

November Hopes. Jews and the Independence of Poland in 1918

Veranstalter: POLIN: Museum for the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw; Instytut Historyczny University of Warsaw

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This conference stands out in a series of events commemorating 1918: as a forum in which some of the most recent, most innovative research on the crucial issue of Jews during the formation of the new state was discussed, it focused on the many ways in which Jews imagined and experienced the independence of Poland in and around November 1918. To the hopes for civil rights, democracy, and the improvement of living conditions came the fears of what the new society would bring, a fear that was corroborated by the wave of anti-Jewish violence that shook especially the border regions. As DARIUSZ STOLA (POLIN, Warsaw) stated in his introductory remarks „it was far from clear what kind of Poland would emerge“.

These hopes and fears were at the center of the intense two-day conference, organized around roundtable discussions and panels with individual papers. As the public discourse in Poland was dominated by the official celebrations that marked 100 years of independence – less than three weeks earlier, on 11 November, 250,000 people had participated in a government-organized rally in the city – in which a rather uncritical, heroic picture of Polish national rebirth was painted, the conference was of significant importance in adding nuance and perspective to a contemporary public and scholarly debate. It was therefore of great importance that while the language of the conference was English, simultaneous translation into Polish allowed for the broader participation of the interested public.

The chair of the first roundtable discussion, MACIEJ ZAKROCKI (Warsaw), raised some of the overreaching questions that traditionally dominate discourses on Jews and Polish independence; these included question of „divided loyalties“, Jews' alleged greater

sympathies for Bolshevism, the motivations of various political actors for granting or not granting rights to the Jewish minority, the problem of a supposed Jewish influence on an international stage and the consequences this might have had for the 1919 minorities' treaties. In their comments, the panelists avoided to respond directly to the 'grand narratives' and instead focused on bringing the discussion 'down to earth', explaining Jews' political and social practices from a) the conditions in which they found themselves at the end of the war and b) older traditions of inter-communal relations that had evolved prior to the outbreak of the war and continued to be key factors. DARIUS STALIŪNAS (Vilnius) showed this exemplarily in regard to the question of allegiances to the Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian causes in Vilnius, arguing that Jews mainly entered „pragmatic alliances“. Being asked to elaborate about the Czechoslovak case for comparative reasons, STEPHAN STACH (Warsaw / Prague) stressed the positive pre-war relations between Jews and some of the Czech nationalist leaders that came to take a central role in shaping the new state, which was important for the comparatively better situation of Jews in interwar Czechoslovakia. He and CHRISTARDT HENSCHEL (Warsaw) emphasized that around 1918, communism was not only attractive to Jews but in fact had a mass following amongst people of all ethnic groups in the Polish lands. Henschel also emphasized the importance of the Polish-Soviet war, both for Polish state-building through the mobilization of large segments of the population, and for worsening Polish-Jewish relations. ANDREI ZAMOISKI (Berlin) elaborated from the perspective of the Belorussian region how it was incredibly difficult for local Jews to articulate support or loyalty to any specific side in the many wars, as this would be cause for revenge by the other side once it came to power.

The first session – „Hopes“ – was opened by NATALIA ALEKSIUN (New York) who continued to focus on the grassroots perspective, followed individual and family stories to show how Jews in Habsburg Galicia imagined Polish independence and how in hindsight they remembered the Empire. She

showed how many Jews' loyalty to the Empire was not in contradiction to Polish acculturation. It seemed that the violence of late 1918, the „collective traumatic experience“ of Galician Jewry, was the determining factor that triggered feelings of alienation and marginalization in relation to the Polish state. JOSHUA ZIMMERMAN (New York) elaborated on one specific case of this traumatic experience, namely the internment of Jewish soldiers of the Polish army in the Jabłonna prison camp at the height of the Polish-Soviet war in summer 1920, as they were seen as potential traitors and supporters of the Red Army (a trope which, as some contributions from the audience later showed, still persists). In the following years, the experience that „during the most existential threat to Poland, the highest authorities kicked out the Jewish soldiers“ and thereby excluded them from the national and civil collective continued to shape Polish-Jewish relations during the II. Republic. MARCOS SILBER (Haifa) built on this question of civil rights by making a crucial point about understanding the relation between demands for national autonomy and civil rights. Whereas the granting of equal rights to Polish citizens of all faiths seemed to include Jews in a liberal sense, the hegemony of Polish (Christian) ethno-nationalism de facto marginalized Jews on a practical level, for example when it came to representation, education, language or the Sabbath. It was this tension between the inclusive principle of governmentality and the exclusive ethno-national principle that fostered the rise of Jewish autonomism, which argued that only through national autonomy, real equality would be possible.

