The Revolt in Łódź in 1892
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The events which began in Łódź on 2 May 1892 shook the city, which, at that time, was the largest industrial center in Russian-ruled Poland with a population of nearly 150,000. The factory workers who numbered around 40,000 halted their work and went on strike in ‘the leading fortress of our capitalism’—in the words of Julian Marchlewski, one of the leaders of the Polish labor movement. Soon, this protest turned into a general strike. As declared by Konstanty Miller, the governor of the Piotrków province, ‘the workers stopped working and gathered in the city in large numbers’. (1)

The background of the revolt

The strike of the Łódź proletariat was its first mass protest. It was referred to by the tsarist authorities as a bunt (‘revolt’) and it is known as such among historians. It was not a coincidental occurrence. For many years the feelings of oppression grew among the workers of the Łódź factories. As shown by the historian Felix Tychy, the brutal exploitation, terrible work conditions, pressure from both the local and foreign capitalists, as well as the lack of any kind of protection against the factory owners, was much more acute in Łódź than in any other centers of the Kingdom of Poland. (2)

The earnings of Łódź workers were at that time only about sixty-five percent of those earned on average by industrial workers in the rest of the country. (3) In numerous Łódź factories these earnings were even lower (for example the factories of I. K. Poznanski and J. K. Kibitzer). As reported by factory inspector Gieorgij Rykowski, those with the lowest income were the workers of cotton factories, mostly women and underage young people.

He also noted that their earnings tended to decrease as a result of holiday breaks, lack of warp for the weavers, poor quality yarn, poor maintenance of the machines, penalties, and illegally frozen payments. Beginning in 1890, with the beginning of a crisis in the Kingdom’s industry by which the weaving production was effected the most, lowering of earnings became a wide-spread phenomenon in Łódź. Layoffs became common. (4)

A long work day was maintained. In Łódź it was thirteen hours with a one hour lunch break. The workers worked in terribly unhygienic conditions. The high output and tight organization of production were indicators of exhausting physical efforts on the part of the employees. (5)

Insufficient health-care, lack of legal protection and guarantees in case of illness, physical disability, unemployment or retirement, worsened the living conditions of the workers. A significant increase of food prices, resulting from bad crops in 1891, led to a drastic deterioration of diet among the Łódź proletariat. There were numerous cases of fainting at work and sickness became wide-spread among children of the working class population. (6) In a report sent to the general governor of Warsaw, Josef Hurko, the governor of Piotrków stated that most of the workers as well as their children were in poor health. (7)

The prices of apartments in Łódź remained very high. All of these factors led to a rapid decrease in the living standards of the workers in the Łódź industrial region. They were brought into severe poverty. In addition their misery was magnified by their
foremen—who were known for their lawless conduct towards, and their willingness to degrade, their employees. Only 23.7 per cent of the all-too-powerful foremen were Polish. The Germans constituted 64.9 per cent, and the remaining few consisted of Czechs, French, Swiss, English, Russians and Belgians. One third of them were not able to communicate with their workers for they did not know Polish.(8) The workers commonly complained that their foremen hated them because they were Polish, called them ‘Polish pigs,’ hassled, hit, punished, and cheated them. The workers claimed that they no longer ‘can tolerate their [employer’s] arrogance’ and that ‘they would be much better off in prison then under the oppression of their foreign foremen’. Despite the fact that the workers were threatened with losing their jobs should they complain about the administration or their immediate supervisors, the factory inspector Rykowski received over 1,000 such complaints annually.(9)

The foremen, like the owners of the factories, differed from their Polish employees not only in terms of nationality but also religion. They were mostly Protestants or Jews. Even though it is difficult to establish how much the religious differences contributed to the workers’ rebellion, researchers often emphasize religious differences by pointing to the hymn ‘Boże coś Polk’ that was often sung during public gatherings. It was at this time that this hymn was being sung for the first time after the crushing of the January Revolt some twenty-eight years earlier. In the political atmosphere of that time public singing of the song by demonstrating workers also had undertones of anti-tsarist sentiment.(10)

Once the exploitation was reinforced by a ‘conspiracy’ of factory owners, directors, and foremen, the injustice became unbearable. There were many indications that by the beginning of 1892 the workers’ patience had run out. The administrative authorities as well as the factory inspectors and the owners themselves were able to see the growing agitation among the Łódź workers. The possibility of a social explosion was becoming more and more evident. J. K. Kibitzer, a factory owner, received an anonymous letter with threats concerning to his relentless treatment of his workforce. On 28 April a group of workers who gathered to deliberate in front of I. K. Poznanski factory was dispersed by gendarmes who hit them in the face and cursed at them. Similar events took place in front of G. Loren’s factory. Those who were suspected of causing agitation were expelled from work.(11) From mid-April fliers were to be found in various factories (among others in Poznanski’s factory) calling for demonstrations on 1 May. The authorities took notice of ‘unknown offenders’ who were planting ‘large quantities of fliers [issued by the] Proletariat association’. It was also noticed that ‘unknown agitators’ exercised their influence over the workers. They were able to make their way into all major factories and managed to ‘inspire the more daring workers to take decisive actions.’(12)

Most anxiety was caused by a leaflet put out by Związek Robotników Polskich (‘Polish Workers’ Association’) for the 1 May demonstration which was brought from Warsaw in the last week of April and distributed in large numbers by the ZRP members in Łódź and surrounding towns. It called for the celebration of the workers’ holiday which had been organized everywhere in Europe since the hundredth anniversary of the French revolution in 1889.(13)

