How immune from myth-making, from fantasies of any kind was Kishinev at the epicenter of Bessarabia, that slice of 600 miles at the empire’s edge with Austria Hungary to the north, the sketchiest of Black Sea access at its south and with new, raw Romania nudging against it, uneasily at the west. Humdrum, rusticated, distant from anything that felt world-important. It was known for its wines (cheap and sold in large quantities to Odessa’s undiscerning harbor bars), for its hides, its unusually large cucumbers, and its all-but-officially sanctioned venality (its government officials were known to be perhaps the most bribable in the empire). Kishinev, fifth largest city in Russia with lovely, wide streets at its center, was a place still where countryside meshed promiscuously with city, whose suburbs were essentially rural and where illiteracy and infant mortality were highest in the empire.

Never was this a region celebrated for Jewish learning. There was a dense Hasidic life in its towns, especially in the area jutting near Austria-Hungary. For several generations the region stood out for its uncannily eerie, gorgeous stone grave cuttings, vivid, fabulous designs originating in the early 18th century and the products, mostly, of one extraordinarily skilled family centered in the region just northeast of Kishinev. Skirting, perhaps because of distance from classical centers of Jewish learning, the traditional Jewish prohibition – better said to be a disinclination – with regard to representational art forms, the region’s artisans produced some of the most original carvings in the Jewish world – grand, ornate
Lions of Judah, stunning Torah scrolls many of them dipped in gold, these carvings executed often with breathtaking precision, dramatic flair, with animals all but human in their expressions, these providing a glimpse of the majesty, the reality of death, the prospect of afterlife.

On the whole, if at all susceptible to mythmaking, it would seem this was only because so few facts were known about Kishinev and its environs. In contrast, places like Odessa, or Kiev, or Berdichev were packed with a welter of associations, with pungent Yiddish sayings -- beautiful girls were known as Odessa moons, or the well-known adage “Lebt vi Got in Odes” this a city replete with buoyant and grim tales of boom and bust. Neither Kiev’s gruesome 1913 Beilis bacchanal nor Odessa’s murderous 1905 pogrom, which left some 500-600 butchered (2/3rds of all Jews killed in this entire pogrom wave), none of this would indelibly define either. Kishinev, on the other hand, was little more than a blank slate, so much so that in May 1903 The New York Times ran a piece entitled “Kishineff as a City: Far from a Bad Place to Live in, Except for Jews” with the goal of filling in the following gap: “So great,” so the article begins, “has been the interest of the public in the recent massacre in Kishineff that little or no attention has been given to the physical characteristics of the place.” Thus provided in the article were basic physical and cultural data, a portrait of a mostly rather nice place with benign weather and pleasant topography. If compared to anywhere, the New York Times suggested the most ready comparison was sunny, even-tempered Southern California.
By the time the article appeared Kishinev was, of course, one of the world’s best known and most notorious places with a multitude of stories about it truthful and fanciful. No more than the mere mention of it was sufficient to evoke a welter of associations, all of them terrible: The then young Joseph Hayyim Brenner – soon the closest Hebrew would 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 the European Jewish map would be so conflated, so linked with horror so that its name alone was all that was needed to evoke images of diasporic catastrophe at its worst. “We write, and write about Kishinev, we talk and talk about its origins,” started a Yiddish Daily Forverts editorial in early May 1903. Every issue of the paper starting in mid-April until deep into June featured banner headlines about the massacre.

How is it that an event becomes an historical event, a moment felt to define something essential about one’s age, imprinted beyond the mere moment of its occurrence, a talisman that does not fade into oblivion, into the back shelves of libraries or archives or administrative files like nearly everything else? Most disappears; only rare moments do not. Why Kishinev did not can’t be explained entirely in terms of the pogrom’s cruelties: 49 Jews were killed in the Kishinev pogrom, no fewer raped with the bulk of this violence occurring within the span of two or three hours on six or seven intersecting streets. But then soon, just two years later in the midst of the revolutionary fervor of 1905-6, hundreds would be
murdered and a little more than a decade later in Proskurov (memorialized widely at the time, all-but-forgotten afterwards) in the span of little more than a single day, February 15, 1919, 1500-2000 Jews were brutally killed. Perhaps as many as 100,000 Jews were murdered in the post-1917 pogroms that erupted around the same time as the Proskurov catastrophe and, yet Kishinev still evokes a chill, Proskurov barely a shutter.

