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Liberation or Occupation? Jews in the occupied territories of the Kingdom of Poland

After the Russian evacuation in the summer of 1915, the Kingdom of Poland came under the German and Austrian occupation. For the Jews, this meant liberation from the barbarian Russian rule, but the occupiers' ruthless exploitation of the country contributed to the poverty of the population and to the worsening of the Polish-Jewish relations. However, the occupiers' liberal cultural policies, their introduction of free municipal and local elections, as well as equal rights for Polish Jews advanced the development of the civil society and the growing political significance of Ostjuden.

Nach der russischen Evakuierung im Sommer 1915 befand sich das Königreich Polen unter deutscher und österreichischer Besatzung. Für die Juden bedeutet diese Situation einerseits die Befreiung von der russischen Herrschaft, auf der anderen Seite hat die rücksichtslose Ausbeutung des Landes durch die Besatzer zur Verarmung der Bewohner und zur dramatischen Verschlechterung polnisch-jüdischen Beziehungen beigetragen. Doch die liberale Kulturpolitik der Besatzer, die Einführung der freien Kommunalwahlen sowie die Gleichberechtigung der polnischen Juden trugen zur Entwicklung der Zivilgesellschaft und zur wachsenden politischen Bedeutung der 'Ostjuden' bei.

In the summer of 1915, the Czar's army finally left the territories of the Kingdom of Poland.¹ The evacuation of Russians and the legislation of German and Austrian occupational administration within the whole territory of the Russian Poland were accepted by the Poles with mixed feelings: The sympathy towards Russia was smaller than the one at the beginning of the war, but 'the Teutonic invasion' and bombardment of the town Kalisz by Germans were remembered. What is more, no one appreciated the forces of the Central Powers, especially the Austrian ones, and no one believed in their long-term reign. 'The fear of Moskal' caused unwillingness towards the cooperation with the invader. On the other hand, the majority of the Jews accepted the end of the Russian rule as a welcome relief. It was no wonder, taking into consideration not only their situation in the Russian empire, but also the scorched earth policy, barbarism and terror that they had to face from the Russians during the first year of the war and during the Russian evacuation that came along with pogroms and robberies which Christians willingly took part in.²

¹ Kingdom of Poland, part of Poland under the Russian rule, informally known as Congress Poland, created in 1815 by the Congress in Vienna. It was gradually politically integrated into Russia over the course of the 19th century, made an official part of the Russian Empire in 1867, after the anti-Russian January Uprising, and finally replaced during the First World War with the Regency Kingdom of Poland in 1916.

² Zieliński, Konrad: Relations between Jews, Poles and Russians at the beginning of World War I (1914-1915), in: Pinkas. Annual of the Culture and History of East European Jewry 2 (2008), pp. 105–119.

This is how Anna Kahan from Siedlce described her impressions at the sight of the soldiers wearing German uniforms: „We felt so free, so peaceful. Where was the fear disappeared that everyone felt towards the Russian soldiers?”³ For others, the appearance of Germans was „a great day in the history of culture and civilization”.⁴ In the summer of 1915, the Jews who encountered more humane treatment from the invader welcomed the troops of the Central Powers with more or less evident relief. As we can read in German and Austrian situational reports from the autumn of 1915, the Jews were helpful, friendly and they were getting accustomed to the new authorities very quickly. At the same time, the Poles were described as being reserved towards the occupants, and that the Polish clergy was evidently hostile towards the new authorities.⁵ The dissonance between the Poles who were hostile or neutral towards the new authorities and the Jews who were enthusiastic enhanced the mutual animosity.

In this article I pose a question of what the Central Powers' occupation in the Kingdom of Poland meant for the Jews. In my opinion, the assessment of the politics of Germans and Austrians must be seen as ambivalent. It is without doubt that the war and the occupation, due to economic policy of the occupants and exploitation of the country, was one of the most difficult experiences for the Jewish population. On the other hand, some reforms and regulations of the new authorities deserve a positive assessment, and, what seems to be the most important issue, the end of Russian rule gave the Jews a relative sense of security and lack of pogroms.

The beginnings of the occupation of the Central Powers seemed indeed promising. The Germans and Austrians noticed the economic situation and the discrimination of the Jews in 'Russian Poland' as well as their expectation of the equal rights with the Poles after being released from the Russian yoke – along with the possibility of expanding their trade⁶. The decree of the Austrian Superior Commander of the Army of 7 March 1915 stated:

„1. The use of the public and private rights does not depend upon religion. The state and civil duties cannot be undermined by the religious faith.

2. The Churches and the religious associations legally operating in the whole Austro-Hungarian Monarchy possess the same rights and obligations in the occupied territory as the churches and religious associations functioning in the neighbouring parts of the Monarchy”⁷.

³ Kahan, Anna: The Diary of Anne Kahan. Siedlce, Poland, 1914–1916, in: YIVO Annual 18 (1983), p. 18.

