

**America's Jews and Russia's Tsars:  
The Struggle over Jewish Persecution, 1881-1917**

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By

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How did American Jewish leaders react to the pogroms that wracked Jewish communities in Russia from 1881 until 1917? How did they interact with Washington officials and how did both groups interact with American diplomats in Russia? That is what I intend to discuss today. I believe the US government's response was misunderstood in the Jewish community and still is by some historians who assume Washington had more influence than it did and by others who assume it did not take stronger positions because of lack of interest in the Jewish issue.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the American Jewish community, I will focus on Jacob H. Schiff, often its *de facto* leader, an immigrant from Germany at age 18 and 20 years later head of the powerful Kuhn, Loeb bank. He was a man of enormous personal wealth and power with a volatile temperament.

He used his position to improve the lot of Jews however he could. For example, he not only refused to raise loans for Russia, he urged other American banks to refuse also because of Russia's strong anti-Semitic policies. Furthermore, combining politics with profit, he funded Japan during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Jews grew rapidly in numbers (3,000 in 1820 to 300,000 in 1880),<sup>3</sup> and in economic strength. They settled largely in New York and developed religious and secular organizations that gave them increasing and continuing political influence.

Their leaders, including Cyrus Sulzberger, Louis Marshall, Mayer Sulzberger, Oscar Straus, and Simon Wolf, frequently wrote to Presidents and Secretaries of State or met with them personally.

Increasingly, the Jewish leaders focused on Russia, and largely as a consequence, John W. Foster, U.S. minister to Russia, started his legation's reporting on the condition of Russian Jews. His reports began during the pogroms in 1881 that followed the assassination of the popular tsar, Alexander II, in which a Jewish woman was implicated. Foster described the violence and chaos in Jewish quarters in more than 100 communities as mobs assaulted and killed inhabitants, looted their homes and shops, and destroyed an enormous amount of their property.<sup>4</sup>

Russian Jews suffered not only from hostile mobs but from a hostile government. In 1882, severe new laws prohibited them from settling in the countryside, restricting nearly all of them—five million by 1897-- to cities, towns, or hamlets in the Pale of Settlement, some 621,000 square miles in western Russia.<sup>5</sup> In all, Russian laws on Jewish matters--some enforced, some ignored--consisted of a vast number of restrictive edicts on all aspects of life, which could, when enforced, cause Jews incalculable hardship.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, facing intensifying popular violence and legal oppression, Jews fled Russia in unprecedented numbers. A few went to Palestine, more to Central and Western Europe, but by far the greatest number to the United States—200,000 in the decade following the 1881 pogroms alone.<sup>7</sup>

By 1891 the administration of President Benjamin Harrison, like many Members of Congress, saw the need to persuade Russia to change its laws about

Jews.<sup>8</sup> However, it was not something American administrations felt comfortable doing, and their efforts were always tentative.

President Cleveland's Secretary of State, Walter Q. Gresham, in 1893 told the Russian authorities that "Continued enforcement of harsh and inhumane measures [was] necessarily driving to our shores large numbers of degraded and undesirable persons who must in great measure be supported by our people," and that was inconsistent with the friendship Russia had long professed for the U.S. The effort was futile. The Russians government was happy to have Jews leave regardless of where they went.<sup>9</sup>

By late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, despite Washington's alarm about immigration, its officials shied away from anything like confrontation with Russia. Once, President Theodore Roosevelt, under enormous pressure from Jewish leaders, reluctantly agreed, not to an official US protest, but only to forward a private Jewish petition with an official transmittal letter. Both were rejected by the Russians, and the American *chargé d'affaires*, John W. Riddle, received a scolding from the foreign minister for interfering in Russian domestic affairs.<sup>10</sup>

America's Jewish leaders felt not only that the State Department lacked force in advocating their cause, but that reports from its diplomats in Russia, some of which they were privileged to see, hewed far too closely to tsarist positions, seldom reflecting the depth of Jewish suffering which they heard about via other channels. Indeed, the reporting was mixed. For example, American diplomats were slow to realize how much of the violence against Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was officially condoned and even stimulated. Furthermore, they did not see for several

years that delays in restoring order during anti-Jewish riots frequently stemmed from deliberate official negligence, not logistics.<sup>11</sup>

