This is a revised version of a keynote address delivered last summer at a conference on Jews and Cities sponsored by the Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center of the Hebrew University. Left unaltered is its rhythm as a spoken text -- hence the absence of footnotes – and condensed is a large body of material into a 50-60 minute presentation. It draws on research for a book manuscript currently in-progress that began as a cultural history of Russian Jewry at the turn of the 20th century but, over time, the Kishinev pogrom emerged as its centerpiece. Starting as a study in Russian Jewish history, it has now become something of an international history tracking the event’s impact on a widely variegated range of institutions, movements, and texts in Russia, Palestine, the United States, and elsewhere. (Several of these are only hinted at in this document, including the first stirrings of the Jewish defense force in Palestine, the Hagannah; the Bolshevik/Menshevik split of 1903 in which the post-Kishinev Bund played a pivotal role and, more surprisingly, the earliest echoes of the NAACP.) My book manuscript tracks an event, localized, brief, and occurring in one of Russia’s more obscure corners, that would define -- arguably more resolutely than any other single event of the time -- the contour of turn of the century Jewish life, and leave a considerable imprint long afterwards, too. Needless to say, please do not cite or otherwise use this text that is circulated only for the purpose of this seminar.

*Kishinev’s Pogrom in Mythology, and History: The Transmutation of the 1903 Riot in Hebrew Poetry, Jewish Politics, and The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.*

Steven J. Zipperstein

“Historical work did not satisfy me entirely…. [I]t does not allow enough scope for showing men as they really are, dismantling their inner workings and penetrating deep into their souls.” Victor Serge

“Most legends spring from facts.” A. J. P. Taylor

It was not only the Pushkin of Hebrew letters, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, who complained about the wretchedness of the city of Kishinev, wedged at late imperial Russia’s distant southwest only a few dozen miles from Romania’s still
new borders. Alexander Pushkin did so, too. This was in a casual composition, a byproduct of the poet’s youthful impudence, his exasperation at being so far from the center of things. (Pushkin was known to compare Kishinev to Sodom but, as he put it, the Russian city lacked both “the enlightenment and hospitality of the Biblical” place.) The particular poem I have in mind was written during Pushkin’s exile there in 1823, and in light of what would transpire many years later on the city’s streets in spring 1903 rereading it feels more than fleetingly chilling:

“Cursed town of Kishinev!
My tongue will tire itself in abuse of you.
Some day of course the sinful roofs
Of your dirty houses
Will be struck by heavenly thunder
And – I will not find a trace of you!
They will fall and perish in flames,
Both Varfolomey’s motley house
And the filthy Jewish booths…”

In Bialik’s poem, “Be-ir ha-ha-regah” (In the City of Slaughter), one of the most famous pieces of writing in the Jewish literary repertoire and undoubtedly the most widely read text in any language about Jewish Kishinev, the city itself is obscured. It is not even mentioned by name. In part, this is because when it first appeared, in December 1903, it was encased in something of a prophylactic, in
deceptive packaging under the title “Masa Nemirov,” “A Tale of Nemirov,” which suggested, though probably few of its readers, including its official censors, were fooled that it was about a Jewish tragedy long ago, half-forgotten. But the poem’s savage, oddly vulnerable rage has never been forgotten and in its original as well as in Russian and Yiddish translations (at the time, it may well have left its greatest mark via a brilliant Russian-language translation by Vladimir Jabotinsky) it offered readers in the space of one epic work something akin to an amalgam of the poetry of Coleridge inflected by the Book of Job.

Still, it’s fair to say that little if anything regarding Kishinev itself with the exception of its pogrom tends to have been known by Jews – and this seems to have been the case in the immediate wake of the 1903 tragedy, as well. The then young Joseph Hayyim Brenner (soon the closest Hebrew would then come to brushing up against the literary imagination of a Dostoevsky) felt little more than the need to write the word Kishinev – this in a letter in September 1903 – so as to evoke horror: “In the world there is certainly news. Kishinev! If we were to stand and scream all our days and all our nights it would not suffice.” Before the Second World War, no spot on European Jewish map would be so conflated, so linked with horror so that no more than the mere mention of it was necessary to evoke images of diasporic catastrophe at its worst and this across the Jewish political landscape. Kishinev, writes historian Anita Shapira, “had the impact of an earthquake.” A Yiddish Daily Forward editorial in early May 1903 starts with the words: “We write, and write about Kishinev, we talk and talk about it…” Every issue of the newspaper from the time news of the event first surfaced in mid-April -- and for no less than for two months – featured headlines about it.
Indeed, no Jewish news item of the time, not even France’s long, contorted vendetta against Alfred Dreyfus, captured quite the same attention. With Jews — avid readers of newspapers — now settled in large, dense blocks in New York, Chicago, London and elsewhere, the press lavished keen interest on the terrors of Bessarabia’s capital with detailed, lurid reporting day after day for weeks. It was the subject literally of hundreds of editorials, as well as books in German, French, and English, some published almost instantaneously; one American clergyman managed to get his 300-page book released already in July 1903. The massacre readily lent itself to the still relatively new, still startling phenomenon of photographic depiction, with newspapers (outside Russia, and the illegal press circulated within it) packed with gruesomely detailed photos of shredded Torah scrolls, ravaged Jewish homes and shops and, of course, the dead shrouded or with their mutilated bodies in full view, lying side by side in preparation for burial.