⁴ Szajkowski, Zosa: Jews, Wars, and Communism. Vol. I, The Attitude of American Jews to World War I, the Russian Revolutions of 1917, and Communism (1914–1945), New York 1972, p. 4.

⁵ Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, Warszawa (further AGAD) K.u.k. Militärgeneralgouvernement in Lublin (further MGGL) 1013 P. 229, 303, 505, 599; AGAD MGGL 1712 P. 567; AGAD MGGL Präs. 3 P. 608; Haus- Hof und Staatsarchiv, Wien (further HHStA) Ministerium des Äußern (further MA) P.A.I 919 pp. 3–4.

⁶ Hausner, Arthur: Die Polenpolitik der Mittelmächte und die österreichisch-ungarische Militärverwaltung in Polen während des Weltkrieges, Wien 1935, p. 4.

⁷ To quote from: Lewandowski, Jan: Ludność żydowska na Lubelszczyźnie w latach I wojny światowej, in: Doroszewski, Jerzy/Radzik, Tadeusz (eds.), Z dziejów społeczności żydowskiej na Lubelszczyźnie w latach 1918-1939, Lublin 1992, pp. 7–40, here p. 34.

The Germans announced similar orders, and thus Jewish departments were created next to civil administrations of Warsaw General Government and Military General Government in Lublin. Jewish departments were designed to administer all cultural-religious and social matters while all the other issues were supposed to be subject to general departments. The Jews obtained representatives who took care of their matters in administration: Ludwik Hasse in Warsaw and Majer Balaban in Lublin were the heads of the Jewish departments.⁸

There is no doubt that the German Jews had an impact on the situation of the Jews inhabiting the occupied lands. *Ostjudenfrage* gained a new importance during the German occupation in the Polish Kingdom. Some thought that the Jews were supposed to become the pioneers and promoters of the German culture and the Western civilization in the East (“Träger deutscher Gesittung und Kultur im Osten”).⁹ From the beginnings of the war, occupants addressed their separate appeals to the Jews, and the Jews were believed to have become the first and natural beneficiaries of the German domination in this part of Europe. It was an unprecedented situation: According to Steven E. Ascheim, the Eastern Jews obtained a new political meaning.¹⁰

In September 1914, *Komitee für den Osten* which was established by the German Zionists (formerly: *Deutsches Komitee zur Befreiung der russischen Juden*) presented a program of a new organization of the East-Central Europe to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Committee hoped to establish a buffer multinational country between the Baltic and the Black Sea. In this country, where there was estimated to be approximately million Jews, the Jews were to be treated as autonomous entity next to other equal nations, among which there were 8 million Poles, 5-6 million Ukrainians, 5-6 million Byelorussians, 3 million Lithuanians and Latvians, and 1,8 million Germans. The new country would be a monarchy where the principal power, the officer corps, the most important areas of administration, and the official language would be German. In fact, this plan was believed to be utopian among the German governing spheres, and what is more, the German Zionists managed to get only vague promises of treating the Jews as ‘intermediaries’ of military and civil boards on the occupied lands.¹¹ In 1916, an agreement for establishing an orthodox Aguda political party in cooperation with the German rabbis Pinchas Kohn and Emanuel Carlebach meant that the authorities would be more inclined to acknowledge the Jews as a religious minority and not as a national one – in contradiction to the plans of German Zionists and Jewish nationalists in Poland.¹² Despite all the reservations, negotiations between the Jews and the authorities indicated a difference in the authorities’ perception of the Jews in comparison with the Russian

⁸ Stempin, Arkadiusz: *Próba „moralnego podboju” Polski przez Cesarstwo Niemieckie w latach I wojny światowej*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 536–537, 543; Zieliński, Konrad: *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach polskich Królestwa Polskiego w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej*, Lublin 2005, p. 193.

⁹ Zechlin, Egmont: *Die deutsche Politik und die Juden im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen 1969, p. 165.

¹⁰ Ascheim, Steven E.: *Eastern Jews, German Jews and Germany’s Ostpolitik in the First World War*, in: Leo Baeck Institute Year Book XXVIII, 1983, pp. 351–365, here pp. 351–352.

¹¹ Wróbel, Piotr: *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, in: Tomaszewski, Jerzy (ed.), *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 13–139, here p. 107; Zechlin, *Die deutsche Politik*, 1969, p. 130.

¹² Bacon, Gershon C.: *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939*, Jerusalem 1996, p. 21; Carlebach, Alexander: *A German Rabbi Goes East*, in: Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook VI, 1961, pp. 60–121, here pp. 62–63; Rabinowicz, Harry M.: *Hasidism. The Movement and Its Masters*, Northvale – London 1988, p. 266.

authorities, for both the supporters of the assimilation and orthodox Jews. For the Russians, the despised Jews were never viewed as interlocutors and partners.

