cannot. She wants to rush out of her hiding place and die along with her mother, but she is powerless to move from where she is. Her mother's body is trembling, shuddering. How repulsive and ugly those shudder are! Does everyone about to die shiver this way? Oh, what is this? What is this? […] With her hair uncovered and her dress ripped open, her mother sat there on the floor, which was covered with broken boards and splinters, her eyes staring about unfocused. The words hovered on the girl's lips: What did he do to her? […] What did he do to you, Mamma? Then mother's and daughter's eyes met and suddenly all the words were stifled: the girl had a stunned sense that some contamination she did not understand had been left in her mother and that she was already a stranger, distant from her. She was no longer her mother. … (Levi Aryeh Arieli, 'Immigrants,' 121)

Vasili Danilovitch, too, concealed several Jews, registering them as patients and assigning them to beds; he hid two of them in the operating rooms. From early morning until late at night the rioters plundered, wounded, and killed, and dozens of women were raped. On the second day after the pogrom, when she went with Vasili Danilovitch to bandage the wounded, her eyes...
beheld the devastation and the murder victims sprawled in the mud. She saw the destruction and the blood and the severed limbs; but she forgot almost all of it because of the rape victims. Because of the virgins and women who came to her in secret to beg her, as a daughter of their people, to ask Vasili Danilovitch to rid them of their misery. (Meir Secco [Smilansky], ‘Falling Birds,’ 173).1

Introduction

These are excerpts from three stories published by Jewish writers who witnessed the bloody assaults and murders of Jews in the pogroms that ravaged Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century. All three texts depict the hooligans raping Jewish women while their children look on. In the first story, by Lamed Shapiro, the pogromists tie the revolutionary son to his mother’s bed and then proceed to rape her in front of his eyes; in the second story, it is a young girl who watches from her hiding place as a Ukrainian defiles her mother; in the third story, Jewish rape victims ask a Jewish nurse to beg a non-Jewish physician to help them. Shapiro, Arieli, and Secco left Russia for the United States and Palestine not long after the pogroms. Shapiro emigrated in 1905, after the pogrom in Odessa; Arieli left Palestine for the United States in 1923, three years after the end of the Civil War in the Ukraine, during which more than 100,000 Jews were murdered or injured; Secco came to Palestine as part of the Second Aliya, left a few years later, and returned after the pogroms. Their stories made readers aware of the horrors of the Civil War and of the terrible price that the Jews in general and Jewish women in particular paid during the bloody events in Eastern Europe. These works, contemporary with the events they describe, are useful supplements to the historical sources about rape and violence against women. They are important chiefly because they raise a sensitive and important topic that has been shunted to the sidelines of the public discourse: how Jewish society in Eastern Europe dealt with sexual violence and the rape of Jewish women during the pogroms.

This article examines the pogroms from a gender perspective, with the focus on violence against Jewish women and especially rape. Historians who have written about the pogroms rarely consider the violence from the victims’ perspective. They tend to concentrate instead on the causes of the brutal assaults, the profile of the murderers, and regional patterns, and ask whether the pogroms were spontaneous or instigated by the authorities. The victim has been marginalized in the historiographical discourse, along with the gender experience. The attempt to study the pogroms from the other side allows us to home in on individuals and how they dealt with the calamity that overtook them. It is the family unit (and not the pogromists) and how it dealt with the complex and dangerous situation imposed on it that stand at the center of our attention here.

The Kishinev pogrom, in April 1903, claimed 49 Jewish lives. It was the first in the long series of gory mass assaults that punctuated the first half of the twentieth century.2 Between 1903 and 1905, more than 3000 Jews were murdered in hundreds of violent outbreaks in the southern Pale of Settlement. During the Russian Civil War (1918–1920), the pogroms became much more lethal: some 100,000 Jews were killed or wounded; countless children were left orphans and women widowed, and tens of thousands found themselves homeless refugees.3

Historical research has dealt extensively with pogroms against Jews in Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost no
studies have examined the pogroms from the perspective of the victim. What was the demographic composition of the murdered? How did the ordinary Jew deal with the pogroms that broke out in his place of residence? And when (if ever) did the Jews return to normal after the wave of violence subsided? Although the Jews were at the focal point of these violent events, their place is almost absent from the academic discourse. The victim and his family disappeared in the overflow of explanations and interpretations over the causes of the pogroms and their implications for Jewish society, the attitude and reaction of the Czarist government.

The absence of comprehensive sociological research prevented gender-based observations of the murderous acts and violence, and the gender experience is not present in the research literature. Pascale Rachel Bos wrote: ‘it seems obvious enough that the history of the holocaust cannot be told without looking in depth at the experience and narratives of half the population which experienced it, that is, at (Jewish women) as subjects.’ Bos’ assertion is also valid for the acts of violence in Eastern European Jewish society at the beginning of the twentieth century, and pogroms cannot be understood without the gender perspective. Mithu Sanyal, notes in her book *Vergewaltigung* that historical research has hardly dealt with sexual violence incidents and that researchers’ duty is to fill the many gaps in our knowledge close and possibly retell the history of sexual violence. She also argued that the voices of the victims as well as of the perpetrators are missing, which has a lot to do with the desolate source situation, but possibly also with traditional narrative modes. This essay seeks to fill the historiographic gap with regard to sexual violence against Jewish women during the pogroms in Eastern Europe in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Because this article takes a gender perspective I will treat the years 1903–1920 as a single period and examine how Jewish women and their families coped with the fear of violence in general and of the rape that (as we shall see below) was a permanent fixture of the pogroms. The article is divided into four sections. First comes a critical examination of the primary documents that deal with violence against women and a consideration of several ethical questions that arise when addressing the phenomenon. The second part is a short review of the pogroms, from the start of the twentieth century through the end of the Russian Civil War. The third part looks at the violence and assaults against women, from the Kishinev pogrom through those in the Ukraine after the First World War. The fourth and last section considers why the Jewish society muted discussion of these rapes in the years after the pogroms.