The second session revolved around „Fears“. All three speakers discussed how Jews related to other group in the region and how the war changed realities on the ground. PIOTR J. WRÓBEL (Toronto) focused on the ideas that existed in a number of Jewish political movements on how society could be rebuilt under German dominance and in cooperation with the German authorities. THEODORE R. WEEKS (Carbondale) focused on inter-communal relations in Middle Lithuania, especially Vilnius, in the wake of numerous foreign occupations from

1918 to 1922. His main argument revolved around the „impossible choice“ Jews in Vilnius had to take in the 1921 elections to the local parliament, eventually deciding for either Lithuania or Poland. He showed how questions of belonging in this nationalized framework were decided more by practical considerations than by 'big' ideology; in fact, Jews were afraid to join the Polish state but at the same time had little to gain from openly antagonizing the Poles and subsequently largely abstained. MICHAŁ TRĘBACZ (Warsaw) analyzed Polish-Jewish relations, and especially the crisis of the Jewish community of Łódź during World War I. The key experience was the social and economic catastrophe that war and occupation brought, which not only caused an increase in antisemitic incitement and violence, but also a crisis of the established structures of Jewish society. With the old institutions being incapable of protecting the community from the poverty that befell it, new networks and local organizations emerged.

In his keynote lecture, DAVID ENGEL (New York) argued for a re-evaluation of the concept of independence itself, asking how contemporaries imagined 'independence', for whom it should be, and who was entitled to the benefits of an independent Poland. He elaborated on the evolution of political theory on 'independence', showing how the concept developed from the idea of the independence of residents to the independence of people with a shared heritage and descentance. Naturally, in the course of this shift the question of what would happen to those who did not share these characteristics was raised. It was in this context that Polish nationalism took shape, and in this logic, Jews were assigned an inferior, non-independent position in the independent state. Notably, Jewish leaders – he referred specifically to Yitzhak Grünbaum – interpreted the Polish-Jewish conflict not as being rooted in age-old antisemitism, but rather in economic terms, which had led the Polish government to see everything from a Polish ethnic perspective, resulting in pushing out the Jews. Grünbaum's solution was to argue for a state of many nations, rather than to challenge this concept of independence and ethnically-based communities. En-

gel concluded by emphasizing how an interpretation of Polish-Jewish history that tries to find the answer in one group's specific characteristics in fact distorts history and how necessary it is to understand these historic developments in their specific place and time.

The second day of the conference started with the third session of papers, revolving around the „realities“ of independent Poland. KONRAD ZIELIŃSKI (Lublin) gave a detailed ethnographic overview of the Jewish population of the Polish lands during and in the aftermath of World War I, showing how the predominantly urban population was exceptionally affected by the impact of the war, which eventually created inner- and inter-communal conflicts that would surface in the years following 1918. ROBERT BLOBAUM (Morgantown, West Virginia) dealt less with the actual demographic relations and more with right-wing Polish nationalists' imagination of this demography and their paranoid idea of Jews' numeric majority and rule in a 'Judeo-Polonia'. He focused specifically on the local case of Warsaw and showed how Polish fears of Jewish domination already existed prior to 1914 and accelerated during the war, making the struggle for supposed Polish hegemony a key trope. He showed how the nationalist right mobilized this myth, how it led to the implementation of specific anti-Jewish measures, but also how in the 1920s this myth gave way to the antisemitic idea of 'Żydokomuna' (Jewish communism) as a new threat to the nation. EUGENIA PROKOP-JANIEC (Cracow) described Jewish cultural efforts and institutions, asking what „the Polish year 1918“ meant for them. She argued that in many respects, 1918 did not represent a turning point in modern Jewish culture but instead was a crucial moment in the evolution of cultural trends and institutions through the imperial era into the II. Polish Republic. She also stressed the importance of local differences, not only due to the different policies of the old partitioning powers, but also different social environments, states of acculturation, and different forms of public spheres.