Schiff once became enraged by diplomatic correspondence concerning the grotesque pogrom in 1903 in Kishinev, a city of about 148,000 people, including 50,000 Jews.<sup>12</sup> When he heard about it he at once assembled New York's Jewish leaders in his office and established a relief committee. But first they required Russian permission to send help and wanted information about what was needed. Schiff asked President Roosevelt and Secretary of State John Hay to help him, and Hay, in turn, told Ambassador Robert S. McCormick to look into the matter.<sup>13</sup>

McCormick replied that Russian officials said aid was unnecessary and "authoritatively denied" that any "want or suffering" existed among Jews in southwestern Russia. Incensed, Schiff told Hay that McCormick was simply a messenger of the Russian government.<sup>14</sup>

What Schiff did not know, and his biographer, Naomi Cohen, and other historians have not relayed, is that Washington told McCormick that when he contacted the Russian government, not to get into the "political phase" of the situation. Furthermore, what is widely ignored now, as it was by Schiff at the time, is that four days later McCormick sent Washington three long dispatches from the correspondent of *The London Standard* describing the rioting in awful detail.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Schiff's disdain, when we review reporting of American diplomats in Russia, starting with Foster's messages about the 1881 pogroms, any assumption that Washington could have been ignorant of Jewish conditions because of inadequate diplomatic reporting simply is not tenable. Despatches like a brilliant 12-page report

on Jewish life in Russia in 1906 by *Chargé d’Affaires* Spencer Eddy<sup>16</sup> or his accounts of the appalling pogroms,<sup>17</sup> or the report of Witold Fuchs, vice-consul in Warsaw, carefully detailing official collaboration in the Siedletz pogrom<sup>18</sup> make it clear Washington knew from its diplomats what was happening to Jews in Russia. The diplomats, however, did err at times in predicting future conditions, believing assurances from high Russian officials that things would improve for the Jews.

America’s own record on minorities was far from spotless, which helped inhibit its officials when it came to protesting Jewish persecution in Russia. Race riots and lynchings of African-Americans embarrassed U.S. diplomats, and the Russians knew it. At least once a semi-official newspaper, *Novoye Vremia*, ran a long, angry article, entitled “Pogroms in the United States,” after the Americans brought up the Jewish issue. Claiming wildly that 4,000 American Negroes had been lynched in the previous 25 years, the article made clear that the Russian government intensely disliked Washington’s meddling in its domestic affairs.<sup>19</sup>

Following one of the worst massacres of all in Bialystok in June 1906, a new Russian minister of foreign affairs, Count Aleksandr Petrovich Izvolsky, firmly refused to discuss the matter even informally with the U.S. ambassador.<sup>20</sup> His refusal led an aide to Secretary of State Elihu Root to say, “Russia appears to have treated our message about Byalostok very much as we would have treated a proposition from Russia to discuss lynching.”<sup>21</sup>

But there was more to Washington’s timidity than diplomatic delicacy or shame about racial violence. It was specific to Russia. But first, we should remember that the U.S. Government had a record of helping distressed Jewish populations in

many places. Time prohibits elaboration, but I would direct you to President Van Buren's action in the Damascus blood libel case in 1840; the action of the US minister in Teheran, Alex McDonald, in 1897 to alleviate Jewish persecution, earning him praise from the Secretary of State; America's stance against Jewish persecution in Morocco during the Madrid conference in 1880 and again at the Algeiras conference in 1906, and the Roosevelt Administration's efforts to help tormented Jews in Romania in 1902, admittedly in part to curtail massive immigration.<sup>22</sup>

Then why did American resolve vanish in Russia? I believe Washington simply had no stomach for anything that could lead to a serious confrontation with Russia, a major European power. Once Schiff suggested use of force, and Roosevelt dismissively responded that he was "hysterical."<sup>23</sup> In those cases when the United States was more forceful regarding Jewish problems abroad, it was dealing with relatively minor powers and usually in concert with allies. Neither was the case in Russia.