Sources

There are frequent references to the rape of Jewish women during the pogroms in the reports and articles published by the contemporary Jewish press. Some of the most important sources for understanding the phenomenon and its scope are the testimonies collected from women and eyewitnesses shortly after the violent outbreaks. These testimonies are important because they reveal how the survivors interpreted and understood the brutality directed against them, but also because they can help us understand the pogromists’ motives and the depth of their hatred for the Jews.

After the Kishinev pogrom, a historical committee was established in Odessa, headed by Simon Dubnow, who undertook the investigation of the riots. Its head, Chaim Nachman Bialik, was instructed to take testimony from the victims and to collect the material needed
in order to bring the perpetrators to justice. The delegation was told to draw up lists of those who had been buried, to interview those who cared for the wounded in the hospitals, to question the survivors and eyewitnesses, to photograph the places and the people, to gather relevant handwritten and published documents, to collect oral and written testimony from public figures, to amass statistics, to inspect the synagogues and other public institutions that had been damaged, to investigate the Jewish self-defense efforts in the city, and to assemble data on the rapes that took place.\(^6\)

By the end of the inquiry, Bialik had accumulated hundreds of photographs, press clippings, posters in Russian, and especially the testimonies of victims about what they had experienced. He planned to use these materials to compose a systematic and up-to-date picture of the Kishinev pogrom; in the event, all this material was filed away and never published. Sixty years passed before some of this treasure trove was published, in a volume entitled *The Kishinev Pogrom, 1903–1963*.\(^7\) The testimonies about rape were left out as if they did not exist. Twenty years later – by now 80 years after the pogrom – there was finally a call to rescue from the archives and publish all the documents collected by Bialik in Kishinev, in order to demonstrate that the Jews had organized and fought back, defending their honor and property against the pogromists. This edition (which appeared in 1991) included all the testimonies, including those about rape and sexual violence against Jewish women.\(^8\)

We also have evidence about rape and sexual assault during the pogroms of 1904–1905. These events were covered by the contemporary pressed and addressed in a comprehensive study written by Leo Motzkin at the behest of the Zionist Organization. The book, which was financed by the Zionist Assistance Fund in London, was intended to be a wide-ranging survey of the bloody events and of the situation of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement. Motzkin printed questionnaires that some 20 research assistants distributed in 85 cities and towns in the Pale of Settlement where pogroms had taken place. Recognizing the similarity between the pogroms of 1905 and those of the 1880s, he decided to expand his canvas. The result was a weighty tome of more than 900 pages, full of testimonies and material relevant to the pogroms, including rape and assaults on women.\(^9\)

Tens of thousands of Jewish women were raped and murdered during the Civil War in the Ukraine (1918–1920). It its scope and intensity, the devastation exceeded anything Jewish society had ever known in the past and had no parallel in the history of the Jewish people (at least until the Holocaust). It is doubtful whether a historian today could assemble much information about the rape of Jewish women then without were it not for the work of Eliezer David Rosenthal and his book, *Megillat ha-Tevah* (The Scroll of Slaughter).\(^10\) Note, though, that Rosenthal was not the only person to document the atrocities against the Jews. We also have extensive documentation produced by the All-Ukrainian Relief Committee, headed by Elias Heifetz, which took down the statements of hundreds of survivors.\(^11\)

Rosenthal, a teacher in the town of Teplik, survived the pogroms and took upon himself the mission of documenting the Jews’ tribulations during the Civil War. He settled in Odessa and interviewed the many Jewish refugees who had congregated there and collected relevant documents. In early 1920 he began work on *The Scroll of Slaughter: Materials for a History of the Pogroms and Massacres of the Jews in the Ukraine, Russia, and White Russia*. Its pages provide an unvarnished description of the many rapes, murders, assaults, and pillage in some 400 towns and cities in the Ukraine during the Civil War. It unfolds the history of the Jews who unwillingly found themselves caught up in a cruel and bloody civil war.
The Scroll of Slaughter is a monument erected by one man, who devoted the rest of his life to documenting the pogroms and commemorating the victims of the turbulent Civil War. It is a bloody chronicle and horrifying account of the Jewish communities in the Ukraine that were destroyed by bullets, strangulation, and atrocious tortures twenty years before the Second World War. The first three volumes, published between 1928 and 1931, covered the towns from letters aleph through tet. After Rosenthal died in Odessa in 1932, the manuscript for the letters yod through shin was forgotten, until it was recently discovered in the Genazim archives in Tel Aviv.

What makes these volumes special is not the attempt to understand the causes or the course of the fighting. Their main goal is rather to serve as a memorial to the tens of thousands of Jews who were murdered in the Ukraine during the Civil War. Rosenthal arranged the towns and cities in alphabetical order, described the pogroms, and recorded the victims’ names, ages, and occupations. Based on the testimonies he had collected, documents, and accounts that were sent to him he chronicled the events and the horror stories. Rosenthal did not spare readers the atrocities, sadism, tortures, and rapes; his vivid descriptions leave readers with an unbearable sense of shock and unease. At the end of each letter of the alphabet, after his survey of the events in the relevant towns, he lists the victims whose names he has been able to unearth – their age, family status, and occupations. For some towns he provides the names of hundreds of victims; for others, only one or two. Rosenthal was able to identify only about 10,000 victims of the pogroms, or about 16% of all those murdered. The testimonies and documents he collected include many accounts of rape.

Additional important sources for understanding the Ukrainian pogroms in general and the acts of violence in women in particular were published by various delegations and organizations that came to the aid of the Ukrainian Jewish population and contemporary Jewish historians who studied the acts of violence during the civil war. Among the numerous reports and books we should note: Elias Heifetz’s book from 1921 The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919. Heifetz headed the All-Ukrainian Relief Committee for the Victims of Pogroms, sponsored by the Red Cross; The documents collected by the Evobchestkom, some of which were published in a book edited by Lidia Miliakova, Le Livre des pogroms: Antichambre d’un genocide. Russie, Russia, Biélorussie, 1917–1922; Nahum Shtif’s book, Pogromen in Ukraina: Die Ziet fun der Priviliger Armie; and the studies of Elias Tcherikower, especially his book: Die Ukrainer Pogromen in yor 1919. As has been said there are quite a few testimonies of rape during the pogroms but historical research rarely dealt with this phenomenon and its impact on Jewish Society.

