

LOVE AND OTHER ACTS OF VIOLENCE

BY CORDELIA LYNN

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HISTORY — OF THE — LEMBERG POGROM

MICROCOSMS, CROSSROADS,
AND LETHAL TENSIONS AS OF 1430

WORDS BY PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERKOWITZ

The epilogue of *Love and Other Acts of Violence* is set in Lemberg in 1918. For Jews, the city is tragically marked by a surprisingly vicious pogrom, at the hands of Polish nationalists, in November of that year. This essay hopes to unpack the social history which led up to and away from that moment. It is intended as a brief (but by no means comprehensive) introduction to the historical background of Jews and non-Jews in contemporary Eastern Europe. It also considers long-term Polish history in order to understand the political consciousness of contemporary Polish Catholics and the tiny minority of Jewish Poles.



In his 1989 essay *The End of History?*, American Philosopher Francis Fukuyama argued that the fall of the Soviet Empire and the rise of Western Liberal Democracy marked the end of man's sociocultural evolution as Liberalism had triumphed over Fascism in World War II and Communism in the later twentieth century.

'For Jews the city is tragically marked by a surprisingly vicious pogrom, at the hands of Polish nationalists, in November 1918'

L'viv, a city in the western Ukraine, known variously as Lwów, Lvov, and Lemberg, is 65 kilometres from the Polish border, in the region of Galicia. The different names of the city suggest the extent to which it has been a bone of contention between Ukrainians and Poles, with Jews in-between, facing harsh pressure from surrounding empires. The fact that the Ukraine was and remains 'the world's breadbasket' has helped to assure its prominence but also volatility in world affairs.

The complex, interwoven history of Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians in L'viv reaches back centuries. In the transformation of the village into a Polish city, Jews and other outsiders were encouraged to settle there. Jews experienced a 'Golden Age' in Poland, in which they enjoyed a remarkable degree of autonomy, despite outbursts of hostility and long-term economic constraints. Lwów was situated on a medieval east-west trade route, and Jews played key roles in commerce, finance, and crafts. In the mid-15th century Jews in Lwów were given the right to sell wine. While helping to provide for Jewish livelihoods, this function had a detrimental impact on how they were viewed and treated by the Ukrainian peasantry as well as authorities.

Historian Rachel Manekin informs us that in the mid-17th century there were about 4,800 Jews in Lwów, a quarter of the whole population.¹ Like everyone else in the 1600s, the Lwów Jews were ravaged by war, plague, and famine. 1648, a signal year in Jewish and East European history, witnessed the Khmel'nyts'ky uprising, a proto-nationalist and anti-Jewish surge. (The present-day Ukrainian perspective on this event is diametrically opposed to that of Jews.) In 1664 they suffered a major pogrom, that is, an attack on their persons and property.

By the late 1600s many Jews returned to Lemberg (as it was called by Yiddish speakers) and they enhanced their economic activity in foodstuffs, cattle, and leather goods. As discussed by historian Mayer Balaban, they also concentrated in certain occupations, as tinsmiths, goldsmiths, butchers, and haberdashers – a pattern that would persist. Jewish fortunes in Lwów declined, though, with that of the overall population in the next century which witnessed the demise of Poland as an autonomous country.

The Jewish Quarter after the Pogrom 1918 in L'viv. Photography: Alamy

'Yet for Poles, the idea of Poland as a national home and ethnicity, largely defined by staunch Roman Catholicism, didn't go away, and animates the politics of post-Soviet Poland well into the 21st century'

Evidence of heightened tension between Jews and Christians in Lwów include a 'Blood Libel' in 1728, a charge stemming from a particularly grotesque Christian fantasy. In 1759 Jesuit officials staged a so-called debate – more a public spectacle – to exacerbate internecine Jewish conflicts. Then, what we now call the first partition of a crippled Poland was enacted in 1772. Along with the subsequent partitions in 1792 and 1795, Polish borders more-or-less disappeared. Yet for Poles, the idea of Poland as a nation largely defined by staunch Roman Catholicism didn't go away, and animates the politics of post-Soviet Poland well into the 21st century.

Lemberg fell, in 1772, under Austrian rule, and it served as the administrative hub of Galicia. Compared to the Pale (the Pale of Settlement was the region in the western Russian Empire where the bulk of East European Jewry was corralled, following the late-18th century partitions of Poland), Lemberg Jews were beholden to a more rational order under Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Nonetheless, both areas were notorious for abject poverty. By the 1790s nearly 12,000 Jews were counted in the city, and their number grew to 13,300 in 1800. Not surprisingly, German-language schools were set up for boys, then girls, with pioneers of the Jewish enlightenment (Haskalah) in Lemberg behind such endeavours. A smattering of Jews became wealthy, and professional ranks grew, but so did the poorest of the poor.