Denunciations poured in from President Roosevelt and former President Cleveland, Clarence Darrow and Tolstoy. (Theodore Roosevelt: “I have never in my experience known of a more immediate or a deeper expression of sympathy.”) News of some 77 protest meetings in 27 states many with thousands in attendance were held in the United States alone with no fewer than 363 public addresses. Within no more than a month of its outbreak, the pogrom had inspired the writing and staging of several instant plays. New York’s Chinese community proudly sponsored several of these productions and launched its own campaign to assist Kishinev’s victims, “the first instance,” as one
announcement read, “that the Chinese have ever expressed sympathy for the Jews.” Dozens of meetings were held in churches in the United States, England and elsewhere where people asked the same plaintive question: How could the largest Christian nation on earth – and at the dawn of the new century – be the scene of such barbarism?

A jarring indication of how deep a mark it left is that when Chaim Weizmann, the first President of the State of Israel, dictated in the early 1940s his memoirs Trial and Error, he described how he was so crushed by news of the Kishinev pogrom that, then a student in Geneva, he rushed immediately to Gomel where he organized the town’s rather successful Jewish self-defense. Now, as it happens, not only do we know that the self-defense group in Gomel (the pogrom there broke out three months after Kishinev’s riot, on September 1) was organized by the Jewish Socialist Labor Bund (with the help of some Marxist Zionists), but Weizmann himself was in the Geneva having just returned from a trip to Russia; we have his postmarked letters to his fiancée, Vera, sent from Geneva and where Kishinev is but scantily mentioned. My point isn’t that Weizmann was intentionally lying -- no doubt, this is what he recalled and he told the same story, in various ways, throughout much of his life. For Weizmann, eventually one of the towering heroes of Russian Jewry, it probably felt quite natural to insert himself into what had become one of its key, and defining moments.

In the midst of it all, the pogrom would be stretched and poked, fit into conflicting ideological grids, and at times made into something still worse,
certainly different than it was. For many, it would become little less than a metaphor for evil itself, a singularly revealing glimpse into the horrors that the new century held in store. Hence, so much of the pogrom’s specificity — the actual details of the event — slipped out of view, sometimes distorted beyond recognition. Bessarabia’s isolation and the simple fact that so few facts were known about Kishinev itself made the widest range of errors and exaggerations all the more plausible. When, only two years later, an immeasurably more widespread and deadly wave of pogroms erupted during the constitutional crisis of 1905-06, there now existed a ready, durable set of responses – political, communal, and even aesthetic with Kishinev’s pogrom providing a persuasive context (the belief that the government sponsored the attacks), and stringent lessons for deportment (above all, the need for self-defense).

Turning back to Bialik’s poem for a moment, one of the ironies of Kishinev’s disappearance in it is that the poet himself knew, of course, an immense amount about the city having spent no less than five weeks examining it with the guidance of two assistants who helped him interview, then translate from the Yiddish into Hebrew the testimonies of pogrom victims, survivors, and bystanders. He sat with them in their homes: his notes on the interviews describe their physical surroundings, the dimensions of their courtyards, the location of their outhouses, all in ethnographic-like detail, rich and specific, laid out in five, black notebooks that he then set aside never to use or refer to again.
Few better examples exist, it would seem, in the history of the history of Russian Jewry of the utter marginality of historical knowledge when confronted with the incomparable pull of the mythological. On one hand, we have the young (then in his early 30s), penurious, still-vulnerable Bialik (he was truly anointed Hebrew’s national poet only after his Kishinev poem’s appearance) hired to perform the onerous task, set in motion by historian taskmaster Simon Dubnow, head of a just-formed Jewish historical commission, to amass accurate information, to collect it meticulously (Dubnow’s instructions to Bialik are so painstakingly detailed as to be downright patronizing) so that Dubnow might situate Kishinev’s real, concrete story, in all its specificity into the fabric of Jewish history. Bialik does just what Dubnow instructs him to do but, then again, he doesn’t: He collects information with great care, goes off in June presumably to write up his findings, and then spends the summer at work on his poem which not only neglects but contradicts outright much of what he had gathered. The poem quickly achieves legendary standing (among its many influences, the earliest stirrings of the pre-state Israeli defense force, the Hagannah, date its origin to it), while his notebooks end up in a closet, then on a shelf in the venerable poet’s Tel Aviv archive not to published for another 80 years. History locked away, with mythologies, tethered neither to fact nor concrete place, running amuck their influences extending even to the creation of one of the world’s best-oiled military enterprises.

I’ll soon modify some, not all, of this: Bialik’s poem certainly did overlook data he amassed but also may well have included within it crucial aspects that history has, over time, found too unwieldy, or insufficiently substantiated to recall.
Historicism’s own, sometimes too-stark counter-mythologies can themselves occupy roles not dissimilar from those that it deplores, counter-orthodoxies that themselves are made too much of the stuff of impious belief, of initial skepticism rendered brittle, too unyielding, too wedded to its own brash, paralyzing disquiet.

By all accounts, Kishinev was on the rise as a commercial hub at turn of the century just at the moment suddenly when it collapsed. At the geographic center of Bessarabia – a sliver of land some 600 miles long stretching from the Austro-Hungarian border at its north to the Black Sea – Kishinev was now the empire’s fifth largest city, connected by rail, boasting some beautiful streets with impressive schools and museums, and a vibrant commercial life with Jews, making up perhaps one-half of the city’s population of some 100,000. Jews dominated its trade and also its small industrial and semi-industrial sector.