Schiff scored one victory, however, in his long struggle with the tsars. The issue centered upon visas for citizens of each country to visit and "sojourn" in the other. The Treaty of Commerce and Navigation of 1832 called for equal treatment. But Russian officials had violated it since 1893 by asking the religion of American visa applicants. If they said "Jewish," the visa was denied. Schiff and the other Jewish leaders found this practice intolerable and wanted the treaty renegotiated.<sup>24</sup>

Russian officials believed that if they granted entry to foreign Jews and accorded them the treatment they accorded other visiting foreigners, they would be

treating them far better than they treated the vast majority of Russian Jews, a potential cause of trouble.<sup>25</sup>

By June 1909, however, Count Izvolsky told the Americans that “in a general way” his government was ready to renegotiate the treaty.<sup>26</sup> What that meant in practical terms remains unclear, because by then renegotiation was no longer good enough for America’s Jewish leaders. They wanted the treaty abrogated, discontinuing not only temporary visits but trade, claiming it benefited the Russians much more than the Americans. Renegotiation would prove useless, they thought, particularly given their belief that American diplomats in Russia were spineless. The diplomats, on their part, not only worried about complicating Russo-American relations, but felt restrained because the United States excluded Asian immigrants.<sup>27</sup>

In February 1911, President Taft, under mounting pressure from the Jewish community, invited leaders of main Jewish groups, UAHC, AJC, and B’nai B’rith, to meet with him at the White House. The meeting was a disaster for Taft. He presented legal and economic arguments against abrogation and said he was president of the whole country, implying that the Jewish issue was relatively small, a comment that immediately angered the Jews, especially the volatile Schiff. Before the day was over, he and Taft were at loggerheads, and Schiff declared that he and his colleagues would turn to the public.<sup>28</sup>

Schiff pledged \$25,000 toward a campaign to publicize the visa issue and, with other leading Jews, lobbied the Congress energetically. They also secured the backing of many American Gentiles. For example, at an interdenominational mass meeting at Carnegie Hall in New York on December 6, 1911, prominent figures from

various walks of life drafted a resolution they submitted to Congress calling for an end to the treaty. Several days later, Louis Marshall and others testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, asking members if they were willing to permit a foreign power to give a religious test to Americans on American soil. They prevailed, convincing Congress to abrogate the treaty.<sup>29</sup>

It was mainly a symbolic victory, although it did curtail the small amount of commerce that existed between Russian and the United States. Persecution of Russia's Jews continued unabated, reaching a high point with the beginning of World War I when Jews were suspected of sabotage, and lasting until the Tsarist regime was overthrown in 1917. It would recur later in various forms, especially in the Ukraine in 1919, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

I will close by pointing out that the policy of successive administrations to tread very gently with tsarist regimes, surely stemmed partly, but only secondarily, from reluctance to jeopardize the small but increasing trade and investment possibilities Russia offered.<sup>30</sup> It stemmed mostly from the fact that Washington had no realistic way to alter Russian policy.

American Jews never came to terms with the fact that anti-Semitism, including pogroms, was deeply embedded in Russian life and government. As former Assistant Interior Minister Prince S. D. Urusov once pointed out to the Duma, it ran deep in the Russian ministries, police, and armed forces.<sup>31</sup> There was no way polite, or even firm, protests by American diplomats could expunge it. Peculiarly, American lack of options is rarely brought into this discussion.

The Jewish leaders unquestionably had an uphill, frustrating struggle with official Washington, but the effort honed their capacity to take an active part in official matters abroad that concerned their co-religionists. In the end, tsarist anti-Semitic policies stimulated the continuing determination of many American Jews to use their numbers and strength to promote the wellbeing of Jews everywhere.

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## NOTES

### A key to abbreviations and spelling:

FRUS = *Foreign Relations of the United States*, the U.S. State Department's collection of diplomatic correspondence (in print and on line).

