

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Arts

Abstract of PhD Thesis

Dániel Bolgár

Assimilation and Integration in Modern Hungary

Doctoral School of History

dr. Gábor Erdődy

Economic and Social History Programme

dr. György Kövér

Members of Committee:

Gábor Erdődy, DSc, elnök

Viktória Bányai, PhD

György Csapeli, DSc

Csaba Fazekas, dr. habil.

Katalin Fenyves, dr. habil.

Gábor Gyáni, CMHAS

Miklós Hadas, DSc

Supervisor: András Gerő, DSc

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Dániel Bolgár
Why the Jews?
The Social History of Jewish Success and Failure in
Modern Hungary (1890–1944)

The central theme of both popular and academic discourse on Jews from the final decades of the 19th century to this day has been the social inequality between Christians and Jews; in other words that modernity has meant that Jews have enjoyed numerous advantages. Though this issue has been around for quite some time, there is nonetheless no satisfactory answer to the mystery of why the specific idea of Jewish success has developed. The academic explanations current in both Hungary and abroad suffer without exception from contradictions. Some are also morally dubious; but most of all they are unproven. The purpose of this thesis is to construct a completely new, logically coherent hypothesis as to the causes of the development of modern inequalities between Christians and Jews and then test its viability in the case of Hungary in the period from the turn of the 20th century to the Holocaust.

The nature and extent of inequality

Not only the origins, but also the actual nature of the advantages enjoyed by Jews remain undefined. Previous works on the topic have not undertaken a systematic quantification of inequalities; the present thesis, therefore, must fill this gap. The most straightforward task proved to be the identification of the peculiarities of the position of Jews in the labour market. As for the belief in the superior intelligence of Jews, I tried to shake this by deconstructing the proof usually given to support it (lists of geniuses, IQ tests). The intention was to make it clear that the stereotype they were looking to prove in fact affected the calibration of the very measurements these researchers used. These tests, therefore, proved not the superior intelligence of the Jews, but merely the superior reputation for intelligence that Jews enjoyed. The idea of the over-education of Jews has already been challenged in several ways. This thesis argues that all of them fail when put to the test empirically. The most demanding part in exploring the nature of these inequalities was measuring the material prosperity of Jews. I tried examining the popular cliché of Jews being wealthy by comparing data on the tithes paid by various religious groups (churches and synagogues) and height, a biological measure of well-being. The thesis will thereby hopefully serve partly as a groundbreaking work in introducing the tools of anthropometric history in Hungary. Though my findings showed that Jews were on average more affluent, they also showed that the distribution of income among Jews was extremely uneven. Jews were over-represented at the bottom as well as at the top of the income pyramid. The end results indicate that there were significant differences in terms of employment and education in modern Hungary between Jews and non-

Jews, but that the beliefs concerning the superior wealth and intelligence of Jews need to be qualified with certain conditions.

Theories

This thesis takes a survey of the academically relevant explanations for the phenomenon of the success of the Jews. It undertakes a thorough critical examination of them, and often serves to uncover the unpleasant circumstances of their genesis. It also examines their core coherence. My survey of this literature concludes that the theory of intellectualism stemming from the nature of the Jewish religion, ingrained in American sociological circles; the theory of Pariah Capitalism that developed in the debate between Weber and Sombart; the Kuznets model of the economics of small minorities; Edna Bonacich's middlemen minority theory; Thorstein Veblen's idea of the creativity of Jews as outsiders; not to mention theories based on genetics are all, for one reason or another, incapable of providing a viable explanation for the development of inequalities between Christians and Jews.