This was also the region with the highest infant mortality rate in Russia, the fewest number of doctors, perhaps the worst roads. (Close both to Romania and Austria-Hungary, Russian authorities chose not to build or improve roads that could, in wartime, prove strategically perilous.) Kishinev itself was surrounded by vineyards and packed with liquor stores – no fewer than 800 by the mid-19th century, many more half a century later: Bessarabia was a major wine producer but by and large the product was deemed inferior, ingested mostly locally, or sent to Odessa to supply that port city’s ample thirst. Much of Kishinev’s
population was very poor and this included the majority of its Jews, part of late imperial Russia’s huge mass of Jewish working poor with the size of the local Jewish population doubling every decade since the mid-19th century. Bessarabia was, it seems, known by Jews as a place where money could be made more readily, a region with gentiles somewhat more trusting and, still more important, with officials said to be supremely bribable. Antisemites -- and Bessarabia then boasted some of the empire’s most influential, most tireless -- would charge that Jews swarmed here to cheat locals, an accusation grossly over-stated but not without some, albeit distant, accuracy.

The ferocity of local xenophobes, inspired in no small measure in this border region by apprehensions of creeping Romanian influences, contrasted vividly with a general atmosphere of laxity, a casualness of mores, even morality. Bribery of officials was in fact all-but normalized with, for example, the rate of 1 ruble per week the set fee allotted for prostitutes to operate without inference. Smuggling probably was easier here than anywhere in the empire -- which is why this was the first place in Russia where Lenin’s *Iskra* was printed, in 1901. The Governor General at the time of Kishinev pogrom -- an easy-going, bumbling fellow, by no means fervent in his hatred of Jews, indeed lax about nearly everything including his administrative duties-- entertained guests with a woman at his side officially registered as a prostitute. Local Moldavians were deemed unusually genial, even sweet, qualities that impressed visitors even to Kishinev’s prison who found inmates, including those jailed for violent crimes during the pogrom, to be friendly, forthcoming, eager to share confidences, not infrequently unable or unwilling to understand the gravity of their crimes.
What were these crimes? They were, in some instances, truly heinous but concentrated, on the whole, in no more than one terrible late-morning and early afternoon and in but one of the city’s neighborhoods. This was among its poorest, an area of mixed residence where a cluster of mostly Moldavians, locals as well as villagers from areas just beyond the city, looted, raped, cut limbs off the living and murdered. Not infrequently it was neighbors who killed or molested neighbors with familiarity, at least acquaintance, contributing to bestiality. Nearly half of the Jews murdered in the Kishinev pogrom – the total number killed was 49 -- were slaughtered in these streets, a tangle mostly of unpaved alleyways intersecting one of Kishinev’s most impoverished called Asia Street and this in the span of some three or four hours. When historian Simon Dubnow later wrote in his Russian-language memoirs that Kishinev “was not an ordinary pogrom, but butchery” it was this he was speaking about.

It is possible to track, hour by hour sometimes building by building, the cycle of events known as the Kishinev pogrom because of trial transcripts (both Jews engaged in self-defense as well as pogromists were put on trial), copious reportage, Bialik’s notes, much else. Violence started Easter Sunday, also the last day of Passover with warnings issued in synagogues that Jews ought to stay at home after services. Weather was mild, balmy, in mid-afternoon drunks, perhaps as many as a couple hundred, guided by young men on bicycles started to stone Jewish-owned stores (periodically in Kishinev and elsewhere, mostly in Russia’s southern region during the Easter season, Jewish stores would have their windows shattered largely by young, marauding boys) with a few homes,
including those of Kishinev’s wealthy Jews, now pummeled with rocks too.
Police intervened intermittently, troops were not called in (mostly, it seems, because the Governor General, entertaining once again that evening, was, as always, asleep at the wheel) but by the day’s end the violence had scarred only a small area of the town and seemed to have ended. It rained early the next morning, and this too promised to bring the melee to a close. That same morning, about 250 Jews, including merchants and laborers, gathered near the marketplace where the violence had started the day before armed with crowbars, hammers, and a small cache of guns. Quickly they were dispersed with some arrested.

The rain soon stopped, and by late-morning the pogrom spread throughout much of the city with residential buildings ransacked mostly by Moldavians, many with wagons waiting just outside the places they attacked, robbing Jews of their belongings. Nearly all the city’s liquor stores were broken into, often with their goods consumed on the spot. Police protected the wealthier neighborhoods with troops not authorized to intervene until mid-afternoon and it then took a few hours for them to do their work. By then, a large swath of Jewish stores had been devastated, some homes destroyed, too, with Jews in them attacked, raped, some killed. By evening, nearly all the violence had ended; a few Jews were attacked the next morning in nearby suburbs but by now troops controlled nearly all the city’s streets and the pogrom petered out.

It was, as mentioned before, the gruesome events of Monday late-morning and early afternoon in Lower, or Old Kishinev that would define the pogrom. This
was the lowest part of the town edging downward toward the Byk, a marshy extension of the Dniester. Bialik’s poem acknowledges the physicality of the Kishinev: Hence, its first word is “Kum,” “Arise, and go now to the city of slaughter/Into its courtyards, wind your way.” This, then, is contrasted, and just as the poem descends into its most terrible and also most self-lacerating moments, with the word “Ve-yaradeta.” “Descend, then, into the valley, verdant...A barn, a shed...like a host of vampires.”