The leaflet stated that the workers ‘no longer want to be subjected to poverty and humiliation. . . . We want to be humans and live like humans!’ The leaflet proposed an eight hour work day and an increase in wages and demanded ‘political freedom,’ saying, ‘We want to govern ourselves . . . We demand that we no longer be forced to speak and
think in a foreign language! We demand Polish schools and a Polish legal system.’ The leaflet concluded, ‘We will not cease to fight until the private ownership of land and factories is abolished . . . and until the factories and the land are in the hands of the working masses.’(14) All agree that that very call was made on ‘volatile ground and caused the general strike.’ The leaflet became the spark which caused the explosion.(15)

The leaflet’s strongest impact was on the young workers who yearned for an increase in status. On the one hand they were much more integrated in the modern world and distant from the traditional environment in which their parents were still located, but on the other hand it was their generation which was economically most uncertain of their future and most discontented.

The development of the strike

Since 1 May 1892 fell on Sunday it was a day off from work. In spite of this groups of workers gathered on the streets of Łódź. The police kept dispersing the restless crowds. On the following day protests took place in eight medium-size and small factories employing a total of 1,500 people. In five of them they turned into strikes. These were young workers who decided to go on strike. They were referred to as juveniles by the factories’ inspector. They demanded a shorter work day and an increase in their earnings. The police was trying to disperse the protesting workers.(16)

On Tuesday, 3 May, after lunch the strike spread to four other factories in which a total of 720 workers stopped working. In two factories production ceased all together and partially in three others. On 4 May, two other factories joined the protest. There were now seventeen factories with 15,000 workers on strike. On the same day the factory workers in towns surrounding Łódź stopped working as well (among others in Nowe Rokicie, Widzew, and Karolew).(17) In Łódź the strike included certain departments of many large firms, including Towarzystwo Akcyjne Ł. Genera (‘L. Geyer’s Joint-Stock Company’), Towarzystwo Akcyjne Alarata (Alarat’s Joint-Stock Company) and the largest factory in Łódź, Towarzystwo Akcyjne K. Scheiblera (‘K.Scheibler’s Joint-Stock Company’) in the part of city called Księży Młyn. The workers in the latter factory demanded a shortening of the work day to twelve hours, an increase of their wages and an expulsion of the German foreman from the weaving plant.(18) The fate of the worker protests was strongly influenced by the last group of workers who joined the strike, enlarging the number by several thousand. Both a policeman and the factory’s inspector tried to negotiate with the workers but to no avail.

Two other things happened on the fourth day of the strike. First, the workers’ protests assumed a mass character. Some 30,000 people ceased their work. They were moreover trying to make their protest into a general strike which would encompass all the existing factories. Groups of protesters in Sunday dress walked through the city encouraging those who still continued working to join in by calling, ‘Let’s go brothers!’ and ‘Let’s go sisters!’ At the same time they were singing the popular hymn ‘Boże coś Polk’ and the Polish national anthem ‘Jeszcze Polka nie zginęła.’

Some of the work crews willingly answered those calls and joined the protesters. In nine factories, however, groups of ‘strike instigators’ forced workers out of their factories.(19) The factory inspector saw it as the result of the activities undertaken by the instigators who ‘were able to organize a fair group of workers who would be responsible for forcefully disrupting the factories’ operation.’(20)
In the meantime a small group of Związek Robotników Polskich activists taken by surprise by the scale of the protest was unable to take control of it and to turn it into an organized action. The extensive nature of the strike, along with the absence of leadership (‘it lacked members of the intelligentsia,’ as one scholar notes), made it impossible to monitor effectively. The streets of the city were filled with people. The governor noted in his report that 'workers numbering about 30,000 wander in the streets with no particular purpose or gather in groups around the intersections.' The police dispersed the crowds, but [people] 'dispersed in one place would immediately gather in another.'

Yet the workers gathering in the streets behaved calmly and with dignity. The authorities had nothing to accuse them of and admitted that they were neither violent nor disturbing. Their composure and seriousness were astounding. No drunkards were to be seen among them. As on previous days they did not begin rioting. Still, the city’s streets were filled with crowds of people in Sunday dress giving an impression that one is in a place of never ending rallies.

The factory owners got scared. They gathered in the Grand Hotel and sent alarmist telegrams to Piotrków and Warsaw. Some of them, like Scheibler, Richter, Hirszberg, Mannaberg, Biederman, and the younger Rozenblat were willing to compromise and to increase the salaries as well as to reduce the work day by one hour. Another group of factory owners represented by, among others, K. Poznanski, L. Geyer, J. Kibitzer, Szaja Rozenblat, and the younger Biederman was opposed to making any concessions.

The latter group was backed by the authorities, who on that day got actively involved in the situation. The strike’s nearly general character—the numerous workers singing religious and patriotic songs in the streets, the factory owners gathering to deliberate in the Grand Hotel, the involvement of the authorities—indicated that on that very day the workers’ protests had entered a new phase.

The governor of Piotrków, Miller, came to Łódź. He issued a statement in Polish and Russian claiming that the workers ‘ceased work and came into the streets en masse against legal regulations and without evident reason and without giving the factory owners a 2-weeks notice.’ He ordered them to return to work, banned all kinds of gatherings, whether on the street, roads, or factories’ courtyards. He announced that he was going to use force to restore order as well as to punish the disobedient. He also promised to consider complaints but only after the strike ended. He also stated that ‘the government cannot tolerate any of the demands which are made by the use of force.’ The workers went on, tearing the sheets with his announcements off the city’s walls.

