

Russian Jews and the 1917 Revolution

AARON LEVINE

The Russian Revolution of 1917 drastically altered Russia in almost every way imaginable, from politics and economics to foreign policy and civil rights. An empire became a nominal republic, ascendant liberal and leftist politicians replaced a tsar, and a new policy toward national and ethnic minorities began to emerge. Each change affected the Jewish population, a small but significant portion of the overall Russian population. Despite this, the impact of the Revolution on Russian Jews has yet to be fully investigated. While the initial euphoria of the Revolution caused the greatest expansion of civil rights for Jews since their arrival in Russia and muted anti-Semitic sentiment and violence, the revolutionary fervor eventually faltered and the major problems and fears of the time reemerged as the dominant concerns. Russia then began to revert back to its anti-Semitic tendencies, to the great detriment of the Russian-Jewish community.

To investigate the events of 1917, it is important to first understand the status of Jews in Russia prior to that year. Before the late eighteenth century, the Russian Empire did not have a significant Jewish population. As a result of the three partitions of Poland-Lithuania, the Russian Empire acquired not just a significant amount of new territory on its western front, but also hundreds of thousands of new Jewish residents.¹ Through the early twentieth century, the Jewish population increased in number partially through other annexations, but mostly through natural population growth. By 1914, more than five million Jews lived in the Russian Empire, though they comprised only slightly more than 3 percent of the total population.²

Through the onset of the 1917 Revolution, the vast majority of Jews lived in these western territories collectively named the Pale of Settlement. In 1791, Catherine II approved a decision that essentially created the Pale as the restrictive area for Jewish habitation, though the official name for the area was created under Nicholas I in the early nineteenth century.³ The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea, along the Russian borders with Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Romania, and extended south to encompass some regions on the Black Sea. It included major cities, for Jews and Russia more generally, like Odessa, Vilna, Warsaw, and Kiev, belying the common misconception that all Jews in the Pale lived in *shtetls* (rural Jewish villages). The 1897 census, the last comprehensive one until the 1920s, found that 94 percent of all Russian Jews – just under five million – lived within the territory of the Pale, though they comprised only 11.6 percent of the Pale’s total population.⁴ Though these numbers may have changed by 1917, it is important to remember that the vast majority of Jews lived on a major front of World War I and were actually distant from the critical revolutionary centers of Petrograd and Moscow.

In some limited circumstances, however, Jews could live and conduct business outside the Pale. Reforms under Alexander II in the 1860s, often called the emancipation of the Jews, allowed settlement throughout Russia, but only if the person in question met certain additional standards. On November 27, 1861, Alexander II agreed to a change in the law permitting “Jews possessing certificates of the learned degree...to serve in all Government offices, without their being confined to the Pale established for the residence of Jews.”⁵ It was around this time that significant Jewish communities began to grow in larger Russian cities. This was especially true of Petrograd, which attracted many industrialists, bankers, and students from the Pale.⁶

Since the Russian Empire’s acquisition of a significant Jewish population in the 1790s, government policy had alternated between attempts at assimilating the new population and restricting its civil rights. Between that time and the onset of the Revolution, the Russian Empire experienced a series of violent anti-Semitic events, with the most volatile occurring in the early 1880s and the mid-1900s.

The assassination of Alexander II on March 1, 1881, spuriously blamed on the Jews, set off the first major round of violent anti-Semitic activities and pogroms.⁷ On April 15, the first pogrom started in the city of Yelisavetgrad, followed by a pogrom in Kiev on April 26, and a larger pogrom in Odessa on May 3.⁸ During this time, dozens of smaller anti-Semitic actions took place in towns across southern Russia, and then continued throughout 1881, culminating with a pogrom in Warsaw. The following excerpt from an account of the Kiev pogrom is broadly repre-

¹ Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the Whites, 1917-1920*, trans. Timothy J. Portice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 6.

