SSOAR

Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

The situation of the Jews in Soviet Union and its satellite countries after the Second World War

Oltean, Anca

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Oltean, A. (2009). The situation of the Jews in Soviet Union and its satellite countries after the Second World War. *Annals of the University of Oradea - International Relations and European Studies*, 1, 24-30. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-417238

Nutzungsbedingungen:
Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de

Terms of use:
This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

THE SITUATION OF THE JEWS IN SOVIET UNION AND ITS SATELLITE COUNTRIES AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Anca OLTEAN*

Abstract: *The present study tries to show that, during the last years of the rule of Stalin, the Jews from Soviet Union and its satellite countries were even victims of the communist regime. Initially, during the German persecution and after the war a part of them found a refuge in the ranks of communist party which they saw as the single force capable to oppose to Hitler and later to racism and xenophobia. They were terrified by the horrors of Holocaust and looked for security by joining communism. But they were affected by Stalin's hostile behavior towards the Jews in the last years of his life. It is important to state that the majority of Jews were not communist and that their property was reduced according to nationalization laws and Jewish aristocracy and intellectuals fell victims of communist regimes from Eastern and Central European countries.*

Keywords: *Jews, communism, Stalin, antisemitism, poverty*

At the end of the war, the Jewish communities from Eastern Europe were severely affected. The Jews from the states such as Romania (North-West of Transylvania), Hungary, Poland or other states from communist space were deported in German concentration camps. Once the war had finished, the survivors returned to a great extent in their home countries. Not of them had returned. Some emigrated in Western Europe, United States or Israel. This was the case of Elie Wiesel, Jew from Transylvania, who received later the Nobel prize, who stopped initially in France.

At the end of the war the Jewish population from these countries, lived in conditions of poverty, fear and misery. They did not have sufficient food and shelter. After the Holocaust, a small number of Jewish children was still alive and they had not sufficient food and clothes. In Hungary, the number of Jewish children under 14 years old was 7.712 (Wasserstein, 1996, p. 36). The international organization Joint procured food supplies and medicines for the Jews from communist countries of Europe. Joint helped over 200 000 of Jews in Romania, 120 000 in Hungary, 65 000 In Poland and 42 000 in Austria (Wasserstein, 1996, p. 36).

In the communist parties from the countries from Central and Eastern Europe, the Jews played an important role. In Poland, for example, there were Jews who were important members of communist party such as Roman Zambrowski, Hilary Minc, Jakub Berman. In Romania, minister of Foreign Affaires was Ana Pauker.

The individual Jewish property was returned only in part and with difficulty. Several non-Jews became owners of Jewish property and did not want to give it back when the Jews had returned from Holocaust. The communists considered the Jews, to a large extent, as owners of considerable fortunes, and according to their ideas of equality, opposed to the retrocession of Jewish properties to their owners. In Czechoslovakia, according to a law, the property with no owners were taken over by the state and, thus, a great part of Jewish property.

The Jews were also affected by the economic policies of communist states. The Jews who did not returned found their property robbed, their houses destroyed. They re-entered in

* University of Oradea, Faculty of History, Geography and International Relations, Universității st. no. 1, 410087, Oradea, e-mail: olteananca@hotmail.com

the property of their assets with difficulty, encountering the opposition of the nationals of these countries. We can not talk of an integral restitution of Jewish property, their houses were robbed in the fascist period, the actions and money lost their value. They were subjected to the same nationalization laws as the nationals of communist countries. As a consequence their factories, stores, land were taken over by the state. In Romania and Hungary, the property of the ones who returned from Holocaust and which was not the subject of the process of nationalization continued to be administered by the Jewish Communities of each state.

Among the ones who returned a large extent tried to contribute to the development of their countries, placed now under the "umbrella" of Soviet Union. It must be said, from the very beginning, that, initially, the Jews did not fear of communism, on the contrary they perceived it as the only force capable to stop the nazism. For them, the arrival of Red Army was an act of liberation because thus it put end to the departures of "death trains" in German concentration camps. Soon it became obvious that, communism was an order imposed by force which caused the sending into prison of the interwar world' elites. It became obvious that Stalin was a tyrant who made numerous victims. A high number of Jews, according to the path created at the end of XIX century by Theodor Herzl, wanted the creation of their own state, Israel, where they emigrated in large number when the conditions imposed by the Soviet Union allowed it. Until 1948, Palestine was under British mandate and the British opposed to the emigration of Jews in Palestine. But these emigrations produced illegally. A large extent of the emigrants came from these communist states.