The governor Miller as well as the general governor Hurko who by then had been informed about the strike, agreed that the workers’ demands were legitimate. He regarded the strike as a revolt, however, and made a decision to crush it. On that day the first military groups entered Łódź. The authorities were preparing bloody revenge against the workers. Friday, 6 May, was to be radically different from all the previous days.

In the meantime the protest was joined by the railroad workers, construction workers, carpenters, and artisans. Factories in Łódź suburbs and in the entire region stopped working. By now about 60,000 were on strike and according to some sources the estimated number of striking workers was to reach 100,000. It was the first strike of this magnitude in the Polish territories and became an unique phenomenon not only in the Polish Kingdom but in the whole of Europe.

The workers who were in the streets since six o’clock in the morning could already see some military groups which were reinforced by a cavalry unit that was
brought to the city. In the early hours the commandant of the garrison sent the entire Ekaterinburg regiment and sixty Cossacks in all directions within the city. The soldiers began crushing the strike by dispersing the workers, arresting the resisting ones, and opening fire.

A report issued by the governor stated that the army and the police were exceptionally efficient. ‘On many occasions whips and butts of the rifles were used and in many cases also bayonets and bullets.’ The governor noted that on the corner of Zawadzka and Zachodnia Streets a patrol fired a few shots into the crowd and ‘undoubtedly wounded some people’; on Konstantynowska Street a military unit fired a few shots wounding three people, who were ‘immediately taken away by the crowd. One of them died shortly afterwards in a hospital.’ Allegedly the soldiers had to take away the weapons from the lawbreakers who were equipped with ‘knives, knuckle-dusters, revolvers, thick half-arshin-long iron screws, rubber sticks with metal ends, whips, and so on.’ (31)

One hundred people were arrested that day. The workers were trying to free the arrested ones. Many were injured or killed in the clashes between the crowds and the military and police. The army had its hands full until late at night both with the workers on the streets and in the casern where the younger offenders were being punished with flogging. Governor Miller had no scruples as to the methods undertaken against the workers. He commented that even though ‘many of those who were beaten up were innocent, it was their fault as they should not have appeared in the streets.’ The soldiers became even more ruthless after receiving a telegram from Governor Hurko in which he urged them ‘not to spare bullets and to restore order by tomorrow.’ (32) As it was stated in a wire sent by the general to the commander-in-chief of the tenth foot division in Łęczyca on 6 May, ‘it was the second day that all regiments were in arms in order to maintain order. There were cases of using weapons.’ (33) By the evening hours the demonstrating workers were dispersed.

On the following day, 7 May, in spite of repressions the strike continued. The army continued to patrol the streets and to disperse the gathering workers. In some factories preparations were made for retuning to work while those on strike tried to interfere by turning away those who went back to the factories. Clashes between the workers and the army took place. The most severe encounter took place in front of Scheibler’s factory when a group of workers refused to disperse. The soldiers began firing shots, killing a seventeen year-old female worker and injuring another worker. Since the striking workers were still seen as undaunted and capable of aggression, the arrests and repressions continued. Because of the pacification conducted by the army and the police, as well as efforts by the factory inspectors, the strike in the factories of Scheibler, Geyer, and Sz. Rozenblat ended and more then half of the workers returned to work. (34)

As the strike began to be extinguished in Łódź it picked up its pace in Zgierz and Pabianice. The situation continued to be unstable in all towns on the following day, Sunday, 8 May. Bloody clashes took place between the army and the protesters. On Saturday night a worker was fatally shot by a guard on Rokicińska Street. Similar incidents took place in Zgierz. The most rebellious workers were being hunted down and arrested. On the same day the ZRP issued an address ‘To the workers of Zgierz and Pabianice.’ The Russian authorities interpreted it as political propaganda disseminated in Western Europe in an attempt to artificially transplant revolutionary ideas into the Polish
territories. The strike in Łódź, according to the Russian authorities, was a result of this propaganda rather than an outcome of economic developments. (35)

On 9 May all factories in Łódź resumed production but not all the workers returned to work. As reported by the governor Miller ‘the commotion in the workers’ brains did not submit but was only restrained by fear of the numerous garrisons stationing in the city.’ (36) The strike in Zgierz, Pabianice, and Zduńska Wolli still continued. Fliers in the German language were distributed in Zgierz. Twenty-two people were arrested. (37)

On 10 May more workers returned to work and the day passed in Łódź pretty quietly. On 11 May the production was back to normal but in Pabianice, Zgierz, and Zduńska Wolli the strike did not end until on 16 May. Only then did Miller return to Piotrków, convinced that all the rioters were already detained during the systematic arrests of the previous few days: anybody indicated by a factory owner or foreman, anybody against whom there was a complaint, was being arrested. (38)

The Pogrom

On Thursday evening, 5 May, when the strike had its greatest number people and the streets of the city were filled with groups of workers, the factory owners gathered in the Grand Hotel to analyze the situation; the authorities decided to deal with the protesters by bringing to Łódź army detachments from both the nearby and the more remote garrisons. It was not that attacks on Jews began in the Jewish area of the city. This pogrom was the most tragic and until now the least explained episode of the workers’ strike in Łódź.