² Budnitskii, *Between the Reds and Whites*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 8 and Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 578.

⁴ Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 578.

⁵ Simon M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1975), II: 166.

⁶ Budnitskii, *Between the Reds and Whites*, 14.

⁷ Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, II: 247.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249, 252, 257.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 280.

sentative of the events of the time:

An immense crowd of young boys, artisans, and laborers was on the march...the destruction of Jewish houses began...the mob threw itself upon the Jewish synagogue, which, despite its strong bars, locks and shutters, was wrecked in a moment.¹⁰

The instigators looted, raped, and killed with such abandon that some speculated that the authorities, which could and sometimes did rapidly disperse the crowds, often allowed such attacks to take place.¹¹ The pogroms would continue, though sometimes sporadically, through 1884.¹²

A series of laws limiting the rights of Jews accompanied this eruption of anti-Semitic violence. The May Laws, called temporary restrictions as they were allegedly meant to end the pogroms, represented the most significant restrictions on the Jews and provided the foundation for further legal discrimination in the ensuing years. These laws forbade Jews from settling in new towns or cities, restricted their right to own property outside existing areas of settlement, and forbade Jews from conducting business on Sundays and Christian holidays.¹³ This legislation sharply limited Jewish movement outside of the Pale and severely restricted Jewish commercial activity. In the following years, Russian officials capped the number of Jewish doctors in the army, limited movement within the Pale, placed strict quotas on Jewish placement in universities, and restricted the activities of Jewish lawyers, among numerous other discriminatory actions.¹⁴

Similar events occurred throughout the rest of the late nineteenth century, including the expulsion of Jews from Moscow in early 1891.¹⁵ Pogroms continued, albeit more sporadically, but began again in earnest in the early 1900s. In 1903, the Russian Empire gained the dubious distinction of having the first pogrom of the new century.¹⁶ Beginning on April 6 – pogroms often started around Easter and the Jewish holiday of Passover – and following a series of virulently nasty rumors, the Jews of Kishinev fell victim to physical violence, destruction of property, and murder.¹⁷ This pogrom received widespread international condemnation, though this did nothing to halt anti-Semitic activities in the Russian Empire.

The 1905 Revolution, which largely failed to produce any significant reform, witnessed reinvigorated attacks against the Jewish population. During this time, the Black Hundreds emerged, a somewhat undefined amalgamation of pro-tsarist and extreme right wing factions.¹⁸ The Black Hundreds agitated against liberalism and capitalism but especially against Jews; one major leader, Mikhail Menshikov, became an early advocate of racial anti-Semitism.¹⁹ Pogroms in the first half of 1905 took place in a variety of cities including Bialystok and, most infamously, in Zhitomir.²⁰ The pogroms became worse around October, with violence in hundreds of cities, and to reference but one example, over 300 dead in Odessa.²¹ The following years saw continued violence and growth in the power of the Black Hundreds.²² Jews faced expulsion from more cities and in 1908 the education quotas tightened even further.²³ In 1913, the famous Beilis blood libel case occurred, representing the continuation of a centuries-long anti-Semitic accusation.²⁴ These decades of pogroms and violence elicited a variety of responses from the Jewish community. For almost two million Russian Jews between 1881 and 1914, emigration became the solution.²⁵

What, then, can be said about the status of Russian Jews on the eve of the 1917 Revolution? It is clear that a pervasive anti-Semitic sentiment existed throughout the Russian Empire, and that it could easily escalate into physical violence and pogroms. Of course, 1914 witnessed the beginning of World War I, and the displacement of thousands of Jews in the Pale who lived on this important battlefield. Through this lens, the impact that the 1917 Revolution had on Russian Jews and anti-Semitism can be viewed.

The Russian Revolution began in late February 1917 on the streets of Petrograd. Within days, the tsarist regime essentially lost all control and Nicholas II soon abdicated his throne, ending the Russian monarchy and Empire. Some political leaders promptly began to create a new central political structure to lead the country, which they called

¹⁰ Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, II: 253.

