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HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anti-Semitic resentments at the universities in the Second Polish Republic on the example of Lviv (1918-1939 AD)

Józef Piłatowicz^{1*}

Abstract: The purpose of the below considerations is an attempt to determine whether the actions of the authorities of the Lviv's Polytechnic were in line with those of other milieus during the period of increasing anti-Semitic sentiment in Europe in the early-20th century. It became the area of research due to the specific character of the city of Lviv, famous for its multiculturalism, multiethnicity and the mutual tolerance of its inhabitants.

Subjects: History; Historical Studies; Modern History; Higher Education Management; History of Education; Legislative Politics

Keywords: history; Jewish students; anti-Semitism; the Lviv polytechnic; Second Polish Republic

1. Introduction

The problem of anti-Semitism in Europe has been analysed numerous times, both on global and local scales. Its origin was researched on cultural, religious, economic or political levels (Andreski, 1963; Aust, 2018; Brustein, 2003). The time-frame of the work was limited to the period of growth of anti-Semitic sentiment, especially among Western European societies, which took place in the late-19th and early-20th century (Almog, 1990; Brustein & King, 2004; Lindemann, 1997).



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Józef Piłatowicz is Associate Professor of History at the Faculty of Humanities, the Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities, Poland. A graduate of the University of Warsaw, he is the author of many publications in the field of education including *Profesorowie Politechniki Warszawskiej w dwudziestolecu międzywojennym* [The Professors of the Technical University of Warsaw in the Interwar Period] (Warszawa, 1999), *Szkolnictwo wojskowe na ziemiach polskich do 1795 roku* [Military Education in the Polish Lands until 1795] (Siedlce, 2018). Since 1970 he has collaborated on *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [The Polish Biographical Dictionary], and also the author of biographical entries. Since 2002 he has been editor-in-chief of *Słownik Biograficzny Techników Polskich* [The Biographical Dictionary of Polish Technicians].

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The question of the fate of the Jews in interwar Poland arouses unusually high passions. The academic community of the Second Polish Republic subscribed to the mainstream ideology held by European societies between the late-19th and the early-20th century, according to which Jews should assimilate rather than integrate. This leads to the conclusion that although Jewish and non-Jewish students shared their crave for education and aspirations in life, there was little chance of integration between them. It should be observed that Jewish students did not want to integrate into the student community emphasising their cultural and religious separateness in the student organisations they established.

The purpose of the following considerations is to try to determine whether the actions of Lviv's university authorities were in line with those of other circles during the period of growing anti-Semitic sentiment in Europe.

In the following considerations, the author would like to refer to the research published by Jerzy Holzer presented in the publication *Polish Political Parties and Antisemitism* (Holzer, 2004). Holzer states that the liberal middle class was able to accept the religious identity of the Jews, but this class was very weak in Poland in political terms. Parties with socialist roots “rejected Judaism movement, along with all religion, advocated their own vision of assimilation in a radical way” (e.g. PPSD: Polish Social Democratic Party or SDKPiL: the Social Democracy of the Congress Kingdom and Lithuania). On the opposite to assimilation were the demands of isolationists, which called for cultural separation and religious hostility towards Jews (E.g., in Stapiński's PSL: Polish Peasant Party). Anti-Semitic slogans were preached by parties with the nationalist programs (ZLN: Popular National Union, the *Endecja*: National Democrats, or the *Chadecja*: Christian Democrats). Holzer describes the gradual radicalization of anti-Semitic slogans in political life, concluding his deliberations with a sentence:

It is as if antisemitism constituted a kind of psychosis at the end of the Second Republic, disabling a healthy political sense and obscuring an awareness of the genuine threat to the life of the Polish state, and to its ethnic and organic life. (Holzer, 2004, p. 205)

The second pivotal point for the author of the study is the research of Agnieszka Graboń (2009) who analyzes the attitude of Polish students to the Jewish question, based on a large collection of the student press, which, according to the researcher, is an important tool for presenting ideas and molding attitudes. Graboń highlights the evolution of the press in formulating increasingly radical anti-Semitic slogans that encourage various restrictions on academic grounds. She also considers the social consequences of the anti-Semitic propaganda popularized by the majority of the Polish academic press.

