

**Policy Towards the Jews in the Newly Founded States of South-eastern
and East Central Europe During the Interwar Period.
A Comparative Index of Crisis and Identity Policy**

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The international conference organised by the Seminar für Osteuropäische Geschichte of the University of Bonn took place between 28.04. and 30.04.2005 and was supported by the Zeit-Stiftung Ebelin and Gerd Bucerius. The given topic aimed at analysing the period of national awakening and the process of national state building in the region of Southeastern and East Central Europe, in the context of national minority protection and more specifically the policy towards the Jews, as a people without a state, within the newly founded states.

World War I and the post-war conferences opened a new chapter in the history of international politics. For the East and South East European national minorities in general, and the Jews in particular, this was an important time.

First, because the dissolution of the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Russian Empires led to the creation of a series of new nation-states with significant ethnic minorities among their citizens. This situation urged immediate adoption of acts for the protection of these national minorities. The final provisions of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 were especially relevant in regard to minority protection rights, whereas the newly established countries had to comply with these provisions in their national policies.

Second, because the postwar period was marked by high hopes and expectations that the new European order would bring better life conditions for ethnic minorities, put an end to the pogroms and hostilities (facing mainly the Jews from Poland, Russia, Ukraine), and guarantee human rights.

Against this background, the conference participants discussed the following issues: Were the international acts for national minority protection implemented by the newly founded states, or were they signed only in order to please the Great Powers? Was there a constructive national policy towards the minorities by the newly founded states in the interwar period? Was the anti-Semitism rather popular, or was it an instrument of state supported ideology? What was the state policy towards the minorities: integration, acculturation, or „assimilation without integration“? These were some of the questions tackled in the presentations of the following countries: Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania.

With the postwar period and the peace conferences as starting point, *Ezra Mendelsohn* (Jerusalem, Boston), in his opening lecture, set the base for the debate on the given topic. He presented a general overview on the Central and Eastern European Jews, and described their aspirations and expectations. Mendelsohn specified four different groups of Jews according to their aspirations: a) *Jewish nationalists*, comprising of the Zionists and the Autonomists; b) *Integrationists*; c) *Orthodox Jews*; and d) the *Jewish Left*. Mendelsohn then made an

assessment of their range of success throughout the interwar period. His conclusion was that each of these groups succeeded in realizing some of their expectations, but that none managed to realise them fully:

- Zionists (among others) succeeded in facilitating the emigration of 5% of Polish Jews to Palestine. The Autonomists enjoyed a limited cultural autonomy in certain cases, like in Lithuania, Bessarabia, Bulgaria, Serbia etc.;
- the Integrationist idea almost totally failed or ended, like in the case of the Polish Jews in: „total assimilation without integration”;
- the Orthodox Jews (the least demanding) were practically unable to resist the modernisation process;
- and finally the Leftists, based on universalistic ideology, did not succeed in revolutionising Europe and therefore failed totally.

In his last contribution, Mendelsohn emphasized that, according to contemporary Jewish historiography, Zionism is said to have been the only answer facing the so-called Jewish question throughout the interwar period.

The first panel of presentations allowed an insight into the state of Jewish life in the *Baltic States and in Poland*. In the Polish case *Klaus –Peter Friedrich* (Marburg) dealt with the problem of the Jewish community (zydokomuna) during the interwar period, „as an element for political instrumentalisation of the ethnic diversities in Poland”. The central point in his presentation were the „stereotypes” related to the Jews among the broader population, as well as the identification with the „Soviet- Communists”, whereas in reality the number of Jewish communists was not that high. These stereotypes were interpreted as a strong reason for the growing anti-Semitism in Poland during the interwar period. On the other side, the Ukrainian minority (higher in number than the Jews) represented a much more worrying problem on the political agenda. The role of the church in the creation of the overall anti-Semitic atmosphere, enhanced by an image of the Jews as a source of economic competition in the years of economic crisis, resulted in the „solution” of the Jewish question through enforcing mass emigrations of the Polish Jews.

Egle Bendikate (Vilnius), presented the view on the „National Policy Towards the Jews in *Lithuania* between the Wars”. The Lithuanian case was emphasized as one of the „brighter cases” in Jewish history, in comparison to the Russian, Polish and other cases in the interwar period. The Jews, Bendikate underlined, were an important element during the constitution of the national state of Lithuania, as well as throughout the peace conferences following the wars. By committing itself to granting national and cultural rights to the Jews, Lithuania created a firm ground for itself as a state. However, later problems emerged as it became clear that the state had been founded on a national concept rather than on a civic one. Minorities, notably the Russians and the Poles, became seen as a threat. And the interest for the Lithuanian Government was to keep the Jews as nationally different from the Russians and the Poles (in order to avoid polonisation and russification). At the same time, the Jews were exposed to the gradual process of lithuanisation.