The imprint it left was deep, astonishingly longstanding. The kernel of the Israeli army dates itself back to Kishinev; the NAACP referred to Kishineff in its original drafts; Kishinev was the immediate backdrop to major changes in the political compass of Jewish socialism as well as Zionism; it helped give birth and lend heightened credibility to Territorialism, it inspired the writing of Bialik’s “In the City of Killing” still widely regarded as the finest Jewish poem written in modern times. When Benjamin Netanyahu sought to capture a couple years ago the horror of the Toulouse killings at a French ceremony he could think of no better way to do this than to recite Bialik’s Kishinev poem whose linkage to the French outrage was, of course, non-existent.

Chronology – better said, primacy – is, no doubt, a crucial factor: That such medieval-like butchery – these terms were recycled time and again in the pogrom’s immediate aftermath – had transpired at the dawn of the new century lent the massacre extraordinary mileage. And then there was the role of ideology, namely the fact that the Jewish political scene in Russia and elsewhere of the first decade of the 20th century, while torn asunder by contestation on quite nearly every single issue (immigration, Zionism, Territorialism, Socialism,
Yiddishism, Hebraism -- Chaim Weizmann’s mother was known to announce that no matter who eventually controlled Russia’s fate she was protected since one or another of her fifteen children supported at least one of these mutually conflicting ideologies of the time); conflicted ideologies divided Jews on nearly everything else but all embraced Kishinev as their own. (1881 was to be claimed largely by Zionists; 1905 mostly by Jewish socialists; Kishinev by everyone.) The pogrom broke out at a moment of singular coherence and overall popularity for these political groups – quite soon after the first empire-wide conference of Russia’s Zionists in Minsk in September 1902, at the height of the Bund’s popularity and before its debacle at the Second Party Congress in August 1903. These parties, especially Jewish Socialists, were now poised to push forward an agenda onto the American Jewish community which is just what they did in Kishinev’s wake: they were the engine that pressed, and despite considerable resistance at the outset, the established leaders of American Jewish life to make the massacre into a cause célèbre, eventually even prompting Secretary of State Hayes to forward a protest, the first of its kind, to the Russian government which the Roosevelt administration fully expected it would never to agree to receive (it didn’t) but that was done because of the irrepressible cascade of Jewish public opinion mostly from the Lower East Side.

And, then there was the undeniable impact of new networks of information: Kishinev erupted at just the moment when what would soon become the greatest of all Jewish newspapers of the age, the Yiddish Forverts, was primed to soar. And there was also the most rambunctious of all newspaper empires in the United States, probably the world – the then-immense news regime controlled by
William Randolph Hearst – that hungered for a campaign for Jewish readers, perhaps more important for Jewish voters for Heart’s runs for New York Governor, indeed the Democratic nomination for President. For the Forverts, Kishinev would become a galvanizing force. Abraham Cahan, newly returned to the paper which was then little more than a fact-sheet for the Socialist Party, would transmute it into the greatest, certainly the most influential of all Yiddish-language newspapers. Both Hearst and Cahan would use Kishinev as a vehicle not only for the selling of newspapers but for grassroots activism: The papers they controlled immediately set in motion major relief campaigns for Kishinev Jews raising money for orphans of the Kishinev dead, their transportation to the United States where they’d be adopted and their lives repaired, for the building of schools. The disaster lent itself to relief work with collections announced immediately by the full range of newspapers – Hearst ran a campaign for months advertising it on the front page with his personal contribution listed on top, day after day, the largest of all. Kishinev would thus provide the first instance when a matter of Jewish concern in the Russian empire captured center-stage in the western press, this visibility enhanced by the massacre’s visual impact with photographs, a mainstay of journalist coverage throughout the western world in spring 1903: rows upon rows of coffins, grimly manhandled and wounded men and women, demolished homes, overcrowded hospitals, shredded torah scrolls.