The author believes that one should also refer to Daniel Pater's (2002) conclusions concerning the Jewish Academic Corporation in Poland in the researched period. Pater paid particular attention to the fact that at the end of the nineteenth century, separate Semitic corporate associations among students began to emerge in Europe. According to Pater, the strongest ones were the corporations founded on the idea of the Zionists, referring to the political thought of Teodor Herzl, which contributed to the growth of the sense of national affiliation among Jews. In Lviv, such activity was carried out by corporations “Emunach”, “Hasmoned” and “Makabea” and other minor ones. At the First Congress of Zionist Academic Corporations (3–6 January 1930, in Warsaw), the Union of Zionist Academic Corporations was established. Important in the context of the following research is the fact that the proceedings of the Congress were conducted by B. Griffow, a representative of the Zionist corporation “Emunach” from Lviv.

2. Religious structure of the city of Lviv

In 1772, after the First Partition of Poland, the city became the capital of the Habsburg Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria (Kaye, 1972; Mick, 2010, pp. 28–67). The religious structure was following, in 1857.: Roman-Catholic—36,526 (51.91%), Greek-Catholic—7,902 (11.23%), Evangelicals—1,007 (1.43%), Judaists—24,700 (35.10%), other religions and non-denominational—231 (0.33%); in 1910.: Roman-Catholic—105,469 (51.17%), Greek-Catholic—39,314 (19.07%), Evangelicals—3,086 (1.50%), Jews—57,387 (27.84%), other faiths and non-denominationalists—854 (0.41%). Division by the mother tongue in 1910: Polish—85.78%, Ruthenian—10.83%, German—2.94% (Wnęk et al., 2006). The Austrian Jews were not recognized by the authorities as a separate language or nationality category, which is why the Jews in the census of 1910 generally declared Polish as their mother tongue.

In 1918 Lviv found itself within the borders of the Second Polish Republic re-established in the aftermath of World War I (MacMillan, 2007, p. 207; Polonsky, 1972, pp. 35–7). The city's population grew steadily (with the exception of 1915–1919, i.e. World War I and the post-war fighting), in 1910.

Lviv had 195,796 inhabitants, in 1914.—212 030, in 1915.—189 000, in 1918.—187 431, in 1920. 219,388 and then grew regularly until 1939 (in 1925.—237 482, in 1930.—241 813, in 1935.—316 645, in 1939.—318 783). Throughout the interwar period, the religious and national structure of Lviv was stable. Between the census of 1910 and 1931, Roman-Catholic (49.1%) and Jews (39.8%) recorded the highest growth, Greek-Catholics noted the increase of in 9.8% and other religions in 1.3%. The censuses of 1921 and 1931 revealed the stabilization of Roman-Catholic: in 1921.—51, 1%, in 1931.—50.4%; a decrease of the Jewish population in 1921.—35.0%, in 1931.—31.9%; a clear increase was recorded by the Greek-Catholics: from 12.4% in 1921 to 16.0% in 1931; the other religions remained relatively stable: 1.5% in 1921 and 1.7% in 1931 (Bonusiak, 2000, pp. 174–189).

3. Religious structure among the students

The students originated mainly from the impoverished nobility, from the clerical oeuvres and from the bourgeoisie. For the young people of the noble origin, the studies at the Department of Civil Engineering seemed the most attractive, as they allowed the prospects for obtaining governmental positions. However, it is difficult to determine the number of Jews studying, because the censuses of the students are limited only to names, their wording indicates that the Jews created rather a small group. The academic regulations allowed only assimilated Jews to study, as can be seen from the statute of the Preparatory School for the Institute of Technology in Warsaw opened on 4 January 1826:

It is the duty of all students of the Preparatory School ... to attend Sunday and holiday services in the academic church ..., to attend religious instruction with the obligation to make Easter confession. (Rodkiewicz, 1904, p. 196)

In the second half of the 1930s, about half of the followers of Judaism considered themselves Poles and treated Polish as their mother tongue. The clear increase, when compared to the 1920s, in the number of students speaking Jewish and Hebrew could have been a reaction to the repeated anti-Semitic actions at the universities.