Despite the cultural autonomy that the Jews in Lithuania enjoyed until World War II, there was some evidence of growing anti-Semitism, especially during the general economic crisis in Europe, that resulted in repression of the Jews in overall political and economic life.

The national policy towards the Jews in the *Soviet Union* after the revolution in 1917/19 was presented by *Heinz-Dietrich Löwe* (Heidelberg). His contribution discussed the tsarist and bolshevik policies towards the Jews, as well as the social changes of the Jewish community in the years that followed the revolution. Shortly after the changes, the Jews were declared to be a part of the „proletarianization process”, and at the same time they became one of the peoples without „civil rights”. Hence, they were prevented from organising, and Jewish parties and institutions were repressed. The percentage of Jews among the „de-classed” people was extremely

high. In his final remark, Löwe concluded that „while the Jewish individual could participate in the Soviet system, there was no room in it for the Jewish collective”.

Milan Ristovic (Belgrade), in his paper titled „Unsere” und „fremde” Juden, made a brief description of the situation of the Jews in **Yugoslavia** between 1933 and 1941. Ristovic underlined the problems linked to the „creation” of a state with different ethnic, religious and historical backgrounds. The stabilisation of the state, Ristovic said, became the top priority for the Yugoslav Government. The minority issue, albeit the second highest priority, became subordinate to state stability. And as far as Jews were concerned, they were not even perceived as a minority, at least not in the same way as the more problematic Hungarians, Germans and Albanians.

Regarding the Jewish community, Ristovic said that although they were united within a Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, there were in fact two culturally and historically different groups of Jews (Ashkenazim and Sephardim), with different interests (although not clear in what regard). Ristovic concluded that the problem of the Jewish refugees from Central Europe urged the Yugoslav Jewry to join forces and respond with solidarity in every way possible.

The observations on **Czechoslovakia** made by *Martin Schulze Wessel* (München) showed a positive tendency in the national policy towards the Jews in the interwar period. In the process of the creation of the modern state, the Czechoslovak Jews got the right to self identification. In this sense the Czechoslovak Republic was the first example in Eastern and Southeast Europe where the Jews could freely express their national affiliation. However, the national recognition was neither based on pleading their religious belonging, nor on the recognition of a Jewish language. The main idea underlying such a policy was to homogenise the population composed of different minorities (Jews, Hungarians and Germans). The privileged status of the Jews served as a balance and a weakening factor towards the other minorities, namely the Germans and the Hungarians. The status accorded to the Jews in Czechoslovakia resulted in Jewish loyalty towards the state, but also in characterisation of the Jews as a minority without specific group-interests.

The contribution by *Krisztián Ungváry* (Budapest) on **Hungarian Jewry** focused on the „Social and Settlement Policy and the Jewish Question as genesis of the anti-Semitic policy in Hungary”. The first anti-Semitic laws were launched already in 1919 under the following justification: „Das Madjartum hat zwei innere Feinde: die in die intellektuelle Laufbahn hineindrängenden Juden und die den Boden aufaufenden Schwaben” (in the second case referring to the Hungarian Germans). The anti-Semitic laws were implemented after their adoption in Parliament.

The idea that the so-called Jewish question, as well as the German question, could be solved through emigration seemed to have been quite popular in Hungary already during the 19th century. With the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany, this idea gained even more support. The government of the Prime Minister Pál Teleki was the biggest supporter of the pan-European solution to the Jewish question. The last years before World War II were marked by growing anti-Semitism (in even more „consequent and radical manner” than in the Third Reich), and culminated in Hungary becoming a driving force in the overall implementation of the politics of the Third Reich.

Concerning **Austrian Jewry**, *Albert Lichtbau* (Salzburg) described the case of Austria and the Jewish population as a „Fragile Corset of Cohabitation”. From the beginning, the coexistence of Jews and non-Jews was seen through an anti-Semitic prism. Moreover, the anti-Semitic tendency, which with time reached a higher, political level, significantly increased the tension in the society. The majority of Jews lived in Vienna, the centre of political life, and therefore became a „main target of the attacks of the German-nationalistic and hegemonic argumentation”. Lichtbau initiated a discussion on the question of how the Jews could encounter such anti-Semitic setting? In his closing remark Lichtbau also suggested that anti-Semitism, as an

overwhelming ideology in Austria but also other European countries, should become a subject for further investigations.

