
Photograph of a Pogrom in the Soviet Union, 1931

TYPE:	Photograph	TOPICS:	Anti-Semitism
TIME:	1900-1949		Immigration
LEVEL:	Middle School and above		



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For the Jews of Russia, the Revolution of 1917 seemed to offer the potential for positive change. The new Soviet government was initially based on communist economic and social ideals that emphasized equality and opportunity, and it promised to embrace the many nationalities that resided within it. The Soviets criticized the anti-Semitism the Jews had faced under centuries of Tsarist rule, arguing that it divided the people, and allowed the Jews to organize their own soviets (councils) and have their own court system.

The reality of Jewish life in the Soviet Union proved to be quite different under the autocratic rule of the Communist Party and the dictator Joseph Stalin. Although the government officially spoke out against anti-Semitism, it largely ignored violence and discrimination against Jews. The Jewish soviets and courts, moreover, were intended to promote Soviet ideology, not to preserve Judaism. Confiscation of religious sites, eradication of Jewish cemeteries, and closing of *mikvehs* (ritual baths) and kosher slaughterhouses hindered religious observance. Perhaps the most significant action was the prohibition of religious circumcision of Jewish male babies.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a shift in Soviet tactics further hurt the Jews. After the Russian Revolution, communist leaders had called for worldwide revolution, but the rise of National Socialism in Germany, combined with other political and economic factors, created a rising nationalism in Russia. Rather than promote a global unification of all workers, Soviet leaders now encouraged patriotism and sacrifice for their own nation. This new rhetoric and accompanying propaganda contributed to rising anti-Semitism as the police and courts ignored increasing violence against Jews, such as the pogrom photographed here.

For more on the tsarist background to this anti-Semitism, go to JWA's *Women of Valor* exhibit at <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/lazarus/>.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What has happened to the buildings in the town?
2. How are the people in the picture responding?
3. What would your response have been?
4. Could such a pogrom happen in Russia (or anywhere else) today?