In the 1920s, 24.0–24.8% of people of the Mosaic faith studied at all universities. Throughout the 1930s, the radical decrease of the Jews studying at the universities was noted. As a result, at the end of the 1930s, 10% of students in all higher education institutions were of the Mosaic religion (*Rocznik statystyki Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, 1925/26, p. 418; *Rocznik statystyki Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, 1929, p. 427). This was an indicator similar to the percentage of Jews in the total population of the Second Polish Republic. In practice, *numerus claususus* was executed, although it was not legally sanctioned.

4. Anti-Semitic actions at universities in Lviv

The Polish Minority Treaty (Fink, 1998; Levene, 2004), which was signed on 28 June 1919, proved insufficient to secure Jewish interests in the Second Polish Republic. Nationalist circles saw the treaty as a tool used by minorities to undermine the newly reborn Polish nation state (Korzec, 1974). The Jewish minority was particularly targeted by such attacks. In the years 1918–1920 pogroms against the Jewish population took place (Gauden, 2019; Hagen, 2018; Reder, 2019). Physical violence against the Jews diminished as the new state stabilized, but anti-Semitism in the population grew in the interwar period, and successive governments adopted increasingly anti-Semitic measures.

4.1. Numerus claususus

The academic communities were no exception, and anti-Semitic sentiments were also growing in them (Aleksiun, 2014). In 1923, the government initiated a *numerus claususus* for the Jewish students, i.e. a fixed maximum number of Jewish students admitted to universities in accordance with the general Jewish representation in the country's population (Rudnicki, 1993). International protests prevented the Sejm from adopting the law, but only after the graduation period of the year. In the academic year 1923–1924, 23,810 non-Jewish and 8,325 Jewish students (25% of students) were enrolled at five recognized universities. It should be noted, however, that the

overall ratio of the Jewish population (10%) was much lower than the percentage of the Jewish population in the cities (30–40%). And it was the inhabitants of towns that traditionally constituted the majority of university students. After Piłsudski's death (12 May 1935), nationalist forces established an openly anti-Semitic programme (Melzer, 1989). In the years 1937–1938, only 4,791 out of 48,168 students (about 10%) were Jewish (Rabinowicz, 1964).

4.2. "Ghetto Benches"

The first "Ghetto Benches" in Poland (a form of discrimination consisting in separating a part of the classroom or lecture hall and assigning it to students of Jewish origin who did not have the right to choose their places freely) were introduced by the Council of the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Mechanics of the Lviv Polytechnic on 9 and 11 December 1935. Students who did not comply with these resolutions could be expelled from the university regardless of their nationality. Jewish students requested the intervention of a member of the Polish parliament Emil Sommerstein and the former prime minister, Professor Kazimierz Bartel, but these actions did not bring any results. Since, in practical terms, the "Ghetto Benches" could only be introduced in large lecture theatres and the small laboratory rooms were a real problem, on 17 December 1935, the Faculty of Engineering ordered the creation of separate laboratory training rooms for Jewish students from the last two years of their studies (Trębacz, 2016). After the protests, the university authorities stated that such a solution was only temporary, on 20 December 1935, a general assembly of the professors condemned the use of violence by some students against Jewish students and demanded that the perpetrators be punished, but did not take a position on the "Ghetto Benches" (Czarnowski, 1935).

On 24 September 1937 on the congress of the presidents, Minister Świetosławski gave his consent to the rectors to introduce their own regulations concerning the "Ghetto Benches" at the universities they headed (Trębacz, 2016, p. 126).