¹¹ Ibid., 255.

¹² Budnitskii, *Between the Reds and Whites*, 17.

¹³ Ibid., 312.

¹⁴ Ibid., 342, 350, & 353.

¹⁵ Ibid., 402.

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷ Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, III: 73-75.

¹⁸ Walter Laqueur, *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 17.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, III: 115.

²¹ Ibid., 128-129.

²² Ibid., 151.

²³ Ibid., 157-158.

²⁴ Budnitskii, *Between the Reds and Whites*, 31.

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

the Provisional Government. By the beginning of March, the Provisional Government began to truly function and issue new laws for Russia, some of which significantly affected the Jewish population. The initial weeks of Revolution were a high point for Russian Jews in 1917, and perhaps in the entirety of modern Russian history.

Issues of equality in the cases of religion, nationality, and class were of paramount importance to the members of the Provisional Government from its inauguration. The so-called Jewish Question explicitly appeared in the earliest discussions within the Provisional Government. In the minutes of a March 4 meeting of the Provisional Government, there arose the issue of the quotas that had restricted Jewish access to education. The members agreed “to abolish percentage quota for Jews entering schools, restoring at the same time the right to continue their education to those students who were dismissed from schools for political subversion.”²⁶ Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tsarist government had introduced and then progressively tightened restrictions on Jewish students’ ability to go to certain universities, so it is not surprising that the Provisional Government acted swiftly to lift such restrictions. It is curious, however, that this was the first specifically Jewish restriction to be lifted by the Provisional Government, raising the question of whether education was explicitly chosen as the first issue, or if it was just an historical fortuity.

On March 9, the Provisional Government issued a decision “to authorize the Minister of Justice to introduce for the consideration of the Provisional Government a bill abolishing all national and religious restrictions.”²⁷ By March 20, such an action had taken place and Prince L’vov, the newly minted Minister-President of the Government, authorized a law entitled “The Abolition of Restrictions Based on Religion and Nationality.”²⁸ The sweeping nature and significance of this law cannot be overstated, especially for the Jewish population, as it represented a fundamental shift in governmental policy toward religious and national minorities. In grand terms, the law declared, “All restrictions by existing legislation on the rights of citizens of Russia by reasons of their adherence to a particular religious denomination or sect by reason of nationality are abolished.”²⁹ The law, then, applied not only to the Jews of Russia, but other religious minorities, like the Muslim population in the Caucasus and other nationality groups, such as the Finnish and Ukrainians.

Yet, the rest of the law, which listed nine specific restrictions that were lifted, does seem to specifically target legal discrimination against Russian Jews. The first five lifted restrictions placed on the Jewish population by the May Laws of 1882. The first provision abolished any restrictions on “settlement, residence, and travel.”³⁰ With the stroke of a pen, constraints on the movement of Russian Jews disappeared. The second provision eliminated restrictions on the “acquisition of the right of ownership and other material rights to any movable or immovable property, as well as possession, use, and administration of this property and the giving or receiving of mortgages against it.”³¹ Laws attempting to restrict Jewish property rights, which had caused the loss of significant assets and wealth outside of the Pale in the late nineteenth century, were now abolished. Provisions three through five lifted restrictions related to engaging in business, participation in various commercial endeavors, and the ability to hire workers.³² With this, the third major section of the May Laws was repealed.

