

Bloody Bacchanalia: The Pogroms of Proskurov and Felshtin

by Michael Nevins, M.D.

There were few contemporary eyewitness accounts of the Ukrainian pogroms during the Russian Civil War period. Former Felshtiner Mina Yuberman visited her hometown in 1931, twelve years after the massacre. From her description, it seemed as if the pogromchiks had only just completed their bloody work.

The most authoritative and objective descriptions of the Felshtin and Proskurov pogroms were provided by delegates of the All-Ukrainian Relief Committee for the Victims of Pogroms under the auspices of the Red Cross. The aim was not only to supply money, food and clothing to the victims, but also to determine and document the true character of the events. Committee members interviewed people, set up special bureaus, held conferences and assiduously sought out every detail. They prided themselves on their impartiality. The chairman, Elias Heifetz of New York, acknowledged "the moral satisfaction of work done together in aid of the wretched victims of the pogroms and ... the stupendous, tireless work of gathering the evidence..."

The Committee carried out its field work during 1919 and prepared a report prepared the following year that was published for the Jewish People's Relief Committee of America in 1921 (*The Slaughter of the Jews In the Ukraine In 1919*, by Elias Heifetz, New York: Thomas Seltzer). The pogroms of Podolia, including Proskurov and Felshtin, were investigated by "the well-known lawyer" A.I. Hillerson. The following insights are primarily derived from the Committee's report.



First victims of the pogrom.

Twice before Ukrainian Jews had been persecuted and plundered in the land where they had settled at the end of the 16th century. First the Cossacks of Bogdan Khmelnitzky ravaged the land (1648-1658) and in the 18th century, another Cossack band known as the Gaidamaks matched their predecessors in brutality. Gaidamak leaders spoke of a holy war against the traitorous and accursed Jewish people. According to reliable accounts, 50,000 to 60,000 Jews lost their lives.

The 1919 pogroms cannot be compared to earlier waves of violence against the Jews during the 1880s and early 20th century. After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, the Jews had been represented as exploiters and bloodsuckers who robbed peasants of the fruits of their work. The aim then was mainly the destruction of Jewish possessions by robbery and plunder. True, there were beatings and rapes, but rarely murders.

During the "first" Russian civil war, Jews were depicted as leaders of unrest and rebellion against the Fatherland and the "Little

Father" (the tsar). Again, loss of life was relatively small compared to what came later. For example, in the famous pogrom of Kishinev in 1903, there were 49 Jewish deaths out of a Jewish population of about 50,000; in Bialystok in 1906 70 deaths out of about 48,000 Jews. Moreover, the pogroms of the tsarist period were almost exclusively confined to the cities.

Not so the pogroms of 1919 when the Ukrainian village played the main role and starting from the periphery, waves of violence embraced the whole land. In all, over 700 localities were annihilated and the main oppressors were a mix of peasants and bands of undisciplined military irregulars and insurgents.

No doubt many political and social factors accounted for the events of 1919, but the tenuous balance between Jews and peasants seems to have been unsettled during the German occupation during World War I, when for a time the well-being of the Jewish population improved disproportionate to that of the peasants. Jews were represented as "bourgeois", yet at the same time as advocates of Soviet communism. The Russian Revolution had unleashed strong nationalist feelings both in Poland and Ukraine. Among the combatants were a new generation of Gaidamaks who for so long had been hostile to the Jews. There also were so-called "clans of death" who loved fighting for its own sake. Since they fought so well, their chiefs permitted them to plunder.

Amidst the chaos, Petlurists (Petliurists) characterized the Jews as Bolshevik sympathizers and used this as a pretext to justify their destruction. On January 11, 1919, the following announcement was posted in Felshtin by the head of the Information Bureau: "The first warning to the Jewish population. I have learned that the Jewish population is confusing the minds of the peasants. I warn the Jews that the Information Bureau is well instructed. They will all have to pay dearly for this offense, and

the peasants themselves will make them pay. You have no one from whom to expect help!"

Proskurov was one of the major towns in the province of Podolia. According to Hillerson's report, its total population was about 50,000, of which nearly 25,000 were Jews. To be sure, there were Jews among the local Bolshevik units, just like there were Jews in the Petlura

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government. On February 15, Bolsheviks who held in the town of Vinnitsa resolved to initiate revolts throughout the region. In fact, Proskurov was the only town where plans for the uprising actually proceeded beyond the talk phase.

Ten days before the pogrom, a brigade of Cossacks and a regiment of Gaidamaks commanded by the Ataman Semosenko, in the name of Petlura arrived in Proskurov and informed the municipal government that he was assuming local authority.

Indeed, a feeble Bolshevik uprising was initiated on schedule in the early morning of Saturday, February 15, but it was easily suppressed within a few hours. In the aftermath, Semosenko plied the Gaidamaks with vodka and cognac, exhorted them that the most dangerous enemies of the Ukrainian people and the Cossacks were the Jews. He demanded an oath that the Cossacks fulfill their sacred duty to extirpate the Jewish population, but not to destroy property. Later that same day, the carnage was accomplished efficiently in three hours and, true to their word, the Gaidamaks cut down without mercy, but did not loot. Roughly 1,500 of Proskurov's Jews

were killed within about three hours.