The new authorities were thought to be a guarantee for normalizing the relations between Jews and Poles. A secret counselor, Georg von Cleinow, who was the head of the Press Department and a press censor in Warsaw General Government, called – at the beginning of his work in the office – the representatives of newspapers and periodicals to stop arguments and mutual attacks. The Jews became convinced that a ‘new era’ was coming and that they found themselves under the protection of ‘civilized powers’. Governor von Beseler transferred a few thousand marks for the poor Jews, which was well appreciated by the Warsaw Jews. He also paid a visit to one of the Warsaw synagogues and participated in the Sabbath service. Nominations of the Jews as officials were accepted with acclamation.¹³ The Jews who used their native Yiddish felt quite comfortable owing to the fact that this language was similar to the German language, in contradiction to the Poles who most often neither knew nor understood German. Many joked: „What is the German language? – An incorrect Yiddish.”¹⁴

In April 1915, the Germans announced the regulation of schools, which was one of the first steps towards many further regulations. Directives of the occupying authorities introduced Polish as the lecturing language instead of the removed Russian in Polish schools. The German language was meant to be taught as a separate subject. High schools were recommended to teach in Polish or German without dividing those schools into Polish schools and other minority schools (e.g. Jewish). On the other hand, in elementary schools German was supposed to be the main language, and ‘next to it’ there was Polish. This situation raised many frustrations among the Jews as well as the Poles, and a directive was finally postponed. Followers of the assimilation who were against the Germanization of the Jews in Poland were for the Polish language as the language of teaching because of the fact that studying in German could lead to the strengthening of the separatist tendencies among the Jews. Groups of the Jews who were in favor of Yiddish also appeared, and as a result, the Germans agreed on Yiddish and additional-extracurricular lessons of the Polish language in Jewish schools. As it was officially justified, the authorities did not want to either Germanize or Polonize the Jewish nation at that time when it was a long way to finally decide on the fate of the Kingdom of Poland. As a result Yiddish was tolerated as a ‘German dialect’ by Germans.¹⁵ In 1917, the educational system, next to the judiciary, was handed over to the autonomous Polish authorities, which was an act connected with further reforms carried out after regaining independence by Poland.

In October 1915, Austrians introduced a directive of learning German as an obligatory language in higher classes of state schools. This generated a wave of protests among Polish political parties, organizations and social unions, but particularly among the teachers, students and parents. Closing down some of the schools and dismissing

¹³Wróbel, *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, 1993, p. 123; Stempin, *Próba „moralnego podboju”*, 2013, pp. 534–536.

¹⁴Margules, Meir: *Moje wspomnienia*, in: *Ćwiakowska, Drezner, Raczyńska* (ed./transl.), *Księga Żydów Ostrołęckich*, Ostrołęka – Tel Awiw 2002, pp. 235–40, p. 236.

¹⁵ Stempin, *Próba „moralnego podboju”*, 2013, p. 539–547; Szajkowski, Zosa: *The Struggle for Yiddish during World War I. The Attitude of German Jewry*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute IX*, 1964, pp. 131–158, here pp. 139–141; Szwarz, Wojciech: *Przejęcie szkolnictwa od niemieckich organów okupacyjnych przez Komisję Przejściową Tymczasowej Rady Stanu (1917–1918)*, in: *Ciągwa, Józef/Opas, Tomasz* (eds.), *Z historii państwa, prawa, miast i Polonii*, Rzeszów 1998, pp. 221–245, here pp. 230–231.

rebellious teachers was a reaction of the authorities. Nonetheless, in March 1916, the starting date of teaching German was postponed until the following school year. German as an obligatory subject did not raise any protests in Jewish secular schools in the province. Churches and religious associations got permission to establish religious schools. Private individuals also received permission to open educational institutions after being issued a concession. Those facts helped to eliminate negative overtones from the directives concerning the language of instruction.¹⁶

Despite all the critical comments, the reform of education initiated by Germans and Austrians should be considered a positive aspect of the occupation. However, the matters of education raised many arguments among the Jews of various orientations and also became the source of conflict with the Poles. As a matter of fact, many Jewish children and teens received the possibility to receive a secular education, and not a religious one. Contemporary society saw the low quality of education, especially in rural areas, and the inhabitants appreciated the efforts that the occupying authorities put into improving it. Critical opinions about this aspect of the Czar's reign were expressed by both the Poles and the Jews. Also both of those communities believed that illiteracy was „a shameful legacy of the former government” as well as in „a glorious contribution and help from the occupying authorities”.¹⁷

The cultural and political development was also connected with the occupation by the Central Powers, and one of its indications was the participation of society in the ruling of the country. Elections and collaboration with the Poles, particularly in city councils, brought more common language in the Polish-Jewish cooperation. However, this situation was also a source of conflict between the Jews and the Poles, even though it became important, if not more important for the Polish-Jewish cooperation than a rescue action and work in civil committees established in 1914. Let us remember, that at the beginning of the war the so-called citizens' committees started to be founded in the cities and their branches in the provincial towns. The committees, managed by the Poles and the Jews, dealt with redistribution of the aid coming from abroad and from the Russian authorities (later on from the occupational authorities), and with organising and coordinating the rescue action. The war spared nobody; additionally it was necessary to take care of the masses of the refugees and exiles, to organise care over the orphaned children and to provide them with shelter. The rescue action was addressed with the Christians and the Jews and was undertaken by the Polish, the Jewish and 'mixed', non-religious and non-ethnic associations.

