

Everywhere and always... Jews

The image of the Jewish community in national camp press and journalism in Poland from 1930-1939

Summary

The national press and journalism of the 1930s devoted great attention to Jewish issues, later referred to as Judeo-centrism. All texts dealing with political, social, economic and cultural issues referred to Jewish issues.

In the decade preceding the period described in this paper, attempts were made to use 'Jewish scholars', who were considered to be specialists in Jewish affairs, in order to lend a Jewish scientific character to discussions on the Jewish community. In the 1930s, these efforts continued, but with markedly diminished intensity. The manner in which Jews were portrayed in the Polish national press had nothing in common with scientific objectivity and methodology. Particular attention was paid to the role of the Jewish community in the history of the world and Poland, depicting its ostensibly clear and sinister influence on the non-Jewish environment. Jews were also portrayed in sociological and ethnographic terms, and all these considerations were guided by the aim of knowing the enemy as well as possible.

Nationalists' interest was piqued by the participation of Jews in political and social life. Strong links between Jews and communism were indicated, with the term "Judeo-communism" used repeatedly. Of the other political groupings active among the Jewish community, Zionist organisations were of greatest interest to the nationalists. On the rare occasions when Jews were spoken of with respect, reference was made to the Zionists, who were building the foundations of their own statehood in Palestine. Since the Jewish community functioned in the Diaspora, the nationalists described its influence on the international arena, showing what they perceived to be an unequivocally negative impact on the political situation. Jews were also linked with Freemasonry, with the national press and journalistic texts reinforcing this stereotype. Another aspect of Jewish participation in political and social life of particular relevance to the domestic situation was the relationship with the parties on the Polish political scene. The relationship of the Jewish community with the Sanation bloc in power in the 1930s was described prudently. Descriptions of Jews' attitude towards their own political camp were also not avoided. Because of the attachment to Catholicism declared by most journalists and national publicists and the importance of the Catholic Church in Poland, nationalists were interested in the attitude of Jews towards this dominant religion. They emphasised the enmity with which Jews fought the influence of Catholicism, repeatedly portraying the religion of Poles as mere superstition. Often on the pages of the nationals, the Jews' approach to the Polish Army and issues of defence the state was written

about. In the opinion of the nationalists, the Jewish minority would be a dubious element in the event of an armed conflict, and Jewish soldiers were of low combat value. The service of the few Jews employed in Polish diplomacy and state and local administration bodies received an equally negative assessment. Such attitudes, as interpreted by Polish national publicists and journalists, resulted from the dislike, and often hostility, of Jews towards Polish statehood.

The Jewish community played a huge role in the economy and the popular perception was that they were associated primarily with this sphere. In the national press and in journalism, nationalists issued extensive proclamations of the Jews' purported harmful influence on the Polish economy. They called for Poles to take over areas hitherto dominated by the Jewish minority and thus complete the building of a modern nation.

The Polish national press described the Jewish influence on Polish culture in a negative way. Although all areas of Polish culture were deemed to be imbued with a Jewish spirit, certain issues attracted particular attention. Nationalists were interested in Jewish influence in the media, which most strongly shaped the worldview of Poles. In the 1930s, a huge role in forming public opinion was played by the press, which in the opinion of the nationalists was dominated by Jews, who, in addition to periodicals in Yiddish and Hebrew, also published numerous titles in Polish. Jewish influence on the formation of Polish opinion was not limited to the press. In the nationalists' view, Jews played a significant role in Polish Radio. Cinematography was also considered to be completely dominated by Jews. The Jewish influence was seen as concerning practically every stage of film production, as well as distribution, since a significant number of cinemas were owned by Jews. According to the nationalists, film's immense popularity made it the perfect medium to promote the 'Jewish spirit'. For similar reasons, Jewish influence was combatted in music, especially in its entertainment form, where the promotion of values alien to Poles was also perceived. Literature, theatre and the visual arts were regarded as being dominated by Jews. By combatting any manifestations of the "Jewish spirit" in culture, the nationalists sought to promote art that was indigenously Polish. The presence of Jewish students and Jewish teachers in Polish primary and secondary schools was consistently opposed. Nationalists feared a negative influence of young Jews on their Polish peers and called for the introduction of separate schools for both nationalities. Threats to higher education were perceived differently. Nationalists were concerned about the number of Jewish students, far exceeding the percentage of this minority group in society. The excess of Jewish students was seen as a threat that would dominate Poland's elites in future. Jewish dominance in the so-called free professions was also opposed with particular force.

Polish nationalists clearly foregrounded Jewish issues, whose significance was greatly exaggerated. The proliferation of Jewish-related publications grew with the passage of time and was only slightly muted in the final months before the outbreak of the Second World War due to war preparations. Invariably, however, the image of the Jewish community emerging from journalistic and press texts was unequivocally negative.

Translated by Rob Pagett