

Anti-Semitism in Inter-war Europe: the Cases of Poland & Hungary

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Introduction

One of the most relevant and interesting topics of 20th century Hungarian and Polish history is the relationship between the so-called *traditional* anti-Semitism and the Hungarian and Polish societies' involvement in the implementation of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is thus much more connected to nationalism than to traditions of anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism. It is possible to claim that the anti-Jewish arguments of the period of World War II have their roots much more in the social, political and economic realities of World War I and the post-World War I than in the anti-Semitism intellectual heritage of the nations.¹

In the period between WWI and WWII Poland was home to more Jews than any other country in Europe. "Its commonplace but simplistic identification with anti-Semitism was due largely to nationalist efforts to boycott Jewish business. That they failed was not for want of support by the Catholic clergy, for whom the *Jewish question* was more than economic."² Poland and Hungary had one tragic similarity to Nazi Germany, the official anti-Semitism, even if this kind of policies can be not compared to the horrible crimes committed against the Jews by Hitler, but at the same time, "it cannot be forgotten that inter-war Hungary and Poland had a very sorry record in terms of its treatment of its own Jewish minority."³

The Case of Hungary

The First World War ended with the defeat of Hungary and after this event there was the institution of a new anti-Semitic movement called the *Awakening Hungarians*. "Its members were recruited from among the disgruntled elements of the lower middle classes, from non-commissioned officers, small clerks with a sprinkling of a few officers. Later the movement was taken over by politicians close to Miklós Horthy, the future regent of Hungary."⁴

The Communist regime (led by Kun) after the World War I had several Jews in the upper positions of the government. "After the Communist revolution had been suppressed, the establishment of the new regime was accompanied by riots and acts of violence against the Jews, the so-called White Terror,"⁵ the number of whose victims has been estimated at 3,000 dead.

The commanders of the national army units often instigated the people to chase the Jews out of their communities. In some places they assured the people that they could do with the Jews whatever they wanted. In others,

¹ <http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies>

² Modras Ronald E., *The Catholic Church and Anti-Semitism: Poland, 1933-1939*, Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994, p.7.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ <http://www.math.psu.edu/glasner/moreshet/faith/node14.html>

⁵ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0009_0_09319.html

they posted announcements calling upon the population to smoke the Jews out.⁶

The new government stopped the violence against Jews, even if it is important to underline that the official policy of the government was anti-Semitic. In 1920 the so-called *numerus clauses* laws reduced the number of Jews in the higher institutions of learning to 5%. “The situation improved while Stephen Bethlen was prime minister (1921-31) and the negative reactions aroused by the anti-Jewish policy weakened this tendency, even though a widespread anti-Semitic activity continued. In 1928, an amendment was introduced to the *numerus clauses* act, but the restrictions were not entirely abolished. The Jews generally believed that the anti-Jewish current was only a fleeting phenomenon.”⁷

A sharp anti-Jewish turn took place during the late 1930's as a result of the strengthening of the Rightist circles and growing German-Nazi influence. In 1938 the First Jewish Law was presented to Parliament; it restricted the number of Jews in the liberal professions, in the administration, and in commercial and industrial enterprises to 20%. The term Jew included not only members of the Jewish religion, but also those who became apostates after 1919 or who had been born of Jewish parents after that date. The bill aroused objections from the opposition parties, but it was ratified by both Houses of Parliament. In 1939 the Second Jewish Law was passed; it extended the application of the term Jew on a racial basis and came to include some 100,000 Christians (apostates or their children) and also reduced the number of Jews in economic activity, fixing it at 5%; the political rights of the Jews were also restricted. As a result of these laws, the sources of livelihood of 250,000 Hungarian Jews were closed for them.⁸

After the WWI the presence of Hungarian Jews was reduced by about a half (473,000 in 1920)⁹ and it is possible to find this data in 1920s and 1930s. “The demographic decline of Hungarian Jewry in this period is evident by the sharp decline in the younger age groups (0-20) and increase in the older age groups. There was a marked tendency in the inter-war years to concentrate in towns, especially in the capital. Over half of Hungary's Jewish population lived in *Greater Budapest*.”¹⁰

Horthy's Years and the *Numerus Clauses*

“The counter-revolution was headed by Miklós Horthy (1920-1944) a former admiral in the navy of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Officers among those closest to Horthy, notably his nephew Ivan Héjjas, Gyula Gömbös and many others operating through individual groups called *detachments* ferreted out Jews, especially well-to-do Jews, in the cities.”¹¹ Jews were often accused of complicity with the Communists even if most of them was hostile to Communism.

