3 ‘The Imperishable People’: Protesting against Pogroms and Persecution in Russia, 1881–1906

On 1 March 1881 the relatively liberal Czar, Alexander II, was assassinated by terrorist revolutionaries. In the ensuing climate of bewilderment and anxiety, a wave of pogroms swept across southern Russia. Commencing in comparatively mild form at Elizavetgrad on 15 April, they assumed more serious character at Smela ten days later, at Kiev on 26 April and at Odessa on 3 May, causing considerable destruction, outrage, injury and loss of life. What began in the urban centres spread to the countryside, so that during the spring and summer of 1881 southern Russia was in the grip of anti-Jewish violence, known to us as pogroms, unprecedented in the Czarist Empire.

Economic resentment on the part of peasants, itinerant workers and migratory unemployed (in many cases often the worse for alcohol) towards Jewish merchants and shopkeepers in what was an area of high population density and competition for employment, seems to have been the root cause of the pogroms. Although the pogroms began during Easter Week, religious antisemitism appears to have been of peripheral significance. Direct evidence that the Czarist authorities orchestrated the anti-Jewish rioting is lacking. Indeed, the pogroms seem to have taken the government by surprise, and made it fear a general attack on order and property. It was in the government’s interest to quell the riots as swiftly as possible, and this, apparently, was done.¹

The assassinated Czar had yielded some benefits to certain sections of Russian Jewry. He had abolished the odious cantonist system, whereby young Jewish boys had been conscripted for a minimum of 25 years of military service. He had eased the entry of Jews into institutions of higher learning. He had permitted selected categories of Jews – university graduates, wholesale merchants, manufacturers and guild-artsans – to reside outside the 15 provinces constituting the
Pale, in whatever part of the Russian Empire they chose (which for most inclined to relocate meant Moscow, St Petersburg and Kharkov). Following the pogroms of 1881, the government of his successor, Alexander III, accepted recommendations that the causes of tension between Jews and non-Jews should be removed. Hence the ‘May Laws’ of 1882, which forbade any further shift of Jews from the cities and shtetlakh of the Pale into the countryside, prohibited Jews from purchasing or renting property in rural localities, and prevented Jews from trading on Sundays or Christian holidays. Police and other local officials were effectively empowered to interpret these regulations as they thought fit, which led to arbitrariness in their enforcement and consequent uncertainty. Pogroms were not halted by these laws: there were further outbreaks in March 1882 and July 1883, and, far east of the Pale, an isolated incident in July 1884.

In Britain there was considerable outrage among gentiles at the pogroms of 1881 and their successors, and the reports from Russia attempting to justify the violence were deeply deplored. It was widely feared in Britain that the revocation by the new Czar, Alexander III, of previous reforms would cause further misery for Russia’s oppressed Jews and a sympathetic response by British philosemites was not slow in coming. Spearheading the British campaign on behalf of Russian Jewry and bringing the issue before influential public opinion was The Times, the Jewish Chronicle later recalled, which

became the mouthpiece for voicing British indignation against the treatment of the Jews abroad. Between 1880 and 1883, at least thirteen leading articles were devoted to the subject, besides innumerable reports and notes. Its protests against the pogroms in Russia could not easily have been more outspoken.

The Times published an account of the wrongs endured by the Jews of Russia, written at its request by the well-known Jewish historian and commentator Joseph Jacobs: ‘This timely publicity was largely responsible for the importance which the question immediately attained in the eyes of the world.’

As a result of such items, in January 1882 a great meeting to protest at the sufferings of Russian Jewry took place at the Mansion House under the chairmanship of London’s Lord Mayor, future Conservative MP (Sir) John Whitaker Ellis. It had been requisitioned by 38 prominent gentiles, including five who had played active parts in the 1872 protest regarding Romanian Jewry: Shaftesbury, the Bishop of Gloucester and William Lawrence MP, all of whom had spoken at the