The bigger involvement of the Jews in the territorial government was another aspect of political equality that the Jews appreciated from German and Austro-Hungarian occupying authorities. Even though the occupants quickly put off the Jewish communities from economic affairs, allowing the Jews to participate in government affairs only on the local level and on some level, it made the Jews look at the new authorities more favorably. Although the Jews were sporadically members of the nominated city councils under the Russian government, the situation created by the new authorities gave them more possibilities. The Jews finally got the opportunity to take part

¹⁶ Zieliński, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie*, 2005, p. 198.

¹⁷ AGAD MGGL 1738 P. 521; HHStA MA P.A.I 919 pp. 464–465.

in free elections. In fact, the curial voting system was a comfortable way of reducing the number of 'Jewish' mandates (on the basis of the requirement of speaking the Polish language, property and education qualification); nevertheless, a part of legal restrictions concerning the participation of the Jews in the municipal authorities disappeared.¹⁸

The curial system and the criteria that the authorities implemented during the formation of curiae reduced the possibility of Jewish representatives to get mandates. For those who were professionally in either trade or industry, it was highly controversial to be ascribed to a particular curia, where there was only a certain number of deputies in the councils. This caused owners of small shops, workshops, or shop assistants, as well as manufacturers and owners of factories to belong to the same curiae. This election statute was an outcome of the occupying countries' consideration for the opinions of the majority of the Polish society. However, the Jews obtained one third of the votes in the elections for city councils in German and Austro-Hungarian parts of occupation, and it was a big success. We have to remember that in 1916 the elections were boycotted by Jewish national parties, mainly Zionists, and the Bund. Many orthodox Jews did not participate in elections, either. In fact, Jewish councilors who were in the minority were not accepted into city boards, their attendance in city councils was a crucial step towards a civil society. Despite all the limitations, they were given the possibility to work for their fellow believers.¹⁹

Erich von Diller, the first Austrian general-governor in Lublin, expressed his opinions about the Jews in an interview. He said that „the intellectual level of the Polish Jews would be changed after giving them equal rights” owing to Austrian ruling.²⁰ German newspapers favorably reported on German and Austrian authorities and on giving the Jews the right to vote. The acceptance of the Jewish participation in the elections and appointing the Jews in local authority departments were believed to be one of the greatest achievements and benefits of the occupying countries in the Kingdom, as the German and Austrian press and brochures claimed²¹. The Jewish press in Poland also appreciated the possibilities created by the new authorities. In 1916, a journalist of a daily *Lodzzer Tegeblatt* commented on the results of government elections that, even though the war had caused the economic ruin of the Polish Jews, „in the political life of the Polish Jews happened a thing of most significance for their future in the country”.²²

Apart from participation in the local self-government, a few Jews were invited to the agendas of the temporary Polish self-autonomous government named Provisional State Council. Kazimierz Natanson, integrationist, lawyer and industrialist from Warsaw, Joel Wegmeister, a member of the inner circle of laymen surrounding the famous hassidic leader 'Gerer Rebbe', Abraham Mordechai Alter from Góra Kalwaria, and Moses Pfeffer from Kielce, another Hasidic civil leader, became a Jewish representatives in the Council.

¹⁸ Zieliński, Konrad: The Poles and the Jews in the Local Authorities of the Kingdom of Poland during the First World War, in: *Iggud. Selected Essays in Jewish Studies* 2, 2009, pp. 123–134, here pp. 123–126.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 128, 134.

²⁰ HHStA MA P.A.I 926 p. 8.

²¹ Die Staatsbürgerlichen Interessen der Juden im okkupierten Gebiet Rußlands, „Neue Freie Presse” 1916, Nr. 18530, p. 2; Die Vorteile des deutschen Okkupation für Polen, (Gedruckt in der Reichsdruckerei), Berlin 1919, pp. 22–23. See also: Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im. B. Nachlass: Hans Hartwig von Beseler N30/38, „Polnische Frage, Band 5, 1919”, pp. 1–30.

²² To quote from: Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warszawa, Tymczasowa Rada Stanu 42, p. 199.

The Council was established after the Manifesto of the two emperors was proclaimed on November 5th, 1916 in Warsaw and Lublin, and established the Act of 5 November or *Polenproklamation*.²³ The Manifesto states that the creation of the Polish state was a step forward in the Polish cause, but attempts of the occupational authorities to get the recruits from the Polish lands quickly alienated the Polish population towards the occupiers and the Polish autonomous institutions created by them.²⁴ The information about the Jews in the context of the *Polenproklamation* in the political reports of the military authorities from November and December 1916 are sparse. It seems that the Manifesto did not evoke greater emotions of the Jewish “masses” although it electrified the political groups.²⁵

What also played an important role on the social level was the contact of the local Jewish inhabitants with the new office and military workers, delegates of foreign rescue committees, artists, lecturers, political parties and political organizations’ activists, and finally, with Jewish soldiers stationing in German and Austrian garrisons in the Kingdom of Poland. For both sides, this contact was not only interesting but sometimes also an inspiring experience.