Although a lot of Jews from the satellite countries of Soviet Union emigrated to Israel during the communist period, a part of them chose to integrate in communist states, to become party members or even representatives of communist superior classes. The orientation towards communist ideas was old. It can not be contested the participation of the Jews to the Revolution of 1917 and their involvement in the first years of Russian communism. But there are also explanations. During the governance of Russian tsars, the Jews were the subject of several discriminations, they were living in a separate zone of residence, they were considered also as scapegoats for the mistakes of tsarists government. Hostile feelings existed and numerous were in modern epoch and at the beginning of XIX century the pogroms whose victims the Jews were. During the war, Stalin had a politics less antisemite towards the Jews from Soviet Union. He created, in this sense, an Anti-Fascist Jewish Committee. After the creation of Israeli state, for short time, he encouraged the zionism (Johnson, 2001, p. 21).

In their relation with communism, they were also victims, the last years of Stalin being characterized by a campaign oriented against cosmopolitanism, so also against the Jews. In Soviet Union, it takes place the process against some Jewish doctors accused because they would have contributed to the death of Soviet leaders. In Czechoslovakia it takes place the Slanski trial, the accused being mostly Jews. In Romania, Ana Pauker, important member of communist Nomemklature was eliminated from power.

Slanski trial began in November 20 and it ended in November 27, 1952. From 14 accused, 13 were Jews. The accused were forced to acknowledge that they worked as imperialist spies, police informers, trotkist partisans and agents of titoist-burgeoisist-nationalist conspiracy (Hodos, 1987). They were accused that they planned to eliminate the president of the state, Klement Gottwald. It existed an antisemite aspect of the process. So Slansky was accused that he had contacts with Granville, a representative of international zionism[1]. After the Slansky trial, Geminder, Frejka, Frank, Clementis, Reicin, Sva, Margolius, Fischl, Sling, Simone were sentenced to death and executed at December 5. The rest of the accused were sentenced for life prison.

[1] (George H. Hodos, 1987*)* "Granville said that his main source of information was Slansky, the solid pillar of his spy net, the most intelligent Jew that he (Granville) ever knew".

In 1948, Stalin started the campaign against titoists, and starting with 1952 he extended it against the Jews (Hodos, 1987). In Romania, the victim of this campaign was Ana Pauker. The victims of the campaign from 1952 were the Jew Ana Pauker and the Hungarian Vasile Luca. Dej succeeded to implement this innitiative being supported by the Russians. His intention was to get away of Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca and Teohari Georgescu. Ana Pauker was considered responsible because she had contributed to an increase of members of Romanian Communist Party. The campaign against the Jews was obvious since 1949 when a dozen of members of Jewish Democratic Committee were arrested, including relatives of Ana Pauker (Hodos, 1987).

But in a parallel way with the communist structures, so it remembers the chief rabbi of Romania, Moses Rosen (Rosen, 1991), it took place the community life with the sinagogue, with Jewish celebrations, with Jewish specific food, with people involved in the practice of Judaic cult. This parallel space did not fit to the official politics of the state which tried to set people apart from their religion or it tried in a forced manner to assimilate national minorities and to create a pattern of "good" citizen of Romanian state. Jewish community life, although much more restrained in comparison with interwar period was observed by Security, and it was a considerable number of party activists who were trying to have the adherence of "Jewish streets". It was a considerable number of Jews who denied their religion which they saw as a cause of their persecution during Holocaust. A lot of Jews did not want to acknowledge that they were Jews or kept hidden this thing, they tried to enjoy the advantages of the communist state, they tried to enjoy the new life. A lot of the Jews were all their life traumatized by the horrors of Holocaust, some of them involved in Security, becoming the masters of history.

In comparison with the years of the war, we have to acknowledge that the communist system was more generous, offering the same advantages to the Jews as to the other citizens. Now they could study at all levels in Romanian schools and universities, they could get a job even of superior level, they had conditions of life and work much better than in concentration or labor camps. But on the other side, in their actions of social purification, of elimination of cultural and economical elites of the interwar period, the communists hit also the enterprisers in industry or Jewish bourgeoisie who were sent to prisons and eliminated. For instance, Ana Pauker was also accused that she ignored the marxist-leninist approach. She was considered responsible as being involved in the right wing deviation, she opposed to collectivization. She was also accused that she entered in contact with foreign intelligence from Israel. She had to renounce to the position of minister of Foreign Affaires. But because of Stalin and Molotov, she was not sent in prison or executed.