Jews were dragged from their homes and taken to the cellars of hotels where the officers had established their headquarters, and beaten mercilessly. They were usually released after payment of very large sums, often their entire fortune. The list of the victims grew very long. The most

⁶ Braham Randolph, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary* (2 Vols.) New York, Columbia University Press, 198, p.18.

⁷ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0009_0_09319.html

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0009_0_09319.html

notorious among the Jew beaters and torturers next to Héjjas were Pal Phoney and Michael Francis Kis, a sadist, who many years later was arrested as a mass murderer.¹²

In all the territories of Hungary anti-Communism and anti-Semitism became the same thing. As a consequence, “special camps were established at different places, camps of torture, and of inhuman mistreatment. Camps that became in Hungary as notorious as have become the names of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka and other infamous camps of Hitler.”¹³

The official position of Horthy was against these crimes, but he didn't implement a concrete action to stop them and He just ordered an investigation. “The fact was established that many of the officers' victims were murdered and robbed. In spite of this, the investigating authorities did not recommend the prosecution of the criminals. On November 3rd 1921, Horthy issued an order of amnesty on behalf of those who *committed certain excesses not for the sake of self enrichment but under the influence of public exasperation against the perpetrators of acts undermining the interests of the Hungarian fatherland and the Hungarian race.*”¹⁴

About Horthy's relationship with Hitler, it is important to underline:

the Regent reminded the Führer that Hungary had been the only true friend of Germany after the collapse in World War I and pointed out the high esteem enjoyed by the Germans by identifying the positions men of German origin held in Hungarian governmental and military apparatus.¹⁵

“The stamp was put on the official character of the anti-Semitism of the new regime by the restrictions on the admission of Jewish students to national universities. In the summer of 1920 the Hungarian Minister of Education issued an ordinance *to limit the number of students admissible to national universities on the basis of their nationality or race.*”¹⁶ This ordinance was created for Jews and not for students of other minorities.

The Jews students were frequently beaten up and humiliated by their fellow students without any protection on the part of the university and police authorities. “At the University of Budapest, they had to sit in the last benches of the classrooms called *benches of shame.*”¹⁷

The *numerus clauses* are very relevant because these laws represented the first act of official anti-Semitism in Europe in contemporary times.

Several Hungarian politicians, such as László Endre, the future secretary of state, a sworn enemy of the Jews; Gyula Gömbös, Horthy's friend who became prime minister in 1932; and others started a movement to steer Hungarian foreign policy in the direction of a close association with Adolf Hitler. Gömbös himself paid a visit to Hitler as early as 1920.¹⁸ After his advent on June 20, 1933 to the prime ministry, Gömbös declared that Hitler is here to stay and so is fascism. He saluted Hitler after his elevation to the federal chancellorship and declared that he was proud of being his friend. It was this orientation of the Hungarian authorities toward

¹² <http://www.math.psu.edu/glasner/moreshet/faith/node14.html>

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ Braham, Randolph, *cit.*, pp.162-163.

¹⁶ <http://www.math.psu.edu/glasner/moreshet/faith/node14.html>

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ When Hitler was the leader of an anonymous political movement.

Germany that made the occupation of the country and the deportation of Hungarian Jews such an easy task for the Nazis in the last phase of World War II.¹⁹

The *numerus clauses* and all the anti-Semitic laws were a clear signal of the strong relationship between Hitler and Horthy. It is important to consider the law of November 20, 1920 (expulsion from Hungary of all Jews who had immigrated to the country after 1914) and the law of 1925, paragraph 15, point 7 (any foreigner who had entered the country as a result of an immigration movement contrary to the interest of the state must be expelled).²⁰ The Minister of Interior officially declared that these laws were necessary in order to prevent a Jewish invasion and, for this reason, industries and commercial enterprises had to avoid the presence of foreign workers.

In compliance with the appeal of the Minister, many raids were staged in that year of 1925 against Jewish families and enterprises. As a result of these raids, the official statistics mentioned that 160 Jews with 183 members of their families were expelled immediately. Expulsion proceedings were started in 354 additional cases involving 824 Jewish persons, and 1,383 heads of Jewish families with 3,113 members were summoned to prove their right to stay in Hungary.²¹

The law of 1925 itself was replaced by that of 1938, article XV, called “*the law to assure a better balance in Hungarian social and economic life*.” This law limited the proportion of Jews admissible to the professions of journalism, filmmaking, of the stage, as well as to membership in the Bar Association and in the medical profession to 20%. Any industrial enterprise employing more than 10 workers was also limited to 20% of Jewish employment.”²²

In 1939, article IV of the same law defined who had to be considered a Jew: “any person either of Jewish faith or having one parent or two grandparents of that faith was classified in that category. Jews were barred from employment in the civil service (they had been *de facto* long before). The profession of a teacher at any level was forbidden to them. The *numerus clauses*—that is to say, the limitation of Jewish students in Hungarian universities—was reaffirmed. Their proportion remained the same—6%. The same percentage was applied to licences in any trade. The law also curtailed the right to vote of Jews in Hungary.”²³

The last Horthy’s law in opposition to Jews (1941) with the article XV was against the right to marry a non-Jew person for a Jew.

