

Summary

Pogroms of Jews as acts of mass violence remain as violent stains in the history of modern Europe. Barbaric attacks, often resulting in death or disability of the victims, have occurred in many countries in the east and west of the Old Continent. Undoubtedly, they occupy a clearly negative place in social memory. The basic problem that society is facing in this area at this time is the issue of guilt and responsibility for the pogroms of Jews. The historical debates concerning pogroms, which were exemplified in the tragedies of Jedwabne in 1941 and Kielce in 1946, prove how socially sensitive this problem is. In both cases, the facts themselves do not arouse such great emotions as searching for the answer to who is responsible for these crimes. Two narratives are present in the public discourse today. In the first one, the local residents, Gross's "neighbors", are blamed. The second narrative indicates that it is the Germans (or Nazis) and Russians (or NKVD). The aim of this book is to discover under what conditions a narrative was created that protected members of the local communities against accusations of the pogroms of Jews and what circumstances and mechanisms caused that such a variant for many years was obligatory, widely accepted and shaped like a research paradigm, limiting the research field even for experienced historians.

The key event that closed the process of building an interpretation formula and description of the pogrom of Jews was the tragedy in Bialystok in June 1906. According to the Durkheim construction of four levels of social imagination, the narrative created by the press and massively distributed through leaflets and photographs – descriptions of the Bialystok pogrom supported by the tsarist authorities – took over the social imagination almost a few days after these tragic events. It was believed that the pogrom was organized and carried out by the tsarist uniformed services associated with the Black Hundred circles close to the tsarist authorities. The level of public trust in tsardom and the Russian government had been severely tarnished. All steps taken later by officials were seen as actions to hide the truth. The Bialystok pogrom broke out at the time of the so-called Stolypin reaction, and thus at the beginning of a strong anti-revolutionary battle in Russia. It was recognized that in this way anti-Semitic Russian authorities were fighting against the radical anti-tsarist underground in which the Jewish community was strongly represented. Discussions on the sense and meaning of the pogrom and the way of its description and presentation to the world took place in various forums. A dispute between Shimon Dubnow, S. An-sky and Ze'ev Jabotinsky became significant, and the conclusion of this discussion helped their contemporaries to develop a pattern of thinking about the pogroms of Jews and the methodology of entering them into Jewish and non-Jewish history. Dozens of journalistic studies that arose just after the pogrom proved only the one thesis (that already existed), about the tsarist perpetration. Their para-historical character, connections with the anti-tsarist opposition and wide distribution in the underground printing sector meant that one could speak about the formation of a narrowly understood research paradigm. This

paradigm assumed in advance that pogroms of Jews were organized by the tsardom. This thesis, legitimized by the para-intellectual publications, and thanks to popular culture, has also gained wide resonance in various social classes. Low-grade occasional poetry, drawings and caricatures pointed out allusively who was responsible for the pogroms of Jews in Russia.

The confirmation of this way of thinking came during the domination of Marxist historiography. This thread was woven into a wide stream of research on the workers' movement and its importance in the fight against tsarism. Marxist interpretations slowly but effectively eliminated the Jews as such from the pogrom stories, replacing them with the Jewish proletariat. Eventually, after the Second World War and the experience of both the Holocaust and the tragic events that took place in the first post-war years, the historical explanation of the organization of pogroms of Jews by external factors (authorities, occupiers, etc.), and not by the local population, gained immense significance; this narrative protected the local communities and maintained the widely accepted state of (non)memory. Other historiographies, including the Jewish one, had no purpose and did not see any need to revise these findings, because the pogroms of Jews in Tsarist Russia, including the Białystok pogrom, did not constitute a special object of their interest. At the same time, without thorough source research, both the theses regarding perpetration in the Białystok pogrom and, more broadly, the entire research paradigm, could not be questioned in any way.

Białystok was a very peculiar city at the beginning of the twentieth century. Significant population growth caused by migration to the city meant that an unstable social structure was created there. The statistical domination of Jews in Białystok was enormous, although the number began to fall even before the pogrom. At that time, the Christian population grew, and more precisely, the followers of the Catholic Church. Such a structure did not go hand in hand with the possibilities of development or influence on the power of various groups and social classes.

A significant part of the city's inhabitants were young people, deprived of social roots, cut off (more or less) from old family relationships, sometimes open to the new values and ideas. The level of radicalism of Białystok youth was very high. Before 1906, this city was the center of anarchism in Russia, and the frequency of acts of violence, including street and direct terror, was significant. In the topographic sense, the border between the Jewish and non-Jewish world was the Suraska street, a place where Jewish youth met and discussed. The proletariat remained clearly divided into Jews and Christians. The essence of this division was, among others, conflict over the social emancipation of the former, manifested in the struggle for access to the textile machines.