The remainder of the lifted restrictions also seemed to target constraints on Russian Jews. The law allowed all citizens equal opportunity toward “admission to the state service both civil and military,” as well as “participation in elections to institutions of local self-government . . . holding any office in government and public establishments, and fulfilling all duties connected with such offices.”³³ Ability to participate in basic civil functions such as voting, office holding, and serving on a jury were certainly necessary for an administration now committed to equality. The final two provisions, which allowed for the use of “languages and dialects other than Russian” in business and education, in addition to reiterating that abolition of restrictions on education, likely had a significant impact on Jews, as they had faced stringent quotas and predominantly spoke Yiddish as their native language.³⁴

The opening of the 1917 Revolution, at least prescriptively, represented a seismic change in the relationship between the Jews of Russia and the main governing body of the country, now the Provisional Government. The numerous and onerous legal burdens that had once encumbered the Jews were now lifted. Indeed, a March 22 editorial stated, “the act abolishing religious and national restrictions should be considered as the greatest conquest of the revo-

²⁶ Robert Paul Browder and Alexander F. Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government 1917: Documents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), I: 164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 211-212.

³³ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

lution.”³⁵ Change in national law, however, guaranteed neither a shift in behavior at the grassroots level nor a permanent transformation of the underlying anti-Semitic sentiments in Russia. The ensuing months of 1917, from the summer into the fall, witnessed what can be seen as a reversion to standard negative treatment of the Jews in practice, if not by law.

Acts of violent anti-Semitism, such as pogroms or looting and destruction on a smaller scale, were often fanned – if not initiated – by right-wing counterrevolutionary elements in Russian society, including the Black Hundreds. These groups tended to prefer a return to monarchical rule and despised the leftist revolutionaries, especially the Bolsheviks. Pervasive in Black Hundreds propaganda, and anti-Semitic propaganda more generally, was a focus on the so-called “world conspiracy of Jews” to dominate politically and economically, and suppress the aspirations of other groups.³⁶ Such notions were deeply embedded in Russian society by 1917, in no small part due to the widespread popularity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and other related texts, which purported a similar message about the Jews.³⁷

Right wing activists generally assumed that Jews actively and overwhelmingly supported revolutionary parties. As one historian aptly stated:

Since the Jews in Russia had been the object of much oppression, it was only natural that many of them should join the revolutionary parties, which promised to overthrow the regime that had been the cause of their sufferings, including the murder of many of them.³⁸

Yet, a variety of religious or national minorities within Russia could claim similar oppression, but the Black Hundreds did not single them out for persecution. Aside from the underlying strain of anti-Semitism, which certainly contributed to the targeting of Jews, these tsarists claimed, accurately, that Jews disproportionately held important positions in revolutionary political parties. It did not matter that most of these political leaders, including all the Jewish Bolshevik leaders, renounced any association with Judaism.³⁹ Since the Black Hundreds virulently disagreed with the overarching revolutionary policy platform, and Jews were disproportionately involved in the elite echelons of these parties, it made sense to some extent that the Jewish populations was especially targeted in the fight to counter the Revolution.

To understand the impact of these extreme right wing groups on the 1917 Revolution, and on Jews especially, some attempt must be made to enumerate the violent anti-Semitic incidents that took place in that year. In the early twentieth century, the American Jewish Year Book annually published accounts of the status of Jewish communities across the world. When discussing Russia, the Year Book included a section entitled “Attacks on Jews,” which recounted the pogroms, acts of destruction, and murders that occurred that year. The report on Russia in 1917 (published in two separate issues of the Year Book, as the publication used the Hebrew calendar, which does not line up with either the Julian or Gregorian calendar) helps elucidate the status of violent anti-Semitism during 1917, especially between the February and October Revolutions.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this account is the lack of recorded attacks on Jews from the start of the February Revolution on February 23 until April 7, when a mob destroyed a Jewish market in the town of Plisovka near Kiev.⁴⁰ According to this data (which is not definitive or comprehensive in its accounting of anti-Semitic violence), for just more than one month after the onset of the Revolution, no significant attacks on Jews occurred. As the year progressed, recorded attacks on Jews increased, with notable surges during the summer and then again in the fall. The following is an accounting of the number of attacks in each month through the October Revolution: one in April, six in May, eight in June, three in July, seven in August, four in September, and eleven in October before the onset of the October Revolution.⁴¹ The trend makes it clear that violent anti-Semitic activity increased as the year progressed. The roles of the Black Hundreds and other right-wing counterrevolutionaries were associated with much of this violence, and their role – especially in espousing pro-tsarist views – seemed to have especially increased in the final weeks before the October Revolution.