These laws are relevant because they represented:

1. an increasingly aggressive policy toward the Jews.
2. The *evolution* of the Hungarian society that became a model for the German Nazis.
3. The starting-point for the subsequent despoliation of the Jews, the deprivation of their rights “as citizens and human beings.”²⁴

¹⁹ <http://www.math.psu.edu/glasner/moreshet/faith/node14.html>

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

Anti-Semitism in Inter-war Poland

In the inter-war period Poland was a state that the Allied Powers had created in 1919 from parts of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. Poland included within its borders a number of ethnic minority groups, among which were Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Slovaks, and three million Jews.

In newly independent Poland matters then got off a very bad star, as we have seen: the Jews being subjected to a continuous hail of verbal attacks and widespread violence, much of it of an exceedingly cruel and humiliating nature vented for no objectively comprehensive ground.²⁵

Several Polish governments protected non-Polish minorities by signing on June 28, 1919 “Little Treaty of Versailles.”²⁶ It is important to underline that the protection of minorities wasn’t efficient, above all after the death of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, the first Polish President, in 1935.²⁷

A 1927 law requiring artisans to pass a formal examination of technical competence laid down that their proficiency in the Polish language be tested as well. The law confronted them with an obstacle that relatively few among them were in a position to overcome and did nothing in practice to accelerate the spread of the Polish language in the Jews population, a natural process that needed no formal machinery to promote it.²⁸

In fact, after 1935, Polish anti-Semitic political parties wanted the Government to approve a law for the restrictions on the social mobility of Polish Jews.²⁹ These parties were very close to the German Nazis and they appreciated the *Nuremberg Race Laws*.³⁰

The first example was a law (January 1st, 1937) that “placed limits on the practice of the kosher slaughtering of cattle by Orthodox Jews. This law allowed the Polish government”³¹

to regulate the supply of cattle to kosher slaughterers, and jurisdictions in which Jews numbered less than three percent of the total population were to be permitted to outlaw kosher slaughtering altogether.³²

This law was discriminatory and it was against a huge number of Orthodox Jews. “It also had a devastating effect on the economic well being of tens of thousands of Jewish butchers, their families, and their suppliers.”³³

From 1935 to 1939, several anti-Semitic laws were created in order to influence professional organizations with the only aim to exclude Jews. Here are only a few examples:

²⁵ Vital, David, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe 1789-1939*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.777-778.

²⁶ Also known as the *Minorities Treaty*.

²⁷ <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Total/Polish%20Antisemitism.htm>

²⁸ Vital, David, *cit.*, p.769.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Melzer, Emanuel, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935-1939*, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1965, p. 90.

³³ *Ibidem*.

- In August 1936, “the Polish Government ordered that all shops include the name of the owner on their business sign. This order was equivalent to specifically marking Jewish-owned businesses.”³⁴ This position was made explicit and was also published in the semi-official newspaper *Gazeta Polska*:

The development of the co-operative movement is a healthy and satisfying phenomenon and we should support it notwithstanding the fact that it spells disaster to Jewish trade. I like the Danes very much but if there were three million of them in Poland I would pray to God to take them away. Maybe we should like the Jews very much if there were only 50,000 of them in Poland.³⁵

The official anti-Semitism also had a religious legitimacy from the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, in 1936 Cardinal August Hlond expressed Church’s prescriptions against Jews in a official pastoral letter.

It is an actual fact that the Jews fight against the Catholic church, they are free-thinkers, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, bolshevism and revolution. It is also true that in the schools the Jewish youth is having an evil influence, from an ethical and religious point of view, on the Catholic youth. One does well to avoid Jewish shops and Jewish stalls in the markets, but it is not permitted to demolish Jewish businesses. One should protect oneself against the influence of Jewish morals. But it is inadmissible to assault, hit or injure Jews.³⁶