Indeed, the newcomers brought new values and models of behavior into the discriminated Jewish population. On the other hand, the German and Austrian Jews who long before neglected particular virtues, encountered orthodox religiousness, piety, and many specific customs in the Kingdom of Poland. More and more studies on the Jews in East Central Europe started to appear in Germany and Austria. After the outburst of the war, the usefulness of Yiddish in promoting and accomplishing German affairs in the east was discovered in Germany. However, business was not the only reason for it. Next to Yiddish dictionaries in Germany and Austria, translations of authors writing in the language of the *Ostjuden* appeared, essays about folklore and religious life of the Eastern European Jews were published as well.²⁶

Equal rights for the Jews and the liberal policy of the Central Powers resulted in establishing new unions and organizations, schools and educational amenities, and newspapers, in participation of the Jews in self-government elections, and finally in the development of a political life. Activating the secular culture and education as well as the political life primarily concerned bigger towns. However, even in the province where orthodox Jews had the majority of votes changes were easily seen. The efforts of broadening thinking horizons of *shtetl* inhabitants were new and outstanding phenomena even though most people focused on everyday problems such as earning a living, and many still defined themselves by religion only. However, all this was a kind of a revolution in *shtetl* where „Torah replaced a daily newspaper”²⁷.

²³ Ibidem, pp. 149-150. See also: Guesnet, François: "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Joel Wegmeister and Modern Hasidic Politics in Warsaw," in: Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC 2, October 2011. URL: www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=222 (10.11.2015)

²⁴ Holzer, Jerzy/Molenda, Jan: Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej, Warszawa 1963, p. 183.

²⁵ AGAD MGGL 1738 pp. 453-800; Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im. B., Nachlass: Hans Hartwig von Beseler N30/17 pp. 10-35; HHStA MA P.A.I 1014 LK 56a pp. 4-6.

²⁶ Szajkowski, The Struggle for Yiddish, 1964, pp. 132-133.

²⁷ Howe, Irving: World of Our Fathers, New York – London 1976, p. 11.

No doubt, changes in the political topography of Polish Jews within the Central Powers played a major part in exacerbating common relations. The Jews started 'leaving their ghettos', but the Poles were not used to meeting them, with the exception of the well-known assimilated ones, in offices, theatres or on the 'Polish streets' of the city. Many demanded to prohibit the Jews from entering the city gardens or prestigious streets of the city. The occupying authorities, in general, rejected such demands.²⁸ Of course, Jews were already visible in the urban space; disputes over the right of access to parks and public gardens were nothing new. There is no doubt, however, that thanks to the policy of the occupiers, the nature of this presence was changing. In *Głos Lubelski*, the newspaper linked to the right-wing, anti-Semitic party National Democracy (so called *endeks*), one could find such commentaries:

"In the first class cafes and restaurants, where before no Jew could be found, now they impertinently sit and squander money, which they, in spite of the war, have in abundance. There are crowds of them everywhere, in the streets, in the City Park, in the Catholic and other Christian cemeteries, under the portals of our temples (...)"²⁹

However, there is something more in meeting of the German and Austrian soldiers with the Jews in Poland. Soldiers and often middle class office workers wearing German or Austrian army uniforms faced poor, even impoverished inhabitants of East-European *shtetls*. On the one hand, nostalgic, romantic topos of Eastern European Jewry existed in Germany thanks to translations by Martin Buber and publications in *Der Jude* or *Ost und West*. On the other hand, this topos was rather not present in the consciousness of an average soldier. He had never read *Der Jude* and was rather convinced of the deep backwardness of Jews in Eastern Europe. This is what we can learn from a private letter of one of the Austrian officers stationing in Lublin: „awful Polish Jews, who are extremely poor and dirty” (October, 1916).³⁰ German soldiers were shocked and moved by the impoverishment of the Jews whom they encountered in Poland, Lithuania, and Galicia. „Eastern Jews were always perceived as stinking and dirty” and everything that the German soldiers saw was confirmed.³¹ A German major expressed his opinion about the perspectives of improving Jewish economic and legal situation in the Kingdom in these words: „Soap. We can start thinking about political ways of civilizing them only if people start washing themselves”.³²

The occupying authorities were particularly concerned about hygiene in regard to their soldiers' safety. Civil and military governments dedicated a lot of attention to fighting epidemics and raising the sanitary level of cities and villages. The measures that the governments took were often brutal. One of the ways was taking elderly people and children out of their houses in winter and leading them in columns to bath houses. After

²⁸ Zieliński, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie*, 2005, p. 253.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, to quote from, *Głos Lubelski* 1916, nr 219, p. 3.