In Soviet Union the anti-Jewish legislation was abolished. The Jews participated massively to Russian Revolution. The political orientation of Russian Jews was more mensevic, than bolshevic. The zionism was forbidden and it was considered as a manifestation of burgeois nationalism. In the same time the schools which taught in idis, the Jewish newspapers and theaters flourished. The Jews received an autonomous area in Birobidjan. Other Jews moved in national districts in Ucraine and Crimeea. The Jewish population of Birobidjan was never higher than 30 % from the total number of people of the region and was no higher than 1% from the total number of Jews in URSS (Soljeniţîn, 2004).

When Israel declared independance at May 14 1948, the president Truman acknowledged this state *de facto*, while Stalin acknowledge Israel *de jure* (Johnson, 2001, p. 526). In 1953, a month before he died, Stalin broke the relationships with Israel (Johnson, 2001, p. 533).

In 1948 started in Soviet Union an "anti-cosmopolite" campaign in cultural field whose leading leader was Jdanov. The Jews were considered "cosmopolitans without roots". The Jews who activated in cultural field remained without jobs. The Jews were expelled from

the sphere of science, art, press. The Jewish newspapers, schools, theatre and other Jewish institutions, and also a lot of sinagogues were closed. In parallel, the zionism is now condemned. The Jews were encouraged to remain in Soviet Union, not to emigrate in Israel. The Jews were considered no more as a particular nation. The Soviets maintained relations with the Arabs and were not in favor of emigration in Israel. This campaign against Jews culminated in 1953 with "blue gown affaire", initiated by Stalin himself, a campaign against Jewish doctors who were accused that they would have contributed to the death of certain Soviet leaders. This campaign was not something new, Stalin started to have antisemite feelings some time ago.

During this time it took place anti-Jewish events. So, at Kiev, at the beginning of September 1945, a Jew, an NKDV member, because of the hit he suffered from some militaries, determined the fact that the local inhabitants attacked the Jews from the city and thus 5 Jews were killed (Soljeniţîn, 2004, p. 414)..

An important institution was Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee whose role increased in time (Soljeniţîn, 2004, p. 419). This had 70 permanent members, a newspaper, a printing house. It played a double role, it had to be the representative body of the Jews in Occident and in front of Central Committee. In September 1946 he stopped its activity, as being considered a zionist and reactionary body. The dezmembration of Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee produced gradually. Important personalities as Fefer and Zaskin were arrested (Soljeniţîn, 2004, p. 421).

In the context of Russification of the Soviet Union' culture, the Jewish intellectuals were elliminated from the sphere of Russian culture. The Jews were excluded from the Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Science, the Institute of Juridical Science (Soljeniţîn, 2004, p. 422). The cultural Jewish institutions were closed.

In August 12, 1952, 13 of the most important writers of idis language were killed on Stalin's order. Thus were killed Peretz Markish, Leib Kvitko, David Hofstein, Itzic Feffer and David Bergelson.

In 1953, Stalin's antisemitism reached a maximal point. It was arrested a group of Jewish doctors accused that they would have contributed to the death of some Soviet Leaders. Stalin died before to start a new wave of arrestments and executions. On March 5 1953, Stalin died. These manifestations became a state politic because Stalin was the leader, but they were also a consequence of a paranoid behavior of Stalin concerning the Jews.

Stalin's antisemitism started to take shape mainly since 1948. In January 1948 the Jewish-Russian actor Solomon Mikhoels was killed and this fact seems to be the beginning of antisemite stage of Stalin. The change towards anti-zionism took a longer time, but it became out in the autumn of 1948 (Johnson, 2001, p. 526).

The Jews of Bulgaria were not deported excepting the ones from the occupied Tracia. A large extent of Bulgarian Jews lost their property. They were in a precarious situation after the war and had no proper clothes.