Korolenko’s famous Kishinev story, “The House at Asia 13” built its entire plot around one building on a street in this neighborhood. Ephraim Moshe Lilien’s much-reprinted portrait, “To the Martyrs of Kishinev” featured the shammos, or ritual attendant, from one of the densely housed area’s synagogues, a Moshe-Tsivi Kigl; he was widely believed to have been murdered while defending the holy ark of his synagogue from attack – such images appear on Lilien’s then famous picture -- but it turns out that Kigel just happened to have been accosted by marauders near this building with the story of his clutching torahs at the time of his murder taking on a life of its own. It was these depictions that would grab hold of the imaginations of Jews and others.

An especially striking example of how the particularities of Kishinev and, no less so, its pogrom tended to disappear -- in the cascade of news items and pamphlets, short stories and plays, propagandistic art and photographs that transmuted Kishinev from an obscure town into a dark metaphor -- is the erasure of the heavy impact of Russian Orthodoxy on its mores, the impact in the pogrom’s making of right-wing politics meshed with religiosity. Exactly the
opposite was the fate of the – now obscure -- Czestochowa pogrom of August 1902, some 120 miles southwest of Warsaw then, of course, in the Russian empire. This was a bloody affair in which fourteen Jews were killed but where all, including even the Jewish Socialist Labor Bund (then in the midst of furious debates regarding Jewish vengeance for anti-Jewish attacks and also uneasy because of the involvement of some local workers in the pogrom) minimized the larger significance of the event pointing to Czestochowa as an unusually fanatical Catholic center and hence unrepresentative. In its case, the town’s singular features were said to have militated against the wider, historical significance of its pogrom.

Yet Kishinev, too, more so than perhaps any other spot in the region, and for centuries, was a valued bastion of Orthodoxy in the Ottoman world, a frontier bulwark against the spread of Islam. This longstanding legacy as a religious center continued to characterize it well into the nineteenth and, indeed, twentieth centuries. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Kishinev was little more than the Old or Lower Town ringed by a medley of noble estates but dominated by influential monasteries. These had been built during something of a sacred building boom in the last decades of the eighteenth century; with a population of barely a couple hundred families in 1800, Kishinev boasted no fewer than seven churches and monasteries. Formally, in fact, it was in the control of the Patriarch of Jerusalem who acquiesced at the time of Russia’s conquest of the region in 1812 to the transfer of it, its adjacent villages and monasteries to the Russians. By 1818, it boasted Bessarabia’s largest seminary (with over 1,000 students by 1903); Kishinev’s first printing press was in the church’s control as were until late
in the century nearly all the region’s primary schools. The first newspaper reports of the pogrom spoke often of the insidious influence of the city’s right wing seminary students accused of coordinating attacks against Jews, of cycling through the marauding crowds, of guiding them to Jewish stores and homes. (The Kishinev seminary was also known as a place spawning radical populists.) Seminarians figure prominently in the earliest news of the massacre but quickly enough references to them all but disappear with descriptions of the pogrom’s origins now rendered generic, and very soon also prescriptive.

Nothing thrust Kishinev’s pogrom into the spotlight more than the assertion – seen widely, then and since, as incontrovertible fact – that the government itself was responsible for planning and executing it. Two years later, with the eruption of hundreds of pogroms in 1905-6, this lesson learned in Kishinev’s wake emerged as perhaps the most widely embraced maxim about Russian life for Jews, radicals, liberals, and so many others. It was the belief in government complicity, not mere inattention or indifference, that more than anything else tore Kishinev’s riot out of time and place. Russia would be firmed up in Jewish memory not merely as corrupt or backward but as a place whose government stooped so low as to conspire with crooks and rapists to wreak havoc on its own subjects then blaming the victims themselves for its unspeakable deeds.

In this respect it was Kishinev that indelibly stamped the word “pogrom” onto Jewry’s consciousness with the meaning it has carried ever since. The Russian “pogromit” means “to beat or attack.” Before 1903, this was one of a medley of words in Russian used to describe mob violence against Jews or others. No less
often used to describe the attacks that broke out in 1881-2 mostly in Ukraine and the Black Sea region was the biblically inflected phrase “southern storms.” “Bezporiadki” or “massacres” was frequently utilized, too. The first English-language press reports on the Kishinev pogrom included words like “atrocities” or “anti-Semitic riots.” In Russia, people would continue, of course, to use the word “pogrom” as a way of depicting the fullest range of attacks. For most Jews, however, as well as many others beyond the empire in the Kishinev pogrom’s wake, the word “pogrom” would now take on the singularly Jewish meaning it has had ever since – namely, an attack on Jews either government-initiated or condoned. Much like vodka, pogroms would be widely seen as one of Russia’s most distinctive contributions to contemporary life.