Not without significance were the experiences of collective violence in the city – such events took place several times before and in 1905. Their participants were Jews, sometimes the local population, and the Russian army that in the summer of 1905 committed at least one pogrom resembling a military pacification. Thus, the limit on violence in the city streets was shifted in 1905, both by the authorities and by the radical groups.

Social tensions caused by omnipresent aggression in the public space and the conflict between Jewish and Christian workers led to the symbolic act of violence in June 1906. The unexplained murder of Białystok police chief Derkachov generated a slew of rumor and gossip. The event was taken as a provocation and the accused was the head of the police station Sheremetov, known for being in conflict with Derkachov and for his anti-Semitic attitude. The level of anti-Semitic sentiments increased considerably after the public accusations that Derkachov was killed by Jewish revolutionaries. The elite of the Białystok Jews tried to relieve tension in various ways. Some of them, like the proposal to put a wreath on the grave of the murdered, produced the opposite effect than intended. Others, like an attempt of mediating by Grodno governor Kister, proved ineffective. Rumors began to spread about the impending pogrom. It is difficult to state clearly who was their author, nevertheless, they themselves could have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Under these conditions, on June 14, 1906, two Christian processions, the Catholic and the Orthodox, went through the city. Due to the threat of escalation of violence, before June 14, Białystok was divided into the zones of activities of uniformed services, and the critical points were manned with the military units and the police. The marches gathered several hundred believers, also from nearby towns. The mood was tense, the sense of danger – very high. Both

processions were probably attacked by the armed members of the Jewish defense forces. It seems that in the situation of the open pushing towards the confrontation between the Jews, the police and the army, the impatience of the fighters won out. The non-Jewish civilian population, touched by the stories of attacks on icons, as well as of the killing of women and children, moved towards the city center, destroying Jewish houses, and beating and killing their inhabitants. Armed with hastily acquired tools – clubs, and even metal pots and pans – non-Jews moved around the city in groups, wreaking havoc. The army at first reacted sluggishly. At the sight of the troops led by the policemen, the attackers dispersed, to later again plunder and kill in other streets where there were no uniforms. On the second day of the pogrom, the military operations were intensified. The soldiers were shooting at the windows of the houses, where members of the self-defense forces were suspected to be hiding. Particularly bloody events took place at the railway station and in the Bojary district. Neither the civilian attackers nor the army entered the Jewish quarter of Chanajki for fear of strong Jewish self-defense forces.

The pogrom became the subject of a political game between the authorities of various levels in Russia. Five independent investigations were conducted afterwards, which illustrated the conflict within the power structures. The work of the commission sent by the State Duma was particularly important. The results of these investigations became an element of the anti-government attack and, contrary to the historians' opinions to date, they are not a more valuable source than the prosecutor's documentation.

The events in Bialystok were also widely reflected in the sphere of international relations, because the pogrom broke out at the time when the fate of the British-Russian agreement was hanging in midair. The diplomats of the European countries referred with a detached attitude to the claims about the Russian provocation in Bialystok, and in the end, the tragedy of 1906 did not have a major impact on international relations.

The Bialystok pogrom of 1906 was not a Russian provocation. Its genesis reaches back to social tensions between Jews and non-Jews in Bialystok at the beginning of the twentieth century. Class and economic problems were superimposed on the anti-Semitic phantasms that increased in the minds of the people. Non-Jews from Bialystok and its surrounding areas were the killers and the plunderers. The soldiers attempted to pacify the city in accordance with the orders given by the officers and in fact joined the pogrom in this way, killing many Jews, but also a few Christians. The Russian authorities took various steps to oppose the pogrom, but tardiness of the officers, and perhaps also of some of the rank-and-file soldiers infected with anti-Semitic attitudes, contributed to the fact that the number of Jews killed was at least 80.

The tragedy of the pogrom continued until 1908. In addition to the necessity to offset its effects and the pogrom fear that remained after this tragic incident, several acts of vengeance were made on Russian officers and officials, thus legitimizing the thesis of the tsarist provocation.

A comparison of the mechanisms of this crime with other events defined by the term "pogrom", concerning not only Jews, clearly indicates the uselessness of the definition of this concept in research on mass violence. One could, however, conclude that the word "pogrom" and the context of its use define and describe the users of the concept rather than the tragic social phenomenon.

A confrontation of the two stories: the one described by Shimon Dubnow, Paweł Korzec and Abraham Ascher, in which the Bialystok pogrom was planned and carried out by the Russian authorities, and the second one, written on the basis of a thorough source query, shows significant discrepancies between them. They do not concern factual material, but the genesis of the pogrom and determining who was responsible for this tragedy. They point to the conservative and defensive function of historiography, regardless of its current or provenance, and to the meaning and power of social imaginations. The scheme of the description of the Bialystok pogrom, although diverging from what the sources say, was implemented into historical stories about other pogroms, eg in Jedwabne or Kielce, and became one of the causes of problems within the social debate over the tragic fragments of the history of Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century.