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Chapter One

The Genesis of the Law

The numerus clausus law—in contrast to the Jewish Laws of the 1930s—created a Jewish quota, not across the economic sector as a whole, but only in one specific area, namely, higher education. But at least some of the forces fighting for the law were not content with merely changing the face of higher education. They wanted to introduce similar limits more broadly, including in other parts of the economy.

During the parliamentary debate, proposals came thick and fast regarding which other elements of the economy should be regulated by Jewish quotas. The establishment of a professional registry was proposed, which would allow the proportion of Jews to be regulated within the individual professions and fields of economic activity. The proposal was submitted to parliament by the Turul Alliance,¹ the Association of Awakening Hungarians, and the United Christian National League and read: “As for the fields in which the Jews are now present in disproportionate numbers, Jews should be banned from entering them until the proper proportions are restored.”² Others wanted to impose quotas on the trade in raw materials, granting Jews access to no more than 8 per-

1 Formed in August 1919 from the law enforcement militia groups established at the Budapest university, the Turul Alliance (Turul Szövetség) became one of the most influential of the student fraternities (*bajtársi szövetségek*). By the second half of the 1920s, it had grown into the largest national higher education student organization, and by the 1930s, into a broad national mass-movement through its member associations. In terms of ideology, the association endorsed the “racial defense” program of Gyula Gömbös and was thus characterized by a right-wing radical stance, revisionism, militarism, and anti-Semitism. The Turul Alliance fully endorsed the numerus clausus, and its members were involved in a number of attacks on Jewish students.

2 MNL OL, K636, item 257/10. Submission of the United Christian National League, the Turul Alliance, and the Association of Awakening Hungarians to parliament, September 1, 1920.



Figure 5. Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös (center) with the leaders of the Turul Alliance in 1933.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

cent of the raw materials and also limiting the proportion of Jews employed by the ministries that distributed raw materials to 8 percent.³ Additionally, a proposal was made to introduce a quota in the press, with printing paper distributed according to the proportion of the various “nationalities,” and Jewish-owned newspapers marked with some Hebrew letters.⁴ Another proposal was to extend the Jewish quota to secondary schools,⁵ while yet another to exclude Jews from state tenders. In addition to these economic sanctions, one proposal also sought the introduction of the so-called “racial defense” laws, which would exclude Jews from teaching subjects that were part of forming the “national and Christian spirit” and would ban Christians from domestic service in Jewish households. Jews would also be excluded from public service and have their political rights revoked.⁶

3 Motion by Károly Ereky, April 27, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés irományai*, vol. 1 (Budapest, Pesti Könyvnyomda Részvénytársaság, 1920), 281; and address by László Budaváry on August 7, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 4: 287–89.

4 The proposals on the press came from István Friedrich. “Levelek,” *Budapesti Hírlap*, April 22 and 23, 1920.

5 MNL OL, K636, item 257/10. Submission of the United Christian National League, the Turul Alliance, and the Association of Awakening Hungarians to parliament, September 1, 1920.

6 Motion by Gyula Zákány, April 28, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés irományai*, vol. 1: 381.

Although the voices demanding these wide-ranging Jewish laws died down within a year or two, during the years of Bethlen's postwar recovery efforts, certain anti-Semitic politicians (Ottokár Prohászka and Gyula Gömbös, a defining figure of Hungarian interwar rightwing radicalism who would become prime minister between 1932 and 1936, for example) nonetheless continued to promote the idea. Gömbös was still demanding a numerus clausus for every sector of the economy in 1922: "I would ask that action be taken systematically in every aspect of government in order to build up the economic base of Christian Hungary. . . . I would ask that these limits be expanded (that is, the Jewish/non-Jewish limits) to at least parity with the relevant proportions. That is the very least that Christian Hungarians can ask."⁷

The numerus clausus as an education law

The push for a comprehensive Jewish quota was not related primarily to higher education. Yet, subsequent attention has nonetheless focused on the numerus clausus in the universities because, in the end, higher education was the only field into which an official Jewish quota, set in law, was introduced in 1920. There were no new quotas introduced for the next eighteen years, until 1938.

