

The Forgotten Pogroms, 1918

Michael L. Miller

On November 9, 1918, soon after the Aster Revolution, the first of three political upheavals that convulsed Hungary between October 1918 and August 1919, Hungary's leading Jewish newspaper recapped the events of an "extraordinarily gripping week for Hungarian Jewry." The "revolutionary events" had precipitated outbursts of "anarchy" in several locations across Hungary, bringing "martyrdom and suffering" to the country's Jews. The newspaper tried to comfort its readers, assuring them that this anti-Jewish violence was an atavistic remnant of the feudal past, not a harbinger of the future. The "feverish moments" were interpreted as birth pangs of a new era, momentary paroxysms of lawlessness and disorder on the inexorable path to a "new and free Hungary."¹ Never before had modern Hungary experienced such widespread violence against its Jewish population, not even during the Revolution of 1848 or the Tiszaeszlár Affair of 1882–83, when popular anti-Jewish violence erupted across the country. But even after a month of wanton pillaging and murder, which affected hundreds of communities and thousands of individuals, the Hungarian Jewish newspaper continued to put its faith in the police, the Catholic leadership, the "entire Christian society," and the "civilized Hungarian nation."²

Reading these news reports a century later, I am struck by the heart-wrenching reports of anti-Jewish unrest following the "bloodless" Aster Revolution, often called the "bloodless revolution" because it brought a bourgeois-democratic coalition to power on October 31 without any major bloodshed (aside from the assassination of former prime minister István Tisza). In the subsequent four–five months, however, Hungarian Jewish organizations estimated that more than 6,000 Jews were wounded or killed, and more than a billion crowns in material damage was caused by pillaging and plunder.³ The Aster Revolution could be called the "forgotten revolution," because it has been eclipsed in Hungarian historiography and in Hungarian collective memory by subsequent events: first, the 133-day Hungarian Republic of Councils (March 21–August 1, 1919), and then the "popular counter-revolution" that destroyed and discredited it.⁴

1. "A hét eseményei," *Egyenlőség*, November 9, 1918, 1.

2. "Pogrom-hirek," *Egyenlőség*, December 14, 1918, 1. For reports on the anti-Jewish violence in Hungary in November and December 1918, see "A forradalom szenvedései," *Egyenlőség*, November 23, 1918, 2–3; "A forradalom szenvedései," *Egyenlőség*, November 30, 1918, 2–3; and "A forradalom szenvedései," *Egyenlőség*, December 14, 1918, 5–7. See also Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, "Forradalmak kora: antiszemita pogromok és atrocitások 1918–1919-ben," *Társadalmi Konfliktusok Kutatóközpont*, at http://konfliktuskutato.hu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=145:forradalmak-kora-antiszemita-pogromok-es-atrocitasok-1918-19-ben-&catid=15:tanulmányok#sdfootnote19sym (accessed August 7, 2019).

3. János Pelle, *A gyűlölet vetése : A zsidótörvények és magyar közvélemény 1938–1944* (Budapest, 2001), 20. Cited by Kádár and Vági, "Forradalmak kora."

4. István Deák, "Budapest and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918–1919," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 46, no. 106 (January 1968), 129.

The anti-Jewish violence in late 1918 has also been eclipsed by subsequent events, and not only by the mass extermination of European Jewry during the Shoah. In Hungary, army detachments under the command of right-wing, antisemitic officers purposefully and systematically targeted Jews during the White Terror (1919–21), leaving a trail of plunder, torture, rape, and slaughter in their wake. At least 1,500 people lost their lives in the White Terror, with some estimates running as high as 5,000. The overwhelming majority of victims were Jews, who were collectively blamed for the crimes of the Republic of Councils.⁵ In Ukraine, pogromists killed tens—and possibly hundreds—of thousands of Jews during the Russian Civil War (1918–20). The number of victims will probably never be known, but it exceeded the number of victims in Hungary by several orders of magnitude. Anywhere between 50,000 and 200,000 Jews were killed in the more than 1,500 pogroms that took place on Ukrainian territory between 1918 and 1920, especially in 1919.⁶ Three years ago, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research organized a panel on this topic, entitled “The Forgotten Genocide,” but this wave of pogroms has really only been “forgotten” in the aftermath of the Shoah.⁷ It was still making headlines in 1927, during the trial of Sholom Schwartzbard, the Russian-born Jewish anarchist who assassinated Symon Petliura, former Supreme Commander of the Ukrainian National Army, in Paris. Schwartzbard’s act was in retribution for the deaths of his fifteen family members who were killed in 1919–20 by Ukrainian forces under Petliura’s command. The sensational trial gripped the world.