The tumult in the old city began unexpectedly. Breaking and looting of the Jewish stores, setting a Jewish inn on fire, attacking and chasing Jews in the streets, as well as fighting between Jews and non-Jews took place. Bronisław Samojło, a socialist activist who was present in Łódź at that time, recalled that these incidents began in the evening of 5 May and that in ‘the fierce fighting more than one Jew was killed and more than one Christian lost his life after being dragged into a gateway by the Jews. From their windows, the Jews also fired revolvers, poured boiling water, as well as threw stones, chunks of coal, and pots on the heads of passers by. One such Jewish house, where Jews were seen pouring out boiling water, was set on fire by the crowds. Although the crowds did not allow people to extinguish the fire, all inhabitants of that house survived. The Cossacks and guards would break through the attacking and escaping crowds, beating people and hitting them with broad swords and firing into the crowd with blanks and blank bullets. The crowd began defending itself. A few Cossacks were injured and fell off their horses; the rest began a discrete retreat while beating both Jews and Christians. Small groups of thugs attacked Jews and vandalized the wretched Jewish stores. The night brought an end to the fighting, though its echoes—amplified by a rumor that the entire Jewish quarter will be burned to the ground—mortified the city.’ (39)

According to an account of Samojło, ‘on Friday the fighting encompassed the entire city. It was scary to walk through the streets. In fact Jews were hunted whether they were civilized or in rags, whether they travelled in carriages or walked on foot. On Widzewskiego Street Herbst [a Jew] was in a carriage, passing by a group that was beating Jews, and was himself hit several times with a stick in the head and in the back. Poznanski met with similar fate. Often a group of thugs would run after groups of escaping Jews. Most often they [the Jews] did not fight back even in their stores which were being destroyed but not robbed.’
According to Samojlo, ‘The most terrifying moment came for the observers when it was only around ten o’clock in the morning: all the fields on the outskirts of the city filled up with country-folk running from the surrounding villages towards the Old City; they were carrying pitch forks, sticks, axes and scythes—having been told that in the city the Jews had broken the windows in the church and desecrated the altars. The crowd of peasants gathered near the church. They looked around but did not notice any damage. So they dispersed, encouraged partly by the charge of the military units which began operating at noon.’ (40)

But the pogrom against the Jews continued in different parts of the city. It was particularly severe on the streets inhabited by Jews as well as in the suburb of Baluty bordering with the Old City. In Baluty, which was described by Governor Miller as ‘the very core of evil,’ there lived over 1,000 thieves and other criminals who were under supervision of the police after having served their prison sentence and who were commonly known as pobytowcy (‘residents’). Over there the anti-Jewish riots were particularly fierce and included plundering and even setting places on fire.

Large groups of people who were hiding when the soldiers marched through the streets quickly reassembled as the soldiers moved away, and used stones to break windows in the Jewish houses, attacked Jews beating them mercilessly, broke into their homes, stores, and inns, plundering their possessions.(41)

Over and over shooting was heard in the streets. Shots were fired in the Old City, on Wolczanska Street, in Księży Młyn. According to Samojlo the guards and the army ‘often shot without the slightest reason whenever their animalistic spirits were animated and whenever they could safely avoid reprisal.’

In the evening of 6 May the riots died down. The Jews were no longer being beaten but in some cases they were robbed. But overall the night passed quietly. At dawn two more groups of Cossacks, each of them one hundred-men-strong, arrived from Sieradz and after a short rest they were sent to scan the city’s suburbs with special attention to Baluty ‘since the biggest crimes were committed in this part of the city which borders with the city centre.’(42)

After the pogrom the entire city looked terrible. The Old City, the Old Market Place (the main stage of the pogrom), Baluty, Franciszkańska Street, Aleksandrowska, Średnia, Widzewska, Kamienna, Skwerowa, Tarnow, Praska, the fish market on Rynek Główny were among those places which witnessed the most terrible events and which suffered the most damage. After the riots were crushed one could see Jewish men and women, beaten up and covered with blood, leaving their temporary shelters and asking the patrols of soldiers and gendarmes to escort them as they were afraid to return to their demolished homes from which they had managed to escape during the attacks. On the streets surrounding the Old Market Place all the windows were smashed; all the doors and gates were broken; the sewage was filled with down and feathers from Jewish quilts and pillows (especially on Franciszkańska Street); the Jewish homes, stores, and inns were looted.(43) The poor suffered the most. There were casualties among them, though it was also they who organized self-defense and got back at many attackers.(44)

Dziennik Łódzki, the principal local newspaper, reported that as the result of the attacks seven Jews lost their lives between 8 and 16 May.(45) There were victims on both sides of the conflict. It was noted in Governor Miller’s report that during the clashes with the Jews and while dispersing the crowds many people were injured. 247 people sought medical help in their homes, seven in the Red Cross out-patient departments, and another thirty-seven in the hospitals. Out of six people with bullet wounds four died. Others
Injuries were caused by axes, knives, crow-bars, swords, bayonets, pikes, and stones (the latter often causing serious head injuries).(46)

What caused these sad and pitiful incidents? One eye-witness, as well as subsequent research into events, suggest a fiery exchange between a Jewish butcher and a Christian woman who was one of his clients. Supposedly they got into an argument during which the butcher allegedly took an ax and cracked open her head. Samojlo writes that rumors of this incident quickly spread around the city and were followed by rumors that the Jews broke windows in a Catholic cathedral, that they threw stones at a priest who was travelling in a carriage, and so on. The baluciarze (‘residents of Bałuty’) arrived and a fierce fight started.’ (47)

The atmosphere in the city was conducive to the spread of all sorts of rumors, including the one about the butcher and a Catholic woman. The rumors were circulating in a climate of high emotional agitation and religious sensitivity and were having influence over the attitudes of people, especially over those of the less educated. Perhaps the rumors revived some old and long forgotten resentments and induced the psychosis of hatred towards the Jews. Researchers claim that at that time sharp antagonisms persisted between different national groups in the Polish Kingdom. The researchers emphasize that these tensions were particularly pronounced in Łódź and in the Łódź region because these territories were amongst those working-class centers which were the most diverse in terms of nationality and religion in the whole of the Polish lands.(48)

In 1895 the total population of Łódź was 168,512. According to the demographers’ estimations 46.4 per cent were Poles; 29.4 per cent, Jews; 21.4 per cent, Germans; 2.4 per cent, Russians; and 0.4 per cent, other nationalities.(49) There were nearly 50,000 Jews in Łódź. This mosaic of nationalities was paralleled by religious differences. There were Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Russian Orthodox, and other members of religious groups living in the city.