³⁰ AGAD MGGL Präs. 225, p. 725.

³¹ Aschheim Steven E.: *Eastern Jews, German Jews and Germany's Ostpolitik in the First World War*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book XXVIII*, 1983, pp. 351–365, here pp. 352–353.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 353.

that, „people started being sick, but they were clean”, as people used to say ironically.³³ People were forced to have baths and hygiene controls in inhuman ways. In the cities, sanitary police forced the inhabitants who were affected by the epidemic to go to the disinfection and quarantine points where everyone had their hair cut off, men had their beards shaved and all Jews had to give away their traditional clothes and wear hospital outfits. What is more, men were forced to undress in front of women, not mentioning the lack of kosher meals given to the Jews.³⁴

Reports about disobeying sanitary regulations by Jewish buyers and traders, lists of the punished for similar offences could be found in Polish and official German and Austrian newspapers. What is more, quite often the Jewish medics withheld information about contagious diseases in spite of the fact that they could be severely punished for it. Such behavior increased the threat of epidemic among both nationalities: Polish and Jewish. Nonetheless, such situations could be justified, because reporting an epidemic was connected with quarantine which as a result led to confiscating goods, closing down shops or workshops, and this was equal to a financial ruin of many families. When the inhabitants came back to their homes, they found houses sprayed with poison, and most often ransacked by thieves. Sanitary police found a way to extort bribes from inhabitants of homes which were free from typhus or cholera so there was no need for quarantine: Those who did not want to pay were sent to epidemiological and quarantine points. The level of knowledge about contagious diseases among Christians was not better, however, due to a higher population density, the character of Jewish settlements and massive migration movements, epidemics were more widespread among the Jews.

Nevertheless, the most annoying effect of politics on the occupied land was the economic policy and the exploitation of the country. The Jews were most affected by orders concerning a free turnover of agricultural produces and trade goods. Many were deprived of their livelihood owing to the state monopoly on many industrial goods and natural resources. In spite of a massive rescue action, begging Jews were a common sight on the Jewish streets. Poverty made the Jews abandon their kosher diet; deaths from starvation occurred, especially in big cities. Jewish traders tried profiteering because of the lack of many goods and inflation in the market. This was a reason for assaults and demands to expel the Jews from Poland by the right wing parties. In fact, trade was in the Jewish hands, especially in the province.³⁵

There were also the Jews who got used to the new realities and got rich very quickly. While the majority faced all the problems of war and economic relations only few did profitable business on the occupied lands. Many contracts were given to the Jewish traders, which originated from many reasons, such as greater trade experience, more efficiency and the willingness to earn less money. The presence of many Jews ‘on the other side’ in adequate government departments, especially in purchasing ones, enabled the Jews to the access to lucrative deals. There is no doubt that the enrichment of few Jews was another aspect of intensifying Polish-Jewish antagonisms, next to the presence of

³³ Szajkowski Zosa: East European Jewish Workers in Germany during World War I, in: Lieberman, Saul/Hyman, Arthur (eds.), Salo Wittmayer Baron. Jubilee Volume, vol. II, Jerusalem 1974, pp. 887–918, here p. 900.

³⁴ Liulevicius, Vejas G.: War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I, Cambridge 2000, p. 106; Wróbel, Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości, 1993, p. 133.

³⁵ Zieliński, Konrad: Polish-Jewish Relations in the Kingdom of Poland during the First World War, in: European Journal of Jewish Studies 2 (2008), 2, pp. 269–282, here pp. 273–274.

Jewish translators with German or Austrian soldiers requisitioning from Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian (Ukrainian, Byelorssian) homes, presbyteries, farms or factories. All of that annoyed Christians who only saw a confirmation of the statement that the Jews robbed their country hand in hand with the occupants.³⁶

Especially, the Austrian personnel policy had a negative role in mutual relations because many counted on engaging Poles from Galicia into various departments of new authorities in the Kingdom. Meanwhile, from the point of view of an average inhabitant, supply departments were employed by office workers of other nationalities. Those people were not always Jews, however, the fact that the Jews worked as intermediaries and translators deepened resentments towards them.³⁷

The exploitation of the occupied territories by the Central Powers included also the labour force. Since the second half of 1915, the authorities started to organise the battalion units of the civil workers (the so called *Arbeiterbataillone* in the areas under the German occupation, and *Zivilarbeiterabteilungen* in the areas under the Austrian occupation). The population suspected that the lists preceded the recruitment to the German or Austrian army.³⁸ In fact, the workers' units created by the Germans and the Austrians were most often used to build and repair roads and bridges, erect reinforcements and dig trenches. The population was also forced to perform exhumations, often without payment, as well as to provide carts for transporting bodies. Moreover, the Jews were often directed to the sanitary and disinfectant columns where the work was hard and more dangerous because of the threat of epidemics. The Jewish workers were a majority in the workforce employed to do such jobs, particularly so, because most of them were performed in the districts inhabited by the Jews.