Records of the attempts to suppress such acts of violence against Jews also shed light on the changing nature of anti-Semitism throughout 1917. It should be noted that many anti-Semitic actions did not spark any sort of response either from state-based groups, such as militias or army units, or from Jewish-organized defenses. In many towns, the protocol for response seemed to be to call the police or local militia to suppress the anti-Semitic agitators. In some cases this initial response was inadequate either because the police were committing the acts themselves, such as in a

³⁵ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, 1: 214.

³⁶ Laqueur, *Black Hundred*, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Events in 5677* (online; American Jewish Year Book, 1917), http://www.ajcarchives.org/ajc_data/files/1917_1918_4_yearreview.pdf (accessed 2 June 2013), 294.

⁴¹ *Events in 5677*, 293-294 and *Events in 5678* (online; American Jewish Year Book, 1918), http://www.ajcarchives.org/ajc_data/files/1918_1919_4_yearreview.pdf (accessed 2 June 2013), 259-260.

May 5 ritual murder accusation. In other instances, the mobs overwhelmed the local forces, prompting officials to call for assistance from larger cities or the army, like in Olriopol on June 9 when the governor-general had to send for military aid to stop a pogrom his police force could not handle.⁴² The increase in calls to suppress such activities as the year progressed lends credence to the notion that anti-Semitic violence increased throughout the year. A telegram from the Minister of the Interior to Government Commissars on July 18 noted, “No arbitrary seizures of property or land, no acts of violence, no appeals to civil war and violation of military duty are to be tolerated.”⁴³ This message seems to indicate that violent activities, even if anti-Semitic ones were not explicitly noted, were increasing in the summer compared to earlier in the year. As the year came to a close and the Civil War began, anti-Semitic violence continued to increase in frequency and severity, highlighting the surprising dearth of such activities at the beginning of the Revolution.

No attempt at documenting some aspect of the history of Jews during the 1917 Revolution would be complete without discussing the dramatic impact of World War I and the status of civilian refugees from the front. The Russian-German border became a major front of the conflict almost immediately after the major participants in the war formally declared hostilities. Between August and the end of 1914, the Germans fought back a Russian incursion into east Prussia and then advanced into Russian territory in the Baltic region, with plans to launch an offensive on Warsaw.⁴⁴ From the outset, the Pale of Settlement was essentially the focal point of fighting in Eastern Europe until Russia signed a peace deal with Germany in 1918, losing much of this territory in the process. The fighting triggered a massive refugee crisis: by the end of 1915, at least 3.3 million people could be considered civilian refugees, with 500,000 more being added to their ranks by April 1916.⁴⁵ Many ethnic and national minorities in Russia, including Poles and Muslims in the Caucuses, were deeply affected by the war because they tended to live on battlefronts.⁴⁶ However, it can be said with some confidence that the Jewish population and refugees suffered most acutely from the discriminatory treatment they faced during the first years of the war.⁴⁷

Before the Revolution upended the war effort, governmental and army war policy toward Jews was decidedly and virulently negative. On the front, army officials decided the guidelines for how to treat the local communities. Mounting losses and paranoia about suspected spies among the ranks of Jews led many in the army to use the Jewish community as a scapegoat, and thus target them for persecution.⁴⁸ One common practice was to expel the Jews from towns or entire regions, forcing them to flee deeper into Russian territory. Expulsions began as early as September 1914, when an army leader forced the Jewish population in the Polish town of Pulawy to leave.⁴⁹ Before the mass expulsions that began in the summer of 1915, some 600,000 Russian Jews had already been displaced.⁵⁰ As the war progressed, the Jewish population continued to be depleted due to expulsions, but also the continuing German military advance into Russian territory.⁵¹