The Jews constituted a high percentage of factory owners. As a result of mass-expulsions of Jews from the Russian territories in 1882, many of the factory owners had come to Łódź in large groups at the end of the 1880s. They were so-called Litvaks. Large numbers of them made all sorts of industrial investments counting on high revenues from production and trade. What made the latter easier for them was their knowledge of the market in the East.(50) The part of the Jewish bourgeoisie that was linked with groups from the lower middle-class and the intelligentsia, had serious capital at their disposal, and was characterized by its industriousness strengthened nationalistic trends among Jews. Formed under different cultural conditions and mostly Crucified this group became fascinated with German culture and strength. Some individuals went so far as to seek German citizenship. The newcomers became competitors for the local Jewish industrialists which resulted in the emergence of two opposing camps.

The religious gmina (communal body) played a key-role in the life of the Jewish community. The proprietors of industry and commerce like I. K. Poznanski, Sz. Rozenblat, A. Prusak, and J. Dobranicki who were members of door bóźniczny (‘synagogue committee’) played a dominant role in gmina. The young Jewish intelligentsia, promoting change, looked at possibilities for developing closer relationships with Christian circles. Conflicts arose, however, as strong Orthodox groups were opposed to any kind of reform and held on to the traditional ways of living. On the one hand the assimilationist tendencies successfully infiltrated some segments of Łódź Jewry, but on the other hand Łódź was fertile ground for the development of Zionist ideas, which stood in sharp opposition to those entertained by the assimilationists.
The situation of Jewish proletariat employed in small industry and handicraft was exceptionally difficult because of a combination of factors: material hardship, religious and cultural differences, and poor command of Polish. What made the discrimination by the foremen and factory owners even more intolerable was the fact that it was coming from their co-religionists. In cases of economic conflict, the rabbis would express its solidarity with the bourgeoisie. Moreover, of all the groups in Jewish society, it was the proletariat who was most prone to antisemitism—as confirmed by the bloody incidents in Łódź in May 1892, during which the Jewish poor suffered the most. (51)

Can a rumor about an actual or alleged incident be considered the true cause of the anti-Jewish riots? Their origin seems to be much more complicated, but as of now it has not been sufficiently explained. Even the sources available to researchers today do not allow definite answers to the question of cause. Following some factions of public opinion of that time, contemporary historians do not rule out the possibility that the riots were inspired or even provoked by the authorities. But again there is not enough evidence to support this theory. One thing which could validate this claim is the passive behavior of the police forces at the beginning of the riots. B. Samojlo mentions in his correspondence that ‘the authorities looked at what was happening with indifference. With my own eyes I saw gendarmes and guards who with laughter and jokes would incite the people to pursue Jews.’ (52) By the time the army and police made any effort at intervention to quell the pogrom, it was effectively over and instead of directing their energy against the looters and attackers, they used it against the protesters. Hence in Robotnik, a paper published in Łwów an article suggested that the antisemitic riots were purposely engineered by the authorities: the riots started after all when the authorities began to pacify the protesters using the army and police. Until then the workers’ protest proceeded without any disturbances there was no excuse for armed intervention. Thus the authorities needed the riots to justify the massacre which was carried out by the Russian army on the workers of Łódź. (53) It had been a while since the army had ‘had an opportunity to show its well known heroism in killing innocent women and children,’ sarcastically commented B. Samojlo who also had the same hypothesis about the pogrom’s origins. (54) In any case, it is very unlikely that the authorities were entirely uninvolved.

Many contemporaries lean towards assigning responsibility for the antisemitic riots to the pobytowcy of Bałuty. According to Gazeta Toruńska the attacks on Jews were initiated by thieves and criminals. Kurier Poznański reported that the ‘thieves from Bałuty’ caused the ferment and that from them were recruited all the ‘commanders’ who were then encouraged by the Russians. (55) Also the official sources confirmed that pobytowcy and other groups living at the margins of the society were among those most active in the pogrom. Some sources indicate unequivocally that the pogrom was carried out by scum of society and criminals who took advantage of the tense atmosphere in the city to conduct their looting activities, while others maintain that it was tsarist provocation carried out by the pobytowcy from Bałuty. (56)

Another explanation might be that the spontaneous mass outbursts were further enabled by police apathy, which gave the rabble a feeling of impunity and thereby encouraged their violence. Samojlo asserts that rumors of the Jews’ having initiated the pogrom themselves circulated the city. (57)