The women’s testimonies pose an important ethical question. We rarely hear the voices of rape victims, whether because of their fear of telling their story or because they were murdered and there was no one to tell it for them. In the case of the southern Pale of Settlement, and especially the Ukraine, the situation is reversed. Some of the testimonies gathered after the pogroms go into great detail about the rapes and sexual abuse. The violence, brutality, and sadism depicted in these primary sources are upsetting and leave readers of two minds as to whether it is appropriate to circulate them further. The dilemma is whether historian should quote their testimony (however harsh and graphic) in order to convey the intensity of the phenomenon and try to understand it. Perhaps, as a matter of common decency, we should avoid the explicit descriptions and make do with summaries. In other words, primary sources are the historian’s bread and butter and it is important to share them with readers; but does quoting them intrude on the rape victim’s privacy and
human dignity, even if the event is more than a century in the past? I believe we can find the answer to this dilemma in ‘Pogrom,’ by the Polish artist Wojciech Weiss (1870–1950) evidently painted in 1918–1919.

As can be seen, the painting depicts two soldiers raping a Jewish woman. One of them is holding her arms while the second, a wicked smile on his face, grasps her legs. Outside, beneath the window, lies the body of a Jew in Hassidic garb, a bayonet stuck in his back. Weiss’s portrayal of the crime is restrained. The woman’s body is only partly exposed. We see her bare legs and part of her upper body, but her intimate zones are concealed by the pillar between the two windows. This is a deliberate choice, reflecting the painter’s desire to preserve some part of the victim’s dignity. Despite his attempt to tone down the scene, it leaves viewers with a strong impression and deep sadness. Learning from Weiss’s artistic method, I will try to place a barrier between the quotation and the readers of this article when I quote the testimony of rape victims, so as to convey shock and disgust at the abuse of these women but avoid descriptions that would offend their privacy.

Pogroms, 1903–1920

The Kishinev pogrom, the first of the twentieth century, began on Easter Sunday in April 1903. The rioters began by plundering Jewish shops and setting fire to property, but on subsequent days the violence escalated into a series of murders that ultimately claimed 49 lives; 86 Jews were seriously wounded, 500 to a lesser extent, and some 1500 residences, workshops, and stores were plundered and destroyed. This pogrom was a deep trauma for Jewish society. This new round was much more lethal than those of 1881 and 1882, which had mainly involved the destruction of property.

In 1905 and 1906 there were no fewer than 657 pogroms in the Pale of Settlement, with a Jewish death toll exceeding 3000. In Chernigov province alone, 250 pogroms claimed 76 Jewish lives. There were 152 pogroms in Kherson province and Bessarabia; although the number is less than the tally in Chernigov, they were much more violent and resulted in the death of more than 1300 Jews. In Yekaterinoslav province, 285 Jews were murdered in 41
pogroms; in Grodno, 356 were slaughtered in only 10 pogroms. These massacres had a distinctly regional pattern. More than 87% (575) took place in the southern provinces of the Pale of Settlement (Chernigov, Poltava, Yekaterinoslav, Kherson, Podolia, Kiev, and Bessarabia). An estimated 1500 children were orphaned of both parents and 800 more lost one parent; 2,000 Jews were seriously wounded and around 15,000 suffered light to moderate injuries. Property damage, caused mainly by arson, was estimated at between 57 and 87 million rubles. Synagogues, factories, shops, and whole towns went up in flames, depriving many Jews of their source of livelihood.

Moshe Rosenblatt, one of the main public activists in Kiev and a member of the Mizrachi Party, wrote a letter to Israel Zangwill that bluntly described the pogrom in Kiev and its implications for the city’s Jewish community. The letter was written as the events were taking place, and the voices emerging from his letter are testimony to the atmosphere of apprehension and terror that prevailed in the city during the pogrom. The author’s emotional turmoil is tangible, such that readers feel as though they are standing near the writer’s desk and looking out the window of his home at the city streets awash with Jewish blood. ‘Not in ink but in blood and tears are we composing these words to you! The hand trembles, the eyes shed tears,’ Rosenblatt wrote to Zangwill.

A shout [is heard] in the streets of Kiev. The soldiers, Cossacks, and police are slaughtering our brothers and sisters in the company of hooligans, and there is no one to protect them. The defense societies have become disheartened; they cannot stand up against the battle-hardened armies with their amazing tactics. Shouts outside, screams in the homes, in the basements, in the attics, in the caves. The screams of children and infants, the sound of women fainting, the groans of the dying, and the breaking of the bones of old people thrown from the upper floors deafen the air of Kiev! Infants and children are being torn up, ripped in half, and thrown to the dogs! They are slicing open the stomachs of pregnant women, cutting out organs from healthy people, and flaying them with iron combs. If the heavens don’t explode at the sound of the cries, they must be made of iron and brass! If the earth doesn’t shudder at the sound of the wails, then it is a bloody earth, a wasteland full of the fire of the inferno!

Following this description of murder and abuse, Rosenblatt detailed the economic situation that prevailed in the city after the plunder. ‘All the merchants and shopkeepers in the city have been left naked and destitute, with only their shirts on their backs.’ Food was scarce and a famine fell upon Kiev.

We are all dying of hunger, including our infants and children!

Thousands of people are crying out for bread but there is none.

The children are fainting from hunger. The committee distributes loaves of bread and herring every day, and like locusts they all fall upon the distributors, pushing and shoving, shouting and weeping loudly, ‘Give me! Give me bread! Give me herring!’ Like predatory wolves they fight over a loaf of bread and grab the herring away from each other!