The forced employment included the poorest people (the unemployed, the landless peasants, the small traders and merchants), which made their situation even worse and seriously limited their possibility to seek better jobs. In April 1916, the Main Rescue Committee in Lublin publicised the order of the *K.u.k. Armeeoberkommando* of 6 December 1915, which contained the following statement: „According to the decision of the regional commanders, the following categories of persons may be exempted from being enrolled into the units of the civil workers: 1. The persons who because of their intellectual status do not fit in the workers' units. 2. The farmers: a) the self-reliant farm owners; b) the absolutely necessary servants both in farms and in forests; c) permanent agricultural workers employed at Spring works; d) the agricultural workers who can prove that in the years 1915 and 1916 they were contracted to do agricultural works; e) the agricultural workers coming from the burnt settlements. 3. The men under 18 and over 50 years old, unless the public interest does not require exceptions (the volunteers in that age group could have been accepted). 4. The people providing for their families, if they earn more than 3 crowns a day elsewhere. 5. Unfit for employment due to their health. 6. The workers employed in the mines (the miners and the foundry workers)”.³⁹ Similar

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ AGAD MGGL Präs. 224, P. 517–518. See also: Adler-Rudel, Salomon: 'East European Jewish Workers in Germany', in: Leo Baeck Institute 2, 1957, pp. 136–165, here pp. 142–143.

³⁸ AGAD MGGL Norm. 24, pp. 1797, 1799; Lewandowski, Jan: *Królestwo Polskie wobec Austro-Węgier 1914–1918*, Warszawa – Łódź 1986, p. 70; Wróbel, *Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości*, 1993, p. 123.

³⁹ AGAD MGGL Norm. 24, pp. 1114–1115.

directives applied to the population in the Warsaw General-Government, although the forced employment in agriculture covered the people in the age group between 14 and 45 years old.

The poor conditions of living, the starvation-level payments and the regime of the working units provoked the indignation and bitterness of the population and – in consequence – numerous escapes and avoidance of that obligation. The methods of recruitment with the assistance of soldiers and policemen led to the understandable resistance: For example, in 1915 in Piotrków, during the *Shevuot*, the Hungarian honveds forced their way into the synagogue and forcibly pulled out the faithful, then directing them to dig trenches in nearby Belchatów.⁴⁰

The forced labour was ineffective, the resistance and escapes from the units finally forced the occupational authorities to resolve them and to introduce the voluntary employment agencies. It brought certain effects, there were Jews and Poles willing to work both in the country and abroad, in Germany or Austria. Let us recall, however, that in 1914, 350 thousand seasonal workers from Poland were detained in Germany while since February 1915, after Częstochowa and industrial Zagłębie Dąbrowskie were invaded, the Berlin Workers' Agency (*Arbeitszentrale*) recruited over 180 thousand workers until April 1916. Apart from that, in the years 1915-1916, the Employment Agency at the City Council of Częstochowa recruited 15 thousand labourers to work in Germany. The Workers' Employment Agency alone managed to recruit 300 thousand people until the end of the war.⁴¹ It is estimated that about 70 thousand Jews from Poland and Russia settled in Germany.⁴² Many people were discouraged, however, by the terms of contracts, which opened the ways for abuse and which could be interpreted as a consent to 6 months employment, but not shorter than the duration of the war.⁴³

Also the families, in this case the Jewish ones, which did not receive any aid from Canada and the United States were in a difficult material situation. Dr Hirszfeld, a lawyer from New York, in one of his interviews in the Warsaw press, said that „many families live only on the money sent from America and their very existence depends only on this aid”. He added: „that was a great despair of those miserable people when – with the commencement of the military operations – they could not be beneficiaries of that aid any longer. They were sentenced to hunger and misery”.⁴⁴

Hirszfeld managed to obtain the consent of the German and Austrian authorities according to which the citizens of the Kingdom of Poland could communicate with their relatives via the Society for the Aid to the Homeless and Immigrants under the name of *Hachnosas Orchim* situated in New York. The attorney underlined in his interview that the Society did not pay attention to the religious orientations, but its offices were open also

⁴⁰ Feinkind, Mojżesz: *Dzieje Żydów w Piotrkowie i okolicy od najdawniejszych czasów do chwili obecnej*, Piotrków 1930, p. 60.

⁴¹ Holzer/Molenda, *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej*, pp. 123–125; Kulischer, Eugene M.: *The Displacement of Population in Europe*, Montreal 1943, pp. 117–118.

⁴² Bade, Klaus J.: *Labour, Migration and the State: Germany from the Late 19th Century to the Onset of the Great Depression*, in: Bade, Klaus J. (ed.), *Population, Labour and Migration in 19th- and 20th-Century Germany*, Spa – Hamburg – New York 1987, 59–85; Baron, Salo W.: *The Russian Jewry Under Tsars and Soviets*, New York – London 1976, p. 161; Maurer, Trude, *Ostjuden in Deutschland 1918-1933*, Hamburg 1986, pp. 36–37, 42.