Like most stories this one, too, is made of small and large details, of small details casting great, wide shadows, of bigger-than-life grandees like Hearst and others too eventually obscured by time, the fall of empires, the advent of revolution. I seek now to deepen and widen the explanation for the Kishinev pogrom’s
emergence as an event of incontrovertible prominence by adding to the mix factors some so seemingly random or accidental, factors local, circumstantial and that foreground individuals now mostly obscure. I do so to unsettle straightforward, clear-cut explanations including those cited above as to why Kishinev became what it became. The factors I now explore help better explain, as I see it, why this event – both in terms of its actual as well as imagined details -- has remained as resonant for so long not only for Jews but also, oddly, as one of the prime props, one of the outstanding motifs of Russia’s antisemitic rightwing arsenal, too. When Alexander Solzhenitsyn sought to explain a few years ago in his late-life book on Jews and Russians why Russia was so weakened by fall 1917 that it simply collapsed, as he saw it, into the waiting arms of the insidious Bolsheviks he placed much on the blame for its vulnerability on the shoulders of the Kishinev pogrom, its devastating impact on Russians, its true victims, not Jews. A story, then, that has explained so much for so many.

The noisiest drumbeat immediately preceding the pogrom’s outburst, as we’ve already seen, fixed on the ever-explosive charge of Jewish ritual murder – the disappearance, and killing of an adolescent in a spot a couple dozen miles west of Kishinev. The investigation occurred amid a cascade of relentless charges leveled daily in the only local newspaper, Bessarabets, edited by the distinguished antisemite (by no means at time an oxymoron) Pavel or Pavolochi Krushevan. Kishinev before its pogrom flew mostly beneath the radar but its Jews were the objects of considerable attention for a not insignificant sector of Russian public
opinion -- the radical right which fixed on Bessarabia, a tenuous border area still relished by Romania from whom it was so recently extracted and where Jews, it was charged, swarmed less encumbered, and more ominous than elsewhere. Not only was Bessarabia home to several of Russia’s leading figures of the radical right but, as they saw it, it was both a spot where Jews exploited non-Jews more mercilessly than elsewhere and also in its political cosmology it was, arguably, the darkest, most sinister hub in the Zionist movement’s relentless juggernaut.

Fantasy, to be sure, but like much fantasy there was an internal logic, a certain illogical coherence to it. (“Most legends spring from facts,” A. J. P. Taylor once observed.) This one too was thickened with concrete, if profoundly, distorted data. This is because for some years Kishinev served as home of the correspondence bureau of the Zionist movement, one of four bureaus with different functions created by Theodor Herzl’s movement soon after its launch in 1897; Kishinev, the most effective, had the responsibility of maintaining communication with branches in Russia and beyond, to disseminate news pertinent to the movement to newspapers, and other organizations abroad.

Kishinev was selected as its location simply because this one-man operation, this grandly named correspondence bureau was the home to one Yaakov Bernstein-Kogan, a doctor with a less than sturdy practice. Never was Bernstein-Kogan able to make more than a nominal living; bouncing around for years, supported for various stints by the Zionist movement and later. after a some time in Palestine, he made the counter-intuitive choice to return to Soviet Russia where
he worked the Jewish cooperative farm circuit and dying in the late 1920s. A man with an excess of heart, but not one of the towering minds or tacticians of his movement, he loomed nonetheless alarmingly large in and around the time of the Kishinev pogrom and mostly because he was the movement’s chief conduit to the world’s press. For not a few in the Russian government as well as in the hard right it was Bernstein-Kogan who personified all that was most horrible, most perilous in the challenge posed by Zionism, and the Jews as a whole.

In some measure these fears soared at the time because of Herzl’s insistent claims that he and his movement were buttressed by limitless wealth, that it was on the verge of persuading Turks, or Germans, or the English to embrace Zionism’s goals, that it possessed the financial capacity to purchase vast chunks of the Holy Land. Such assertions, all either completely untrue or vastly over-stated, were taken with deadly seriousness by the Russian Right and by many Russian government officials, apprehensions that grew to fever pitch when Zionism launched its campaign to buy land in Palestine and then, in 1901, petitioned for permission for the Palestine bank to function in imperial Russia. The move transformed Zionism in the minds of substantial sectors of Russian opinion from an organization intent merely on Jewish emigration, a benign even positive goal, to one planning on acquiring Christianity’s most sacred sites and then, perhaps, of immeasurably more.