At the start of the 1919–20 academic year, the situation in higher education (albeit temporarily) was truly dire. The students who had interrupted their studies to fight, either in the war or in the revolutions that followed, all turned up at the same time. There were twice as many students registering at the Faculty of Medicine as there had been in 1914. The faculty was simply unable to undertake the teaching of that many students.⁸

In theory, it would have been possible to alleviate the situation in Hungary by instituting extra semesters during the summer and by relaxing some requirements. This is what many other European countries did. This solution was, in fact, tried in Hungary in 1918, but the experience of the extra semesters led to the heightening of anti-Jewish tensions, since the Christian students showed

7 Minutes of the parliamentary session of December 16, 1922, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 7: 48.

8 Katalin N. Szegvári, *Numerus clausus rendelkezések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988), 97–98. There were 6,500 students enrolled to the Faculty of Medicine for the 1919–20 academic year, in contrast to 3,524 in 1914. See Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 31.

less enthusiasm for the extra semesters than their Jewish colleagues. By that time, the proportion of Jewish students—including those enrolled for the summer semesters—had risen to 34 percent.

The universities were also afraid that the flood of students immigrating from the territories lost by Hungary after the war would lead to permanent overcrowding. (This did not, in fact, come to pass, because the universities in the lost territories were soon moved into the territory of post-Trianon Hungary.⁹) Given that anyone with a secondary school diploma could apply to university freely and without any kind of limits, the universities themselves called for the system to be changed: the law should regulate the maximum number of students allowed to enroll in any one year; in other words, a “closed [fixed] number” system should be put in place—or, to give it its Latin name, a “*numerus clausus*.”

The introduction of limits on the number of students in higher education would not necessarily—under different political circumstances—have gone together with the system of an anti-Jewish racial quota. In 1912, before the war, a debate was organized at Hungarian institutions of higher education on whether a *numerus clausus* should be introduced—following the German model—in some faculties but the debate did not include any sort of racial arguments, since the legal instrument of a “fixed number” is not, in itself, discriminatory.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the *numerus clausus* in Hungary is still synonymous with the anti-Jewish system of quotas and this is justified in so far as the *numerus clausus* was linked to an anti-Jewish quota right from the moment of its introduction in the country. This was the case despite the fact that the number of students in higher education could have just as well have been regulated in Hungary—as in many other European countries—without the use of quotas, by selecting students on the basis of academic merit alone.

Numerus clausus without the Jewish quota?

It would have been possible for the law to introduce some sort of quota, without it being necessarily aimed at the Jews. Originally, on August 22, 1919, the Faculty of Medicine presented just such a proposal, and incidentally, this was

9 According to Ministry of Religion and Public Education data from 1921, 4,632 of the university students in Budapest (which was 37.5 percent of the total) had refugee status. Pálffy, “Nemzetállam és felsőoktatási piac,” 153.

10 N. Szegvári, *Numerus clausus rendelkezések*, 42–44.

the first faculty to recommend a numerus clausus. The Faculty of Medicine's original recommendation, which was passed to the minister of education by professor of ophthalmology Károly Hoór, contained a proposal for a planned system of quotas, but it was aimed not at Jews but at women, and it also proposed excluding those who had taken part in the revolutions from higher education.¹¹ The preparation of the law took a full year and it was on July 22, 1920, that Minister of Education István Haller finally submitted the proposed bill. It still did not contain a Jewish quota.¹²

Discussion of a Jewish quota did not arise during the planning process regarding the proposal from the Faculty of Medicine. Rather, it first arose in the Faculty of Theology's response to the Faculty of Medicine's recommendation, which was approved by the dean of the faculty, Mihály Kmoskó. His reasoning was that the introduction of a fixed number system automatically dictated the next step, the introduction of a rule by which "the individual faculties should establish the proportions governing student enrollment on the basis of past behavior and race," because this was the only way of ensuring that "no domestic nationality, race, or religion should benefit from undue privileges . . . under the numerus clausus system of enrollment."¹³ Since the Faculty of Theology had no Jewish students, Kmoskó was clearly not concerned with keeping Jewish students away from his own specialist field, but from the universities as a whole.