In 1918, a palpable fear of pogroms swept the former Habsburg lands, as waves of anti-Jewish violence erupted in quick succession, first in Galicia, and then in Hungary, Bohemia, and Moravia. “There will be no pogrom!” read a headline in the above-mentioned Hungarian Jewish newspaper, whose editor hoped to reassure the readership on December 7, 1918, that Budapest would be spared the anti-Jewish violence of the kind that was engulfing the Hungarian countryside and the newly-established states of Poland and Czechoslovakia at the time.⁸ By then, the “November pogroms” had wreaked havoc in Galicia, affecting more than a hundred localities and culminating in a three-day orgy of violence in Lwów, on November 22–24.⁹ No fewer than seventy-three Jews were “killed or burned to death” in the Lwów Pogrom, and the number may have even exceeded 150.¹⁰ The material losses in Lwów’s pillaged and plundered Jewish quarter totaled over a hundred million crowns,

5. Paul A. Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Ithaca, 2006), 88n24; Eliza Johnson, “‘Cleansing the Red Nest’: Counterrevolution and White Terror in Munich and Budapest, 1919” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2004), 83–87.

6. Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917–1920* (Philadelphia, 2012), 216–17.

7. “The Forgotten Genocide: The Pogroms in Ukraine, 1918–1919,” Discussion at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, May 16, 2016.

8. Lajos Magyar, “Nem lesz pogrom!,” *Egyenlőség*, December 7, 1918, 3.

9. William W. Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 2018), 124.

10. William W. Hagen, “The Moral Economy of Ethnic Violence: The Pogrom of Lwów, November 1918,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 31, no. 2 (April–June 2005), 208.

but the pogrom's psychological toll was incalculable. As William W. Hagen has argued, the pogrom gave expression "in carnivalesque form . . . to a collective sense of celebration, triumph, and cruel playfulness and joy at the Jews' dispossession, humiliation, and even murder."¹¹ It excluded Jews from the Polish body politic, rendering them defenseless, vulnerable, and unprotected. It even became a rallying cry for anti-Jewish violence elsewhere. On December 1, 1918, rioters in Prague yelled: "Thrash the Jews! Give them what they got in Lwów!"¹²

The anti-Jewish violence in Bohemia and Moravia could be called the "December pogroms." The first two weeks of December witnessed a wave of anti-Jewish riots, not only in Prague, where several torah scrolls—and part of the Jewish community archive—were destroyed, but also in the Bohemian and Moravian countryside. The worst violence, by far, took place in Holešov, a small Moravian market town, where, on December 3–4, locals pillaged and ransacked Jewish houses and shops, vandalized the synagogue and Jewish community offices, and murdered two Jews, before the army finally intervened. The historian Zdeňek Fišer called it the "last pogrom" in Moravia, implying that the rioting in Holešov (and the environs) was the end of a dark era and not a foretaste of things to come.¹³ More recently, Kateřina Čapková, Michal Frankl, and Miroslav Szabó have challenged this interpretation, arguing that the anti-Jewish violence in the early years of Czechoslovakia was not an aberration or an atavistic trend, but rather part of a larger discourse of exclusion that placed Jews outside the Czech (or Czechoslovak) body politic.¹⁴ This anti-Jewish violence has to a large extent been forgotten, because it was not congruent with the image (or myth) of interwar Czechoslovakia as a "welcoming and tolerant place for Jews," or as an "island of democracy in Eastern Europe."¹⁵ Even today, it is hard for some people to imagine that, in 1920, a German diplomat could describe "the Czech people" as "antisemitic to an extent that I have yet to see in any other nation."¹⁶

The November and December pogroms occurred in newly-established Habsburg successor states that had not yet achieved a monopoly on the use of physical force. Across the monarchy, national councils took power in October 1918, and in quick succession they proclaimed new states on the basis of the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination. On October 28, in Prague, the Czechoslovak National Committee announced the establishment of Czechoslovakia. On October 29, in Zagreb, the Croatian Parliament declared the independence of Croatia, Slovenia, and Dalmatia. On October 30,

11. William W. Hagen, "The Moral Economy," 215.

12. Quoted in Kateřina Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews?: National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia* (New York, 2012), 111.

13. Zdeňek Fišer, *Poslední pogrom: události v Holešově ve dnech 3. a 4. prosince 1918 a jejich historické pozadí* (Kroměříž, 1996).

14. Kateřina Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews*, 107–20; Michal Frankl and Miroslav Szabó, *Budování státu bez antisemitismu?: násilí, diskurz loajality a vznik Československa* (Prague, 2016), 47–71.