To escape the rioters’ claws and find some help, the Jews assembled in the city’s public buildings. ‘The theaters and community centers are crammed like [chicken] coops with men, women, and children, ill and wounded, heads bandaged, screaming in pain! Every day, many of them die horrible deaths in terrible agony!!!’ According to Rosenblatt, about 700 families (some 3500 people) found themselves without a roof, and ‘beset at all times by fear of death.’ In view of this grim reality, Rosenblatt asked Zangwill to publish in England the account of the massacre of Jews and to pressure the government to give the Jews a territory that would provide a refuge for their distress.
The pogroms in the Ukraine after the First World War were much more brutal than those at the start of the century. Historians disagree about the number of victims. In the 1920s, after the wave of violence had ebbed, several attempts were made to estimate the number of town that had been destroyed and the toll of Jewish dead, which was reckoned at between 30,000 and 250,000. A report by the Red Cross put the number of Jews murdered at 30,500.\(^{15}\) In his book *The Slaughter of the Jews in Ukraine in 1919*, the head of the All-Ukrainian Relief Committee Assistance Committee, Elias Heifetz, maintained that the Red Cross figure was much too low and left out Jews who were killed in small villages, those who after fleeing their homes were attacked and killed in the forests and train stations, those who were thrown off boats into rivers, and those who succumbed to starvation and disease. Counting all these, he estimated the number of victims at 120,000.\(^{16}\) Eliezer David Rosenthal reckoned the death toll at a quarter of a million.\(^{17}\) A study conducted many years later produced estimates of 60,000 dead and 40,000 wounded.\(^{18}\)

The death statistics for the pogroms, as reported by historians, are ‘dry,’ noting only the number of Jews murdered in each city or town. There are no obituary lists from which we could also extract demographic information: a breakdown of the victims by sex, age, and occupation. Such data are important, however, because they allow historians to pierce through the dry husk of the statistics, to vivify the quantitative data, and to restore the victims’ identity as human beings.

A look at the names of 462 victims of three pogroms – Kishinev (1903), Odessa (1905), and Bialystok (1906) – reveals that women were in the minority. Among the 41 Kishinev victims whose names and ages we know (eight died later of their wounds and this information is not available), there were seven women (17%) and three children – two year-old infants and a girl of 12.\(^{19}\) In Odessa, on October 18–22, 303 Jews were murdered, including 28 women (9%) and 10 children through age 15.\(^{20}\) Four of these women were members of the self-defense force and fell while resisting the pogromists. In Bialystok, in early June, 110 Jews were killed, including 18 women (16%) and 10 children.\(^{21}\)

A similar gender breakdown can be found among the 60,000 Jews murdered during the Civil War in the Ukraine: 75% men and 25% women. As for their ages, 10% of the victims were infants and children through age 15; 12% were 16 to 20; 50%, 21 to 50; and 26% past 50.\(^{22}\) These numbers suggest that many victims were murdered along with their families. Of the 80 Jews killed in the town of Obodovka, in Podolia, 56 (70%) were families and 24 (30%) individuals. Nathan Shayevitch, age 42, was slaughtered along with his children, who were 11 and 16; Treitman Shalom, 47, was killed along with his two sons, 28-year-old Levi and 26-year-old Ephraim; in the Sagi-Nahor family, the grandfather David, 78, his son Chaim Yisroel, 54, and his two sons, Schneur 32 and Ephraim 28, were murdered, along with his son-in-law Motl, aged 26.\(^{23}\) In the town of Festchani in Kherson province, 29 Jews were murdered, 22 with other members of their family and seven as individuals.\(^{24}\) In Lodizenka, 41 Jews were murdered, 31 of them with their families and ten as individuals.\(^{25}\)

**Violence against women and rape**

The pogroms cast a pall of terror on the Jews and threatened the nuclear family. The sadistic killers murdered young children and molested women. The pogromists dispatched anyone they encountered; sometimes it was only a matter of chance, timing, and luck that determined one’s fate. The smothering fear that prevailed in the days before and during a pogrom
was a formative event for Eastern European Jewish families and is reflected in memoirs of the period. The daughter of the well-known Yiddish author Sholom Aleichem (Shalom Rabinovitz) recalled her family’s dread when they heard about the pogrom that was brewing in Odessa. To escape the looming catastrophe, they left their home, which was in the Jewish neighborhood, and moved into a hotel until the threat was past:

The very next morning we were awakened by a terrifying noise, a confused racket of clatters and crashes of loud shouts and shrill cries. We ran from our beds to the windows on the streets and looked down on a scene of brutality and murder—a gang of hoodlums beating a poor young Jew with heavy sticks; blood was running over the face of the young man, who was vainly shrieking for aid. A policeman stood nearby, casually looking on not moving a finger. Our mother quickly pulled the shade down, sent us back to bed and ordered us never again to go near the window. But what we had seen was enough to give us nightmares for weeks to come.26

Sometimes wives and children had to contend with the peril on their own, because the man of the house had already left for America in order to establish himself and then bring them over. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a tidal wave of Jewish immigration to the West, chiefly to the United States. Because moving to a new country was difficult and expensive, the husband often left first; only after he had saved up enough money did he bring over the rest of the family. The waiting period could be long and was marked by grave uncertainties. The wives who were left behind had to support the family by themselves and care for the children until the anticipated steamship tickets arrived. During a pogrom things were even worse. The husbands, too, so far from home, found themselves powerless, left the prey of rumors, and unable to assist their family in its time of need.27

Rachel Kositza was left behind in Bialystok with her children when her husband sailed to the United States. By the time she wrote her memoirs, in 1964, she was 86, but the six decades that had elapsed since the pogrom had not dimmed her memory. She set down a vivid description of her fears and anxieties when she heard that the pogromists were murdering Jews and trembled for her children, who had been left home alone:

I ran home to the children but didn’t find them in the house. … There was a fine and pious woman named Leah, whose children played with mine. Knowing that I was at work, she had taken my children to her house and didn’t let them leave until I came to collect them. … After I led the children home, I was overcome by fear and dread.28