For the historian Adam Próchnik it was clear that ‘the striking workers had nothing to do with the pogrom.’ (58) Gazette Robotnicza stated that there was purposeful agitation of the workers to act against the Jews but with an exception of a ‘handful of
rascals’ people did not fall into this trap. *Nowa Reforma* claimed that ‘practically no workers participated in robbing the Jews,’ and condemned those who caused the fights. The same view was put forward by *Novoye Vremia* and added that those who attacked Jews were usually young people and that ‘only a small number of workers’ was among them. The socialist newspaper *Di Neue Zeit* wrote that ‘the Polish workers proved to be fully capable of differentiating between their real enemies and the scapegoats which were to divert their attention’ from the actual problems.(59) In 1927 Piotr Kon fully supported this opinion in the columns of *Głos Polski* while recalling documents regarding the Łódź protests. He claimed categorically that ‘it was a regiment of petty thieves from Bałuty that was the real “hero” of the anti-Jewish excesses and not the Łódź workers.’(60)

Both contemporaries as well as the researchers who have followed indicate that the workers made attempts to prevent the pogrom. Bronisław Samojło in his reports from Łódź and Antoni Humnicki in his reminiscences recall numerous cases of workers who defended the attacked Jews.(61)

On 8 May 1892 ZRP issued a proclamation ‘To the Workers of Łódź, Zgierz and Pabianice.’ Addressing the ‘Brother Workers’ the document cautioned that ‘instead of our grand slogan “Struggle for our holy workers’ cause” the government put forward a call ‘Hejże na Żydów’ (“Go for the Jews’). By doing so it pushed a bunch of thieves and irresponsible juveniles towards plundering. We, the workers, have nothing to do with it! We are fighting neither against Jews nor against Germans but against the exploiters and oppressors.’(62) The ZRP maintained this claim again in its proclamation issued in July of the same year which read: ‘the government of thieves and bandits wanted to make us responsible and therefore secretly ordered all the renegades, the police, and thieves from Bałuty to rob and beat the Jews while spreading rumors that behind those robberies and attacks were the workers of Łódź. Right away shots were fired and the innocent blood of our brethren was spilled.’ (63)

Still, although in insignificant numbers, workers took part in the attacks against the Jews. A mention of their nominal participation is to be found in the report written by the factory’s inspector who wrote that ‘the workers’ participation in the riots was very small.’(64) Nevertheless, their participation cannot be ignored. It has to be realized that there was a group of workers who took part in the pogrom against the Jews. The socialists who tended to idealize the proletariat and to propagate its heroic image distanced themselves from the workers and were very reluctant to acknowledge the facts. Their vision, however, is contradicted by the workers’ actual behavior during the strike.(65) To express their dissatisfaction with the environment in their factories and to better their work conditions and economic position the workers often resorted to extremes. Their hope was to widen the strike and to protect themselves against the army and the police. Their willingness to use force took pathological forms during the anti-Jewish riots.(66)

About two hundred people were arrested in connection with the disturbances. Most of the workers who were among them were arrested by chance since they were employed in Poznanski’s factory and lived in the neighborhood of Bałuty. Most of them were soon cleared and discharged. A group of thirty-nine, most of whom happened to be juveniles, were punished with flogging for throwing stones at Jews and mocking them. There were three Jews among those arrested which indicated that offenses took place on both sides. Four people were put under police surveillance and four others were sent home.(67)
The court considered more serious offenses, such as attacks on Jews, robbery, destruction of property, and arson. Forty people were brought up before the District Court in Piotrków. Twenty-eight of them were found guilty and received sentences from two months to two and a half years in prison. All of them were inhabitants of Łódź between the ages of sixteen and fifty-two, most of them teenagers and young adults in their twenties. Among them was one woman and, in addition to the Poles, there were also two Germans. Nine of the guilty were skilled workers and eight others were manual workers. The professions of the others were not specified. Nine of the guilty were illiterate; five others were previously convicted of theft—three of them more then once. (68)

The authorities’ bloody reprisal

The authorities were troubled by the explosion and then rapid development of the strike and by its wide scope. After unsuccessful attempts to persuade the workers to end the strike, they authorities decided to end it by force. The local organs of public order were too weak to pacify the protesters and their growing sense of self-importance. The local police reinforced by military units from the Łódź garrison did not prove to be very effective either. The violence escalated when governor Miller declared the workers’ protests a revolt and when the Warsaw general governor, Hurko, gave an order to take the most stringent measures to extinguish it immediately.

A penal expedition had been organized and Colonel Boltin, the commander of the military units stationed in Łódź, had been put in charge of it. He immediately decided that obtaining ‘help from the cavalry is indispensable because the already existing thirteen army units are not sufficient for maintaining order in such a large city.’ (69) Hence, along with the five regular military units, one cavalry unit was also sent to Łódź and arrived in the city on the following day. The local forces were strengthened by the thirty-seventh Ekaterinburg infantry regiment, two units of Cossacks (100 men each) which were brought from Sired and several dozen of policemen.

The army and the police carried out the massacre. The infantry detachments and the Cossacks used fire-arms as well as other arms and whips. The newspaper Nowa Reformat wrote about ‘horrible acts committed in Łódź by the Russian army’ (70). Many were killed and wounded. Shots were fired at all who were in the streets. The tsarist authorities officially admitted to killing six workers but according to Samojlo, who was present in Łódź at that time, ‘the number of killed reached forty.’ The newspapers and other sources quoted 200 killed and 300 injured. This figure, however, included only those who asked for medical assistance. The governor Miller himself was convinced that there were many more casualties. Nobody bothered to count, for instance, all those who were hit with butt-ends of rifles and with whips; even their numbers were high, going into the thousands, according to the authorities. Among the injured were also three soldiers.