The various faculties responded differently to the proposal. Of the twenty-four professors at the Faculty of Humanities, fifteen (including the dean, Ernő Fináczy) expressed marked objection to the plan. The majority of professors at

11 Mária M. Kovács, *Liberalizmus, radikalizmus, antiszemitizmus: A magyar orvosi, ügyvédi és mérnöki kar politikája 1867 és 1945 között* (Budapest: Helikon, 2001), 76. The Faculty of Medicine's recommendation of August 22, 1919 states that "there is a need for a numerus clausus for students," but they do not suggest any racial or nationalities filter. Their recommendation would cap the number of students at 400 per year, and they envisaged their selection thus: 1) a restricted number of female students; 2) the students should be selected by a board of admission (in the higher years, year-end exams should be before a committee); and 3) those who played a role in the Commune [the Hungarian Soviet Republic] should be filtered out, or in other words, those who "were not restrained even by the idealism of youth from taking up roles in revolutionary mass-organizations in workers' or soldiers' councils or as agitators." Minister István Haller's draft law, as introduced at a cabinet meeting a year later on July 21, 1920, still made no reference to a system of quotas. N. Szegvári, *Numerus clausus rendelkezések*, 96, 114.

12 The parliament debated the draft of the law on seven occasions (September 2, 3, 16, 17, 18, 20, and 21, 1920). Nándor Bernolák's motion for an individual amendment, which was about the creation of the nationalities quota, was introduced on September 3, and the law was passed on September 21.

13 N. Szegvári, *Numerus clausus rendelkezések*, 97.

the Faculty of Law, on the other hand, agreed with Kmoskó's recommendation. It was also supported by the majority of the professors at the Faculty of Medicine, and later at the University of Technology.¹⁴ Another full year passed before parliament made the recommendation into a law. Thanks to Kmoskó's contribution, however, it was not the educational impact of the numerus clausus that was at the center of the debates, but the anti-Jewish element.

The Jewish question would certainly have arisen in some form in connection with the numerus clausus even if the recommendation from the universities had not contained measures aimed at Jews. For in the case of a merit-based admissions system, the issue would have arisen that the proportion of Jewish students under a numerus clausus system would foreseeably have risen, since the average academic performance of Jewish students at secondary school level (excepting physical education) was higher in every subject than that of their non-Jewish counterparts.¹⁵ Consequently, the proportion of Jews in the student population would have increased in proportion to the extent to which better academic results were reflected in the admissions process. Alajos Kovács also concluded that "without the establishment of proportionality in the numerus clausus (i.e., the limitation of the proportion of Jews), it would have resulted in an even higher proportion of the next generation of the intellectual elite being Jewish than before its introduction."¹⁶

The introduction of a numerus clausus in higher education, then, would in any event have drawn attention to the Jewish question, even under different circumstances. Supporters of the numerus clausus understood that if a fixed number system was introduced without a Jewish quota, then the proportion of Jewish students would actually increase. But in 1919–20, the Jewish ques-

14 With institutional roots going back as far as the early eighteenth century, the University of Technology was founded in Buda in 1872 under the name Royal Joseph Technical University. In 1934, the university was reorganized and officially renamed Palatine Joseph University of Technology and Economics.

15 Karády, *Iskolarendszer és felekezeti egyenlőtlenségek*, 118–19. Karády looked at the academic results of the students at twenty-four secondary schools between 1873 and 1930. The average difference in grades between Jewish and Catholic students was 0.32 in Hungarian Language and Literature in the Jewish students' favor, while the average difference in grades between Jews and other religions was 0.22. In Latin, the same study found (with the same categories in the same order as above) a difference of 0.27 and 0.26; in German 0.33 and 0.25; in mathematics 0.22 and 0.13, all in favor of the Jewish students. In physical education, however, the difference was against the Jewish students, at 0.22 and 0.19.

16 Alajos Kovács, "Értelmiségünk nemzeti jellegének biztosítása," *Társadalomtudomány* 6, no. 4 (1926): 267.

tion was in any event a tinderbox for social tensions. The loss of the war, the left-wing revolutions that had a high proportion of Jewish participants, and the general political and economic crisis resulting from the Trianon Peace Treaty meant that the Jews were cast in the role of scapegoats.

“An orgiastic cacophony of the basest human motives”

Anti-Semitic forces accused the whole of Hungarian Jewry of treachery and betrayal of the country. At the same time, they blamed them for the war-induced shortages, war profiteering, price increases, the apparently disproportionately low number of Jewish war dead, the harsh peace terms imposed by the Entente powers, the dissolution of historic Hungary, their prominent role in the leadership of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and for the suffering caused by both capitalism and communism in general. After 1919, the traditional concept of Jewish capitalism was joined by the idea of Judeo-Bolshevism as an element of political anti-Semitism: the figure of the left-wing Jewish revolutionary was now conflated with the Jewish plutocrat as a target for the anti-Semitic movements.