Kositza’s family was unscathed and all of them made it to the United States, safe and sound. Not so the Moskovitz family. When the pogrom broke out, Samuel Moskovitz contacted the National Committee for the Relief of Sufferers by Russian Massacres and asked it to help him locate his wife and son. A representative of the committee wrote to the British consul in Odessa, requesting his assistance in the matter. After an inquiry the follow information was forthcoming:

From the inquiries I have made about the boy Solomon Moshkowitz, I have found out that the boy was killed during the October disturbances. Was buried in the Jewish Cemetery under an unknown name, but the Cemetery Officials have a photo of the child. The reason of his being buried unknown was, in account of his mother being at the time in the Hospital. My man found out that the mother is in Odessa and will let her know that the British Consulate has been making inquiries about the boy; when he sees her it is possible that you will have fuller particulars about the case to lay before the Committee in New York.29

Because Solomon’s mother had been hospitalized and there was no one to identify the body before burial, a photograph was taken of the corpse so that it could be identified later. This practice of photographing the victims before burial became the norm for pogroms that
claimed a large number of victims, when it was impossible to wait for a relative to come to
identify the dead person. Zalman Itches, who covered the pogroms for the newspaper
_Hazeman_, mentioned this in one of his dispatches:

> By then there were already 412 dead, of whom 227 were identified by relatives. More than 300 of
> the dead were laid on the ground as many people passed by, looking at their shattered bodies.
> The wailing here has not stopped for the last five days. Tens of thousands of people have come
to the mass graves, paying no heed to the driving rain. Many orderlies and physicians helped
the distraught fathers and mothers, siblings and orphans, who fainted at the sight of their dear
ones. Mass graves were dug, each one for 35 bodies. The corpses that were not identified were
photographed and the procurator and rabbis signed the form. The bodies were laid in the grave
in a row, one alongside another, … and the rabbis prayed and recited Psalms.

We may assume that Solomon Moskovitz was not identified because his mother was in the
hospital and that his body was photographed for later identification. The experiences of the
Rabinovitzes and Moskovitzes are typical of the dread and anxiety that were the lot of so
many Jewish families who were caught up in a pogrom in the early years start of the twen-
tieth century.

In the absence of law and order, the pogromists exploited the anarchy to sexually assault
Jewish women. As we have seen, fewer women were killed than men, but their bodies were
mutilated by the ruffians and they were humiliated, tortured, and raped. Rivka Schiff, 24,
was raped during the Kishinev pogrom in April 1903. She told Bialik what had happened to
her and her girlfriend Sima-Golda. ‘When the goyim broke through the roof into the attic,
several of them jumped on Zeychik’s daughter [Sima-Golda]. First they pistol-whipped her
face and surrounded her. Then they turned her face down on the floor, with her rear up in
the air …’ and began raping her. Schiff spared no details and told Bialik exactly what took
place in the house at 11 Nikolai Street. Soon several pogromists who had been waiting their
turn seized hold of Rivka and her husband.

Some of them jumped on me and on my husband. He tried to run away, with me behind him.
They jumped on him. Give us money! Miti Karsilchik wanted to assault me and demanded money.
I begged for mercy. Please don’t touch me, Miti. We’ve known each other for years. I don’t have
any money. Several of them ripped open the lower part of my dress. One of them slapped me
in the face and said, ‘If you don’t have any money, we’ll get our pleasure from you in another
way.’ I fell to the ground with Miti on top of me and he started doing it to me. The rest of the
gang stood around waiting their turn.

Rivka Schiff noted the pogromists’ lust for Jewish women, who avoided intermarriage with
the non-Jewish society. ‘Only Simi Zeychik and I were left. They mocked and abused me: ‘Of
course you’ve never had sex with a Gentile in your life – now you’ll find out what a Gentile
tastes like, too.’ I don’t know how many were with me, but it certainly wasn’t fewer than five
and maybe seven.’

Many of the testimonies about rape in Motzkin’s comprehensive study of the pogroms
of 1904–1906 are of a piece with the violence that targeted women in Kishinev. In the town
of Semjonowka, ‘among those murdered were two women, aged 60a and 65, as well as two
young mothers and their children (six children of one and seven of the other). A daughter
of one of those mothers, aged 17, was dragged out of the cellar into the field, where she
was raped and then murdered.’ In the town of Ovidiopol, a Jewish woman was raped in
the synagogue. In Yekaterinoslav, a woman was raped and then murdered. In Winniza,
one witness told of the abuse of a married Jewish woman that traumatized him more than
the murder. In that same town, according to Motzkin: ‘a Jewish matron asked a farmer’s wife
to hide her. The latter immediately let people know. Several young men showed up, stole all of the Jewish woman's money, and then raped her in front of her children.37

The rape of Jewish women during the Civil War continued the pattern of violence of the first years of the century. As noted at the outset, one of the most important sources for appreciating the scale of this sexual abuse is Rosenthal’s *Scroll of Slaughter*. This exceptional primary source for understanding the phenomenon refers frequently to rape. Sometimes the account is laconic: 'The pogroms and slaughter continued for three weeks; more than 100 persons were killed and a similar number injured in the town. There were many rapes'38 Or his entry for the Nehar Tov agricultural colony in Kherson province: ‘There were about 400 Jewish families in the colony. On Saturday, 16 May 1919, a battalion of Grigoriev’s army passed through Nehar Tov. They stayed there from Saturday morning until Sunday afternoon, blocking off the Jews’ houses, raping the women and murdering ten people.’39 ‘We young men … were stood up against the wall. Eleven were killed. Only I survived, by a miracle. Over the course of a week, 122 people were killed. Many more were injured. Almost all of the women and girls in the colony were raped.’40 In the town of Obodovka, after all the men had been rounded up and killed, the women and girls were raped: ‘The widows and orphans were raped and abused. Several hundred women and virgins were raped then.’41 Sometimes the reports go into much greater detail and describe specific cases:

This is how the Vilfand girl, a fatherless girl of 13, was killed. She fell into the hands of three ruffians, who dragged her to one of the houses and raped her. Three old women who were sitting in the other room heard only her moans. The ruffians ordered her to shut up or they would kill her. After the assault her hair went white and she died later that same day of pain, grief, and anguish. She wasn’t the only one. Many died under the hands of their assailants. […]

Dunya, a high-school girl, was raped by the ruffians. Then they dumped her in the cellar, where she died from loss of blood. While they were raping her she begged them to kill her and they refused. But they forced her brother to watch.42

Like beasts of prey the volunteers burst into the Jews’ homes, emptied the houses and shops of everything, raped young girls of four and five, and tortured to death every Jew who fell in their hands. Two little girls, the granddaughters of old Ronin, one of them four and the other five, were raped. One died as direct result of the rape; as for the other, after they were done raping her the thugs stripped her of her clothes and displayed her naked out of doors on a winter night, until she froze to death.43

There are also many accounts of the abuse and murder of pregnant women. Although there is no way to quantify this phenomenon or estimate its dimensions, it was written up in the press of the time and included in the testimony of survivors. For example, according to an account in *Hazeman*, published shortly after the Odessa pogroms: ‘On Pedikhorovsky Street the hooligans tried to rape a Jewish girl. They stripped of her clothes and chemise, but the naked girl got away. The poor thing ran through the street with nothing on. … The girl reached the hospital, where she fell, covered with blood.’44 According to another report:

Details of the pogromists’ appalling brutality are slowly becoming clear. … One orderly recounted that on Radislavkaya street the rioters killed a pregnant woman who was about to give birth. Only the infant’s head had emerged from the mother’s body and the villains killed both the mother and child. In the same lying-in hospital, they killed the midwife and a woman. … On Hafdekhovoit Street the sadists burst into one of the maternity hospitals and tried to rape a woman who was lying there, wearing only her chemise. She got away from the hooligans and ran outdoors naked, where, exhausted, she fainted on the hospital steps.45

In a letter to Israel Zangwill, Rabbi Moshe Rosenblatt described a similar scene in Kiev.
We record these events for you not with ink, but with blood and tears. Our hand trembles and our eyes weep. … There is great wailing in the streets of Kiev – the soldiers, Cossacks, and police are slaying our brothers and sisters, in company with the hooligans, and there is no one to protect them. The self-defense units have given up and cannot withstand the trained soldiers! Kiev is deafened by the loud cries in the streets, the wailing in the houses, the cellars, the attics, and the caves, the shrieks of children and infants, the voices of women falling in a faint, the moans of victims, and the shattered bones of old people thrown from the upper stories! Toddlers and infants are smashed and torn in half and thrown to the dogs! They rip open the bellies of pregnant women, sever the limbs of healthy men and tear their flesh with iron combs. If the heavens do not explode at the sound of these cries, they must be made of iron and brass! If the earth does not burst open at the sounds of the wailing, then the bloody land is a barren land full of hellfire.46

Rosenblatt’s excruciating descriptions leave little to the imagination. He depicts the murderous onslaught in the streets of Kiev, during which the rioters not only murdered Jews but also abused their victims and defiled the bodies of pregnant women. One might suspect Rosenthal of exaggerating in order to spur Zangwill to take action to rescue the Jews of Kiev, but similar accounts can be found in the contemporary press. In Odessa, ‘hooligans killed a pregnant indigent woman. After they had abused her in a very shameful way and after they had ravaged her home, they slit open her belly and yanked out the child.47 In his newspaper Hashkafah, Eliezer Ben Yehuda wrote that at the far end of Svitshana street in Kishinev, the pogromists grabbed ‘a pregnant woman, sat her on a chair, and struck her abdomen with an iron bar; on Kirovskaya Street they threw small children out of a second-story window. There were also many rapes of young girls who died in their assailants’ arms; there was even one girl who was torn in half.48

The reports in the Jewish periodicals, as noted, did not spare their readers the atrocities, and they were soon reprinted in other publications. For example, Alexander Siskind Rabinovitz (‘Azar’) wrote in 1920:

Between December 1918 and May 15, 1920, there were pogroms in a total of 568 localities, in which 138,000 people were killed. 200,000 were wounded and raped, and 120,000 were left orphans. Property worth billions was plundered. But it is not only the horrifying number of dead and wounded and women raped that makes one shudder, but also and especially the way the murderers abused the Jews, the terrible degradation and unimaginable humiliation. … They threw women from the fifth or sixth floor down to the cobblestones below. Many were raped. The howling of the ravished women spread through the entire city. From one courtyard came a shriek, and then a second courtyard responded, and so it continued, until the entire city was one vast outcry that terrified fear even on the enemies of Israel. … On June 9, 1919, a certain Christian farmer bought to the hospital in Uman the last two surviving Jews of Ladizhenko, two severely injured young women. One had had her nose cut off; the other’s arms had been broken. In addition to their external injuries, they needed to be treated for syphilis, with which they had been infected by the rapists.49

In volume 3 of Reshumot which was dedicated in its entirety to the pogroms in Ukraine, Alter Druyanow, the editor, wrote that he had received ‘several testimonies by women who had been raped.

Here, for example, is the final tally of a short report about when the ‘volunteers’ occupied Kremenchug: 21 women raped – one of them 11 years old, one of them 13 years old, one of them 15, one of them 17, three of them 18, two of them 19, one of them 21, one of them 24, one of them 27, two of them 28, one of them 32, one of them 42, one of them 44, and one of them 47 years old. The ages of the other three are unknown. Five were raped in front of their parents. Two were raped while pregnant. All these women (except for three) were gang-raped by two, three, four, seven, and even ten Cossacks, one after another. The 12-year-old girl, too, was violated by four Cossacks.50
These testimonies paint a gruesome picture of rape and of sadism directed against pregnant women. What they have in common is that they mainly convey information; there is no public dialogue about this sensitive issue. We learn nothing about how the women dealt with the trauma. How did Jewish society react to the mass violation of its women? What assistance did it provide to the victims? What implications did such a traumatic event have for Jewish society? And why did a pall of silence stifle the public discourse, leaving so few references to such an important matter? The clamor of the primary sources stands in stark contrast to the silence of the public discourse. In other words, we have primary sources describing the rape of women, but there is almost no public reference of the Jewish society to sexual violence during the pogroms.