15. Tatjana Lichtenstein, "Jewish Power and Powerlessness: Prague Zionists and the Paris Peace Conference," *East European Jewish Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2014): 2–20.

16. Quoted in Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews*, 112.

in Vienna, the Provisional National Assembly founded the state of German-Austria. Finally, on October 31, in Budapest, the Hungarian National Council ended the personal union between Austria and Hungary, paving the way for the establishment of the Hungarian Democratic Republic and prompting Emperor-King Charles to dissolve the Habsburg Monarchy once and for all. Meanwhile, new governments in Poland and the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic made competing claims to Galicia.

It was tempting to view the power vacuum as the main context—and catalyst—for the anti-Jewish violence that erupted after the collapse of the monarchy. As David Engel has observed, pogroms often occur in times of political chaos, when states lose “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (in Max Weber’s words).¹⁷ The already-cited Hungarian-Jewish newspaper understood the rumblings of anti-Jewish violence in precisely such terms: “The revolutionary government, born from one day to the next, was unable to protect us from the catastrophe, because power temporarily slipped from its hands due to the demobilization [of the army] and the decline of the gendarmerie. In the first few days, state authority totally ceased to exist, allowing the smoldering embers across the country to ignite.”¹⁸ Such observations could have just as easily been made in Bohemia and Moravia, and even more so in eastern Galicia, where Polish and Ukrainian armies and irregulars were locked in a bitter and bloody battle for possession of Lwów. The “smoldering embers” metaphor implied that old hatreds had only temporarily flared up in the post-war chaos and lawlessness, and that the raging fires would eventually be extinguished when the state regained control.

A closer look at the anti-Jewish violence, however, suggests that it was part of the state-building process, or at least part of an effort to demarcate the exclusive terms of membership in the newly-established states. In general, the violence was justified as retribution for the “disloyalty” of “the Jews”—understood as a collectivity—during the war and its immediate aftermath. The litany of charges included war-profiteering, black marketeering, shirking military service, and above all, insufficient devotion to the national cause—be it Hungarian, Polish or Czechoslovak. “Execute the Jews! Hang them! Lock them up! Let them eat war-bread and cabbage!” shouted rioters in Prague, who targeted Jews, not only as war profiteers, but also as pillars of Germandom in the capital of the new Czechoslovak state.¹⁹ Many Jews lamented the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, all the more so after the outbursts of anti-Jewish violence, and this was naturally marshaled as further evidence of insufficient devotion to the new states and their titular nations.

In this respect, it is significant that anti-Jewish violence erupted in “victorious” states as well as “defeated” states. Two recent studies of popular violence in the aftermath of the First World War have tried to understand why such violence flared up in “victorious” Czechoslovakia, but not so much in

17. David Engel, “What’s in a Pogrom? European Jews in the Age of Violence,” in Jonathan Dekel-Chen et al., eds., *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History* (Bloomington, 2011): 19–37, especially 27.

18. “A hét eseményei,” *Egyenlőség*, November 9, 1918, 1.

19. William W. Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence*, 147; Michael Frankl and Miroslav Szabó, *Budoványi státu*, 70–71.

“defeated” Austria.²⁰ This is part of a larger debate on whether—or to what extent—a specific “culture of defeat” lies at the root of paramilitary (or uniformed) violence in this period.²¹ As Ota Konrád convincingly argues, the violence in Czechoslovakia was actually driven by a “culture of victory,” which saw national and political elites—including Czechoslovak legionnaires returning from Russia—trying to fulfill their fantasies of a new order. Jews were “identified as enemies of the new order.”²² They were remnants and reminders of the imperial past, who had no clear place in a newly-born, nationally-defined Czechoslovakia. As the anti-Jewish violence in Holešov demonstrated, this sentiment was not only shared by the soldiers who prepared “the last pogrom,” but also by the townspeople who eagerly joined in.