Though the situation seemed quite desperate for the Jews living on the front, it ironically served to benefit them in one sense; the Russian elite realized that they could no longer restrain Jewish settlement, thus affording Jews the opportunity to live throughout Russia and, in a de facto sense, ending the Pale of Settlement by 1915.⁵² The Provisional Government formally abolished the Pale of Settlement, ended restrictions on Jewish movement, and restored other civil rights to the Jews in March 1917. Interestingly, Gatrell noted that the government ministers did not publically support the violent anti-Semitic attitude pervasive in the army and among its leaders, and that there was “a fundamental political constraint on more extreme manifestations of prejudice against Jews.”⁵³ This notion may have held true among some of the political elite throughout the Revolution, though it likely began to change toward the end of 1917 and especially into the Civil War years.

Many questions remain regarding the treatment of these Jewish refugees before and during the Revolution. It is unclear the extent to which these refugees were harassed both when traveling and settling in new places.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it remains uncertain if Jewish refugees were treated differently from the local Jewish population in cases where evacuees from the front resettled in cities or areas with existing communities. From the available data, pogroms and other violent anti-Semitic activities in 1917 occurred in cities where refugees had settled, including Ekaterinoslav and

⁴² *Events in 5677*, 294 and *Events in 5678*, 259.

⁴³ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, III: 1439.

⁴⁴ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 17.

⁴⁵ Gatrell, *Whole Empire Walking*, 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

Odessa.⁵⁵ In any case, it seems unlikely that groups such as the Black Hundreds would distinguish between different groups of Jews, though further research is needed to investigate this claim. Certainly, the reforms of March 1917 benefitted all Jews in Russia regardless of geographic origin, and likely all suffered from the increasing incidence of anti-Semitic violence that followed.

After reviewing much of the available evidence, it can be said with some confidence that anti-Semitism was surprisingly muted at the beginning of the 1917. Though this seems somewhat intuitive – as the Revolution faltered and Russia moved toward instability and civil war, such pervasive anti-Semitic feelings were bound to resurface – why such sentiments remained subdued for part of the year remains an important question to be analyzed. One possible reason is that because Russian society almost unanimously hated the tsar, and because the tsar and his policies were notoriously anti-Semitic, Russians decided to repudiate anti-Semitism along with the tsar. A number of newspaper editorials from March express this sentiment. A March 7 editorial in *Izvestiia*, regarding the civil rights gains of the Revolution, stated, “Russian citizens know what these freedoms...were converted into by the old regime! Free thought was stifled; freedom of association and of the exchange of ideas among citizens was completely abolished!”⁵⁶ Five days later, another *Izvestiia* editorial reiterated this point, with a greater emphasis on religious freedom, noting, “Under the old regime, Russian citizens were deprived of their rights, but the representatives of nations which were persecuted by law were deprived twice as much.”⁵⁷

Such sentiments were reiterated after the major civil rights bill passed through the Provisional Government. A *Russkiiia Vedmosti* article from March 22 entitled “The Abolition of Religious and National Restrictions,” stated:

Another pillar of the old order has fallen, a survival of barbarism, which has for a long time outraged the popular sense of righteousness, but on which the defenders of the order built on inequality and oppression has so long and persistently leaned...⁵⁸

To cite one more example, a March 23 article entitled “equal rights” in *Nove Vremia* stated, “And one can state with full justification that in no domain of the former state administration did the Russian public so drastically disagree with the government as here,” referring to the recent bill.⁵⁹ Clearly, there was a strong association between the old regime and religious intolerance, if not outright anti-Semitism, and to fully purge Russia of the terror of tsar, anti-Semitism would have to go as well.