The Hasidic movement (a Jewish variety of popular pietism) entered Lemberg toward the end of the 18th century, which was fiercely resisted by mainstream Jews. While Hasidism gained ardent followers in the 1820s and 30s, and their groups mushroomed, the vehemence between competing streams was fierce. Meanwhile the Jewish community in Lemberg grew in size and importance. A 1820 census counted some 18,000 Jews, slightly less than 40% of the entire population. Half were said to be engaged in commerce (always rather a loose term), including proprietors of restaurants, inns, coffee houses, distilleries, and breweries. They traded between points East and West, and stocked up in the colourful trade fairs of Brody and Leipzig. The best-off among them supplied fashionable wares to Polish nobles, who ruled the roost. Between 1839 and 1870 more Jewish doctors and lawyers could be noticed, but most Jews lived in poverty, in part due to the short season in the clothing trade.



Jewish orphans in L'viv circa 1922. Photography: Alamy

In the mid-19th century the growing Jewish intelligentsia helped to found a formidable, progressive synagogue in Lemberg. A Jewish school educating both boys and girls proved to be extremely popular, drawing nearly 1,000 pupils. This led to increased tension between the more and less traditionally-minded, which was not immune to violence. The failed European revolutions of 1848 posed new threats and physical harm to Jews. But they did attain voting rights and Jews were officially emancipated through the Austrian constitution in 1867.

'Zionism took hold in the late 19th century, as did branches of socialism, often overlapping with other streams. But antisemitic forces, too, gained ground and intensified'

The city prospered and grew, abetted by new railroad lines, and its Jews fared relatively well. In 1869, there were around 27,000 Jews in Lemberg. By 1900 the Jewish population reached 44,258. Whilst Jewish scientists, academics, journalists, doctors, and lawyers became more common, squalor also increased.

Forces were brewing, though, which portended bitter, protracted conflict. Poles were granted 'home rule' in Galicia after 1867, with Lemberg increasingly adopting a Polish character. Diverse Jewish political organizations were spawned advocating protection for political rights, safeguarding Orthodox practices, and expressing cultural tastes (including being 'pro-Polish'). School networks and occupational training courses, modest free-loan societies, newspapers, social clubs, pamphlets, posters, and mass rallies proliferated. Zionism took hold in the late 19th century, as did branches of socialism. But antisemitic forces, which were tied to varieties of nationalism that excluded Jews, gained ground and intensified too.

In World War I, the summer of 1914, the Russian army conquered Lemberg. Some 16,000 (of around 50,000) Jews fled. Those who remained included many refugees. Russian soldiers (although there were Jews in the Russian army) attacked and

plundered Jews. Many were summarily executed on dubious charges. In May 1915 Russia withdrew and the Austrians returned, with assistance to Jews more rationally dispensed. Simultaneously, Ukrainian/Polish tensions in the city and region festered. Jews had tended to side with the Poles since the 19th century. They often elected to have their children educated in Polish (which they did, with great enthusiasm, upon Polish independence after the Treaty of Versailles). But Jews also had formed brief political alliances with the Rusyns (Ruthenians) in 1873 and 1907, and many Jews spoke Ruthenian as well as Yiddish. For some, a Ukrainian alliance was not unthinkable.

Hailed as the dawn of liberation by Poles in the wake of the Great War (World War I), which Jews hoped would include them as equals, Polish versus Ukrainian nationalism was inflamed. Jews found themselves in an increasingly precarious situation. They were poised between, among others, Poles and Rusyns. As a community, the Jews declared themselves neutral when Poles and Ukrainians fought in 1918. And here the play's epilogue depicts what happened next.

The brutal 1918 legacy of a hundred dead Jews in the Lemberg/Lwów pogrom would be largely obscured by the thousands killed by Nazis and their Ukrainian accomplices in what we now know as the Holocaust. Upon the Nazi surrender in 1945, the 150,000 Jews of Lwów were revealed as reduced to 2,500. Most were murdered in Nazi extermination camps. Some two-thousand were openly murdered by Ukrainians who had welcomed the Nazis as enabling their 'national liberation' in 1941. Of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, three million derived from the 3.3 million in Poland upon the eve of the Second World War.

In recent years L'viv and the Ukraine have been manipulated and exploited, especially through the mean-spirited, cynical ploys of Putin and Trump. Rather than the demise of the Soviet Union signalling an 'end to history' and quelling blinkered ideologies, national chauvinism has resurfaced, stoked by antagonisms resting on layers of religious, economic, and cultural difference, including smouldering unease and resentments. Yet, in the long history of Jewish and non-Jewish co-existence in Eastern Europe, the occasional shared hopes, dreams, and friendships among their neighbours also warrants remembrance.

For further reading see Rachel Manekin, "L'viv," in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010); available at <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lviv> and Alexander Prusin, *Nationalizing a Borderland: War, Ethnicity, and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).



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