

A Loud Echo. 115 Years Since the Pogrom of Chisinau
By Greta Ionkis - April 8, 2018

Translation by Yefim Kogan and Ala Gamulka; edited by Gloria Green

The prologue to the Holocaust, experienced by the people of the Book in the last century, was the Jewish pogroms in Russia at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. The twentieth century is now gone, and we have entered a new millennium. However, the memory of the Chisinau pogrom that occurred on the Easter days of 1903 is alive. Both in Tsarist, and the former Soviet Russia, they wanted to kill this memory. Leo Tolstoy, professors of Moscow University V.I. Vernadsky and S.N. Trubetskoi, along with other figures of Russian science and culture (over 300 signatures were collected under their appeals), indignantly accused the ruling elite of connivance with bloody villainy, their voices trying to drown them out. The hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, John of Kronstadtkiy, and Bishop Antony of Zhitomir turned to the flock with the condemnation of the thugs, but the pamphlets with their sermons were confiscated by the Chisinau authorities. The trial (November 1903) of the pogrom case was closed and under orders of the Minister of the Interior, Plehve, was not covered in the press. Newspapers that violated the ban were strictly warned.



"Help". A compendium for the victims of the Chisinau pogrom. 1903 Title page with engraving and dedication: "Killed in Chisinau". The artist E.-M. Lillien

Verbatim reports on the trial were published in the foreign press; they were put together by lawyers and close relatives of the victims. It is worth noting that the first small book, "*Chisinau Pogrom, Collection of*

Documents and Materials,” appeared in 1903 in Stuttgart—not in Russia. It was published through the efforts of the former “legal Marxist” P. Struve. Prince S. Urusov, appointed after the pogrom to be the Governor of Bessarabia, was present at the trial. He writes in his memoirs “Essays on the Past” that the words “Chisinau pogrom” did not disappear from the pages of newspapers and were repeated everywhere as a reminder, then as a warning. However, he had in mind the domestic and not the foreign press. Before the inhabitants of the West learned the Russian word “Sputnik,” they had included the word “pogrom” in their lexicon.

In 1911, the poem “*Poems and Poems*” by Haim Nahman Bialik appeared in Russian in the translations by Ze’ev Jagodzinski, in “*Legend of the Pogrom*.” (H.N. Bialik, “The City of Slaughter” <http://faculty.history.umd.edu/BCooperman/NewCity/Slaughter.html>)

The “Legend” had a great resonance. However, the First World War and the revolution pushed back the events of 1903 in Chisinau. True, in revolutionary Petrograd in 1919, the first volume of “Materials on the History of Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia” was published. However, the second volume never came out. Meanwhile, during the Civil War, Ukrainian Jews suffered even worse pogroms. In Chisinau, in 1930—when it was part of Romania—there was a book by Dr. M. B. Slutsky, [head physician of the Jewish Hospital in Kishinev] and an eyewitness to the events, entitled “*In Sorrowful Days. Kishinev pogrom in 1903*.” Then came the era of long silence, followed by the Holocaust.

During the period of perestroika and glasnost, Chisinau historians turned to the previously forbidden topic. As a result, the archives “talked”—all these clippings, books, brochures, pages of the case. In April 1993, a scientific conference was held in Chisinau, the materials for which—“*Chisinau Pogrom*,” a compilation of articles—was published with the help of the Joint. Two years earlier, a thoroughly documented book, *The Bloody Roundabout*, by Semen Reznik, was published in Moscow. At the center of the book are two figures: the publisher of the newspaper *Bessarabets*, extreme reactionary, chauvinist, monarchist Pavel Krushevan, the main ideological inspirer of the pogrom; and his opponent, the writer Vladimir Korolenko, the more famous, whom we would now call a human rights activist.

Nowadays, when the interest in documentary literature is very high, it might be worthwhile to speak about these works, where even the figures cause horror: 49 killed, 586 wounded, more than 1,500 Jewish homes destroyed ... However, I prefer the facts of history embodied in works of art and that is why I prefer to address them.

Korolenko and Bialik arrived in Chisinau almost simultaneously, immediately after the pogrom. The first—from St. Petersburg, on the instructions of “Russian Wealth,” the second—from Odessa, on behalf of the Jewish Historical Society, whose chairman was a prominent historian—Shimon Dubnov. Korolenko, for two weeks, examined the sites of the monstrous events, where the traces of outrage had not yet been erased. He went to the dilapidated houses, talked with the surviving inhabitants (in particular, with the residents of house No. 13 on Asiatskaya Street), visited the hospitals, interviewed the wounded. He called his essay “House No. 13” without specifying the street and thereby emphasizing the generalized meaning of the picture: after all, there was a house No. 13 on every street where the same thing happened or could happen.