Another complementary possibility is that the initial euphoria and unity of the February Revolution overpowered any public expressions of anti-Semitism, at least temporarily. On March 7, revolutionary leaders in the first declaration of the Provisional Government proclaimed that:

The unanimous revolutionary enthusiasm of the people, fully conscious of the gravity of the moment, and the determination of the State Duma, have created the Provisional Government, which consider it to be its sacred and responsible duty to fulfill the hopes of the nation, and lead the country out onto the bright path of free civic organization.⁶⁰

The new government clearly placed its hopes in the idea that society was unified in its discontent with the old system, unanimous in its support of the new government, and optimistic about the future. A March 23 editorial in *Nove Vremia* espoused a similar sentiment, noting, “For all practical purposes, these [religious] discriminations were swept away at the moment when people, in the Petrograd streets, ‘without distinction as to nationality or religion,’ tore the power from the hands” of the tsarist regime.⁶¹ It seems evident that, at least among the governing and societal elite, the unanimity and exhilaration of the initial revolution precluded and prevented legal anti-Semitism and any form of public or violent anti-Semitic activity.

It is possible that there was a spontaneous shift in Russia toward favoring notions of religious and national equality. This seems improbable, though there is evidence that some believed anti-Semitism only existed because the Russian masses were unenlightened. A successful and sustained revolution, then, could have served to foster norms of religious equality. An October 5 editorial in *Rabochaia Gazeta* concerning the rising number of pogroms and violence against Jews affirmed this point and stated, “It should be firmly and clearly understood that several months of revolution are not enough to re-educate at once the masses who lived for centuries in darkness, under the yoke of lawlessness.”⁶² The events that followed the February Revolution belie the notion that Russian society dispelled anti-Semitic tendencies from its midst.

⁵⁵ *Events in 5677*, 294.

⁵⁶ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, vol. 1: 195.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁰ Frank Alfred Golder, *Documents of Russian History 1914-1917*, trans. Emanuel Aronsberg (New York: The Century Co., 1927), 311.

⁶¹ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, I: 212.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 431.

This raises an important question regarding why anti-Semitic violence resurfaced as 1917 progressed. One possible answer is that as the initial unity and euphoria of the Revolution faded, Russia began to fracture along the familiar fault lines of nationality and religion. Attempting to resolve the so-called nationality question had been important since the start of the Revolution for a variety of groups, including Jews, Georgians, Muslims, and Finns. A resolution from an April meeting of the Tenth Conference of the Bund highlighted the importance of the nationality question for the Jewish community. The resolution stated, “in a multi-national state such as Russia the question of the type of democratic republic that will best provide for normal coexistence of various nationalities will come up before the Constituent Assembly with particular acuteness.”⁶³ The Bund then resolved “to found local organs of cultural-national autonomy of the Jewish nation” to prepare for the process of greater autonomy.⁶⁴ Crafting a satisfactory resolution to this question would prove to be quite difficult.

The major political institutions increasingly became concerned about the question of national autonomy in the middle of 1917, highlighting the resurfacing of deeply contentious issues. A June 20 meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies drafted a resolution addressing the problem stating, “the settlement of the national question in Russia is inseparable from the consolidation of the gains of the Russian revolution on a national scale.”⁶⁵ By summer, the political elites recognized the growing unrest throughout Russia and the rising discontent with the government and its policies. Resolving the question of national autonomy would be a step toward greater stability and progress, though an amendable solution could not be found. As late as October, the Provisional Government continued to try to create a workable policy. A report from a commission within the Provisional Government drafted a series of laws regarding autonomy and federation, to be implemented by the Constituent Assembly. The draft stated, “the Russian state is one and indivisible,” but also that “regional autonomy shall be introduced in the Russian state.”⁶⁶ Such a sentiment might have seemed realistic in February, but by October it was certainly unworkable and perhaps a bit naïve.

