



PERSPECTIVES

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The Kishinev Pogrom as a Catalyst to the Russo-Japanese War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Historians covering the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 tend to focus on the strategic and regional ramifications deriving from the unexpected victory of the Japanese. Less attention is paid to the motives behind Japan's decision to launch a surprise attack on Russia. An article written in 1935 by Israeli historian Prof. Joseph Klausner may solve this mystery. Based upon the testimony of a Japanese intelligence agent, the article points to the 1903 Kishinev pogrom as the decisive factor that led the Japanese to initiate war with Russia.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 has remained largely overshadowed by other military conflicts that occurred during the 20th century. The war was without question the biggest and most significant conflict of the first decade of that century, yet it is scarcely remembered.

The object of the war was to gain control over northeast Asia in general and Korea in particular. Although those areas were not deemed of great importance at the time, the war nevertheless resounded across the world. It was fought between Tsarist Russia and imperial Japan—two nations that were both at the end of periods of expansion and growth.

The unexpected Japanese victory, which was a "David and Goliath" match-up, paved the way for a new strategic order in the Asia-Pacific. Japan's territorial military achievements, along with the build-up of its naval forces, positioned it as the main regional power, which would be manifested during WWII. This period saw the birth of Japanese militarism and sowed the seeds that would eventually lead to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor nearly 40 years later, which utilized almost the same military doctrine as the Japanese attack on Russia.

The Japanese surprise assault was launched just before midnight on April 8, 1904, when Japanese destroyers fired torpedoes without warning at a line of Russian battleships lying at anchor in the Port Arthur roadstead on the China coast. Ten Japanese destroyers caught the Russians unprepared, badly damaging three of their largest battleships. A declaration of war was issued a few hours later.

Tsar Nicholas II was stunned by the attack. He could not believe Japan would commit an act of war without a formal declaration, and had been assured by his ministers that the Japanese would not fight.

Historians are wondering to this day why the Japanese broke the rules. Why did Tokyo take the enormous risk of an all-out war with Russia, especially as a peaceful compromise was already on the table?

A very interesting and surprising explanation is to be found in a forgotten article published in 1935 by Prof. Joseph Klausner, a prominent Zionist historian. The piece, entitled "The Revenge of History," claims there is an indirect Jewish connection to these events and that it might have been the catalyst for the attack.

While living in Europe as a Zionist activist and editor of the Jewish magazine *HaShiloah*, Klausner was horrified to learn of the Kishinev pogrom of April 1903. He heard terrible accounts of the suffering of the Jews of that town, who had been slaughtered, injured, raped, and ransacked by a Russian mob spurred on by the Russian authorities. When the pogrom was over, 49 Jews were dead, 500 were wounded, 1,300 homes and businesses had been looted and destroyed, and 2,000 families were left homeless.

The brutality of the event sent shock waves across Russia and around the world. Leo Tolstoy spoke out about it. Mass rallies were held in Paris, London, and New York. Western governments protested the apparent complicity of the Tsar's police, which had refused repeated pleas to intervene.

The Kishinev Pogrom was a major turning point. It was not the bloodiest pogrom to have occurred, but it was the first time antisemitism was explicitly a main motivator for violence. The international press picked up the story and for the first time, the word "pogrom" became known around the world.

The New York Times (April 28, 1903) was graphic in its description of the Kishinev pogrom:

The anti-Jewish riots in Kishinev, Bessarabia, are worse than the censor will permit to publish. There was a well laid-out plan for the general massacre of Jews on the day following the Russian Easter. The mob

was led by priests, and the general cry, "Kill the Jews," was taken up all over the city. The Jews were taken wholly unaware and were slaughtered like sheep...The scenes of horror attending this massacre are beyond description. Babes were literally torn to pieces by the frenzied and bloodthirsty mob. The local police made no attempt to check the reign of terror. At sunset the streets were piled with corpses and wounded. Those who could make their escape fled in terror, and the city is now practically deserted of Jews.

The young Hebrew poet Haim Nahman Bialik (who later became Israel's national poet) was sent to Kishinev by the Jewish communal commission to interview survivors and report firsthand on the bloodbath. Before returning home he composed one of his most powerful poems, "On the Slaughter," with its unforgettable cry that Satan himself could not forgive the death of a child. A year later Bialik would publish his epic masterwork, "The City of Slaughter," an agonizing condemnation of Jewish passivity.