The next morning an emergency meeting of the municipal council was called. Semosenko spoke and vowed to continue to massacre the Jews, who he claimed were all Bolsheviks and had plotted to kill the Cossacks. At this point, one brave voice was raised in protest.

Verkhola, a member of the council who had only escaped from prison in Tarnopol two days earlier, delivered a long speech in which he declared that the events in Proskurov were a disgrace to Ukraine. Speaking of the past good services of the Cossacks, he declared that Semosenko had clothed thugs in the uniforms of Cossacks and made himself their chief. Turning to Semosenko he said: "You are fighting Bolsheviks; but were these old men and children Bolsheviks whom your Gaidamaks cut down? You assert that only Jews produce Bolsheviks; but do you not know that there are Bolsheviks among other nations, too, including the Ukrainians?"

The municipal council supported Verkhola's demand that the mass murders stop; indeed, only sporadic killings occurred in Proskurov during the next few days. However, Semosenko had spoken of dispatching Cossacks to Felshtin and other towns and the council insisted that he call them back. He grudgingly agreed, but according to the Red Cross report, probably never issued the order. In any case, the Gaidamaks probably did not even set off for Felshtin until early on the next morning of Monday, February 17th.

During the Felshtin pogrom, which lasted several hours, about 485 people were killed outright and more than a hundred of the 180 wounded died soon afterward, making the death total about 600, or nearly one third of the town's Jewish population. Moreover, the number of rapes and robberies was greater



Cadavers in the snow at Felshtin, 2/17/19

than in Proskurov, for as Hillerson remarked, "this time the sanctity of the oath, apparently had evaporated from the consciousness of the Gaidamaks. In Felshtin robberies went hand in hand with murders." And when the trumpet sounded the end of the action, the best houses in town were set on fire.

The Proskurov/Felshtin incidents in February marked a turning point from the immediate preceding period, which had been primarily intended to destroy property. Now the object was annihilation. According to Hillerson's Report, "Beginning with Proskurov the basic purpose of the pogroms in Ukraine appears as the total destruction of the Jewish population."

As for the Felshtin massacre, three days later, "the Gaidamaks having tasted Jewish blood (in Proskurov) got a liking for it, and showed a desire for further slaughter.... the debauch of the Gaidamak horde in Felshtin was irrestrainable." Hillerson's report closes with the following mordant comment: "Thus these champions completed their work for the welfare of the Ukrainian fatherland, and thus ended this bloody bacchanalia in Proskurov and Felshtin."

According to the Red Cross data, if one adds to the pogroms of the first nine months of 1919 the later violations attributable to the White forces led by General Denikin, which

were even more numerous, there were at least 700 incidents; some communities had multiple pogroms. A second wave of killings struck Felshtin on June 6.

In Podolia alone there were at least 55 pogroms with an estimated 15,000 people killed by the troops and bands loyal to Petlura. The Red Cross Report noted that it was impossible to give more than an approximation, but calculated 120,000 deaths directly due to pogroms, about 600,000 others who suffered material loss and all told more than a million people who were seriously affected.

In town after town, thousands of ragged, barefoot, diseased men and women with decaying clothing, or no clothing at all, squatted in the synagogues, in empty barns or simply on the streets. The report concluded with the observation that "The pogroms in the Ukraine in the year 1919 form one of the most tragic episodes in the dark history of the much-suffering Jewish people."

After the Proskurov debacle, Semosenko was forced to resign his leadership. Hillerson suggested that he might have disliked the moral satisfaction that his going would give the Jews and so let it be known that he was forced to leave because of a chronic venereal disease. Later, he was arrested and tried; witnesses described him as a weak young man of 22 or 23 who was "half-witted, nervous and unbalanced." Semosenko was executed in May 1920.

From the perspective of history, one issue that has been particularly contentious, even unto

the present, concerns the responsibility of Simon Petlura. Ukrainians still think of him as a hero who was unfairly accused of being an enemy of the Jewish people. Indeed, many consider him to have been an idealist and even pro-Jewish.

Without repeating all the charges and counter-charges, it is true that Petlura was not personally present during the pogroms. In August 1919 he did issue an official statement that deplored the pogroms. Some argued that this was a self-serving statement written in order to ingratiate him with the Western nations when it was evident that his cause was lost. Later day apologists, such as Rutgers historian Taras Hunczak (*Symon Petliura and the Jews: A Reappraisal*, Ukrainian Historical Association, 1985), are equally as strident as those whom they accuse of having vilified an innocent man.

Whatever Petlura's ultimate responsibility, or that of others, it made no difference to the many thousands of victims of the pre-Holocaust that occurred in the Ukraine in 1919-1920. Indeed, it has been said that after *tsar* and *vodka*, *pogrom* may well be the Russian word most widely understood and used by non-Russians.



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