The first arrests took place on 5 May. The Colonel Boltin spoke of ‘several dozen instigators of the disturbances as well as other suspects.’ With every passing day the number to those arrested grew as they were indicated by factory owners and by other workers as ‘the agitators and the leaders of the riots.’ On 8 May, 348 people were arrested. The Piotrkow public prosecutor reported that 383 people ‘were locked up for participating in the disturbances in Łódź, Pabianice and Zgierz.’ Samojlo noted that ‘in three days 400 people were arrested.’ (71) The arrests of the ‘instigator still continued in June and July and as the result another fifty-three people were arrested.’ (72)
Some of them were simply released from jail (ninety-nine persons), forty-seven of them received penalties, and thirty-nine were punished with flogging. The remaining 289 people were imprisoned and subsequently tried. Those who were sentenced were then sent to convict gangs. Long afterwards the inhabitants of Łódź lived in fear of any appalling news that circulated through the city.

The use of military units to fight the rebelling workers in Łódź was not a unique phenomenon in those days. Similar occurrences took place in France, Belgium, England, the United States and in other countries. The brutality and cruelty used to pacify protesting workers in Łódź was greater and the number of casualties was significantly larger than in any other country, however. This shocked world opinion and among the workers raised desires for vengeance. Colonel Bolting recounted cases in which the mob attacked soldiers who were escorting prisoners and in turn used the mob’s attack as an excuse to fire shots into the crowds. The protesting workers threw stones at the soldiers, occasionally even used fire-arms and built barricades. The desire for revenge grew stronger among the workers. It expressed itself in threatening letters received as late as a year after the revolt had ended. Among the addressees of those letters were the despised industrialists like Scheibler, Garner, Majerhof, Kibitzer, and many factory foremen, as well as the priest L. Dąbrowski and pastor Angerstein. The latter were detested for publicly criticizing the workers’ bending to socialist influence and for expressing negative opinions about the socialists. There was even an attempt on Kibitzer’s life, who mistreated his workers and used his connections with the Russian authorities against them.

The consequences of the revolt and its significance

The Łódź revolt was an unusual phenomenon among other social conflicts of Europe, especially in that part of the continent. It was a general strike involving the workers of one of the largest centers of the industrial proletariat in Europe. It was also the first strike in which the entire working class stood against all industrialists in the city rather than workers of individual factories protesting against the owners of their particular factory. Until the revolution of 1905 it remained not only the biggest strike in the Polish Kingdom but also in the whole of the Russian Empire. ‘It was a battle for everybody’ wrote Roza Luxemburg about ‘the brothers from Łódź.’ This awakening of the masses was at that time received by the proletariat as a turning point and the first sign of a social mass-movement. In an open letter addressed to the workers of Łódź the workers of Petersburg wrote: ‘May the memory of the Łódź victims be deeply rooted in your hearts, Polish workers. May it become a guiding star in your life which will call upon you for unity, self-improvement, and solidarity.’

In Western Europe and in the United States every single complaint on the part of workers had the support of a trade union, self-governing body, or, indeed, a political organization, and often of all of them. The workers in the West had the legal rights to organize themselves into unions. They also had their own legal press and another important political tool—the right to vote in municipal and parliamentary elections. The protests of the Łódź workers had no organizational or political backing in the country. The illegally emerging workers’ organizations were weak and taken by surprise by the scale of the protest. They were unable to realize its scope, let alone take control of it. The strike was spontaneous; it suffered from a lack of any sort of planning and was completely illegal. Nonetheless the strike showed Poland to be beginning on a path of
modernization, as the workers demanded, among other things, a shorter work day. This alone suggests that the character and the scale of the protest brought Łódź closer to the West of Europe than to Russia.(79)

This spontaneous movement which lacked any kind of organizational framework or leadership did not succeed in formulating uniform proposals to present to the industrialists and the tsarist authorities, which showed that the conditions for the strike’s success did not exist. Had it been successful ‘your victory would be a victory of all of us,’ wrote R. Luxemburg.

The strike was a failure but it also had some positive consequences. It influenced the future attitudes of the authorities who could no longer underestimate the threats of the workers’ mass-movement. The authorities were now preparing themselves for any possible confrontations with the workers in the future. As a result further repressions were applied and the police forces in the city were fortified. Once the commotion died down the authorities also embarked on ‘gathering information about the people’s real work conditions and their wages in order to propose action that would force industrialists to improve the workers’ welfare.’ Moreover, the authorities decided to introduce new rules and regulations that ‘only Russian subjects who are fluent in Russian and Polish’ can be appointed as technical supervisors in the factories of Vistula Territory (the name now used for the Kingdom of Poland). Those foreign foremen who were already employed in Łódź factories had to pass an exam in both languages. Those who could not prove sufficient knowledge of Polish and Russian were fired. A decision was made to end once and for all that the sending of former criminals to Łódź, Zgierz, Pabianice, as well as to the municipalities of Radogoszcz and Chojny. Those who already lived there under supervision of the police had to leave.(81)

The revolt in Łódź forced the industrialists to respect the workers. The industrialists now realized the threat of power and potential of the proletariat. They also realized that using the police and army against the workers was not a solution and that their demands had to be considered. The workers therefore were paid for all the days they were on strike and the work day was shortened by one hour. K. Scheibler was the first one to make these concessions, followed by J. Heine and subsequently by I. K. Poznanski. Between 1892-93 the industrialists increased the compensation for textile-workers by 8-15 per cent. After the protest many relief organizations as well as educational and social institutions were established. The workers’ protest speeded emergence of out-patient clinics on the premises of the factories, of hospitals, and of specialized clinics for employees of smaller factories and facilitated as well the legal status for the factories’ sick-funds.(82) In general, it helped to improve the treatment of workers.