- May 1937: the membership of the *Polish Medical Association* adopted a paragraph into their professional charter excluding Jews from the medical profession.³⁷
- May 1937: official state action in May 1938 restricting the ability of Jewish lawyers to attain licenses to practice law.³⁸
- 1938: the *General Assembly of Journalists* officially declared that anyone Jewish could not belong to their organization.³⁹
- April 1938, the *Bank Polski* adopted a provision excluding Jews.⁴⁰
- March 1938: the new *Citizenship Law*. “This law stated that as of October 30, 1938, the passports of Polish citizens who had lived abroad for more than five years would be revoked if those citizens had not maintained contact with the (home) country.”⁴¹

Although this law did not target Jews specifically, its effect had a dramatic impact on Jews who had lived outside of Poland. One such community of Jewish expatriates were the tens of thousands of Polish Jews residing in neighbouring Germany. The Polish action would have effectively rendered these people stateless on German soil, making them a German problem. Nazi officials, particularly Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS,

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Editorialized *Gazeta Polska* on 16 January 1937.

³⁶ Melzer, Emanuel, *cit.*, p.90.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p.91.

and his subordinate, Reinhard Heydrich, had planned since earlier in the year to force Jews—particularly Polish Jews—to leave Germany. On October 28th - 29th, the SS and Gestapo detained 15,000 Polish Jews and sent them over the German frontier into Poland. These refugees were turned back by Polish border guards and then interned in a refugee camp “between” Germany and Poland at Zbaszyn. There they languished under terrible conditions until Poland finally relented and allowed them to enter the country in 1939.⁴²

The Polish *Madagascar Plan*

Polish Government, in 1935, wanted to establish a colonial presence in Africa and to find a territory in order to relocate over three million of Polish Jews; the island of Madagascar was the best option.⁴³ Poland held no colonies in Africa and Madagascar was under French control. “The Polish government therefore campaigned in Britain and France and in the League of Nations for its right to ten-percent of former German colonial holdings in Africa.”⁴⁴ Great Britain and France didn’t accept the Polish request.

These policies (the will of a colonial presence and the Madagascar Plan) represented an attempt to play a important role in international arena.

After the negative response of Great Britain and France, Polish Government decided that the creation of a Jewish colony on Madagascar would have represented the first step for a colonial acquisition. “The basis of Poland’s hopes lay in comments that French Colonial Minister Marius Moutet had made in January 1937 concerning the possibility of sending France’s Jews to many different locations around the world, all of which were French colonial holdings, including the island of Madagascar.”⁴⁵

Within weeks of hearing Moutet’s comments, the Polish government initiated negotiations with the French to explore the possibility of sending Polish Jews to Madagascar. The French responded positively to the Poles and on the 5th of May 1937 a joint Polish-French Commission under the direction of Mieczyslaw B. Lepecki left Marseilles for Madagascar. During the weeks that the Lepecki Commission was in Madagascar, it studied several regions on the island to determine how many people could viably live there. The commission then returned to Europe and in October 1937 Lepecki published a 250 page report detailing his findings. Lepecki’s report concluded that the Madagascar solution was not feasible. Not only would the cost of transporting Jewish families be exorbitant (some 30,000 francs per family) Lepecki concluded that the island could only support between 40,000 and 60,000 Polish-Jewish refugees. Polish Jewry alone comprised over three million people. Sending 60,000 Jews to Madagascar, therefore, would not solve the Jewish problem in Poland and it would bankrupt the state treasury.⁴⁶

⁴² <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Total/Polish%20Antisemitism.htm>

⁴³ The idea of creating a *Jewish colony* in Madagascar had its roots in the writings of the racist and anti-Semitic thinker Paul de Lagarde. He had written in 1885 that Europe’s Jews should be resettled on Madagascar because it was an island and as an anti-Semite, Lagarde believed that the only way to curb Jewish influence in the world was to isolate Jews geographically. <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Total/Polish%20Antisemitism.htm>

⁴⁴ <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Total/Polish%20Antisemitism.htm>

⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

The Madagascar Plan wasn't implemented. After the Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, Germany didn't consider the Plan and adopted the *final solution* to solve the Jewish problem and "liquidated most of European Jewry in death camps they located in occupied Poland."⁴⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to claim that official anti-Semitism lawfully adopted as national and governmental policy in Hungary and Poland represents one of the most infamous aspects of our recent contemporary history. It is very clear that the leaders of those countries (in particular Horthy) can be regarded and absolutely considered as forerunners of the German Nazis.

Because of this fact, the role of Hungary and Poland, in spite of their small sizes, were very important in the history of the international affairs of the twentieth century. It is possible to state, without a doubt, that the racist policy adopted by Hungarian and Polish governments created a new era of instability and prejudice against minorities (not only Jews) that can be considered a marked tendency of the European continent during the inter-war period and the following decades.

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⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

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