The last panel included the cases of *Romania and Bulgaria*, where the former was emphasized as a more „difficult”, and the latter as a „brighter” case in Jewish history in the interwar period. The presentation titled: „The Romanian Nation Code and Minority Politics: Between Paradigmatic and Incomparable Minority”, by *Dietmar Müller* (Berlin), started with a reminder on Romania’s commitment to fulfilling the national minority requirements from the Berlin Congress as well as from the Paris Peace Conference. The Romanian elite, Müller said, considered these requirements unfair, something that deprived their country „of the right to construct an ethnically homogenous nation-state”.

The Romanian nation, which had been defined exclusively on ethnic and religious grounds, was using the Jews as a principally unchangeable „other” for defining one’s own national identity. This attitude logically led towards a gradual failure of the Romanian state to integrate the Jews into society (with the excuse that they were resistant to assimilation). As a result, the Jews from the newly attached territories remained „stateless people” until 1924. They were expected to follow the example of the naturalised Jews from old Romania by pursuing the assimilation process. In contrast to other minorities (Hungarians, Germans etc.), considered „normal”, the Jews were considered the „eternal other”. The Romanian government was the first anti-Semitic government, and also the first to join the Axis powers.

The case of the Jews in Bulgaria in the interwar period was presented by *Irina Ognyanova* (Sofia). The Bulgarian case turned out to be one of the „brighter cases” in the Jewish history in the interwar period, due to the fact that 50 000 Bulgarian Jews were saved by the Bulgarian King in 1941. Nevertheless, the dispute was raised on the 12 000 Jews from Thrace and Macedonia (the parts attached to Bulgaria after becoming a Nazi ally) which were sent to Treblinka with the endorsement of the Bulgarian government. Furthermore, the evidence of a number of pogroms against the Bulgarian Jews throughout the thirties raised great interest among the participants, and it was therefore proposed that the pogroms deserve to be analysed more in depth. On the issue of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria, Ognyanova stated that „the anti-Jewish actions in Bulgaria were committed under the influence of the German concept of racial hatred” by large numbers of anti-Semitic groups and organisations consisting of „reactionary ex-officers and intellectuals”, as well as of „groups” based on fascist ideology. Whether the anti-Semitism in Bulgaria was a popular or a state-supported ideology remained rather a controversial issue during the closing discussion.

Conference participants approached the issue somewhat differently. Some focused on the subject from a Jewish perspective; others tried to display the overall political, social and economic setting in which the Jews and other minorities developed.

Some of the cases were interpreted as „brighter” (Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria), because there was at least some form of cultural or religious autonomy for the Jews, or because Jews were allowed to express their national affiliation. Yet, at the same time, these countries endorsed the politics of national assimilation.

Conversely, other countries were seen as more „difficult” (Hungary, Poland, the Soviet Union etc.), based on their policy of repression, or because of their instrumentalisation of Jews in promoting other political interests. The national policies of these countries varied according to the number of the Jews. In the countries with a large Jewish population, the issue was at the top of the agenda; in countries with less Jewish population, the Jews were not seen as a threat or a particularly urgent problem.

The conference showed that assimilation, acculturation and integration of Jews as part of the process of the establishment of the national states deserved more attention. Other areas that might merit further analysis: the nature of the pogroms in the interwar period; the clarification of the treatment of the Jews as a „religious”

or „national” minority; the role of the Jews in society and national politics between the wars, as well as their position in society (according to their interests etc.); the effect of economic development (and crisis) on policies towards Jews. Several speakers also reminded the participants that debating about the Jewish minority should not mean forgetting other minorities (sometimes greater in number than the Jews).

The least-addressed aspect throughout the presentations was the actual implementation of the provisions of the Paris Peace Conference, by the successor states, as well as the failure of the Geneva System to protect minorities.

The conference offered an insight into the complexity of the issue of national policies towards the Jewish populations in the fragile interwar era, with the drive towards homogenous national states, economic insecurity, and gradual radicalisation of the society. The policy towards minorities, historiographically, remained a troublesome issue throughout the interwar period but also represents one of the crucial issues of today. A publication is planned.

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