In explaining or justifying the anti-Jewish violence, perpetrators (or their supporters) often invoked the old canard of Jewish “provocation.” Provocation took many forms, but the accusation always entailed blaming the victims for their purported sins of commission or omission. In Lwów, the “sin of 1918” was the Jews’ failure to side openly with the Poles in the Ukrainian-Polish battle for the capital of eastern Galicia. Poles blamed the Jewish militia for remaining neutral, or even for fighting on the Ukrainian side. As David Engel has shown, “the Jews’ unforgivable ‘neutrality’ with regard to Lwów” became “an abiding *symbol* of Jewish perfidy” well into the 1940s.²³ In November 1918, it served as a justification for the deadly pogrom. In Bohemia, the sin of the Jews—according to the Czech Realist politician and publicist Jan Herben—was their “non-Czechness.”²⁴ The Jews’ alleged cowardice during the war and their failure to identify with the Czech national cause provoked an “antisemitism of disappointment” (*antisemitismus zklamání*), as Herben called it. “The Jew suddenly became an evil element in our national society and has nothing in common with us,” he wrote at the end of 1918.²⁵ Remarkably, a Czech Agrarian newspaper even claimed that the anti-Jewish violence in Prague was willfully orchestrated by “Judeo-Germans” in order to harm Czechoslovakia’s reputation abroad. “It was discovered,” the Agrarian paper reported, “that Judeo-Germans are organizing and hiring provocateurs who want to start a pogrom in our capital city, so they can say that the government of our state does not have the strength and power to maintain order and discipline in its own home.”²⁶

20. Rudolf Kučera, “Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria,” *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 4 (December 2016): 827–55; Ota Konrád, “Two Post-War Paths: Popular Violence in the Bohemian Lands and in Austria in the Aftermath of World War I,” *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 5 (2018): 759–75.

21. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York, 2003). For a comprehensive, comparative study of paramilitary violence in Europe, see Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford, 2012.)

22. Ota Konrád, “Two Post-War Paths,” 768.

23. David Engel, “Lwów, 1918: The Transmutation of a Symbol and Its Legacy in the Holocaust,” in Joshua D. Zimmerman, ed., *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Brunswick, 2003), 33–34.

24. Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews*, 109.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Quoted in Michal Frankl and Miroslav Szabó, *Budování státu*, 71.

The canard of “Jewish provocation” often went hand in hand with myth of “Jewish power.” In his classic article on “the paradoxical politics of marginality,” Jonathan Frankel observed that the belief in Jewish power reached mythological proportions precisely when the Jews of east central Europe were at their weakest and most vulnerable.²⁷ The prominence of individual Jews in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the November Revolution in Bavaria, and the Aster Revolution in Hungary fed Jewish conspiracy theories and even pushed them into the mainstream. At the same time, the coordinated intercession of American, British, and French Jewish organizations on behalf of their coreligionists, and the diplomatic activities of Zionist leaders, fueled fantasies of an all-powerful “world Jewry” that could influence the decision-making process at the Paris Peace Conference. Polish leaders claimed that “international Jewish influence” was directed against Poland.²⁸ Hungarian leaders dismissed the Jews as belonging to “some kind of Jewish *internationale*.”²⁹ Czech leaders—such as Tomáš G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš—viewed “world Jewry” in more favorable terms, believing that Jewish power could serve the interests of the new Czechoslovak state.³⁰ In 1899, Masaryk had come to the defense of Leopold Hilsner, a Bohemian Jew accused of ritual murder, and this earned him great respect among Jews in the Habsburg Monarchy and beyond. Two decades later, as the monarchy was in its last throes, Masaryk expected to reap the benefits from his earlier stance against antisemitism. “Hilsner is very useful to us now,” he wrote to Beneš on October 31, 1918. “The Zionists and the other Jews have publicly accepted our program.”³¹ This acceptance was crucially important to Masaryk, because he was convinced that “the Jews” had the power to influence the terms of peace in Paris.

The anti-Jewish violence in November and December 1918 must be understood against the backdrop of alleged “Jewish provocation” and imagined “Jewish power.” Jews were repeatedly accused of lording their power over their Christian neighbors or wielding their power against the best interest of the successor states in which they resided. The pogroms in Galicia, as William W. Hagan has argued, were “unself-conscious enactments of Christian self-liberation not only from Austrian rule but also from imagined Jewish domination.”³² Likewise, the pogroms in Hungary, Bohemia, and Moravia were also motivated by a desire to put “the Jews” in their place, to restore what was perceived to be the natural order of things. They were not “smoldering embers” suddenly reignited, but rather new reactions to a world turned on its head. They were not atavistic remnants of a feudal past, but rather efforts to shape the national(ist) future.

27. Jonathan Frankel, “The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality: Thoughts on the Jewish Situation during the Years 1914–1921,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 4 (1988): 3–21. See also Tatjana Lichtenstein, “Jewish Power and Powerlessness,” 2–20.

28. David Engel, “Lwów, 1918,” 32.

29. “A magyar zidókhoz,” *Egyenlőség*, November 2, 1918, 1.

30. Frank Hadler, “‘Erträglicher Antisemitismus’?—Jüdische Fragen und tschechoslowakische Antworten 1918/19,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 1 (2002): 169–200.

31. *Ibid.*, 178.

32. William W. Hagan, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland*, 126.