Rational arguments did not carry much weight in the atmosphere of political hysteria. The country had been “overtaken by an orgiastic cacophony of the basest human motives,” as Ödön Beniczky put it in parliament in the summer of 1920 (Beniczky had been minister of the interior in the Friedrich and Huszár governments).¹⁷ It did not matter that it was merely a small fraction (two to three thousand people) of the several hundred thousand strong Jewish community in Hungary that had taken part in the communist movement, even if the leaders of the movement were in large part Jewish. It did not matter that the vast majority of Jews remained just as passive during the Hungarian Soviet Republic era as the population overall, that the victims of the Red Terror included Jews as well as non-Jews, and that Jews also supported the counter-revolutionary efforts and took an active part in diplomatic efforts surrounding the question of Hungary’s borders.¹⁸

Anti-Semitic posters went up in the streets, Jewish shops were attacked, Jewish passengers were thrown off trams, the buildings of Jewish religious

17 Minutes of the parliamentary session of July 15, 1921, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 9: 575.

18 Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, “Rendszerváltások és pogromok,” *Népszabadság*, June 20, 2008.

communities were burgled, and Jewish students were prevented from entering university.¹⁹ There were lynchings nationwide as hundreds of Jews, who had had nothing to do with and showed no sympathy for the revolution, and indeed some who had previously supported actions distinctly opposed to the Soviet Republic, fell victim to detachments of officers seeking retribution for the Hungarian Soviet Republic from the autumn of 1919 onwards.²⁰ The detachments often used the flag of political anti-Semitism as a cover for common criminality, as in the famous case of Izsák, where in the summer of 1920, an armed group of twenty men robbed and murdered three rich Jewish wine merchants in the name of the Association of Awakening Hungarians, even though the merchants had nothing to do with the 1919 Soviet Republic. The Jewish families fled, the detachment occupied their houses, and anyone who tried to return home later was beaten and driven away once again; meanwhile, their wine harvest was sold off in Switzerland.²¹ On the day of the signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty, there was an anti-Semitic demonstration in Budapest, as a result of which 85 Jews were wounded.²² It was in a similar atmosphere that the parliamentary election campaign, encouraged by the Entente, was conducted in the winter of 1919. Prior to the election, the government led by Károly Huszár confined the Social Democratic politicians in internment camps, and the party—which could have counted on a tenth of the votes cast—ended up boycotting

19 Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő*, 292–95.

20 Of the 480 victims of the Soviet Republic who lost their lives, 31 were Jewish. See the report on the activities of the National Office of Hungarian Jews 1929, MNL OL, K28, item 53. There are differing estimates in the historical literature of the number of victims who lost their lives at the hands of the officers' detachments during the White Terror. In any case, even the lowest estimates of between 800 and 900 persons included many Jewish victims. Ignác Romsics mentions more than a thousand, "probably close to two thousand" victims. Ignác Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 132. Nathaniel Katzburg gives a figure of around 700 dead, see Nathaniel Katzburg, *Zsidópolitika Magyarországon, 1919–1943* (Budapest: Bábel Kiadó, 2002), 38–39. See also János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 112; and Krisztián Ungváry, "Sacco di Budapest, 1919: Gheorghe Mardarescu tábornok válasza Harry Hill Bandholtz vezérőrnagy nem diplomatikus naplójára," *Budapesti Negyed*, nos. 29–30 (2000: 3–4): 173–202. According to research by Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, "the murders, lynchings, and torture in more than fifty places can be attributed with certainty to detachments that can be linked to Horthy's national army. But it was not only the perpetrators of [Iván] Héjjas and [Pál] Prónay's white terror who murdered: in numerous cases, the local population organized pogroms." Kádár and Vági, "Rendszerváltások és pogromok."

21 Countess Gyula Andrásy noted in her diary that this "was not about the Hungarians rising, nor about the Christian National movement, nor even those worried for the Hungarian race, but a union of wine merchants." MNL OL, P4 330, diary of Countess Gyula Andrásy.