The protests in Łódź began for economic reasons but as they progressed were also driven by political and national concerns of the workers who demanded among other things recognition of the workers’ national language. That the strike was put to such a bloody end by the tsarist army made the workers realize the necessity of bonding with the industrialists in economical and political struggle. This strike was the most significant outbreak since the downfall of the January Uprising and was an expression of an awakening sense of national unity among the proletariat. Aspirations for national independence gave way to resistance against the oppressors. In the measures which were taken against them during the strike the workers were able to see not only ‘their old enemy—the industrialists—but their biggest and most sordid enemy—the vile Muscovite government.’(83)
Analyzing the 1892 protest of Łódź workers, the socialist activists recognized the need for incorporating the objective of Poland’s independence into their agenda. Directly inspired by the Łódź protest Jan Lenartowicz wrote in the socialist paper *Pobudka*: ‘Only one shout has come out from the mouths of all Polish socialists: Independence!’ (84) In that way the failed strike accelerated the changes which were already penetrating the Polish socialist movement and significantly influenced their development in the Russian sector of partitioned Poland. All sources indicate that the strike also precipitated the establishment of democratic socialist parties in the Polish Kingdom. One of the strike’s immediate consequences was a gathering organized by the Polish socialists in Paris in November 1892. During that convention the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) was called into existence. In its program the PPS strongly emphasized the importance of Poland’s independence.
Notes

(2) F. Tych, Zwięzek Robotników Polskich 1889-1892: Anatomia wczesnej organizacji robotniczej (Warsaw, 1974), 382.
(4) ‘Dokumenty,’ 210, 211.
(6) A. Próchnik, Bunt łódzki w roku 1892: Studium historyczne (Warsaw 1950), 23.
(9) ‘Dokumenty,’ 210, 211, 213, 218.
(10) A. Chwalba, Sacrum i Rewolucja. Socjaliści polscy wobec praktyce w symboli religijnych: 1870-1918 (Krakow 1992), 248 ff.
(15) Tych, Zwięzek Robotników Polskich, 384; Bandurka, ‘Dokumenty,’ 210, 216.
(16) ‘Dokumenty,’ 211.
(17) Próchnik, 65-70.
(18) ‘Dokumenty,’ 212, 213.
(21) Próchnik, 78.
(22) ‘Dokumenty,’ 216, 217.
(23) Ibid. 217.
(24) Próchnik, 81.
(26) Próchnik, 83.
(27) Governor Miller wrote to Hurko: ‘I will not allow any compromise on their [the industrialists] part which would benefit the workers as long as the latter will not calm down. The reason being that any kind of actual compromise is like putting a dangerous weapon into the hands of the agitators who will try to convince the workers that those concessions are the result of their determined actions against the industrialists and the government’ (Bandurka, ‘Dokumenty,’ 221).
(29) Próchnik, 89.
(31) Ibid. 219, 220. Note: arshin (Russian length of measure) = 28.0 inches.
(32) Próchnik, 100.
(33) ‘Dokumenty,’ 209.
(34) Ibid. 214, 221, 222.
(36) ‘Dokumenty,’ 222.
(37) Ibid. 224, 225.
(38) Próchnik, 109, 112, 114.
(40) Ibid. 235.
(41) Próchnik, 90.
(42) ‘Dokumenty,’ 221, 235.
(43) Samus, Między powstaniem a rewolucją, 104.
(44) In his report the governor Miller recorded instances when the Jews struck back at their attackers in a cruel way. One of the attackers was ‘hit with iron-bars so badly that all skin from his buttocks was gone. His pants were soaked with blood which kept dripping down his legs and it looked like a sail.’ Another attacker suffered ‘all sorts of severe injuries’ and ‘his hand was, supposedly, chopped off with an ax’ (Dokumenty, 219, 220).
(45) Myśliński, 79.
(47) A. Żarnowska, ‘Robotnicy w Królestwie Polskim—pokolenie uczestników strajków w koncu XIX wieku,’ ‘Bunt łódzki,’ 45.
(48) Ibid.
(50) Badziak, ‘Podłoże gospodarczo-społeczne,’ 27.
(51) Samus, Między powstaniem a rewolucją, 400, 401.
(52) ‘Dokumenty,’ 235.
(53) Myśliński, 71, 72.
(54) ‘Dokumenty,’ 234.
(55) Myśliński, 80.
(57) ‘Dokumenty,’ 234.
(58) Próchnik, 86.
(59) Myśliński, 79, 80, 84.
(62) Quoted from Próchnik, 142.
(63) Ibid. 145.
(64) ‘Dokumenty,’ 214.
(66) Samus, ‘Wydarzenia majowe,’ 96.
(67) ‘Dokumenty,’ 214, 222.
(68) Samus, ‘Wydarzenia majowe,’ 103, 104.
(69) ‘Dokumenty,’ 209.
(70) Myśliński, 77.
(71) ‘Dokumenty,’ 222, 228, 236.
(72) Próchnik, 122-4.
(73) Tych, ‘Bunt łódzki,’ 16; Mysłinski, ‘ 84.
(74) ‘Dokumenty,’ 209.
(76) Tych, ‘Bunt łódzki,’ 16
(79) Tych, ‘Bunt łódzki,’ 11, 16.
(80) Socjaldemokracja Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy, 156.
(82) Pytlas, ‘Przemysłowcy łódzcy,’ 65, 66.
(83) ‘Dokumenty,’ 237.
(84) Myśliński, ‘Opinia publiczna,’ 85.