NA = U.S. National Archives.

RG = Record Group.

M = Microfilm.

I spell "despatch" in the State Department manner.

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Medoff, for example, believes that in 1869 Russia cancelled an order to move thousands of Jews from their homes because of U.S. intervention, proving that the United States had emerged as a "major world power" and could pressure countries like Russia to change internal policies. See *Jewish Americans and Political Participation*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, Cal., 2002, p. 103. Evelyn Levow Greenberg agrees that Grant administration protests, along with those of other nations, were probably the cause of halting the deportations. See "An 1869 Petition on Behalf of Russian Jews," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1965, p. 290. Ronald J. Jensen, however, demonstrates persuasively that despite much deliberation and correspondence, no protest was ever sent from the U.S. Government and that the deportation order was rescinded really for Russian internal economic reasons. See "America, Russia, and the Jewish Question," *American Jewish History*, vol. 75, no. 3, Mar. 1986, pp. 288-89. In fact, Washington was reluctant in President Grant's era to interfere in Russia's internal affairs on behalf of the Jews and remained so until the end of the tsarist period.

Greenberg, *op. cit.*, demonstrates the "lack-of-interest" view calling non-action a classic government pattern regarding Jewish protests. See p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Naomi Cohen's excellent biography, *Jacob H. Schiff: A Study in American Jewish Leadership*, Brandeis, 1999, for background on Schiff's life and career.

<sup>3</sup> Library of Congress exhibit, "A Century of Immigration, 1820-1924." See [www.loc.gov/exhibits](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits).

<sup>4</sup> FRUS, 1881-1882, vol. 1, p. 1019. Fisher, Ralph T. Jr., "Anti-Semitism in Russia" in *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*, Joseph L. Wiczynski, ed., Academic International Press, 1977, vol. 2, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Population figures for the Pale vary considerably. I have taken the number 5-million for Russia from I. Michael Aronson who gets it from an 1897 census. See his *Troubled Waters: The Origins of the 1881 Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia*, Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1990, p. 35, and *The Atlas of Modern Jewish History*, edited by Evyatar Friesel, Oxford University, 1990, p. 32., which concurs. The figure for the area of the Pale comes from *A Concise History of the Jewish People*, by Naomi E. Pasachoff and

Robert J. Littman, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 200. They put it at approximately 1-million square kilometers, and I made the conversion to square miles. *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., by Martin Gilbert, Routledge, 2007, has a good map of the Pale.

<sup>6</sup> FRUS, 1891-1892, pp.734-46. Bickerton, Ian J. and Carla L. Klausner, *A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Prentice Hall, 2005, p. 23. Gitelman, Zvi, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1988, pp.13-14.

<sup>7</sup> FRUS, 1891-1892, p. 738. According to the Library of Congress, *op. cit.*, over 2.5 million Eastern European Jews had migrated to the United States by 1924 when legislation sharply restricted immigration.

<sup>8</sup> NA, RG 59, M 77, Roll 139, Blaine to Smith, despatches 78, Feb. 18, 1891, and 126, Jan. 5, 1892.

<sup>9</sup> NA, RG 59, M 77, Roll 139, Gresham to White, despatch 119, Aug. 28, 1893; and RG 59, M 862, Roll 115, Eddy to Sec. State, despatch 644, Sept. 15, 1906. FRUS, 1906, Part 2, p.1311.

<sup>10</sup> NA, RG 59, M 35, roll 60, Riddle telegram to Sec. State, July 16, 1903. Edmond Morris has a good description of Roosevelt's effort on this occasion to placate the Jewish leaders without offending the Russians. See *Theodore Rex*, Random House, 2001, pp. 243-45, 254-55.

<sup>11</sup> Prince S. D. Urusov, a former minister of interior, explained in detail to the Duma how this worked. For a record of his remarks, see FRUS 1906, part 2, p.1261 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Ettinger, S., "The Jews in Russia at the Outbreak of the Revolution," from *The Jews in Soviet Russia Since 1917*, Oxford, 1970, Lionel Kochan, ed., p.25. Population figures for this period vary widely. These are from the *Jewish Encyclopedia.com.*, but Ettinger, for example, gives 100,000 as the total population for Kishinev with 65,000 Jews.

