

KATA BOHUS

ISRAEL'S INFLUENCE ON THE SITUATION OF CENTRAL-EAST EUROPEAN JEWS:  
COMMUNIST POLICIES AND PROPAGANDA  
BETWEEN THE SUEZ CRISIS AND THE SIX-DAY WAR

My research at Open Society Archives is part of my dissertation project which examines state-policies toward Jews in Central-East Europe during the first decade of the post-Stalinist period. My enquiries at OSA aimed at examining one aspect of this broad problem: the connections between political developments in and around the state of Israel, and their effects on the lives of Central-East European Jews. The research questions I attempted to answer were: How did Israeli political developments affect Central-East European Communist states' (1) policies toward local Jews; and (2) the image of the "Jew" as reflected in their propaganda? What common patterns can we identify among members of the Eastern bloc, and what features seem to be country-specific?

As expected, the various records of Radio Free Europe's national research units (Hungarian, Polish, Czechoslovak, Bulgarian) proved to be very useful. Among the Subject Files, I identified the issues relating to anti-Semitism, Jewish religion, foreign trade and relations with Israel as central. However, the research process also led me to other keywords, such as repatriation to Poland in 1957-58 and the youth-movements in Czechoslovakia and Hungary during the second part of the sixties. For the analysis of propaganda, I used the Press Survey containers of the RFE national units. I found two previous exhibitions at OSA – entitled 'Raoul Wallenberg' and 'Auschwitz Rekonstrukció' – and the source materials that were used for them and have been kept by the archives very revealing. For secondary sources, I consulted the library at CEU, as well as the on-sight collections of OSA.

My research at OSA was very fruitful and took new, unexpected directions. I managed to identify policy areas that had the most influences on Jews: emigration to Israel and the life of the religious Communities were obvious outcomes while purges, trials and persecution turned out to be areas more difficult to recognize, yet more challenging to explain. In the area of Communist propaganda, I identified the Eichmann trial in 1961 as

a turning point for the formation of WWII narratives including Jewish behaviour and the Holocaust. The Six-Day War and the evaluation of Israeli activities in it on the other hand turned out to be decisive for the redefinition of the notion of ‘Jewishness’ by the Communist state and by its subjects as well.

My results proved on the one hand that Israel had very little chance to *directly* influence the lives of Central-East European Jews. On the other hand, many developments in and around the Jewish state and the Middle-East *indirectly* did so, and frequently in unexpected, contradictory ways. This confusion arose because Communist states did not have a clearly defined political direction with regards to Jews but subordinated that question to furthering their various, often unrelated political goals. These in turn included questions of unity in the Party and the nation, tracking down and liquidating “ideological enemies”, explaining socio-economic problems, etc. Thus, policies toward Jews turned out to be more significant than the number of the Jewish communities would have suggested; and affected many more than those who considered themselves – or were considered by the state as – Jews. I would argue, contradictory as it may seem, that the bigger pressure on Central-Eastern European Jews indicated the weakening of the regimes. However, we can not talk about ideologically driven “leftist antisemitism”, but rather about political calculation, situational pragmatism which was repeatedly but not systematically applied against Jews.

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