22 Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő*, 306. The demonstration was on June 4, 1920.

the elections.²³ In the elections the anti-Semitic extreme right secured a serious showing in parliament.²⁴

Numerus clausus as anti-Jewish law—Russian precedents

István Haller, the minister of education, considered the numerus clausus with its Jewish quota to be an epoch-making innovation. “There is certainly no one who has preceded us in what we are about to enshrine in law.”²⁵ But on this point, he was mistaken: in 1887, three decades before the introduction of the Jewish quota in Hungary, Russia had introduced a state-sponsored Jewish quota. In the cities of the Pale of Settlement, the number of Jewish university students was capped at 10 percent, while in other Russian cities it was set at 5 percent, and in Moscow and St. Petersburg at 3 percent.²⁶ Russian Jews, excluded from higher education, flooded west; at the turn of the century there were almost four thousand young Russian Jews studying at universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, mostly enrolled in medicine.²⁷ At the turn of the century, there were more than two thousand Russian students in Germany alone.²⁸ German universities reacted to the influx of Russian Jews with their own form of fixed number system. This, however, unlike the Russian numerus clausus, did not contain any openly anti-Jewish measures. It merely decreed that the number of “foreign” students at German universities could not exceed nine hundred from 1913 onwards. This had the effect of reducing by two thirds the number of places that were available to young Russian Jews.²⁹

The Russian numerus clausus quickly came to the attention of the Hungarian devotees of political anti-Semitism. In 1891, Géza Petrassevich, editor of the

23 The Huszár government issued the decree for internment on December 5, 1919, on the basis of which Social Democrat workers and Jewish small traders were also interned in the Hajmáskér internment camp. Romsics, *Magyarország története*, 135.

24 László Hubai, “A szociáldemokrata párt részvétele a választásokon, 1922–1947,” *Múltunk* 42, no. 2 (1997): 119–45.

25 Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 2, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 150.

26 Israel Cohen, *Jewish Life in Modern Times* (London, Methuen, 1914), 152.

27 Cohen, *Jewish Life in Modern Times*, ch. 2.

28 Peter Drewek, “Limits of Educational Internationalism: Foreign Students at German Universities between 1890 and 1930,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, no. 27 (Fall 2000): 39–64.

29 In 1911–12, there were around 2,000 Russians studying in Germany and almost half of them were medical students. Half of all foreign students at German universities were still Russian in 1914. Drewek, “Limits of Educational Internationalism,” 44.

journal *Alkotmány* (Constitution) recommended that Hungary adopt the Russian system. In 1907, Károly Hencz recommended in the parliament that limits be established on the number of Jewish students at the universities, while Károly Kmety urged the same for secondary schools. At the time, these recommendations were not taken up, and reappeared only after 1918 among the demands of anti-Semitic politicians.

Nonetheless, Minister of Education István Haller was right about some things. The classification of Judaism as a “race” really was the beginning of a new chapter in Hungarian history. The novelty of the situation was summed up thus in 1921 by Vilmos Vázsonyi, Hungary’s former minister of justice (who was Jewish and who fled the country at the time of the revolutions): “I fled from the Communists a denomination, and returned a race.”³⁰ Vázsonyi’s interpretation was shared by many leading politicians throughout the 1920s. Klebelsberg, as minister of education, agreed with Vázsonyi that the law of 1920 was really a “racial” law, precisely in the sense that belonging to a “race” was determined by ancestry. According to Klebelsberg, the universities which treated the Jews as a race and therefore “counted converted Jews among the Jewish racial contingent . . . basically acted logically,” or in other words, they interpreted the law of 1920 correctly. If “the universities interpreted the law in such a way that the converted Jew was included in the contingent of the Jewish race, then they were acting logically in accordance with the spirit of that law. For once Jews have been classified as a race, one cannot escape from race as one does, say, from a religious denomination by converting, or from a nationality by declaring oneself to be of another nationality.”³¹ The concept of “race,” then, is different in Klebelsberg’s conception from the concept of “denomination” or “nationality” in that belonging to a “race” is determined at birth, and this characteristic cannot be changed by voluntary conversion or assimilation to a different language. And, as Klebelsberg said in parliament, “anyone who reads the debate preceding the adoption of Law No. XXV of 1920 attentively cannot help but gain the impression that the members who passed that law did, indeed, intend at the time to define Judaism as a race.”³²

30 Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő*, 335.

31 Minutes of the parliamentary session of February 23, 1928, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 9: 198.

32 Minutes of the parliamentary session of February 10, 1928, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 9: 12.