A vivid glimpse of the Russian government’s perceptions of Zionism’s reach – and Bernstein-Kogan’s uncannily powerful influence -- may be seen in police director A. A. Lopukhin’s book–length report on the movement produced in
1903 for use by his agency. Packed with information, much of it accurate, in the
document Lopukhin portrays Bernstein-Kogan as a figure of uncontested
influence; there are nearly as many references in it to Kogan-Bernstein as to
Herzl and he is described as “chief of all of Russian Zionism,” its virtual
“president.” A populist in his youth, a lifelong atheist, brother of a political
radical, Bernstein-Kogan’s activity was monitored with great care, his motives
the object of the greatest suspicion.

There was little to discover, really, but neither the government nor the radical
Right believed this to be the case. Bernstein-Kogan’s moment in the limelight
was brief, but intense, entering history in the immediate wake of the Kishinev
pogrom. What he managed to set in motion as head of the movement’s
correspondence bureau in Kishinev starting in 1898 (he had stepped down from
the post by 1903) was a well-run outfit with runners capable of smuggling
information about the movement and its concerns across the border to
newspapers and elsewhere. Its capacity to disseminate information and at the
empires most porous borders was the Kishinev bureau’s great asset. This
goodhearted (unusually portly) man was but a second-tier activist whose
significance in the larger constellation of the movement was keenly
overestimated by the government and others. But since the Kishinev pogrom
broke out on his home turf and since he had at his disposal an impressive range
of international contacts, he now found himself at the epicenter of the action.
Had the same attack transpired a mere 100 or 200 miles to the east, not in
Kishinev and without easy access to Bessarabia’s porous borders and without
Bernstein-Kogan’s good work it seems unlikely to me that it would have become what it almost instantly became.

On the second night of the pogrom, once it was reasonably safe to walk outside, Bernstein-Kogan went to the homes of the city’s wealthier Jews until the early hours of the morning, collecting money for the relief of pogrom victims. If he encountered resistance, he simply argued until the money was forthcoming, and by the night’s end, he had collected 48,000 rubles in cash, 18,000 in checks. Then, working closely with messengers he knew through his Zionist work, he smuggled news of the pogrom across the Romanian border and arranged to transmit from Jassy 1,500 rubles-worth of telegrams to the Western press.

The messages yielded, as Bernstein-Kogan later recorded in his memoirs, nearly 1.5 million rubles in immediate relief, with the bulk of the money coming to Kishinev in Bernstein-Kogan’s own name and from as far away as Australia. (To this day, Portland Oregon claims in its local histories that it gave the largest of all sums.) A few days after having transmitted news of the pogrom via the border town Jassy, Bernstein-Kogan was summoned to St. Petersburg to meet with Russian Jewry’s leading figures, government officials and sympathetic members of the Russian literary community, including Maxim Gorky and there was he introduced as “Herzl’s right-hand man.” Plehve astonished Herzl during their session together that August in St. Petersburg when Plehve stated, “But, take, Bernstein-Kohan! …[W]e know that he conducts a press campaign against us abroad.”
Above all, the news regarding Kishinev that mesmerized the world’s press – still more than the massacre’s brutality, and it was this that prompted the plethora of public meetings denouncing Kishinev’s outrages, that inspired Tolstoy to speak out in defense of Jews for the first time – was the so-called Plehve letter. What this was thought to signal was the most resonate of all lessons to be learned from the massacre: namely, that the government at the highest levels was directly responsible for it all, that it was intent on wreaking havoc, perhaps little less than the annihilation of its Jews. This would become the most unassailable, the most canonic of all assumptions shared by Jews regarding the late imperial regime. And the Plehve letter would constitute the main body of evidence utilized by Jews and others in the effort, in the end quite successful, to block restrictions on the Jewish immigration to the United States comparable to those under very serious consider at the time in England.