<sup>13</sup> FRUS, 1903, pp. 712-15. Feingold, Henry L., *Silent No More: Saving the Jews of Russia, The American Jewish Effort, 1967-1989*, Syracuse University, 2007, pp.4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, p. 131-32.

<sup>15</sup> FRUS, 1903, pp. 712-15. Led by prominent figures in the Jewish community, protest rallies were held around the country and newspapers throughout the nation ran outraged editorials. Speeches and articles are collected by Cyrus Adler in *The Voice of America on Kishineff*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1904. For background on these responses see Philip Ernest Schoenberg's "The American Reaction to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, Mar. 1974, pp.262-83. David S. Foglesong in *American Mission and the "Evil Empire," Cambridge University*, 2007, pp. 43-44, shows how the Kishinev and other anti-Jewish riots in Russia stimulated some Americans to examine racial violence in the United States.

<sup>16</sup> FRUS, 1906, part 2, p.1300 ff.

<sup>17</sup> See FRUS, 1905, P. 831 for an example of one of these reports.

<sup>18</sup> NA, RG 59, M862, Roll 115, despatch 625, Aug. 13, 1906, transmitting Fuch's report.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Meyer to Root, #661, Oct. 3, 1906, and Roll 66, draft for Sec. State's signature, June 25, 1906. The Tuskegee Institute puts the number of lynching victims at 4,730 between 1882 and 1951, of whom 3,437 were African-Americans and 1,293 were White. The figures are quoted by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. See [www.Yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979](http://www.Yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979); "Themes in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Culture—The Negro Holocaust."

<sup>20</sup> NA, RG 59, M 35, Roll 66, Meyer to Sec. State, tel., June 25, 1906.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, handwritten note stamped, "Secretary of State, June 25."

<sup>22</sup> See Frankel, Jonathan, *The Damascus Affair*, Cambridge University Press, 1997. Re. McDonald in Persia, see FRUS, 1897, pp.429-31. Re. the Madrid Conference, see FRUS 1880, pp. 893-920. Re. the Algeciras Conference, see FRUS, 1905, pp. 680-84, and NA, RG 59, M77, Roll 155, pp. 406-42. Re. Romania, see FRUS 1902, pp. 42-45, 910-15, and 1903, pp. 702-03.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> Ann E. Healy has a thorough review of Russian passport and visa restrictions affecting American and other Jews from 1880, including the matter of questioning visa applicants about religion. See "Tsarist Anti-Semitism and Russian-American Relations," *Slavic Review*, vol. 42, no. 3, fall 1983, pp. 408-25.

<sup>25</sup> NA, RG 59, M 77, Roll 137, Blaine to Hoffman, despatch 103, Nov. 23, 1881. *Ibid.*, Roll 138, despatch 21, Freylinghuysen to Hunt, Dec. 15, 1882, and Adee to Wurtz, despatch 51, Sept. 20, 1889. Cohen, p. 145-46.

<sup>26</sup> NA, RG 59, M 862, Roll 942, Riddle to Sec. of State, despatch 487, June 12, 1909.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, unsigned note stamped Sec. of State, Jan. 26, 1909, addressed to Alvey A. Adee.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, pp. 147-50, has a good description of the American Jewish leaders' campaign against the Taft Administration's policy concerning the visa issue.

<sup>29</sup> For an exhaustive Congressional report on the hearing, with enormous background material, see "Termination of the Treaty of 1832 Between the United States and Russia," Washington, Government Printing Office, 1911. To see it online, go to <http://books.google.com> and enter the title.

<sup>30</sup> For figures on America's trade with Russia in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Healy, *op. cit.*, pp. 423-24. Foglesong points out that American businessmen complained about "counterproductive criticism" of Russia by Jewish leaders which reduced U.S. exports but got nothing in return. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*