Now perceptions of Russia shifted decisively with Jews and their supporters insisting that the streets of Russia were unsafe for Jews with its official anti-Semitism setting it apart from all civilized countries. When Russian officials sought to compare the uncontrollable anti-Jewish violence in their south to lynching in the American South – a typical refrain at the time -- reactions ranged from rage to befuddlement, and these in turn left an indelible imprint on the discussions leading up to the consolidation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the NAACP started in 1909. The first meeting of the group that set the organization in motion took place in the New York apartment of journalists and left-wing activists Anna Strunsky and William English Walling, both of whom wrote about Russia’s pogroms which they compared – for reasons, needless to say, different from those lodged by Russia’s apologists -- to America’s race riots. Walling would emerge as one of the
NAACP’s leading figures in its first, formative years. And historians now question whether the comparison between pogroms and lynching was quite so far-fetched, and it seems clear that the official Russian version was more often right than wrong. By this I mean the Russian government’s refusal to implement the tough decisions necessary to quell hatred of Jews, which rose to the level of an obsession in the regime’s last decades, greatly contributed, no doubt, to the worsening atmosphere that so afflicted Russian Jews in those years. But the most egregious of accusations leveled – namely, that the regime was directly responsible for fomenting pogroms – is now known to be untrue at the highest levels and, with the rarest of exceptions, untrue for local officials, too, who more often were clumsy than complicit.

Still, in Kishinev’s wake – and largely because of what we now know was almost certainly a forged telegram widely attributed at the time to Minister of Interior Vyacheslav Plehve and published in The Times of London – the notion that authorities planned and executed the massacres would emerge as something of a commonplace, perhaps the most sturdy, widely believed of all assumptions regarding twentieth-century Russian Jewish life. (Plehve would be assassinated, after three unsuccessful attempts and a year after the Kishinev pogrom, in no small measure as punishment for his role in the massacre.) Planned the pogrom was but not by St. Petersburg authorities. Rather, it was likely plotted by a clutch of local activists led, at least inspired by the owner of Bessarabia’s only daily newspaper, Bessarabets, a Moldavian-turned-Russian ultra-right-winger Pavel, or Pavlochi Krushevan. His paper stoked the flames by spreading rumors of Jewish killings of Christian children for use during Passover, also claiming that
Jews had devised a way to make wine without the use of grapes so as to undercut the international wine market. It was widely assumed that Krushevan played little less than a decisive role but, then again, he, too, fell by the wayside much like the mysterious seminarians. Contemporary accounts placed Krushevan front and center in the tale but he would soon be marginalized and when mentioned at all mostly because of – really rather tenuous -- government ties linking him and his wretched newspaper which was now depicted as little more than a conduit for official machinations.

A few words about Krushevan: If judged only on the basis of the incendiary, as often as not blatantly ridiculous, items appearing as news in his Bessarabets he seemed your standard ultra-right bigot, a figure cut from much the same debased cloth as, say, the protagonist of Umberto Ecco’s recent The Prague Cemetery. By and large this is how Krushevan has been depicted in the few historical accounts that grant him at least passing attention. Essentially, he receded from the public arena soon after Kishinev’s pogrom: A few months afterwards he, too, was stabbed on the streets of St. Petersburg by a young Jewish student, a Zionist stalwart named Pincus Dashefsky, who had on his own initiative, and without the support of his movement, stalked him for months from city to city sleeping in city parks and the like while awaiting the best moment to attack and then when he fired his pistol at pointblank in daylight on a busy boulevard the gun jammed. Krushevan was wounded, not killed but spent the remainder of his life (he died of a heart attack in 1909) fearful of another attack and in semi-reclusion. He remained a highly respected figure of the ultra-right, a member of the Second Duma, the elected leader of Bessarabia’s Black
Hundreds but mostly sequestered, rarely appearing in public except when absolutely necessary.

Passing from public life quickly with his reputation, such as it was, mostly a byproduct of his primitive Bessarabian hate-sheet, it’s easy to underestimate him. But one should not. Not only was he the author of a spate of highly interesting essays and fiction as well as the writer of a superb, erudite guide book to Bessarabia (by no means was this book viciously antisemitic, at least when judged by the standards of the day; *Baedeker* in 1900 on the Jews of Brody: “They differ in their dress and the mode of wearing their hair from the other inhabitants, who despise them.”), but Krushevan’s now little read *Chto takoe Rossiia? (What is Russia?)* is a fascinating, fin de siècle tour of the life and fate of imperial Russia. Published in 1896, it contains -- unsurprisingly in view of the then standard tropes of late imperial xenophobia -- a grim chapter on the insidious, anti-Russian attitudes of both Poles and Jews. But much of its reportage is sharp, and keenly perceptive; here is how he starts a supple, vivid portrait of Odessa:

“I have known Odessa for a long time.
I saw it for the first time in the beginning of the 1870s, an in my childhood memories it always appears like a glorious, fairy-tale city, with shining palaces and a colorful, holiday crowd.
I remember it later on, at the end of the 70s and at the height of the Russian-Turkish War, when the Odesseans quit the town while waiting for the
bombardments. An endless line of carts laden with furniture stretched out and trains were constantly bringing in transports of wounded people. I myself, already a young man, survived all the horrors of war here, the cruel, chilling horrors....And because I myself am a southerner (and all southerners are proud of Odessa) or because many of the bright young days of my life are connected with it, I love this flourishing, young, and cheerful city.”