The explanations provided up till now do not only have problems that are specific unto themselves, but also have three absolutely key common flaws that have never before been explored. Firstly, their epistemological status is uncommonly uncertain: we are talking here about nothing more than hypotheses or hunches; none of these explanations is supported by narrative or quantitative proof. Secondly, all these explanations take it as read that the success of Jews stems from Jewish over-achievement, which is to say Christian under-achievement. In other words, the development of inequalities is presented against the background of some meritocratic idyll. But social success is not something that people attain merely by *deserving*. It is always *accorded*. Advantages do not come about simply through talent beating a path for itself, but are always the result of interactions which weigh certain accomplishments, not always fairly. Thirdly, the nature of the inequality is not *in fact* the same as the one for which these theories are seeking to find an explanation. It is not really a question of the Jewish half having enjoyed advantages in every field and Christians being disadvantaged in every field; in some important fields (like the armed forces, civil service, politics and physical education grades) it was Christians who had the advantage. Academic research till now has either been silent about these Jewish disadvantages, or attributed them to anti-Semitism. In other words, it attributes Jewish successes to over-achievement, while attributing Jewish failures to fallacious judgements of Jewish accomplishments.

Hypothesis

It is not hard to admit, however, that Jewish success could not have been purely the result of Jews working harder or performing better, if Jewish failures were caused by anti-Semitic prejudice. For it is unclear how the majority would have been willing and able to find the generosity of spirit to overcome its anti-Semitism and not to place any obstacles in the way of Jewish success in numerous fields of signal importance. Why did Christians not exercise their hatred of Jews when choosing a doctor or a lawyer? There is likewise no explanation of why, while society prized the proverbial industriousness of the Jews in some fields, this self-same society was incapable of appreciating this same trait when – for example – appointing Generals. How is it that, while in some fields of competition, the effort Jews put in was given free rein to succeed, while in others it was ignored? We will keep bumping into these contradictions until we are ready to acknowledge that both these kinds of difference developed in the same society. Until, in other words, we stop placing successes and failures within separate conceptions of the society in which they came about; until we accept that the logic behind the development of successes and failures could not have been diametrically opposed.

If we review the nature of these inequalities, our first impression will be that where the Jews are at an advantage, greater emphasis is placed on the intellect, while where Christians are better placed, there is more emphasis on the body. On this basis, we can develop two useable hypotheses. The first – let us call it the 'meritocratic model' – is the politically and morally extremely unpleasant proposition that these inequalities expressed actual differences in achievement. In other words, they came into being because the Jewish intellect was superior, while the Jewish physique was inferior; or, Jews were smart but weak, while Christians were the opposite.

The other, 'interactionist' explanation, which this thesis tries to prove, would say, however, that Jewish successes and failures were based on purely imaginary differences in achievement. In other words, Jewish intellect was not superior, nor physique inferior; Jews were merely *believed* to be smart but weak and the way people discriminated between Jews and non-Jews in their judgements of certain achievements was directed by the then current discourse around the character of the Jews. According to my theory, the inequalities came into being because society judged the intellectual accomplishments of the Jews to be disproportionately large, and their physical achievements disproportionately small. If that was so, then Jews were not only influenced negatively by the prejudiced attitudes towards them and the compulsive speculation on their character, but in fact had these very things to thank for their extraordinary social progress in the modern period. The myth of Jews being

clever but weak did not reinforce the inter-group hierarchies in society, but rather subverted them. The dominant Christian ideas of their own (low) self-worth and the constant discourse on the superior capabilities of the Jews they dominated actually worked to the benefit of the Jews. The interactionist model, however, can accommodate a certain amount of actual difference in achievement, since Jews and Christians could internalise these popular images of them and accept the futility of fighting against them, which – like a self-fulfilling prophecy – would impact on their achievements.

Conditions

The myth of the weak but clever Jew could only give rise to social inequality, however, and could only subvert the established social hierarchy, if two historical conditions were fulfilled. The first is that the discourses on the weakness and cleverness of Jews should have been widespread and consistent, which is to say that most people thought more or less the same thing about the character of the Jews. The other is that the two groups should have been interconnected and have formed part of the same social network, sharing a homogenous culture that made unrestricted communication possible. Which is to say that society should have presented an image of integration, but that the Jews should have nonetheless been recognisable, separable, or un-assimilated, so that people continued to be conscious of their Jewishness. If integration had not existed, there would not have been common ground where the two parties had an opportunity to make prejudiced judgements about each other, while if Jews were not unassimilated, then considering them weak but clever (and Christians the opposite) would have been nothing more than harmless daydreaming, for no-one would have known to whom they could apply these preconceptions.

