

## **EUROPEAN POGROMS: FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE EARLY MODERN ERA**

During the first two Crusades (1096–1102 and 1147–1149), the Jews of central Europe, especially in Germany, fell victim to persecutions and sacrifices. The initial nature of the conflict was religious. The persecutors justified their action with the argument that the liberation of the Holy Land should be preceded by the murder of the “murderers of Christ” in Europe. The actual motives of the perpetrators were more economic, however. The burgeoning religious fanaticism of the time presented a suitably legitimate opportunity to get rid of some economic competitors, because many Jews were involved in credit trades at the time. Yet it would be a mistake to equate the history of the Jews in medieval Europe with persecution and discrimination. There were certainly longer periods of relatively peaceful coexistence with the Christian world. Nonetheless, relations between Christians and Jews were precarious. Famines and epidemics inflamed the Christian majority against religious and social minorities. Thus the great epidemic and plague of the late Middle Ages in the mid-fourteenth century resulted in pogroms against the Jewish population. The Jews were accused of causing the plague by poisoning wells and streams. Hence the initial motive for the persecution was an attempt to explain the sudden appearance of the rapidly spreading illness. At the same time the hatred of the Jews this stirred up played into the hands of Christian debtors and merchants.

Mobilization against the Jews was further spurred by accusations of ritual murder. These assertions claimed that Jews stole Christian children and slaughtered them in order to use their blood for ritual purposes. This accusation, among others, served as a reason for the destruction and plunder of the Prague Ghetto in 1389, which at the time contained the largest and wealthiest Jewish population in Europe.

Because the threat of persecution and expulsion constantly hung over their heads, beginning in the thirteenth century large segments of the Jewish population moved farther to the east. The Polish kings encouraged the settlement of Jews and guaranteed their security and economic privileges. The Jews soon became indispensable for the Polish economy, mediating as traders and brokers between town and country. The Polish nobility came to prefer leaving the administration of their property to Jews, which dragged the latter into conflicts between nobility and peasantry. In 1648 these tensions finally resulted in a pogrom of hitherto unseen magnitude, when Ukrainian peasants joined with Cossacks, Russian cavalry, led by Hetman Bogdan Chmelnicki (1595–1657) and attacked Polish cities. As many as 125, 000 Jews fell victim during these massacres. As a rule the Jews could not count on the support of their Polish neighbors, and it took decades for the Jewish communities to rebuild. One reaction to the catastrophe was the rising popularity of cabalistic doctrine among eastern European Jews and the spread of messianic apocalyptic sects. The eventual outcome of these movements was Hassidism, one of the most significant mystical-religious movements in Judaism.