⁴³ Zieliński, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie*, 2005, pp. 215–217.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

for the Christians. Ultimately, the American missions could operate in the whole occupied territory.⁴⁵

The war had a substantial impact on Jewish religious communities. Mobilization, devastation, fires, evacuations and migrations of people with constantly present epidemics of contagious diseases and economic crisis resulted in financial problems of certain religious communities. 'Cost of living allowances' started to appear in columns of budgets of some communities referring to rabbis' or other more important community workers' salaries. Besides that, donations to 'those who are too ashamed to beg' appeared. They were defined as people whose financial situation before the war had been quite good, but it changed for the worse during the war. Work of many religious communities was shaken by the war, because the occupying authorities tried more strictly control significant religious institutions, for example, houses of prayers, ritual baths, or *kheders*. All this disturbed the normal functioning of the mentioned institutions. Moreover, many shops had to be open on Saturdays, which was against Jewish faith principles. Germans and Austrians wanted to sort out the religious affairs that were neglected during the Russian times and this meant the removal of rabbis who did not have appropriate qualifications, e.g. they did not know the official language and not have rabbi's diplomas. In the Russian times, it was not a problem. The Russians agreed to have on the official rabbis' posts people who knew the official language and generally turned a blind eye on certain practices and did not interfere in the life of religious communities. The new authorities wanted to put these affairs in order, however, without significant results, as it was in the case of the attempts to count and control *kheders*.⁴⁶

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of February 1918 had a negative impact on the situation on the occupied land. The Treaty included handing over Chełm and Podlasie regions to Ukraine. The announcement of decisions of the Treaty raised public outrage and resulted in protests of the Poles. The increase of a chauvinist mood together with reluctance to trust the occupants triggered a wave of assaults on the Jews associated with Germans and Austrians. Unfavorable changes in Polish-Jewish relations were brought about by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the news coming from revolutionary Russia, a widespread stereotype of Jewish communists, the deteriorating economic situation and the weakening occupants. Some Polish societies and political parties found in the Treaty a justification to promote anti-Semitism. In 1918, mutual relations considerably worsened, and the loyal attitude of Jewish political parties and Jewish inhabitants of the Kingdom of Poland towards the Polish matter did not stop worsening.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ HHStA MA P.A.I 1032, LK 56h, P. 107–131.

⁴⁶ Bałaban, Majer: Raport o żydowskich instytucjach oświatowych i religijnych na terenach Królestwa Polskiego okupowanych przez Austro-Węgry, in: *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 1, 2001, pp. 35–68; Bałaban, Majer: W sprawie szkolnictwa dla Żydów w Królestwie Polskim, in: *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 1, 2001, pp. 69–72, here p. 71; Schuster, Frank M.: „Lepiej jest wykonać w jednej części Polski całą pracę, niż w całej Polsce połowę lub wcale”. Uwagi dotyczące sprawozdania prof. dr. Majera Bałabana o wizycie w polskich gminach żydowskich w czasie I wojny światowej, in: *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 1, 2001, pp. 27–34, here p. 33.

⁴⁷ Zieliński, Polish-Jewish Relations, 2008, pp. 278, 280–281. See also: Blobaum, Robert: “A Warsaw Story: Polish-Jewish Relations during the First World War”, in: *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis: Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Anthony Polonsky*, (eds.) Dynner, Glenn and Guesnet, François, Leiden – Boston 2015, pp. 271–296; Schuster, Frank M.: *Zwischen allen Fronten: osteuropäische Juden während des Ersten Weltkrieges (1914–1919)*, Köln 2004.

To answer the question posed in the title— what did occupation mean for the Jewish society in the Kingdom of Poland? – one must mention that the occupation undoubtedly entailed many unfavorable changes: an economic fall, pauperization of people, and tension of common relations. The economic policy of the Central Powers and ruthless exploitation of the country especially contributed to the poverty of Jewish inhabitants. Furthermore, the dramatic worsening of Polish-Jewish relations was another negative factor. However, a characteristic feature of social relations during the Great War was a kind of parallelism between the (economic) fall and (cultural and political) development. One could observe the growth of a phenomenon of denying civil rights to a certain social group, which was anti-Semitism and, on the other hand, ‘citizenizing’ a part of the Jewish society. The First World War turned out to be an essential phase in shaping a civil society and it was shown in the participation of more and more numerous and diverse groups of society in votes for local government institutions, commitment in the rescue action, establishing civil committees and founding cultural-educational institutions. New, bolder patterns of behavior, which newcomers from Germany and Austria brought to the communities of Eastern Jews, and liberal cultural policy of the occupants would result in the development of the political life and more confident demands of their rights. But the most important change was the fact, that governance by the occupants gave the Jews a certain feeling of safety and liberation from Russian rule which meant repressions, discrimination and pogroms in the first year of the war.

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