4.3. Physical violence

The growing anti-Semitic sentiment resulted in the situation when the events of small significance became a pretext for dangerous actions. This situation took place in Lviv from 2–12 June 1929, when students of the middle secondary school of the Jewish Society of Public and High Schools were accused of insulting the Corpus Christi procession. The students of the middle school were beaten, and a group of about 200 people demolished the biological and physical offices, the library and the drawing room. The police arrested 27 people, mainly students. The starosta A. Klotz, despite pressure from the crowds, refused releasing the arrested (Biedrzycka, 2012, p. 474). On 4 June, the police arrested 42 students. 31 people were imprisoned in the jail at Kazimierzowska Street, including 28 students of the technical university (Łapot 2015). On 7 June, on St. Mary's Square and Academic Square, a battle between students and the police lasted several hours. The horse police dispersed the crowd using sabres, 15 people were wounded, including 6 students and 4 policemen (Rędziński, 2016).

In November 1931, the conflict escalated, inspired by the death of a Polish student Stanisław Waclawski during the riots between Polish and Jewish students in Vilnius (10 November) (Srebrakowski, 2004). On 12 November, Lviv was the scene of riots, during which the horse police had to intervene. On the night of 26/27 November 1932, a group of students from the Lviv Academy of Veterinary Medicine got into a fight with a group of Jewish youth in the "Adria" café on Szajnochy Street, as a result of which Jan Grodkowski died in hospital (Biedrzycka, 2012, p. 638). Grodkowski's death became another impulse for the riots, which lasted until 15 December 1932.

The lack of any action from university authorities' side made the perpetrators of the riots feeling unpunished. The situation was tackled by the police, but their interventions turned into street fights, e.g. on 28 January 1935 or March 10/11, 1939 in Lviv. During this second intervention, the police found 16 revolvers, 13 hand grenades, 2 flowers, firecrackers, 20 daggers and bayonets, 4 crowbars, 34 castes. 46 university students and 40 students of technical university were arrested (Biedrzycka, 2012, p. 954).

During a fight in the courtyard of the technical university on 18 November 1938, 2 Jewish students—Mendel Lehrer and Samuel Proweller (he died as a result of the wounds) were injured with knives. On 24 May 1939 in the building of the university of technology during classes in the chemical laboratory, Markus Landesberg, a third-year student of chemistry was killed with hth crowbar by a student band (Biedrzycka, 2012, p. 939). The perpetrators were never found.

5. Conclusion

In the analysis of the above considerations, inconsistency in the actions of the academic authorities, which have not made decisive attempts to resist the pressures of extreme youth groups, which are however a minority in the academic community, comes to the fore. The passivity of most students made extremists feel unpunished. Moreover, the anti-Jewish sentiment was fuelled by publications in the academic press. The Graboń's study (Graboń, 2009) showed an increase in anti-Semitic sentiment in the academic community, fuelled by press publications. These publications led to the antagonism of Polish and Jewish students. On the other hand, it should be noted that Jewish students did not seek to integrate into the community, even in relation to their activities in student organizations, they kept emphasizing at every step their cultural and religious distinction. The Jewish student corporation activities of which were analysed in detail by Pater (2002) opposed any types of assimilation. What seems to be most important here is the fact that the appeal of the most resilient corporations to Zionism ideas put Jewish students in a way in opposition to other students, leading to their peculiar isolation.

In the light of the above, it is impossible to agree with the thesis cited by Jerzy Holzer at the introduction to his article:

In Polish political life, the processes of assimilation and Polonization were the traditional means of solving the Jewish question, a view inherited from the democratic movements of the nineteenth century and from Warsaw positivism. These points of view were characterized by a tolerance of Jews as individuals, as well as by a dismissal of Jewish religious and cultural traditions as manifestations of backwardness (Holzer, 2004, p. 194).

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