

Author's Statement: For this essay I was asked to examine the gendered contexts behind an important cultural, social, or political event. I analyzed the pogroms that took place in the Pale of Settlement and more specifically, the rape of Jewish women that occurred within them. Due to a dearth of research surrounding this phenomenon, I leaned not only on more conventional materials for analysis, but also on common themes in the literature of the time that dealt with the Jewish communities of Tsarist Russia. In this essay I argue that Jewish women were viewed by both Pogromists (perpetrators of the pogroms) and Jewish men as a gendered component of the Jewish community who represented Jewish culture in the same way a cultural artifact might, and that this lack of agency given to the Jewish woman meant that her rape was not her 'own' but instead placed within the ownership of the Jewish man, leading to a lack of avenues for Jewish women to find treatment for their trauma.

### Symbols but Not People: An Examination of Mass-Rape in the Pale of Settlement

Between 1791 and 1917, an incalculable number of Jewish women were raped during “pogroms”—massacres of Jewish populations in Tsarist Russia instigated by local Russian Orthodox peasants, military, and police.<sup>1</sup> Many women were tortured or killed immediately after being violated, and those who lived experienced venereal disease, pregnancy, and trauma, with suicide a common outcome for many.<sup>2</sup> But along with the initial humiliation of rape, Jewish women also experienced another kind of degradation. To both their own communities and their oppressors, Jewish women were seen less as recognized actors within the context of their persecution but more so as a kind of gendered arm of the Jewish people, whose center was the

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<sup>1</sup> Gur Alroey, “Sexual Violence, Rape, and Pogroms, 1903–1920,” *Jewish Culture and History* 18, no. 3 (August 3, 2017): 313–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169x.2017.1360594>.

<sup>2</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

Jewish man. Thus, their rape was recognized by neither their torturers nor their families as their own, but was instead viewed as a symbolic punishment against Jewish men. This ‘secondary humiliation’ made it especially difficult for Jewish women to have their trauma validated and centered by the wider Jewish community.

In 1791, Catherine II, the Empress of Russia at the time, restricted Jewish populations to a landmass called the Pale of Settlement in a series of attempts to incentivize Jewish citizens to convert to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Pale, comprising modern-day Belarus, Moldova and Lithuania, along with much of Poland and Ukraine, was essentially the only place in the Empire where Jewish people were allowed to live, and at its peak, it housed forty percent of the global Jewish population.<sup>3</sup> While life in the Pale was diverse and varied as attitudes towards Jews changed over the its 126-year existence, the majority of Jewish citizens experienced severe economic hardship due to the common practice of employment discrimination and isolation from non-Jewish communities, as most Jewish people only spoke Yiddish, not Russian or other Slavic languages.<sup>4</sup> Stereotypes about Jewish people were easy to spread due to their perceived status as an isolated minority group who carried with them centuries of myths about their supposed financial and political power.<sup>5</sup> Thus, false generalizations and beliefs about Jews created a perfect environment for violence that led to the instigation of over one-thousand pogroms throughout the duration of the Pale’s existence.<sup>6</sup>

A defining tactic of mass rape during the pogroms was the practice of making Jewish men watch their female relatives be violated by Pogromists. In one particularly brutal case, a

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<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Deutsch and S An-Ski, *The Jewish Dark Continent* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Ande Manners, *Poor Cousins* (Putnam Pub Group, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*(Harper & Row, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

group of Pogromists forced a Jewish man to join a thirteen-person gang rape of his wife.<sup>7</sup> Multiple accounts of pogroms describe girls as young as ten being undressed and raped with their fathers and grandfathers pinned to the ground, held at gunpoint and forced to watch. Obviously, to be violated in front of one's own family is incredibly dehumanizing, but the Pogromists centered their punishment not around the women they were violating, but around the men they were forcing to witness such acts. This idea is supported by oft-used plots in pre-Revolutionary Russian literature. An incredibly common trope in Tsarist Russian fiction tells the story of a Jewish father who is incredibly overprotective of his daughter and keeps her from being with non-Jewish suitors. This father character embodies every stereotypical Jewish trait (rich, weak, ugly, manipulative) but his daughter holds an intense, exotic beauty not found in other Russian women. This daughter wants to be with a Gentile, but her father won't let her marry a non-Jew, so the daughter cuts ties with her family to be with the righteous Gentile man.<sup>8</sup> The Gentile conquers the Jewish father-figure through the capture of 'his' woman, and the Jewish woman is rendered a mere trophy representing the Gentile's victory. With this added context, the rape of Jewish women in front of their male relatives acts as a manifestation of these tropes— a taking of revenge against the Jewish father and grandfather for not giving his women to the Gentiles. Thus, the Jewish woman is objectified in the sense that the Pogromists do not see her rape as a harm being inflicted against her, but instead as a punishment geared towards the men who possess her.