The conference was concluded by a roundtable discussion, chaired by ANTONY POLONSKY (Brandeis / Warsaw), that

elaborated on how the events around Polish independence at the end of World War I have shaped Polish-Jewish relations since. David Engel emphasized how Poland at the time was still 'in the making', with no recognized borders and no stable regime. It was in this situation that the news about pogroms reached the West, which did not help the Polish cause. Polish nationalists subsequently accused Jews of spreading rumors and being behind the Minorities' Treaties, which were considered as an affront to national sovereignty. JOCHEN BÖHLER (Jena) strongly argued for a rethinking of categories and that later conceptualizations of 'nation' or 'Polish independence' should not be projected back into history, ascribing identities to people that they probably did not have in this form – especially given the high percentage of peasants in the population. In respect to the Jewish population of interwar Poland, Piotr J. Wróbel emphasized the importance of internal migration and how it changed Jewish communities in Poland. JOLANTA ŻYNDUL (Warsaw) reflected on the conference and argued that aside from concentrating on Jews' fears in the context of Polish independence, a lot could be gained by inverting the question and asking why Jews did support Polish independence, and what made Jews support Polish national claims. She elaborated on the *longue durée* of Polish-Jewish relations in the three partition zones and argued that it was also these trends that were essential for shaping Polish-Jewish relations in the interwar period.

Many of the contributions to the conference enabled new insights into a vitally important aspect of modern Jewish and Polish history. The decision to concentrate on the ethnic/national frames of 'Polish' and 'Jewish' meant that other aspects of hope and optimism like revolutionary activism and women's rights, that were so powerful in November 1918, were not really reflected on. However, in respect to Polish-Jewish relations, the conference connected numerous key experiences of the period, allowing not only for a better understanding of November 1918, but also of subsequent developments that shaped the interwar period. The key factor in this development, which many participants

emphasized, was that in November 1918, it was far from clear what the result of this process would be, allowing for people to project many of their hopes and ideas on an anticipated outcome; or as Marcos Silber put it in regard to Jewish patriotism: „They were patriotic to their fantasy of Poland.“

Conference Overview:

Opening Session

Dariusz Stola (POLIN, Warsaw) / Anna Azari (Ambassador of the State of Israel to Poland)

Roundtable 1: Polish Independence, Jewish Question and the Neighbors

Chair: Maciej Zakrocki (Warsaw)

Panelists: Christardt Henschel (German Historical Institute, Warsaw) / Stephan Stach (POLIN, Warsaw; Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague) / Darius Staliūnas (Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius) / Andrei Zamoiski (FU Berlin)

Session 1: Hopes

Chair: Kamil Kijek (University of Wrocław)

Commentary: David Engel (New York University)

Natalia Aleksion (Touro College, New York): Jews in Galicia Imagine Independent Poland

Joshua Zimmerman (Yeshiva University, New York): A Black Spot in Polish-Jewish Relations that Won't Go Away: The 1920 Internment Camp for Jewish Soldiers in Jabłonna

Marcos Silber (University of Haifa): November Hopes for Genuine Equality: Citizenship, Nationalism and National Autonomy

Session 2: Fears

Chair: Jerzy Kochanowski (University of Warsaw)

Commentary: Antony Polonsky (Brandeis University, Waltham; POLIN, Warsaw)

Piotr J. Wróbel (University of Toronto): The First World War: Poles, Jews and Germans

Theodore R. Weeks (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale): Jews between Poland and Lithuania: Wilno, 'Middle Lithuania' and Modern Nationalism, 1918–1922

Michał Trębacz (POLIN, Warsaw): Great Fears of a Great War. Łódź Jews on the Eve

of Polish Independence

Keynote Lecture

David Engel (New York University): Independence for Whom? Jews and the New Political Order in Eastern Europe after 1918

Sessions 3: Realities

Chair: Dariusz Stola (POLIN, Warsaw)

Commentary: Jochen Böhrer (Imre Kertész Kolleg, Jena)

Konrad Zieliński (University of Lublin): Jewish Population on the Polish Lands on the Eve of Poland's Independence

Robert Blobaum (West Virginia University): The Specter of Judeo-Polonia and the Politics of Containment: 1918 and beyond

Eugenia Prokop-Janiec (Jagellonian University in Cracow): 1918: Institutions of Jewish Culture on the Eve of Poland's Independence

Roundtable 2

Chair: Antony Polonsky (Brandeis University, Waltham; POLIN, Warsaw)

Panelists: David Engel (New York University) / Jochen Böhrer (Imre Kertész Kolleg, Jena) / Piotr J. Wróbel (University of Toronto) / Jolanta Żyndul (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw)

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