“The house is dead: he looks with empty eye sockets as broken windows and frames hang, like broken hands. The yard is covered with down, dotted with glass shards, fragments of furniture, scraps of clothing. The sensation is as if the evil, savage bitterness has not as yet subsided.”

Korolenko did not see how the residents of house number 13 were killed, but he spoke with a lot of witnesses, including a little girl who saw everything. He transmits her story, and it is as if at that moment the dull voice of an ever-frightened, dying child is heard. The story makes an impression deeper than the most violent philippics against bandits.

What happened in Chisinau, by its nature, is contrary to human nature. Korolenko is tormented by the questions which he puts before the reader: how does one become an animal? Who is to blame for this?

Why is the crowd of Christian inhabitants giggling as they watch gangsters chase two defenseless old men and a girl on the roof, while those who fall down die? Who destroyed the humanity in these people? Korolenko was not only indignant, he was ashamed, he was ashamed of the Russian Orthodox.



The same feelings—anger and shame—repeatedly amplified (furious anger and burning shame), permeate Bialik's poem "*The Legend of the Pogrom*." At first Bialik was going to write a chronicle. He kept a diary, wrote six notebooks, took 60 photographs, gathered a lot of evidence about the inflammatory role of the press in Chisinau on the eve of the pogrom. However, he did not write any chronicles. Instead, the artist in him began to speak, and he created a poem that brought him worldwide recognition. The materials of his archive, 85 years on the shelves, were finally published in Israel through the efforts of Dr. Jacob Goren.

"Legend of the Pogrom" is a work of great artistic power. Despite its small size, (Gorky, who considered Bialik a genius poet, generally called it a poem), the poem has both depth and scale. Springtime Chisinau of those terrible three days (the scent of blossoming acacias, the blinding southern sun, playing on splinters of broken glass, the fluff of pillows lying on yards and streets, the ruined, looted houses, the dusty attic, the ice cellar, where women were raped, the bloodied coachmen's barn) is raised to the height of symbolism and to some extent is devoid of signs of a specific historical time. Of course, Bialik describes exactly what happened in these black times for the Chisinau Jews, and he recreates the exact details of the pogrom of 1903 ("splattered on tree trunks, stones and fences / Chilled brain and blood clots"; "Stuffed with fluff from the ripped featherbed / Stripped belly—and a nail in the live nostril"), but at the same time he is talking about something more than the brutality of the thugs and the torments of their victims.

Bialik follows the Biblical tradition. It is not by chance that Gorky saw in the poem the complaints of the long-suffering Job, the fearsome voice of the prophet Isaiah. "The Legend of the Pogrom" -is a monologue of G-d, addressed to the Poet as an intermediary between Him and His people. And this fills the text with biblical prophetic pathos, gives it real power.

The plot of the poem is a journey through the "city of massacres." G-d himself leads the poet and demands that he see everything, remember everything. Involuntarily, Pushkin's memory comes to mind:

“Arise, prophet, and see, and listen, be fulfilled by my will.” “Stand up and walk through the city of massacre”—commanded the Lord to his companion Bialik. And further:

“Go on. Scramble to the roof of the attic: The darkness is still saturated with the shadow of death... And look you into the ice cellar, Where the whole herd, in the darkness of the damp vault, Shamed the wives of your people. Seven heathens flung one woman down. Look at the barn in the country outside the garden—Come in there. You are in the temple of massacre.”

Nevertheless, the poem evoked complex, conflicting feelings among the Jews, for it was not only a requiem for innocently murdered people, but also a passionate accusation of Jewry. Not that the Jews gave rise to the pogrom, as the defenders of the assassins claimed at the trial. No, G-d did not count such sin for his people. He blamed the Jews for forgetting their heroic history, changing the traditions of their great ancestors, failing to meet death with dignity, not defending the honor of every family, every person.

“The descendants of the Hasmoneans lay trembling in the midst of the abomination, In the mud, the scions of lions sat in the garbage, Nested in every pit, in every place.”

The poem, in other words, is not filled with compassion alone: “The grief is great, but the shame is enormous.” And, what’s more, answer, son of man! “G-d’s reproaches are irresistible. His court is ruthless.”

The scenes of the pogrom are not yet the finale of the poetic story. The author is interested in the further course of things. How will life go on after what happened? How will people behave? Hearing sobbing, moaning, tearful pleas, G-d is indignant. He does not want mournful prayers. He wants to see his people ready for revenge, he awaits an effective protest, a rebellion. He is angered by weakness and resignation.