The idea of the Jewish woman being the possession of or acting as a symbol for the Jewish man can be expanded beyond the family unit and into the political realm. Many

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<sup>7</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Christopher John Tooke, "The Representation of Jewish Women in Pre-Revolutionary Russian Literature" (Dissertation, University College London, 2011).

Pogromists believed myths about Jewish people either being all Bolsheveiks or being all Capitalists (which one depended on the political affiliation of the individual Pogromist).<sup>9</sup> In one case, a Cossack General argued with a delegation of Jews who were trying to stop an upcoming pogrom. The General claimed that the rape of young Jewish girls represented a necessary victory over the incoming force of Communism, and the Jewish delegation declared his point void because young Jewish girls did not have the social power to create real political change. To this the General responded that his soldiers were “good looters” who “needed to unwind”, implying that the Jewish women were the property (or “loot”) of the all-male delegation, and then he said they would stop the pogrom “if you all just killed Trotsky.”<sup>10</sup> To the General, the rape of young girls constituted a representative act fired against the wider Jewish community. The girls were not seen as people, but instead as “loot”— cultural objects to be stolen from the actual holders of the culture (the men) in the same way a menorah or mezuzah might be. The girls were essentially held in ransom with an ultimatum that the only way the violence against women would stop would be if the Jewish community assassinated one of the most influential men in Russia, an impossible task that was believed to be within their power due to false stereotypes about the political positioning of Jews. This extended the idea of Jewish women as a symbol for Jews into a political framework, including it within other stereotypes about the relationships between Jews, money, and power.

Another aspect of the Jewish women’s secondary humiliation comes into view when considering the trope of the Jewish man not appreciating the Jewish woman’s beauty. A standard narrative in pre-Revolutionary Russian literature speaks of the exotic beauty of Jewish women

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<sup>9</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

and the attraction Gentile men have towards them.<sup>11</sup> The myth of Jewish women's allure was inexorably tied to beliefs about their male counterparts, as a prevailing myth of the time was that Jewish men were punished with ugliness as retribution for killing Jesus, and that Jewish women were blessed with a singular and inimitable beauty for not having any role in the death of the Christian Savior. Since Jewish men were punished with ugliness, they could not comprehend the beauty of their women.<sup>12</sup> This expands the trope of the Jewish father withholding his daughter from the Gentiles to include a belief that Jewish women's beauty was for Gentiles to appreciate, and that the Jewish man becomes lesser because he does not cherish this blessing. In a short story called "Zydivka" (which literally translates to "Kike Girl"), a character called Petro rants about this topic, claiming:

"Poor, pathetic people! Your whole glory lies in money, your whole life in profit! You cannot see the fire that blazes in the eyes of your Jewish women, the wellspring of life that beats in their high breasts. . . You do not live the life of humans. Money is your life, your thoughts, your dreams, joys and sorrows, love, will—everything! A small coin elicits an envious fire in your eyes, while a gold coin captures your whole heart, your whole soul with a hellish, heavy yearning and draws you into the depths, in the same way as our people are seduced by the bright eyes of a woman."<sup>13</sup>

From the Gentile perspective, the Jewish man is a megalomaniac who does not have the more 'human' and thus more superior desire for women. The Gentile is more righteous and more deserving of Jewish women because of his appreciation for her. His "weakness" for Jewish women provides an added context to the mass-rape of Jewish women, and the idea that the

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher John Tooke, "The Representation of Jewish Women in Pre-Revolutionary Russian Literature" (Dissertation, University College London, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Ulrike Brunotte, "The Beautiful Jewess as Borderline Figure in Europe's Internal Colonialism: Some Remarks on the Intertwining of Orientalism and Antisemitism," *ReOrient* 4, no. 2 (April 1, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.13169/reorient.4.2.0166>.

<sup>13</sup> Myroslav Shkandrij, "Constructing Jewish Identity in Ukrainian Literature, 1914–1929," Jstor (Yale University Press, 2009), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npc34.1>.

Jewish man does not “appreciate” Jewish women provides an added context for whom the punishment of rape truly centered.<sup>14</sup>