In the study of Arieh J. Kochavi, *British Diplomats and the Jews in Poland, Romania and Hungary during the communist takeovers* it is showed that at the end of the Second World War, excepting the territories of USSR, they still remained important communities of Jews also in other states of Soviet block such as in Romania, Poland and Hungary (Kochavi, 1995). The article of Kochavi describes the situation of the Jews from the three countries between the years 1945-1947 reflected in the reports of some British Diplomats, as Great Britain tried to stop a possible wave of emigrants coming from these countries. In 1945, more than 100 000 of Jews registered in Bucharest with the intention to emigrate in Palestine, them being encouraged also by the Red Cross. In Hungary, the Jews who returned from concentration camps found it impossible to re-organize their community and religious life. This aspect motivated the zionists to try to emigrate in Palestine. More Jews were involved in Hungarian

political life: Matyas Rakosi, important leader of Communist Party, Erno Gero, the minister of Transport, Josef Revai, a prestigious journalist, Zoltan Vas, mayor of Budapest. The author shows that the most difficult situation was of Polish Jews where in August 1945 they were only 50 000 of Jews left. Initially Polish government did not stop the Jews to go. Approximately 300 of Jews were killed in Poland after 1945 as a consequence of antisemitism.

In Hungary, several leaders of Communist party were Jews such as Matyas Rakosi and Erno Gero so as other important communists. In Hungary, it started the show trial Laszlo Rajk while in Czechoslovakia started a hunt for a "Czechoslovakian Rajk", namely Rudold Slansky, Jew, who was accused of zionism.

In Czechoslovakia, the communists succeeded to have the control only in 1948 and here the antisemitism was less encountered than in other regions. A part of the country was annexed by Soviet Union as a price for the liberation of country by the Soviet Union. Because of the fear of Soviet antisemitism, several Jews declared themselves Chzeck and Slovaks. A great part of Czechoslovakian Jews found a refuge in the American zone of domination of Germany.

In Poland, antisemitism knew exaggerated forms as the pogroms. In Poland, the anti - Jewish persecutions coming from the Polish side continued to manifest both during the war, but also after the instauration of the communism. A lot of Polish were antisemite because of the fact that a high number of Jews was present in the ranks of Polish Communist Party. In Poland, the victims of the Anti-Jewish persecutions after 1945 varied between 600 and 3000 of persons (Szaynok, 2005, p. 265-283).

Polish antisemitism took even the form of pogroms whose victims the Jews were. So was the pogrom of Kielce and Przeborze. The author Bozena Szaynok in its study *The Role of Antisemitism in Postwar Polish-Jewish Relations* considers that the murder of the Jews became a usual fact (Szaynok, 2005, p. 265-283)..

In the same time, a reason of the murder of the Jews both in the time of the war and after the war was the wish to get or to maintain the use of Jewish property by Polish ethnics. A common approach in the European communist states concerning the Jews was that them created and implemented the communist system. They encountered thus the opposition of the nationals of these countries who, in general, rejected the communism, this system being imposed from outside by Soviet Union with the secret consent of the other allies.

It can not be denied the fact that the Jews were also victims of the communists. This is reflected by the fact that before the war, they were, to a great extent, the exponents of a social superior class who fell into disgrace when the communism was established. There were also pretexts, justifications, most often fabricated, which the Polish used to justify their antisemite actions. Such accusations were the ritual murder, cases of coercition with the intention to make the Jews go or to take their property, crimes committed after robbery, other atacks directed against the Jews (Szaynok, 2005). In 1946, 125 000 of Jews arrived from Soviet Union. Because of some incidents which took place in Kracow, 5 Jews were killed. Starting with the year 1946, the number of Jews who emigrated in Palestine increased. During the Stalinist epoch, the zionist parties were dissolved. The Jews became active involved in the Security of Polish state.

During the years 1948-1953, numerous were the antisemite activities. So in May 27 1945 at Przeborze took place a pogrom. The Jews' need of security, under these circumstances, was obvious. Danuta Blus-Wegrowska in an article about the situation of the Jews in Poland after 1945 defined the existent atmosphere from those years as "pogromlike"[2], in other words specific to a pogrom. In Kielce took also place a pogrom which started with the

[2] Danuta Blus-Wegrowska, "Atmosfera pogromowa" Apud Bozena Szaynok, *op. cit.,* p. 271.

accusation of ritual murder. It is probable that the number of the victims of this pogrom was 42 (Szaynok, 2005, p. 272).

Polish intellectuals, after this pogroms, denounced antisemitism, but they represented the voice of elites. Polish community and also the Jewish one distanced themselves. In the context of the change of Soviet Union's politics towards Israel, Polish state changed also its attitude. Jewish Community was subjected to the control of political sources and of Security. An israeli official was arrested in Warsaw, so as the ex-chief of Jewish Committee of Lower Silesia (Szaynok, 2005, p. 281). Poland's attitude towards Israel remained as hostile as in the Stalinist period.