The silence of the public discourse

This pall of silence is not unique to Jewish society. The twentieth century witnessed many campaigns of mass rape by the soldiers of conquering armies. It is estimated that Japanese troops raped 20,000 Chinese women in Nanjing and its environs in December 1937. Many of these women were then turned into sex slaves, while others were tortured and murdered. During and after the Second World War, Russian soldiers raped a million and a half German women; women were raped in the concentration camps and the military brothels established to satisfy the troops’ sexual needs. Vietnamese women were raped by American soldiers. Serbian fighters raped Bosnian women in the 1990s; in Rwanda, Hutu tribesman raped and murdered their Tutsi neighbors. In a historical perspective, there is no difference between the rapes of Jewish women during the Civil War in the Ukraine by soldiers of Deniken’s army and Petlyura’s forces and the other cases later in the twentieth century.

Until the civil war in Yugoslavia, wartime rape was not considered to be a war crime or a crime against humanity and did not fall under the jurisdiction of international tribunals. The international courts set up in Nuremberg and Tokyo after the Second World War rarely dealt with sexual violence and rape and the indictments against the war criminals did not include such offenses. In her book *War and Rape*, Nicola Henry lists a number of general statements that can be made about wartime rape: there is usually documentation of soldiers’ sexual abuse of women; in most cases the criminals are men and the victims are women, although there are exceptional cases of women who sexually abuse men. The rapists do not expect to be punished; even though they are documented, the rapes are generally shunted to the sidelines of the public discourse and rarely discussed.51

The mass violation of its women in wartime has far-reaching repercussions for the victimized society. It shatters the social fabric, rends the basic tissue of life, and destabilizes the community as an organic unit. The damage wreaked on the nuclear family and community is passed down from generation to generation and impedes recovery. Unlike war victims who must deal with their refugee status, economic hardship, cultural devastation, and death, rape victims must deal with the shame that attaches to their trauma.52 What is more, whereas refugees have social and sometimes international legitimacy to sue for damages, rape victims wrap themselves in silence and the topic is censored from the public agenda.

Researchers and jurists who studied the mass rapes of wartime and occupation note that the victims tend to remain silent because of their shame; the public discourse hardly considers what happened. There are diverse reasons for this. The rape of Jewish women by the pogromists had far-reaching social and moral implications and was part of a broader strategy
to attack the Jews, beyond the fact that they were a separate ethnic group in Ukraine. The murderers plundered, burned, and murdered, but the assault on the Jew could not be complete without the desecration of his wife and daughters, in both body and soul. These atrocious violations of the Jewish woman’s body and womb put the final touches on the murders’ work. The pogromists slaughtered Jews but also raped their women and contaminated them with their semen as a way of completing their mission of control and dispossession. By raping Jewish women, they sought not only to humiliate and shame their victims but also to redouble the pain of the Jewish men who had to stand by helplessly and watch their wives and daughters in their agony.

In addition, the sexual violence and rape were another way to make the Jews vanish from the cultural and human landscape of Russia. Jewish women were victimized twice over: as Jews but also as women, the symbol of national continuity and fertility. This is why they had to be attacked in their pregnant belly and womb. The Jews were perceived as enemies who must be eliminated from the cultural and human landscape of Ukraine; rape was not only an opportunity to satisfy one’s sexual urges but also an effective way of attacking the Jews. It was a way to eliminate an ethnic group; the assault on its women also targeted the men, who interpreted the situation as a symbol of their own vulnerability and defeat.

Another reason for the public silence, in addition to the shame and desecration of the Jewish woman’s honor, may be the halakhic corollaries of rape and the need to resolve them discreetly: the possibility of halakhic illegitimacy, unwanted pregnancies, venereal disease, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and children conceived ‘in sin.’ Although Jewish law does not consider a woman who was raped to be an adulteress, and she faces no sanctions, even coerced intercourse with a non-Jew renders her ineligible to marry a kohen, a member of the priestly caste. If she was already married to a kohen, he was required to divorce her. Given the scope of the phenomenon and the vast number of women who had been raped, these and many other issues posed difficulties for the community leaders and rabbis who had to deal with the halakhic and human problems that resulted. It was better to avoid a broad public discussion and to deal with the human problems without undo exposure, solving them quietly and far from the public eye.

One of the few public figures who drew public attention to how the rapes affected Jewish society was Joseph Schechtman. Born in Odessa in 1891, he was educated in Berlin and turned to a career in journalism and politics. When Ukraine declared its independence in 1917, Shohetman was elected the Zionist representative to the Ukrainian National Assembly. In an article published in 1923, ‘Anti-Semitism and Pogroms,’ he referred to the dimensions of the phenomenon and its implications:

Rape occupies a special place in the pogroms committed by the volunteer army. In no previous pogrom had women been raped in such large numbers and with such brutality. But there was not a single pogrom [in the Ukraine] in which the volunteer did not defile Jewish women. There are towns in which every woman, from youngest to oldest, was raped. Their age – venerable old woman or tender girl – did not deter the hooligans. In their coarse bestiality and utter immorality, some would rape a woman of 60 and then defile a girl of 10. There were cases where they raped mother, daughter, and granddaughter side by side. They raped them in front of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. … Many rapes were in broad daylight: several dozen soldiers and Cossacks molesting one woman, after which they might kill the poor woman, or else she died from the abuse or went mad. … According to the estimates we have, the number of rape victims exceeds 10,000. In Kremenchug alone, more than 350 women were raped; in Tolno, more than 200; in Korsun, about 150; in Dimer, more than 40. … In the Ukraine, the question of the thousands of rape victims has become a severe and painful national and psychological problem.53
Schechtman’s spotlight on the rapes during the Civil War was limited, but his reference to ‘a severe and painful national and psychological problem’ embodies the distress of Jewish society, which had to deal with the social implications not only during the pogroms but for years afterwards. An inkling of this problem can be found in the Secco’s ‘Falling Birds’ (quoted at the beginning of this article), when the women ask the non-Jewish physician to help them deal with the consequences of being raped.