In Kishinev, in the months before the pogrom’s outbreak Krushevan emerged as the leader of a small underground of the sort Hans Rogger once termed “honest maniacs” but these were neither marginal nor mere cranks. Krushevan himself was often described, at least at the height of his career, as the most respected man in Bessarabia. His close friend, G. Butmi -- in 1905, publisher of the first-book length version of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion -- owned large estates at the edge of Bessarabia in Kherson province; another, G. A. Pronin, made a small killing in Kishinev’s booming property market. It was these men who, together with a handful of others, who were as likely as not responsible for setting the pogrom in motion, the massacre the work of backroom conspirators, including young, politically right-wing religious devotees inspired by an exceptionally xenophobic local press under the sway of one of Russia’s most skilled, intelligent anti-Semitic leaders. Krushevan had labored hard and long to inculcate the belief that what Jews possessed was unfairly earned and ripe for the picking and he operated in an overwhelmingly illiterate or semi-literate peasant milieu – illiteracy rates in Bessarabia were the highest in the empire -- where rumor readily morphed into fact, The drumbeat of his ritual murder charges, the guarantee that
the tsar allowed attacks on Jews with the added bonus of local seminarians
guiding the attackers at the pogrom’s start provided just the right match to set
Kishinev ablaze.

More astonishing still, however, is the likelihood that this same tightly-bound,
resolute group of men were responsible for composing the first version of what
came to known as – not quite yet, but a couple years later when in book form –
The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. There exists much internal textual evidence that
the first version of The Protocols was written -- better said, stitched together – in
the immediate aftermath of the Kishinev pogrom. Krushevan and other Russian
antisemities had long had their sights on Kishinev which, despite its apparent
obscurity, they were convinced was at the epicenter of the international Jewish
conspiracy. Their attention was focused especially on one Yaakov Bernstein-
Kogan, a Kishinev doctor – rotund, and kindly, and without anything but the
most modest of means -- who in their eyes was in influence second only to
Theodor Herzl himself, the mightiest of cogs in the fearsome Zionist juggernaut.
By now, the Russian right as well as some in the government, too, saw Zionists
as interlinked, even synonymous with the empire’s Jewish radicals and with
Herzl’s movement perhaps the more dangerous of the two. Zionism suddenly
stood out because of the movement’s 1901 announcement to launch the Jewish
Colonial Trust to systematically purchase land in Palestine and with a branch
they hoped would be authorized by the Russian government. What this meant, it
was feared, was the first step toward the acquisition by Jews of land everywhere,
first the buying up of the Holy Land and then the onset of a veritable Jewish real
estate onslaught.
Bernstein-Kogan for several years he ran Zionism’s so-called correspondence bureau based in Kishinev that was charged with maintaining communication between the movement’s branches in the Russian empire, and elsewhere. Its brief was also to forge contacts with newspapers worldwide. Such activity garnered the otherwise quite modest, unassuming Bernstein-Kogan great attention: An indication of his perceived prominence in Russian governmental circles is how in a 1903 report on Russian Zionism produced by empire’s then-head of police Lopukhin there are quite nearly as many references to Bernstein-Kogan as to Herzl himself.

Right here, then, in provincial, remote Kishinev the claws of worldwide Jewry were being stretched, exercised in ways terrifying, all this grimly clear to the ultra-right but nonetheless tough to pin down. And, more so than ever before, right-wing fears were fanned by recent, insistent declarations of Herzl’s that his movement was buttressed by limitless wealth, that it was on the verge of persuading Turks, or Germans, or English to embrace Zionism’s goals, that it possessed the financial capacity to purchase vast chunks of the Holy Land. While either untrue or spectacularly inflated, such claims were taken with dead seriousness by the right as their publications amply attest. Herzl’s theatrics (he would die the next year at the age of 44) meshed well with the right’s darkest, apprehensions that Jews planned first on acquiring Christianity’s most sacred sites and soon after that immeasurably more.
Bernstein-Kogan was, in fact, a man of solidity, not genius; he had a tough time eking out a living as a physician and his grandly-named correspondence bureau was but a skimpy affair, one of four similar outfits performing various tasks in the empire, by far the best run of the lot but still a small-time operation. He had once had access to some Zionist funds (by 1903 the correspondence bureau had been moved elsewhere along with its modicum of funding), but he had forged good relations with the local Jewish rich and no less important, extensive journalistic connections cultivated while in his Zionist post. A man of deep devotion, organizational ability, and rectitude, on the second night of the pogrom -- by then, the streets were more or less safe -- he describes in his memoirs how he went door to door until 2 in the morning to the city’s richest Jews collecting money (he claims that he refused to leave until money was given by nearly every single one of them) to aid those harmed in the riot. Then relying on the ample opportunities for smuggling afforded by Bessarabia’s notoriously porous borders, he spent 1,500 rubles -- a large sum -- on telegrams to the press, Jewish and general, throughout the world, with messages forwarded to Jewish notables, as well. Weizmann, in Geneva not Gomel, received first word of the pogrom from Bernstein-Kogan. When the London editor of the Hearst newspaper chain sent Michael Davitt, the Irish revolutionary, to Kishinev to write about the aftermath of the pogrom, the first name he forwarded to him as a local contact (as revealed in notes taken by Davitt in connection with his trip, now among his papers at Trinity College, Dublin) was that of Bernstein-Kogan. Suddenly Kishinev was appeared, often daily, on banner headlines throughout much of the western world with most of these reports devastatingly critical of
the Russian government. It seems more than likely that this worldwide hubbub bolstered local rightwing Russian beliefs in worldwide Jewish conspiracy and prompted them to rush into print the core of the text of what would become *The Protocols*. A recent linguistic analysis of the first printed version issued by Krushevan in nine installments of a St. Petersburg newspaper he owned in August/September 1903 reveals, as Cesare M. de Michelis has persuasively shown, the prevalence of distinctively Ukrainian turns of phrase that would likely only have been used by someone from the region where Krushevan and his colleague Butmi -- both known to have been intimately linked to the initial stages of the document’s publication -- came from. Every one of these terms was then expunged from the book-length versions that would appear in 1905 and later. De Michelis musters striking, persuasive evidence on this first 1903 score: The word used for gentiles in this first variant – “goevskii” – differs from the standard Russian term “goyskii,” and is dropped from all subsequent editions of the document. Numerous other Ukrainian spellings or word usages are studded throughout the text.

