

Antisemitism and the Fall of Tsarist Russia

Reading [A People's Tragedy](#), Orlando Figes' magisterial account of the Russian Revolution, one is confronted with the plight of Russia's Jews, scapegoated for the empire's failures. It is noteworthy that a surge of virulent antisemitism immediately predicated the Tsarist regime's collapse—a tide of hatred that fueled the chaos which the revolutionary spirit harnessed.

Returning to Vladimir Solovyov's [reference](#) to the Jewish people as the 'axis of world history' it is worth recalling the antisemitism in late tsarist Russia that immediately precipitated the revolution that ushered in a century of atheism.

Figes' book spans from the 1891 famine, which exposed the frailty of the imperial system, to Lenin's death in 1924, when the Bolsheviks had firmly consolidated their power. The late 19th and early 20th century Russian was an anachronistic patchwork of poverty-stricken peasants, downtrodden workers, and out of touch ruling elite. Under Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II, antisemitism was a policy wielded cynically to maintain power. From the 1880s onward, Jews were routinely blamed for a litany of national ills—economic hardship to revolutionary agitation. The infamous [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#), a fake document purporting to reveal a Jewish plot for world domination, surfaced.

The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, which Figes covers in harrowing detail, was predicated on the blood libel, the medieval myth that Jews ritually murdered Christian children for religious purposes. When a Christian boy was found dead, local Jews were falsely blamed for his death. What followed was a brutal two-day rampage: Jewish homes sacked, businesses destroyed, and nearly fifty murdered. Local authorities stood by while the press fanned the flames. Nicholas II, the last Tsar, held deeply antisemitic beliefs himself, which were reflected in his administration's tolerance of these pogroms. He allowed groups like the Black Hundreds to operate with impunity.

Figes highlights the [Beilis Affair of 1911-1913](#), where a Jewish factory worker, was falsely accused of ritually murdering a Christian boy in Kiev. The case laid bare the depth of antisemitism in the Russian judiciary and ruling elite. Although Beilis was eventually acquitted, the trial poisoned the well of public moral sentiment.

By 1917, the long-standing antisemitism of the Tsarist era had woven itself into the fabric of Russian society. Even as the Romanovs fell, antisemitism persisted. During the Civil War both sides—Reds and Whites—committed atrocities, but the Whites, the anti-Bolshevik forces, were particularly notorious for their virulent hatred of Jews. Figes recounts how many White leaders, blaming the Jews for the revolution itself, launched vicious pogroms killing thousands.

Figes' masterful work is a sobering reminder to the nations that the ill-treatment of the Jewish people, on account of the Abrahamic covenant, is a direct affront to the divine, who said: "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you". While it would be simplistic to attribute the decline of Imperial Russia solely to the ill-treatment of God's chosen people, history is awash with examples of national fortunes rising and falling in accord with their attitude to the Jewish people.