The reason for public silence can be found in Sanyal’s observation on rape, which she defines as an act of destructive effect. Since sexuality is central to the way we think and understand identity. The body and, in particular the sexual organs are thought of a place of identity. The vagina is regarded as an essence, the place where female self is settled.

Rape is a ‘murder of the soul’ that harms the feminine identity and the essence of the victim’s existence as a human being. Its ramifications on the ethnic group are so great that any public debate in it may lead to social dilemmas that the ethnic group prefers to suppress in the collective consciousness.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the pogroms as experienced by the victims and from a gender perspective. Unlike many studies that focus on the pogroms’ causes and regional patterns and the extent to which the authorities were implicated in the murder of Jews, here it is the Jewish woman and her family that stand at the center of the discussion. The examination of gender issues associated with the bloody assaults on the Jews in Eastern Europe between 1903 and 1920 allows us to consider a number of issues that have been shunted to the margins of the public discourse and historiography. From survivors’ testimonies, contemporary newspaper reports, and other material published shortly after the pogroms we learn that the pogromists were not satisfied with plundering and murdering Jews, but also raped and tortured Jewish women. Such incidents were a feature of every pogrom in those years and reached their zenith during the Civil War in the Ukraine.

Rape was the last stage in the pogromists’ campaign to dispossess the Jews. This final injury and humiliation made the assault on the Jews that more terrible. A plundered business could be reopened and a vandalized house could be rebuilt; but rape left behind a profound trauma that could never be repaired. It was an open wound that shattered the family cell and continued to bleed for long years to come. This may be why we have no testimonies of how the women and their families dealt with it and whether they were able to reconstruct their lives and that of their family.

As is evident from this article, there are sufficient primary sources for a historian to study the pogroms from the perspective of the victim and understand what they thought and felt during the events themselves. The focus on the murder victims and their family (and not on the murderer) is important not only because it places them at the center of the historical discourse, but also because it can shed light on the criminals’ intentions and motives. The systematic rape of Jewish women, the sexual abuse, and the multiple attacks on pregnant women indicate the depth of the hatred for the Jews and the fierce desire to make them vanish from the human and cultural landscape of Eastern European society.

Because of the thunderous silence that marks the public reaction, it is difficult to reach any conclusions about how Jewish society coped with this complex and sensitive issue. It
would seem, however, that the time has come to direct historians’ attention not only to the pogroms themselves, but also to the day after and to Jewish society’s ability to recover after such a traumatic event.

Notes

1. Lamed (Levi Yehoshua) Shapiro (1878–1948) was a tragic figure who spent most of his life as a nomad. Born in the Ukraine, he moved to Warsaw at age 18 to try his luck as a writer. He lived in abject poverty and only later began to acquire a name as an author. After immigrating to the United State in 1905 he tried to support himself in various ways. He opened restaurants, but they failed. He spent many years on his own invention, a method for color photography. His wife died young and they had no children. In the last 20 years of his life he was an alcoholic and hardly functioned. When he died in 1948 he was living in a garage that belonged to a friend in Los Angeles. The Hebrew writer and playwright Levi Aryeh Arieli (Orloff) (1886–1943) was born in the Ukraine and immigrated to Palestine in 1909. He published his stories in the Hebrew press there. In 1923 he moved to the United States, where he was a teacher in St. Louis and other cities. Later he received an appointment as an instructor in literature at the Teacher’s Seminary affiliated with the Yitzhak Elhanan Yeshiva and the Seminary for Hebrew Teachers in New York. Meir (Smilansky) Secco (1876–1949) is another long-forgotten Hebrew author whose literary activity covered four decades. He published many stories in the Hebrew periodicals Hashiloah and Hapo’el Hatzair.

2. On Kishinev pogrom as seminal event on the Jewish people in the twentieth century, see Steven Zipperstein’s lecture: “Rethinking Kishinev: How a Riot Changed twentieth Century Jewish History,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJNLiQwzgs0


7. Ibid.

8. Testimonies of Victims of the 1903 Kishinev Pogrom, as written down by Ch. N. Bialik and Others, ed. Yaakov Goren (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame’uhad, 1991) (Hebrew).


11. On Elias Heifetz and his committee, see Elias Heifetz, The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919 (New York, 1921). The present article relies only on the testimony collected by Rosenthal that are compatible with those collected by the All-Ukrainian Committee.


13. See Klier and Lambroza, Pogroms, 228.


20. See David Horowitz, *Der blutiger pogrom in Odessa* [The Bloody Pogrom in Odessa] (Odessa: 1906), 13–16.


25. Ibid., letter lamed.


29. See: Samuel Moskovitz to the National Committee for the Relief of Sufferers by Russian Massacres, January 9, 1906, and the consul’s reply, January 27, 1906, American Jewish Historical Society, I-5, Box 2, Folder 2.


32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. *Die Judenpogrome in Russland* (Cologne, 1910), 319.

35. Ibid., 155.

36. Ibid., 186.

37. Ibid., 455.


39. Ibid., letter nun.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., letter aleph.

42. Ibid., letter yod.


45. Ibid.

46. Moshe Rosenblatt to Israel Zangwill, November. 6, 1905, CZA, A36/53b, 1.

47. See note 44.


51. See Nicola Henry, War and Rape: Law, Memory and Justice (London: Routledge, 2010), 4–5.
52. Ibid.

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Notes on contributor

Gur Alroey is a Professor in the Department of Israel Studies at the University of Haifa. He published five books on Jewish migration in the late 19th century and early twentieth century and on the Territorial ideology. Also published many articles in the leading journal of the field dealing with various aspects of his research interests. His new book Zionism without Zion: The Jewish Territorialism Organization (JTO) and the Zionist movement, was recently published at Wayne State University Press.