Over the course of a few abnormally warm April days in 1903, the residents of Kishinev (now Chisinau, Moldova) perpetrated one of the most infamous pogroms in global Jewish memory. Steven J. Zipperstein presents a comprehensive and engaging survey of this pogrom and its complicated afterlife in *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History*. By early 1903, as Edward A. Judge argues of Kishinev, these pogroms had a basic anatomy.[1] Kishinev’s timing, circumstances, and progression mirrored that of those that reverberated throughout the Russian Empire in the decades leading up to and following 1903. As Gentiles prepared to celebrate Easter and Jews planned for Pesach, rumors of ritual murders swirled in conversations, pamphlets, classrooms, and the headlines of newspapers, like the Kishinev-based *Bessarabets*. A small group of children and teens started throwing stones at Jewish businesses near the center. Older residents and seminary students joined in, progressing to the plunder of liquor, tobacco, and other material goods. In a drunken revel-like state, they publicly raped women and extorted and beat Jewish merchants and shopkeepers. Things seemed to calm down, as news of the day’s mayhem slowly spread to Lower Kishinev, where most of the city’s Jews actually lived. The next day, large swaths of the city joined in, moving from building to building and block to block. Ransacking devolved into humiliation, abuse, serial rape, and ultimately murder.

How is it that the site of this seemingly formulaic pogrom came to occupy such a unique space in Jewish memory? News of the pogrom, sometimes exaggerated or falsified, rapidly spread across the Atlantic. Stories of the heroic rabbi Moshe Kigel shielding Torah scrolls from the onslaught until his last breath; allegations that a tsarist official, Vyacheslav von Plehve, issued a letter warning police against intervention on behalf of Jews; and depictions of Jewish male cowardice inundated readers. Zipperstein demonstrates that Kigel’s death was embellished, the Plehve letter was a forgery, and a large group of Jews staged a valiant self-defense effort in Kishinev. He argues that these stories amalgamated with other instances of Jewish and non-Jewish suffering in the Russian Empire and abroad, as the pogrom both predated and outlived its occurrence, becoming reimagined, used and abused across space and time. A canon of Jewish victims and tsarist/Russian killers emerged, entering into Jewish and non-Jewish vernaculars alike. For those who fled the Pale in the 1880s, often from sites unaffected by the rash of pogroms that raged through South Russia at that time, Kishinev became a stand-in for the violence they cited as a catalyst for emigration. The Plehve forgery validated claims that the Russian Empire plotted against them. A few years later, the bloody wave of pogroms of 1905 would be read and projected backward onto Kishinev. Prior to the Holocaust, Kishinev had become so entrenched in diasporic and public memory that “no place-name evoked Jewish suffering more starkly”; it became a synonym for Jewish suffering (p. xiii).

Writing to both contemporary Jewish and academic audiences, Zipperstein aims to “defamiliarize a familiar story”—that of Kishinev, anti-Jewish violence, and Jewish life in the Russian Empire as told and retold across borders and generations (p. xiv). He parses out myth and memory, firmly rooting the Kishinev Pogrom in its own place and time while simultaneously tracing long-lasting effects on global Jewish memory, anti-Semitism, and social movements. To do this, he breaks the book into
six “essay-like” chapters. As if peering through the lens of a kaleidoscope, Zipperstein takes readers through the same moment(s) to the same place(s) with the same people repetitively, turning the lens ever so slightly to illuminate a new, yet still connected, narrative and argument each time. He pens each chapter episodically, in easy-to-digest, potentially stand-alone bytes. This methodology augments Zipperstein’s overarching claims concerning Kishinev’s role, real and imagined, in Jewish diasporic development and a collective memory rooted in mutual suffering. It makes the book more accessible to readers with limited blocks of time, easily understood in five-minute subway rides. Yet, the first and last chapters bow under the weight of their dual roles, as introduction, conclusion, and stand-alone essays. Zipperstein’s enthralling episodes often leave the reader to perform much of the analytical work. Perhaps there is a subtle brilliance to this. It leaves popular audiences a sense of investment in and satisfaction with the argument’s outcome, as if they came to it all on their own.