Plehve was the ideal boogey man -- mordant, haughtier than Tolstoy’s Karenin; no photograph of him shows with anything but a grimace. His loathing of Jews was deep, all the more so since, in contrast to most Russian antisemites, he had had sustained contact with them in the courtyards of his Warsaw youth. Rather obscure until the moment he became infamous, Plehve was barely known beyond St. Petersburg bureaucratic circles before the Kishinev pogrom; he had been appointed Minister of Interior only in 1902. Yet, when shortly afterwards Theodor Herzl rushed to Russia in Kishinev’s wake it was Plehve whom Herzl was most eager to see (once Nicholas II made it clear he wouldn’t meet with him) as Plehve was now widely viewed as the keeper of Russian Jewry’s fate.
He was, then, a made-to-order villain: recollections of him by government colleagues, too, show someone akin to that of an Oliver Stone rendition of a Wall Street mogul, ceaselessly conniving, endlessly self-important, too vile to be accused of mere corruption, a human cipher. Jews, Plehve said shortly after hearing news of the Kishinev pogrom, were “conceited” and deserved “to be taught a lesson.” A year after Kishinev’s pogrom, Plehve was assassinated by an agent of the Socialist Revolutionary Party on orders to do so largely because of his responsibility for the pogrom.

The single most damning piece of evidence implicating Plehve was a letter with the signature of the Minister of Interior himself dated two weeks before the pogrom outlining its basic details – in short, just the smoking gun that for so long had been so exasperatingly difficult to locate. It first appeared in *The Times of London* a month after the pogrom and was then reprinted widely. The government’s immediate reaction was to expel the Times correspondent. It took eight days for the government to disavow the letter, and it did so clumsily, with all sorts of reckless, insulting claims about Jews and their responsibility for the massacre that their disavowals only sharpened suspicions that the letter was authentic. By the time the regime decided to react, it was simply taken for granted – probably even by most of its friends -- that Plehve had written it and that St. Petersburg’s demurral was but a perfunctory one. The letter read as follows:

“It has come to my knowledge that in the region entrusted to you wide disturbances are being prepared against the Jews, who chiefly exploit the local
population. In view of...the unquestionable undesirability of instilling, by too severe measures, anti-government feeling into the population....your Excellency will not fail to contribute to the immediate stopping of the disorders which may arise, by means of admonitions, without at all having recourse, however, to the use of arms.”

It was a shocking document, a green light to marauders whose only concern was that local authorities would not respond too severely and thus alienate the rioters. Not only did the letter offer no guide as to what ought to be done to stop the massacre, but helped to explain why the government’s response turned out to be so ineffective.

There is no doubt that Plehve greatly disliked and distrusted Jews. He made these feelings amply known: He saw Jews as a disruptive force, economically untrustworthy, politically subversive, and alien to the natural rhythms of Russian life. He hated them because too many of them were radicals, he suspected that most of them were insufficiently loyal to the regime. There’s little doubt that he wouldn’t have minded if there were far fewer of them in the empire. He would easily have lived without Jews, no doubt he would have much preferred to do so but would have never have done anything – certainly not wreck havoc on Russia’s streets – to do away with them.

But claims that his career was a long and unrelentingly anti-Jewish one are overstated, mostly untrue. Lopukhin, who served under Plehve as police director, published remarkably candid memoirs after the 1917 revolution, where
he stated that Plehve had nothing at all to do with fomenting the Kishinev pogrom. When Plehve’s papers were opened to scholars after the fall of the Romanov regime, researchers scoured the materials for evidence of the infamous Kishinev letter and any other evidence of Plehve’s responsibility for the Kishinev pogrom but nothing was found — this, despite the fact that they discovered a great deal of highly embarrassing data on a wide range of other sensitive matters.

Later, in the regime’s final years on the eve of the First World War, when it seemed to be veering out of control, the government included some officials, most prominently those who had engineered the Mendel Beilis fiasco — a cynical campaign to prosecute Beilis with the charge of using the blood of Christian children for Jewish ritual purposes — officials prepared to sacrifice the stability of Romanov Russia for a radical, right-wing agenda. It was anti-Semitic men of this sort, albeit not any in the employ of the central government in St. Petersburg, who, as we’ll soon see, likely set the Kishinev pogrom in motion, but Plehve wasn’t one of them. He could easily have lived without Jews, no doubt he would have much preferred to do so but he would never have done anything – certainly not wreak havoc on Russia’s streets – to do away with them.