“I cry for them, and these tears are unpleasant! Yes, shout to them that threats come. Against me and the sky, and the earth—To respond to the torments of generations, the Wolves rose to the hillside and stormed My throne!”

In the mouth of G-d Bialik put his cherished thoughts about the impending awakening of his fellow tribesmen, that the time has come to rise from their knees, straighten their backs and fight for a worthy place in the world. Only with high spiritual aspirations, boundlessly devoted to the idea of an independent Jewish state, could the poet throw a bitter, contemptuous reproach to passivity, humility, and fawning in front of other nations for the sake of their condescension.

“Pray, beggars, to the wind of all sides, of the mercy of the kings, about the pity of the tribes—And rot, as it were, and beg, like to this day!...”



Of course, one cannot take the maximalism of the poet entirely, but his invectives are unquestionably dictated by a demanding love for his people. "*Legend*" was not only crying. Anger was mobilized. Bialik brought up a new generation of Jewish youth: self-defense units appeared in Russia, volunteers-pioneers went to Palestine to work the land of the forefathers.

However, today it seems that the scope of the Bialik poem does not correspond to the scale of what happened in Chisinau in the spring of 1903. Only fifty Jews perished. Against the background of the subsequent Holocaust, it is generally comparatively inconsequential. The prophetic nature of the poem became especially clear forty years after its writing, when Bialik was no longer alive. "*Legend of the Pogrom*" was turned into a requiem and for the victims of the Holocaust, who were counted in the millions.

Reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book "Two Hundred Years Together", where there is an assessment of the Chisinau pogrom and its consequences for Russia, I felt indignant. Having cited a number of exact figures and reliable facts, the author took up arms on "far from these events, public opinion leaders," who, in his opinion, resorted to "inciting exaggeration." He does not mention the name of Bialik but speaks of one expressive detail of the poem: "... a nail in the living nostril." Solzhenitsyn refutes the poet: the nail, they say, did not happen, for there is no such detail in the testimony of witnesses: "The relatives of the Jew hammered on the head ... did not come up with such inventions."

Solzhenitsyn is right when he writes that the Kishinev pogrom "has laid down a bit of a stain on the whole of Russian history." But he is looking for the guilty among the Jews—those who, in his opinion, "through lies" and "poisonous fakes" thickened and distorted the truth about the pogrom. Chaim-Nahman Bialik was not in this case a historian, he was a poet. The poet has the right to exaggeration in art, and it is not considered a lie. When Bialik wrote his stanzas, he was concerned about the fate of Jewry, and not the prestige of Tsarist Russia, which Solzhenitsyn cares for. And Bialik, as time showed, was able to look far ahead, and his prophetic eye saw the coming tragedy of a whole people. "*The Legend of the Pogrom*" in its own way anticipated the Holocaust.

Now, at the beginning of the new millennium, the poem by Bialik still sounds modern. In 1990, the journal "Foreign Literature" published a new translation, by Lev Berinsky, entitled "The City of Massacre." The words of righteous anger again appeal to us. And again, probably, a lot of courage and inner honesty are needed to recognize the poet's rightness.

The novel by Boris Sandler "Life and Dust" (1991) is the newest book about the Chisinau pogrom. Another echo of the past. The novel is based on official documents obtained by the author in the opened archives. Now B. Sandler is preparing the reissue of his work. While there were no living witnesses remaining of the Jewish pogroms of the beginning of the twentieth century, the memory of the tragedy does not really die.

At the Jewish cemetery in Odessa, in its far corner, there is an unusual monument - a tall one, double the size of human height, and a long concrete wall. Above it is the Star of David. Both sides of the wall are adorned with columns full of inscriptions in Hebrew. These are the names of the victims of the Odessa pogroms of the late XIX - early XX centuries. My stepfather, whose name I bear, a contemporary of the age, a pupil of the Jewish orphanage, brought me somehow to this... Odessa Wall of Weeping." There appears the name of his father, a poor tailor, who was killed in 1905 only because he was Jewish. There is no such wall in Chisinau. Being in Odessa, I always go to this monument to listen to the Holocaust-reinforced echoes of ancient atrocities.

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Subject: Looking For Vital Records in Bessarabia

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Hundreds

The *Black Hundred* also known as the *black-hundredths* (Черносотенцы in Russian; chernosotentsy), was *an* ultra-nationalist movement in Russia in the early 20th century. It was a staunch supporter of the House of Romanov and opposed any retreat from the autocracy of the reigning monarch