I have examined how widespread and consistent this subversive myth was in both Hungarian and international discourse. I found that the discussion of Jewish characteristics, the Jewish physique and intellect were subject to enforced rituals; while the content, order, and combination of statements had a strict framework by which everyone was bound. For example, committed anti-Semites and Jewish tradition both considered that the Jewish physique performed badly while Jewish intellect performed well, compared to the Christian.

The thesis that the Jews took part in the construction of the nation and yet continued to be differentiated from the nation, or in other words that the principle of the preservation of Judaism was maintained, does not need especial proof, given that it is the subject of academic consensus. The challenge for historians is not the existence, but rather the interpretation of this phenomenon. As a first step, therefore, I tried to work out an

explanatory model of Jews mixing into society without melting into it by extending Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism. I argued that – unlike other peoples – Jews were not assimilated into the nation without a trace because the word 'Jew' delineated not only a group of people but also had a positive meaning in the context of production in modern industrial society. The word was worth preserving almost as a profession in itself, since the wearers of this label entered Industry with the stamp of industriousness attached to them. As a second stage, I leave the abstract, theoretical level and demonstrate 'from the bottom up', through the medium of life histories, that there is nothing inconceivable in a situation where though a group of people have made the culture of a nation their own, a different label is nonetheless applied to them than is applied to the nation. I first undertake a sociological analysis of the fictitious worlds drawn at the turn of the century in prose pieces by Kálmán Mikszáth (*Szent Péter esernyője, Új Zrínyiász*), then test the validity of the image built up therefrom on texts referring to reality. I undertake a parallel analysis of the autobiographical writings of György Bálint (better known as 'Bálint gazda'), a Jew from Gyöngyös and the memoirs of H. P., also from Gyöngyös, but Christian. My conclusion was that there were no obstacles to Jews and Christians maintaining relations in a Hungarian provincial town in the first half of the 20th century, but people nonetheless kept track of who was and who was not Jewish.

Proof of the Hypothesis

In order to determine to what extent the success and failure of Jews was a result of discriminative judgements influenced by the subversive myth, we must be able to quantify the achievements of the Jews, the judgements made about them, and the gap between the two. I demonstrate the systematic underestimation of the physical strength of Jews by means of a comparison of physical education grades (which reflect the judgements of the teachers) and fitness protocols giving the results of measurements taken during physical education classes (which represent actual accomplishments) using statistical analysis with several variables. The reports from a total of 28 secondary schools within the territory of post-Trianon Hungary gave data for measurements of performance in the period from 1886 to 1916. I have made a complete analysis of the data of seven. The results are unequivocal: though Jewish students did perform less well in physical education than their Christian counterparts, their grades were a good deal worse than the difference in their performance actually merited. This analysis therefore served fully to support the interactional theory of the development of Jewish failure.

In order to observe the actual consequences of the fantasies about Jewish intellectual superiority, or in other words to observe the hypothesised overestimation of Jewish intellectual achievement, I had to be (even) more resourceful. The following solution proved practicable. I first observed the grades awarded to Jewish students in the 'intellectual' subjects within the Hungarian educational system when they were taught together with Christians, and their grades could therefore be influenced by the myth about the intellectual superiority of Jews. I then looked at the grades awarded when Jews were taught separately, when a teacher's attitudes towards Jews or Christians could not have been a factor in their grading. Examining seven secondary schools at the turn of the century, I looked at how the grades in religious education classes, which Jews were taught in exclusively Jewish groups, compared to their grades from other 'intellectual' subjects. I also compared the marks awarded in the Jewish secondary schools of Budapest and Debrecen with those given to Jewish students in mixed secondary schools in the capital and in Debrecen during the Horthy era. For the period of the Jewish laws, I compared the marks of the „purely” Jewish classes instituted in the three grammar schools in Budapest with the marks from the mixed classes. The results were conclusive again: Jews were awarded significantly higher grades in the integrated education system than in the segregated system, and the prejudices of those judging their performance must therefore have played a fundamental role in the development of Jewish intellectual success.