There are several reasons as to why Krushevan’s role in the saga of *The Protocols* has been underestimated. First, he was generally dismissed as a run-of-the-mill rogue and rabble-rouser — in the words of Norman Cohn’s influential study, *Warrant for Genocide*, “a typical pogromschik.” Then again, Krushevan never claimed responsibility for the text, never mentioning it, in fact, in print once it appeared in book form after he released its original version in his newspaper and this despite his continued presence on the Russian right. Following the attempt on his life, he hid away, as best as he could, until his fatal heart attack. His close
collaborator Butmi eventually, too, disappeared, killed probably in the
turbulence of 1919 and before The Protocols achieved the worldwide prominence
it would garner soon afterwards. More important still, the widely believed, oft-
repeated linkage between the document and the government was itself
consistent with the assumption that tsarism, not random pogromchiks like
Krushevan, concocted late imperial Russia’s greatest anti-Semitic literary hoax.
Since so much of the interest garnered by The Protocols focused on proving it a
forgery produced in the recesses of the Russian government this presumption
seemed a foregone conclusion unnecessary to revisit. That the text was but
another item to have tumbled from Kishinev’s rubble never gained traction.

In the realm of Jewish literature, pride of place with regard to situating the
Kishinev pogrom into the recesses of Jewish memory belongs to Bialik’s great
poem. Widely venerated, indeed loved by Jewish readers, it was nonetheless
seen at the time of its appearance by not a few critics and, later, by historians and
literary scholars, too, as an egregious – in minds of some also disturbing --
example of the sidelining of fact, the diminishment of lived experience in the face
of larger, (in Bialik’s mind, apparently) greater goals. Armed as he was before he
came to Kishinev with a political and cultural arsenal teaching him, and those
closest to him, nationalist lessons about diaspora powerlessness and the
necessity for a new, Jewish assertiveness, Bialik was accused of having ignored
much of what he had actually heard and saw during his five weeks’ there. No
better example exists of what he elided than the following page from his own Kishinev transcript. What he describes occurs early morning the second day of the pogrom in Kishinev’s wine market courtyard:

“We decided [on the morning of the second day] to arm ourselves, but not to be the first to start the fight. Many who had returned to their houses to hide the weapons, to fill the breaches, and to close the doors and shutters came back with poles and some with pistols….At eight o’clock in the morning, gangs of gentiles arrived via the market. A battle broke out between the two camps, and we pushed them back twice. On Bolgarski Street, the Jews who did not have a chance to arm themselves fled, and the rest joined the Jews who were armed and standing in the wine courtyard. As this was happening, the number of gentiles in the gangs grew, and nearly a hundred of them attacked us – and there were no police or patrol in sight. We decided to strengthen our fortification so that not even one gentile could approach us, as other Jews joined our ranks – wine transporters, residents of the old settlement…who heard about the defensive war and came to help so that we numbered about 250 persons (others said that there were even more). Gentile passersby received light blows to scare them off. Some police came to the area and ordered Jews to put down their arms; but we did not heed their orders...”

Not a hint of such activity in “Be-ir ha-haregah.” Instead, we have its best remembered, most influential lines:

Note also, do not fail to note,
In that dark corner, and behind that cask
Crouched husbands, bridegrooms, brothers, peering from the cracks,
Watching the sacred bodies, struggling underneath
The bestial breath,
Stifled in filth, and swallowing their blood!
Watching from the darkness and its mesh
The lecherous rabble portioning for booty
Their own kin and their flesh!
Crushed in their shame, they saw it all; they did not stir nor move;
They did not pluck their eyes out; they
Beat not their brains against the wall!
Perhaps, perhaps, each watcher had in his heart to pray:
_A miracle, O Lord, -- and spare my skin this day!_

The poem, as mentioned before, had its share of detractors: the great Yiddish novelist known as Mendele Mocher Seforim complained privately, bitterly of its tone, especially its laceration of Jews; the leading Hebrew critic of the day, David Frischman, lambasted it in print. Several of those who questioned its literary merit pointed out that Bialik’s charge that Jews shamefully, cowardly shirked self-defense in Kishinev contradicted press reports and transcripts of trial records not only describing dozens of Jews that sought to resist but also those arrested for doing so. None of its initial critics had access to Bialik’s own notebooks that offered further proof of resistance and, more importantly, made it clear that the
The poet himself seemed to make distinctions between what he saw and what it truly meant.

All this seemed clear-cut to me, too, until just moments before putting the finishing touches on this draft. Then I managed to see the copious notations in special collections at Trinity College, Dublin written by Michael Davitt, the once-famous Irish revolutionary, a one-armed, erstwhile member of Parliament, a working journalist for much of his life sent by the Hearst papers to write about Kishinev and whose articles were collected into the best-selling book, *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecutions in Russia*. The book inspired, in turn, the writing of plays where the hero is the one-armed, fearsome reporter David Michael who protects Kishinev’s Jews, especially its Jewesses, from attack. The Jewish Publication Society of America republished the book soon after its appearance, presenting copies to every member of Congress, the Supreme Court, etc, and the volume set the society on the publishing schedule regarding Russian Jewry that culminated in Dubnow’s highly influential three-volume history of the Jews of Russia and Poland.