In 1946 in Poland took place an antisemmite campaign which involved entire Polish media. As a consequence of certain anti-communist Polish manifestations which took place in Polish universities, the blame was put on the cosmopolitans and the Jews were considered as scapegoats (Stola, 2005, p. 284-300).

In the book of Jay Howard Geller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945-1953* (Rapaport, 2005) it is described the situation of Jewry both in German Democratic Republic and in the German Federal Republic in post-war period. A part of the book refers to Eastern Germany. Jewish leaders tried to show the sufferings endured by the Jews, while the communists considered the Jews as being equal with the German nationals. In Eastern Germany the problem of reparations was not brought into the foreground. In the Western Germany the situation was different and, as a consequence of Luxembourg Agreement, the western German state decided to pay compensations to Israel. Like in other communist states, in Eastern Germany, Jewish political leaders were put under trial.

In Romania, during 1945 – 1953, several Jewish organizations were constituted which in time disappeared and their role was taken over by Jewish Democratic Committee, an institution controlled by communists who wanted to supervise closely the Jewish Community. As it results from the files existent in the National Archives branch of Oradea, the Jews from Oradea and the ones from Romania tried in the first years after the war to recuperate their houses and furniture confiscated during the fascist occupation, they tried to support and to offer to their fellows counseling with the support of the community. They tried to organize cultural activities, they offered to the Jews who had no qualification the chance to learn a job, they tried to support the ill people and the orphans. At the beginning, they achieved all these things with the suport of some institutions of their own (sanitary, educational, orphelinates), which ulterior entered in the posession of Romanian state. A number of Jews became communists, and they denied their origins, but most of them chose to emmigrate in Palestina (Israel after 1948). During the British mandate in Palestine, the communist supported the immigration of the Jews in Palestine, as counter reaction to the British power. They did not abandon the idea to spread their system in Israel, and the ones who emigrated were politically prepared, thing which did not have the expected success. In the same time, the zionism was condamned by Romanian Communist Party, a lot of zionists being interogated. Radu Ioanid in his book *Răscumpărarea evreilor* argues that for every Romanian Jew emigrated in Israel, the Jewish state paied money to Romanian authorities, a condamnable fact, kept secret even in present times (Ioanid, 2005, p. 95-117).

As a conclusion, we can state that the situation of Jews from the communist space was far from good during the years 1945-1953. They were affected by the war, later by Stalin's antisemmitism and by the policy of communist states to punish the interwar period's elites. Jewish mentalities were not compatible with communism, it was only a particular historical situation which determined a part of the Jews to become communists.

Bibliography:

Hodos, George H. (1987), *Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe*, New York, Praeger Publishers.

Ioanid, Radu (2005), *Răscumpărarea evreilor. Istoria acordurilor secrete dintre România şi Israel,* Iaşi, Polirom.

Johnson, Paul (2001), *A history of the Jews,* London, Phoenix Press.

Kochavi, Arieh J. (1995), *British Diplomats and the Jews in Poland, Romania and Hungary during the Communist takeovers* in East European Quaterly, vol. 29.

Langrebe, Alix (2004), *Polish National Identity and deformed memory from 1945 to the present: Mythologizing the Polish Role in the Holocaust*, in RFE/RL *East European Perspectives, volume 6, Number 6.*

Rapaport, Lynn: Jay Howard Keller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945-1953,* in *German Politics and Society* , volume 23, issue 2, 2005.

Rosen, Moses (1991), *Primejdii, încercări, miracole*, Bucureşti, Hasefer.

Soljeniţîn, Alexandr (2004)*, Două secole împreună. Evreii şi ruşii în epoca sovietică. 1917-1972*, Bucureşti, Univers.

Stola, Dariusz, *Fighting against the shadows. The Anti-Zionist Campaign of 1968,* in Robert Blombaum (ed), Antisemitism and its opponents in Modern Poland*,* Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

Szaynok, Bozena (2005), *The Role of Antisemitism in Postwar Polish-Jewish Relations* in Robert Blombaum (ed), *Antisemitism and its opponents in Modern Poland*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

Wasserstein, Bernard (1996), *Vanishing Diaspora. The Jews in Europe since 1945*, Great Britain, Hamish Hamilton Ltd.