It is all but certain that the letter was a forgery; its origins remain obscure and perhaps always will. Still, there is good reason to believe that whoever wrote it nonetheless believed it to be essentially accurate. This is because it was widely presumed at the time that an explosion like the Kishinev pogrom simply could not occur in autocratic Russia without governmental sanction and that such
permission could only have been issued by Plehve. And self-evident as this presumption was, it was, unfortunately, unlikely that it could ever be proven to be true. So, although those responsible for the letter knew that the exact words it attributed to Plehve were inaccurate, the sentiments the letter conveyed was as good a stab at reality as anyone was likely to muster.

Planned the pogrom likely was but not by St. Petersburg authorities. The most likely culprits were a clutch of local activists led, at least inspired by the owner of Bessarabets, the Moldavian-turned-Russian ultra-right-winger Krushevan. It was his paper that 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. Contemporary accounts placed Krushevan front and center in the tale but he would soon be marginalized and when mentioned at all mostly it was because of – really rather slight -- government ties linking him and his wretched newspaper which was now depicted as little more than a conduit for official machinations.

If judged only on the basis of the incendiary, as often as not blatantly ridiculous, items appearing as news in his Bessarabets Krushevan 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 shot 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 merely grazed by the bullet and when he dashed into the nearest pharmacy where his wounds were treated by a Jewish druggist.) Krushevan then spent the remainder of his life (he died in his late forties 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; according to some, he was the most highly regarded figure in turn of the century Bessarabia. And what seems clear is that in Kishinev in the months before the pogrom’s outbreak Krushevan emerged as the leader of a small underground made up of neither marginals nor mere cranks. There was the highly-regard Krushevan, his close friend, E. 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, and another named Pronin who made a small killing in Kishinev’s booming property market. It was these men who, together with a handful of others, were probably 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 Bessarbia, as I’ve noted, 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 some local rightwing seminarians guiding the attackers at the pogrom’s start provided just the right match to set Kishinev ablaze.

Far astonishing, however, is the likelihood that this same tightly-bound, resolute group 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 and because of the rotund, ubiquitously sinister Bernstein-Kogan at the epicenter of the international Jewish conspiracy.
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. Suddenly Kishinev appeared -- in the Hearst press quite literally daily for some two months, and elsewhere too -- on banner headlines with nearly all reports devastatingly critical of the Russian government. It seems 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 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, evidence on this score: For instance, 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 original 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.” (So truly marginalized was
Krushevan that the fact that his sister married a Jew -- his name was Bronstein -- and settled in Baltimore where converted, and Orthodox, and renamed Sarah she granted in the 1930s interview to a Russian-language newspaper, and yet this too never disappeared from view.) 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 1918 or 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.

Kishinev managed to distill for much of Jewry – and much of liberal as well as radical opinion in Russia and elsewhere, too – a coherent, longstanding set of beliefs regarding Jews and Russia, governmental repression, how to respond to it, the character of right and left, the character arguably of modernity itself rendering the word pogrom – sketchily used before then into a phenomenon seen now little less intrinsically Russian than vodka or the tsar himself.
Kishinev may be said, without too much exaggeration, to have provided much of the original, resilient glue that, time and again, has kept American Jews in particular, a community that took the Kishinev pogrom to heart and in many ways made it its own, attached despite socio-economic reasons to the contrary, to the NAACP, to the ACLU, to Barak Obama.

Much of what was learned by Jews regarding Kishinev was, as it happens, the product of half-truths, of mythology that morphed into historicity, of poetry read as documentary journalism, of seemingly irrefutable facts passed from generation to generation often without basis in fact. Kishinev morphed into myths so dense, so clotted as to obscure almost entirely for most the actual, terrible horrors exacted on the dusty town’s tiny alleyways, its darkest, poorest, most miserable corners that were, almost immediately, fixed for all time as the quintessence of Jewish life in the rotting Russian empire. Its mythologies, in turn, made history. Dizzying in its twists, made of something so specific and made into something so vast and emblematic, it begs to be cut down to size and then reassembled with its many offshoots made into crucial parts of its story, one where fact and fantasy mesh, where digging down deep reveals immeasurably more than the details of one catastrophe but little less than the mind-set of Jews, Russians, and others, too at the cusp of a new century whose perspectives on that springtime in Kishinev would be so laden with meanings and counter-meanings. They would resonate time and again, long after the city itself fell into obscurity, a place now all but empty but filled nonetheless with lessons thick and conflicted and that, once opened up, might well reconfigure so much of what we believed we already knew.