The Jewish community perpetuated the belief that Jewish women were not real members of the Jewish people, but instead representatives of it, and this left devastating repercussions for rape victims. Misogyny was embedded in Jewish culture in the Pale, and the idea of the Jewish woman as being merely a symbol or gendered aspect of the Jewish people was maintained not just by their oppressors, but by Jewish citizens as well. Most Jewish women were not allowed to study the Torah like Jewish men were, robbing them of the intellectual complexities of their culture and making it so that the only way a Jewish woman could be respected by her neighbors was by becoming the perfect representative of her community, becoming a wife and mother who follows Jewish law to a tee without being allowed to dissect or examine such laws like her male relatives.<sup>15</sup> Just as the Pogromists saw the Jewish woman not as an actual Jew, but as a symbol for the Jewish people, the male-dominated Jewish culture of the time forced women into this role of representative, not actor, through its own misogynistic practices. Such a patriarchal culture could not possibly respond well to an epidemic of rape amongst its female population. While a victim of rape was not considered to be in a position as lowly as that of an adultress in the eyes of Jewish law, she still did not have the full rights that a woman who only had sex with her husband possessed. To have sex with a man who was not her husband made a woman seem tainted by the Jewish community, even if the sex was without her consent.<sup>16</sup> This meant that many women denied being raped to their communities while at the same time going on perilous,

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Lestschinsky, “The Anti-Jewish Program: Tsarist Russia, the Third Reich and Independent Poland,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 2 (1941): 141–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4464396>.

<sup>15</sup> John Doyle Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Gur Alroey, “Sexual Violence, Rape, and Pogroms, 1903–1920,” *Jewish Culture and History* 18, no. 3 (August 3, 2017): 313–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169x.2017.1360594>.

secret trips to condescending, oftentimes antisemitic doctors to obtain treatment for venereal diseases or to get dangerous and illegal abortions.<sup>17</sup>

When women did admit to being raped, they were offered very little support by the Jewish community. One of the only avenues for a woman to tell her story was when asked about her ordeal during anthropological questionnaires. Such polls were asked by inspectors sent by various groups dedicated to pogrom relief. Of the many questionnaires sent out to Jewish communities, the only question consistently asked to women was whether or not the woman had received a secular education.<sup>18</sup> This question served a political purpose. At the time, there was a debate within the Eastern European Jewish community between two distinct ideologies: *Hasidism* and *Haskalah*. Followers of *Hasidism* desired a strict, somewhat archaic deference to Jewish biblical law. In their perfect world, Jewish women would not receive formal education, and Yiddish would be the only language spoken by Jews. Followers of *Haskalah* (Hebrew for “Enlightenment”) wanted to bring Jewish life into the modern world, forming a secular version of Jewish culture that allowed for more than one language to be spoken, and for women to be educated.<sup>19</sup> The main players of both movements were men, and so were most of the inspectors, who were more likely to be wannabe politicians of *Haskalah* than to be neutral knowledge-takers or counselors.<sup>20</sup> Because the questions asked to women were more likely to concern male-dominated political ideologies rather than their actual experiences, contemporary scholars now lack a statistical understanding of mass-rape in the Pale. Pretty much the only complete

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<sup>17</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Banbaji, “The Broken Promise of Transcendence: A New Reading of the Haskalah Allegory,” *Prooftexts* 31, no. 3 (2011): 143, <https://doi.org/10.2979/prooftexts.31.3.143>.

<sup>20</sup> Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe, 2018).

narratives in existence come from a series of testimonies that arose from a historiographical group formed during the Kishinev Pogrom that had more expansive and consistent questions to ask of the women, but even within that exception, the testimonies of women who were raped were not released until an expanded edition was published in 1991, almost a quarter of a century after the fall of Tsarist Russia.<sup>21</sup> The centering of men in collective Jewish identity meant that even within the contexts of the community, women were rarely able to seek proper treatment for the consequences of rape.

As is with many imperialized women around the world, Jewish women in the Pale of Settlement “stood as symbols of [their] race,” instead of being treated as active community-members by the Jewish community, or as being seen as something more than just a gendered component of the Jewish world by the Slavs. However, unlike depictions of non-white women in the colonized world, Jewish women were not viewed as beautiful or exotic in order to justify their rape or to support a construction of an ideal white woman.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the trope of Jewish women as beautiful was tied to stories about evil, ugly Jewish men, so the rape of a woman in the Pale was not ‘hers’ per say, but instead a punishment geared towards Jewish manhood. This rendered Jewish women invisible twice over— first in the sense that their humanity was ignored by their rapists, and second in the sense that these violations occurred more with their male counterparts in mind than with themselves. Then, once the pogrom was over they went back to husbands, fathers, sons and brothers, all of whom experienced an unimaginable trauma by way of their witness, but who still enforced the idea that Jewish women served more as pawns for their peoplehood than as members of their community. The patriarchal culture looked down upon

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<sup>21</sup> Gur Alroey, “Sexual Violence, Rape, and Pogroms, 1903–1920,” *Jewish Culture and History* 18, no. 3 (August 3, 2017): 313–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169x.2017.1360594>.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (Routledge, 2004).

the raped women and asked them cold political questions instead of offering them spaces to heal, leaving many of the Jewish women on their own to grapple with disease, pregnancy, and trauma. Thus, Jewish women in the Pale were forced to repeat a story told by marginalized women around the world— that of being invisibilized by both their oppressors and by their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.

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