

# Amsterdam: Calling a Football Riot a Pogrom Insults Historical Memory

Monday 18 November 2024, by [BAJALAN Djene Rhys](#), [BURGIS Ben](#) (Date first published: 12 November 2024).

**Israeli ultraright football hooligans rampaged through Amsterdam, and regular fans were targeted with violence in turn. The whole episode was atrocious, but calling it a pogrom is historically ignorant and trivializes genuine horrors.**

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*Football riot at the Dam Square in Amsterdam, Netherlands, on November 7, 2024. (Mouneb Taim / Anadolu via Getty Images)*

Last week, Bari Weiss's newspaper, the *Free Press*, ran the [headline](#), "Last Night's Pogrom in Amsterdam." Two days later, *Fox News* informed its online readers [that](#) Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu had "condemn[ed]" the "antisemitic pogrom in Amsterdam."

Right now, a one-word Google search for pogrom gets you headline after headline about the same event, many accompanied by videos of fans of the Maccabi Tel Aviv soccer team being attacked on the streets of Amsterdam.

The narrative logic seems simple enough. What happened after the match between Maccabi and Amsterdam's Ajax was (a) a riot where (b) the victims were Jewish and (c) the perpetrators were not. Hence, it was a "pogrom."

But what actually happened in Amsterdam? When we take a closer look, we see that there is no remotely meaningful sense in which it was a "pogrom."

## What Pogroms Actually Were

The term "pogrom" stirs profound memories of Jewish trauma, evoking a history of brutalization at the hands of dominant ethnic communities. Yet to apply this term to recent events is a grave error, one that distorts the true meaning of pogroms as they emerged historically, especially during the transition from feudal to capitalist civilization.

Pogroms were not isolated incidents of violence. They were calculated assaults to keep Jews locked firmly in their social place. Pogroms were a tool wielded by the majority against a racialized minority that was denied full political and civil rights.

While their primary purpose was maintaining hierarchy, scholars of pogroms such as [Professor Hans Rogger](#) have argued that they were at their worst during moments when the apparatus of the

existing order — legal and institutional systems that perpetuate discrimination — began to weaken or fall into disrepair. The minority was exposed to the full brunt of the majority’s vengeance because they were seen as “getting above their station.” In short, pogroms served as instruments of terror, reinforcing the foundations of the existing social regime at times of rapid change.

This pattern of calculated violence bears a striking resemblance to other historical moments where legal structures of subjugation were in decline, such as the brutal violence Ottoman Muslims [inflicted upon Armenians](#) — a process unfolding precisely as the legal basis for “dhimmitude” (the lesser status of non-Muslims) was being dismantled. Likewise, in the United States, the [Tulsa massacre](#) stands as a pogrom of racialized violence aimed at economically successful black Americans, an attempt to reinforce racial stratification at a time when many whites feared the erosion of the existing hierarchy.

These examples illustrate a fundamental principle: pogroms cannot occur outside the framework of a society that systematically denies rights to a minority, ensuring that it remains vulnerable to the violence of the majority. What happened in Amsterdam, however, bears no resemblance to this structure. These were not attacks predicated on religious or racial oppression. They were incidents fueled by political discord between different groups of nationalists.

To describe what happened in Amsterdam as a pogrom serves only to blur the lines between [antisemitism and anti-Zionism](#), obscuring the specific (albeit sometimes overlapping) nature of each and profoundly distorting the material realities of modern Europe.

## **What Happened in Amsterdam**

Jews in the Russian Empire, where the term “pogrom” was invented, typically knew better than to hope for assistance from the tsarist authorities. In a classical pogrom, those authorities would usually hold back and let the violence happen, or perhaps even directly participate. And the victims were often far too afraid of the consequences for themselves or their communities to even try to fight back. More often than not, the best options were to barricade the doors or to flee. If you were very lucky, you could flee all the way to a country like the United States where pogroms didn’t happen. (That is, on a personal note, how the family of one of the authors of this article got here.)

The dynamics of what happened in Amsterdam could hardly have had *less* resemblance to this history.

Like many teams around the world, some of the fans of Maccabi Tel Aviv are what are popularly known as “football hooligans.” As is also common in several other countries, this thuggishness has a nationalistic political element. The hooligans at the match in Amsterdam seem to have been in overdrive on this particular occasion. Before the tables turned, some Maccabi fans pulled down and burned Palestinian flags, violently attacked Muslim cab drivers, and cheered and chanted during a moment of silence at the Ajax game for the victims of a flood in Spain. According to [the New York Times](#), much of the nationalistic chanting from this group over the course of these events veered into “incendiary and racist slogans, including declaring that there were ‘no children’ in Gaza anymore. . .”

Later, there were assaults on Israeli fans, including hit-and-run attacks by perpetrators on bicycles. Some of the victims were Maccabi fans who hadn’t participated in the earlier hooliganism. In other words, this played out like a classical nationalistic football riot — the thuggish element of one group of fans engages in violence, and the ugly intercommunal dynamics lead to not just the perpetrators but the entire group of fans (or even random people wrongly assumed to share their background or

nationality) being attacked.

If this were a matter of, for example, Manchester City hooligans engaging in violence in Madrid and then innocent Man City fans (or perhaps even just random English people) being attacked in return, no one anywhere would call this a “pogrom.” They’d just call it a football riot. And it’s striking that, far from acting like tsarist authorities during a pogrom, the police in Amsterdam seem to have cracked down far harder on those who attacked Maccabi fans than the overtly racist Maccabi hooligans who started the first phase of the riot.

Our point here is not that the incendiary (and, in some cases, actually violent) actions of Maccabi hooligans justify what happened later. Our boiling-hot take on the actual events that transpired is that football rioting is a bad thing.

But our other, bigger point is that trying to force a pretty standard inter-nationalistic football riot into the category of “pogrom” is a major stretch. Furthermore, using that designation to opportunistically smear global dissent against Israel’s atrocities in Gaza as classically antisemitic only serves to trivialize genuine horrors. This historically illiterate conflation should be rejected by all who truly care about antisemitism.

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**P.S.**

• Jacobin. 11.12.2024:

<https://jacobin.com/2024/11/pogrom-football-amsterdam-israel-antisemitism>

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