Throughout the text, Zipperstein engages some of the most pervasive myths concerning anti-Jewish violence, and propaganda in the Russia Empire, from exposing the Plehve forgery and countering assertions of a tsarist “conspiracy theory” to challenging the origins of the most pervasive piece of anti-Semitic propaganda to date, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.*[2] As opposed to propagating stories of clandestine meetings, where tsarist secret police huddled over drafts of the *Protocols,* Zipperstein roots them in Kishinev. Paul Krushevan grew up in Kishinev, with Jewish neighbors and schoolmates, prior to a short stint in the nearby city of Odessa (now Odessa), where more than a third of the city’s population was Jewish. He formed and developed his anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist sentiments here, at the geographic periphery of empire and in the heart of eastern European Jewry. For years, prior to going bankrupt, he owned the Kishinev-based *Bessarabets* newspaper, the pages of which he populated with anti-Semitic drivel. His salacious rhetoric inspired Kishinev’s Gentiles’ distrust of their Jewish neighbors, long before they took to the streets armed with clubs, crowbars, rocks, and unchecked masculinity. Fleeing his financial failures, Krushevan set up shop in St. Petersburg, where he set to work on the *Protocols.* As the *Bessarabets* did in Kishinev, Krushevan’s mostly plagiarized *Protocols* would inspire anti-Jewish sentiments and violence across the globe.

Zipperstein also treats two well-known publications detailing the pogrom—Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s “In the City of Killing” (1904) and Michael Davitt’s *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecutions in Russia* (1903). Oscillating between their biographies and literary products, Zipperstein underscores the impact of their own political evolutions on both publications, from Davitt’s Irish anti-imperialism, to Bialik’s budding Zionism. Both men conducted substantial interviews and observations in the wake of the pogrom with the intent of producing publishable reports. Bialik, instead, penned an emotionally charged poem. Zipperstein highlights the reoccurring theme of Jewish male cowardice, in response to violence and rape, throughout Bialik’s prose. While Davitt made similar comments in his personal notes, he excluded them from print. Zipperstein insightfully chalks this difference up to Bialik’s Zionist ambitions and emotional investment in anti-Jewish violence; his overstatement of Jewish male cowardice signified his goal of shocking Jews out of their perceived passivity and into national political action. However, alongside his analysis of Bialik’s critique of Jewish men, Zipperstein habitually refers back to rape victims, whom he treats more extensively in prior chapters. Overwhelmingly, he writes these women in as passive actors, raped by Gentiles, and spurned by their husbands and potential suitors after. Men rape them and men, like Bialik and Davitt, collect and tell their stories after. Zipperstein’s treatment of men and women, and sexual violence in particular, would have benefited from the sizable body of gender theory scholarship, including works that specifically engage the relationship between violence and gender—pogrom and rape—in Kishinev and elsewhere.[3]

This book is clearly the product of decades or more of research and thought. Zipperstein’s primary and secondary source selection underscores a preexisting wealth of experience working, thinking, and writing in and about Jewish life in the region. Researching in English, Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish, and German, Zipperstein astutely leverages and synthesizes an unwieldy, multilingual body of scholarship in service of his overarching assertions. He builds upon this historiographical scaffolding with archival materials from Israel, Russia, Moldova, the United States, and Ireland, including interviews collected during the weeks and months following the pogrom, journalistic accounts, travel guides, maps, weather reports, literature, and poetry. Notably, Zipperstein utilizes a previously unexamined cache of Pavel Krushevan’s personal papers, which he serendipitously located in the personal holdings of Mikhail Khazin, a journalist with links to the region and an odd fascination with Krushevan. Khazin acquired the collection from Krushevan’s nephew, who was in an insane asylum.
suffering from “hereditary insanity,” and brought them to the United States (p. 151). Zipperstein recently facilitated the Hoover archive’s acquisition of the collection.

Zipperstein demonstrates how the examination of a singular event can unearth the complexities of a moment, a place, and the event’s aftershock and afterlife. The linguistic variety and structural depth of his sources substantiate the network of historiographically poignant arguments he references throughout the text. Somehow, he manages to situate this all within a clear, poetically written, accessible, and succinct text—consumable by popular and academic audiences alike. A true exemplar of the historian’s craft, any historian seeking to sharpen their skills could glean lessons from this text. More specifically, those interested in the Russian Empire, Jewish life and death in the imperial borderlands, the rise of global anti-Semitism, the Jewish diaspora, the relationship between violence and memory, Jewish-African American relations, the NAACP, and lynching in America should read Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History. Additionally, this book would be a worthwhile addition, in whole or in part, to both undergraduate and graduate courses addressing the aforementioned topics and should be considered for courses on historical research and writing methodologies.

Notes


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