Davitt was an assiduous note-taker with his papers offering considerable insight on many different matters; they certainly make clear how profoundly Kishinev, and the barbarism he encountered there, left its mark. Perhaps most striking is following paragraph, itself written long before the appearance of Bialik’s poem and by someone without access to the nationalist categories of Ahad Ha’amism, or cultural Zionism that so nurtured the Hebrew poet. It is based, Davitt insists, on repeated, and repeatedly disquieting encounters with Jews in the stricken city.
still, at the time, fearing still another pogrom outbreak. Merely a hint of what he describes below made its way into his book where he speaks only, and in passing, of the surprising fact that in a city of some 50,000 Jews a few thousand attackers were able to do whatever they wished to do. It is no more than coincidence – but a striking one, nonetheless -- that both Davitt’s account and Bialik’s begin the very same word, an allusion, arguably, to the counter-intuitive factuality of what it is that both are saying: both begin with the word “note” in Bialik’s case the Hebrew “Re-eh.” The section in Davitt’s notations:

“Note: Jewish men appear except in rare instances to have acted as contemptible cowards. In no instance have I heard from women of any courageous stand being made by either their husbands or sons….Several of these miserable poltroons came to my hotel to recount their marvelous escapes but not one had a story of courage or of counter attack to relate.”

Quite what to do with this still eludes me. Davitt based his assessment, he insists, not on hearsay but on many encounters with Jewish witnesses who sought him out to tell him their stories. He proved himself -- in his book, as elsewhere in his other extensive writings -- an excellent, reliable reporter, weighing evidence, following up on leads, assessing in the Kishinev book as well as in his other, much-acclaimed journalistic work, the riot’s origins with care, and authority; his account of the pogram’s origins remains among the best. Hence Davitt’s apparent substantiation of Bialik’s claim of widespread male Jewish cowardice is jarring not only because his charge of Jewish cowardice is the starkest of all
examples of how history was sidelined in recollections of the Russian Jewish past, by metaphor, by memories stretched or contorted by ideology, Zionist or otherwise.

For so long historians, like myself, have presumed with regard to late imperial Russian Jewry – the seedbed for so much of 20th century Jewry’s institutional and ideological life – that an all-but unbridgeable chasm existed between the horrors recalled by Jews and the immeasurably more mundane, if also admittedly grim, realities on the ground. A good example is how for so long, as already mentioned in this talk, it was so widely believed that the Russian government inflicted pogroms on its own Jews as a way of terrorizing them, deflecting them from radicalism, punishing them for a swath of sins imagined or exaggerated. For so long historians of the region like myself have felt ourselves in little less than a state of combat, in effect, with Jewish collective memory that had, over time, so inflated its most vile features, all but obliterating quite nearly everything else.

Much of this, no doubt, remains true. And yet as the late John Klier has shown -- most cogently in his recently published, posthumous book on the pogroms of the 1880s -- while the government wasn’t literally culpable for this wave of riots it was nonetheless responsible, as he sees it, if only because of how it both sustained and vigorously articulated so many of assumptions at the core of pogromist animus. Based on thorough archival research – this is consistent with the research I’ve conducted too -- Klier demonstrates how collective Jewish memory retained, at least in this respect, a more accurate sense of the nexus
between official xenophobia and popular violence than have recent historians of the region. True, the specific details Jews, as often as not, got wrong; the essential story they may have understood more clear-headedly than they’ve been given credit for.

It may be said that the Kishinev pogrom enveloped not only its Jews on that dreadful day or two in spring 1903 but the city itself, flattening it, at least beyond its immediate environs, into a little more than a symbol of what the twentieth century mustn’t become. For Jews, liberals, radicals, and many others this meant one set of things; for antisemites, or those otherwise inhabiting the nooks and crannies of Russian right, not infrequently they found themselves little less preoccupied with the pogrom than were their critics: Solzhenitsyn devotes no less than an entire chapter to Kishinev’s insidious impact on western attitudes toward Russia in his late-life book on Russians and Jews. For him, for reasons obviously different than, say, for Chaim Weizmann, the pogrom continued to represent something of far more than mere historical significance or, better said, a historical episode whose implications remained still alarmingly pertinent.

Looking closely at the event and its aftermath provides, then, a crucial entry into understanding so much more than the details of those one or two dreadful days. Looking at it from within and also from without offers the prospect of a singularly multi-faceted glimpse into a past where, as often as not, mythology and historicity collide so as to make history, where misunderstandings -- about the Russian regime, its anti-Jewish animus, and the like -- ricochet into the making or remaking or, at least, the inspiration, direct or distant, for institutions
as variegated as the NAACP, the Hagannah, and the American Jewish Committee. It helps us cut across otherwise bifurcated historical narratives separating, counter-intuitively, Russian and Jewish history. It gives us a fuller sense of how a vicious, murderous bacchanal on the sides streets of one border town at the spring of a new century so recast one’s sense of so much else, giving it new content and context, making the horrors enacted on a cluster of some six or seven intersecting alleyways in a place barely known before, barely thought about since except as a site of horror, how this was then fixed as arguably the most resonant of all metaphors for 20th century Russian Jewish life.