Indeed, the seeming insolvability of the nationality question dovetailed with increasing fears of anarchy and civil war, which did not bode well for the Jewish population. A September 20 editorial in *Volia Naroda* noted, “against the background of merciless foreign war and defeats of the armies of the Republic, internally the country has entered upon a period of anarchy and, virtually, a period of civil war.”⁶⁷ Quite presciently, the editorial feared that, “In a few more weeks, perhaps a few days, all of Russia will be swept by the fire of dissension, mutual discord, and the complete paralysis of all life.”⁶⁸ The government realized this too, as seen in a September 25 declaration from the Third Coalition Government, which stated:

Waves of anarchy are sweeping over the land, pressure from the foreign foe is increasing, counterrevolution is raising its head, hoping that the prolonged governmental crisis, coupled with the weariness that has seized the entire nation, will enable it to crush the freedom of the Russian people.⁶⁹

Attempting to address this growing problem, however, would prove to be futile.

As such fears rose, so did unrest and violence against the Russian Jews. A September 20 editorial in *Russkiiia Vedomosti* lamented, “a great wave of disorders has spread through Russia... west and east, the center and the borderlands, by turns or simultaneously [have] become the arena of pogroms and all sorts of disorders.”⁷⁰ Clearly Jews living within the former Pale –the borderlands of Russia – and outside it faced increasing danger. An *Izvestiia* article from September 30, which reproduced a “discussion in the Provisional Government on the struggle against anarchy,” noted the “urgent demands that the Government adopt immediate measures for putting down the disorders which have arisen on account of either the food question or the nationality question.” Furthermore, the article stated, “the Jewish population in the former areas of the Jewish Pale...[was] especially alarmed” by the mounting violence.⁷¹ Such fears were clearly justified in the face of escalating reports of pogroms and other anti-Semitic attacks. Indeed, an October 7 article in *Russkiiia Vedomosti* noted this growing concern, but also fears that something much greater and more violent was about to occur to the Russian Jews:

Plunder and murder rage throughout the uezd [specifically the administrative region of Bessarabia in the former Pale]. The authorities are powerless. The militia is unable to cope with the situation. The pogrom movement is mounting. Talk is heard of shifting all the blame to the Jews.⁷²

⁶³ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, I: 428.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁶⁷ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, III: 1641.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1715.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1643.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1644.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1648.

The impending Civil War certainly made such dire predictions seem prophetic.

The Jews of Russia, who had lived in that vast country in large numbers since the late eighteenth century, witnessed in 1917 the heights of liberty and the lows of violent intolerance. The February Revolution resulted almost immediately in the granting of full civil rights to the Jewish population, including the freedom of movement outside of the Pale of Settlement. As the year progressed, Russia's longstanding societal fractures overwhelmed the revolutionary euphoria to the detriment of the Jewish community. Anti-Semitic sentiment mounted through the summer and fall leading to even more devastating results just a few months later. An October 26 article in *Isvestiia*, in the last issue before the Bolsheviks seized the newspaper, summed up the situation in Russia and for the Jewish community following the October Revolution quite succinctly. They wrote, "To date the Bolsheviks have seized Petrograd but not all of Russia. The danger of a bloody civil war is threatening. Bloodshed and pogroms—this is what we must prepare ourselves for."⁷³

Within a few months, the Russian Civil War began, with devastating results for Russian Jews. Most historians put Jewish deaths in 1918-1920 between 50,000 and 200,000, mostly within Ukraine, leading historian David Roskies to deem this period "the Holocaust of Ukrainian Jewry."⁷⁴ Of course, about two decades later Russian Jews faced the wrath of the Nazis, and millions more perished. This period of devastation was followed by the Cold War, which included restrictions on Jewish immigration and religious practice. The first few months after February 1917 should be seen as the high point for Russian Jewry if not in all of modern history, then certainly through the end of the twentieth century.

⁷³ Browder and Kerensky, *Provisional Government 1917*, III: 1801.

⁷⁴ Budnitskii, *Between the Reds and Whites*, 1.