Klausner was particularly impressed by a remarkable article published in January 1904 in Austria by the Norwegian writer Bjornstjerne Bjornson (who received the 1903 Nobel Prize in Literature). The article, entitled "Taking Off the Bear's Skin" (the bear a metaphor for Russia), expressed the belief that Russia posed a severe danger to Europe and the whole cultural world. The author believed the time had come to deter Tsarist Russia.

The core of Bjornson's argument was that the Kishinev pogrom was the ultimate evidence of the barbarism, inhumanity, and cruelty of the Russian authorities. He wrote:

Beware of a country that in order to carve a freedom movement chooses to instigate a pogrom within its borders. Pogrom is a sort of civil war, namely the onslaught of one part of the population against another, for evil purposes. It's the low point, the worst danger...If a government decides to use such insane means to survive, it's a clear indication of a rotten and broken system. That's why any power that will pounce on the Russian bear will defeat it and remove the danger to the world order.

The twist in the tale was the coincidental contact between Klausner and a senior Japanese intelligence agent stationed in Europe. The agent, who was not identified by name, happened to be in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1905, while Klausner was studying at the local university.

During their conversation, the Japanese remarked to Klausner, "Did you know that there is a connection between the Kishinev pogrom and the

Russo-Japanese War?" Klausner was astonished that there could be such a link. The agent's story, which can be considered first-hand testimony, deserves attention:

A furious internal debate among the Japanese decision-makers concerning the imminent conflict with Russia had almost paralyzed the government for almost six months...The "hawks" were preaching war with Russia, while the "doves" recommended a peaceful solution to the conflict. The "con" arguments [were about] the logistical constraints [of taking on] the Russians with their advantages and military experience, while the "pro" arguments [noted] several Russian shortcomings, especially emerging from internal unrest and corruption among high-ranking military echelons...They [also] highlighted Japanese patriotic sentiment and the integrity of the people.

The Japanese defense minister, who was the most prominent supporter of a proactive policy, brought to a special clandestine cabinet meeting in early February a tiebreaker argument: the above-mentioned article by the Norwegian poet Bjornstjerne Bjornson. A striking impression [was] made by the description in the article of the barbaric Kishinev pogrom against the Jews, and especially its bottom line, namely that only a rotten country could support a situation in which its government encourages one part of its population to slaughter another. The minister's conclusion was that it was clear that the Russian military forces were not a real army...and therefore its state of readiness was almost nonexistent. He concluded by stating that you can't deal with such a barbaric government able to conduct the Kishinev pogrom [the way you would deal] with a cultured country. Therefore, the cultural rules regarding preemptive war don't apply here.

The Japanese agent concluded his conversation with Klausner by saying, "History takes revenge."

Another angle on the story concerns the sensitivity of prominent Jewish figures to the fate of Russian Jews. This was visible in the cautious approach taken by Jewish financiers, such as the Rothschild family in Europe and Jacob Schiff in the US, to Japanese efforts in 1904-05 to raise money for war expenses through a bond issue. They justified their reluctance by their "desire to help the Russian Jews." It was not until after the Portsmouth Treaty (sponsored by President Theodore Roosevelt) was signed on September 5, 1905, ending the war, that the Jewish financiers authorized the Japanese bond deal.

A book published in 2018 by Prof. Steven J. Zipperstein entitled *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History*, which is considered the most comprehensive historical analysis of the pogrom and its surprisingly broad ramifications, misses the linkage to the Russo-Japanese War.

Historical research focusing on that war in the first decade of the 20th century might have faced gaps in documentation, so a part of the puzzle was missing.

Therefore, new attention to the Kishinev pogrom as a crucial motivating event leading to the Japanese decision to attack Russia in 1904 at Port Arthur could be considered a correction to a flawed historical recollection.

The Japanese decision to launch a preemptive war against Russia under the above circumstances could be considered a kind of “alternate casus belli.” It can also be said to fit into the principle of the Monroe Doctrine presented to the US Congress in December 1823, which declared “the nation's responsibility to protest international humanitarian atrocities by nominally civilized powers and, in extreme cases, act to prevent them.”

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