Nationality, religion, race

Throughout the 1920s many people debated and interpreted the precise meaning of the term “racial group” (*népfaj*),³³ which was used in the numerus clausus law. The crude nature of the law, the anomalies and inconsistencies in its application, coupled with the fact that the classification of the Jews as a “nationality” was against the law then in force, made it possible throughout this entire period for the term “race” to be a point of constant contention, and allowed the term to serve as a political weapon as well. When, for example, in 1925 Vilmos Vázsonyi asked Prime Minister István Bethlen in parliament whether the government actually considers the Jews a race or a religion, Bethlen’s equivocal answer showed that the government applied one or the other depending on the political character of the individual in question:

As for the question my right honorable friend [i.e., Vilmos Vázsonyi] poses, as to whether the Jews are a race or not, my answer is that the law establishing the numerus clausus declared the Jews to be a racial group or a nationality, respectively. Of this there can be no doubt, since, my honorable friend, even if he happened not to be present at those debates, will be aware that when the law was made, this section referred specifically to the Jews. This, naturally, does not mean that this is the position of this government. If it pleases the house, I consider those Jews who identify with the Hungarians, who were partners to this nation for better or for worse, to be Hungarians of the Jewish religion and not a separate racial group. On the other hand, I must also say that in this country there were Jews who declared themselves to be a separate racial group by refusing to associate themselves either in the past or even to this day with the interests of the nation.

Patriotic Jews—he said—should be considered “Hungarians of the Jewish religion,” while the rest had declared themselves to be a “racial group.”³⁴

33 The term *népfaj*, which literally translates as “folk race” (and as such is similar to the German *Volksrasse*), could, based on context, mean both ethnicity and race. The translation “racial group,” used in this volume, intends to convey some of this ambiguity, while making it clear that the term was used to justify a discrimination based on a racial understanding of the Jews.

34 István Bethlen’s speech on the parliamentary session of December 17, 1925, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 38: 223.

We cannot say that the proponents of the *numerus clausus* did not want to clear up this confusion in 1920. The men who made the law knew that there was no such concept in Hungarian law as “racial group,” and it did not allow for the differential treatment of citizens based on their origin. This was precisely why the anti-Semitic student groups and the Christian Socialist trade union demanded that parliament make a law that declared the Jews to be a race. “Jews are a separate race,” they wrote in their submission of March 15, 1920, “and therefore we demand that the Jew—no matter if they be of any Christian religion—be judged on the basis of his race.” This submission explicitly states that by doing this, they wanted to withdraw the possibility of assimilation and equal rights from the Jews, because “any attempt at assimilation is a suicidal design for the Hungarian race.” “There has never been,” they wrote, “a more opportune historical moment . . . than now” for the introduction of a racial law, “this brave endeavor,” as the submission says.³⁵

The reasoning of the authors of this submission was logical. They were right that without the law for which they were calling, the Jews could only be treated as a “nationality” or “racial group” by finding ways around the law then in force. The drafter of the law could theoretically have chosen a different solution, for example a system of quotas based on religion, but this too—just like the nationality/race-based quota—would have run counter to the obligations Hungary had taken on in the peace treaty, which ruled out limiting the equality of citizens before the law on the basis of nationality, religion, or race. But a system of denominational quotas would not, in the case of the Jews, have had the desired effect anyway, because the system would have had to treat Jews who had converted as Christians, and thus the number of people subject to the system would have been smaller. The other argument against a religious quota was that if such a system were introduced, it would have been necessary to establish the proportion of places for one Christian denomination versus another, and this would have involved serious political battles.³⁶ One thing, therefore, stayed in place: the classification of Jews as a “racial group” based on ancestry, but without establishing criteria for belonging to that “racial group.”

³⁵ Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 142.

³⁶ Nonetheless, the introduction of proportions on a religious basis did feature in the early recommendations for the introduction of the *numerus clausus*, from 1919. Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 142.

In the end, there was no separate law about the classification of the Jews as a “race.” This was left, in effect, to the relevant implementation decree of the numerus clausus law. Nonetheless, with the introduction of the Jewish quota, the law came out in support of the position of the extreme right. This was summed up in the summer of 1919, a year before the law was passed, by Albin Lingauer, an anti-Semitic journalist (and a member of the parliament of 1920) as follows: “we have a reckoning with the Jewish race and not with the religion. And there’s no converting out of the race!”³⁷ The Hungarian government was still committed to this viewpoint in 1925, years after István Bethlen took office, when it defended the racial clause in an official statement to the League of Nations, saying: “With the Jews, race, religion, and nationalities are merged and they appear in different aspects in the different countries. . . . In the Law under discussion, all mention of religious minorities was deliberately omitted, for religion is something over which the individual has control, since he has the power to change it. Religion is, therefore, not a characteristic sufficiently consistent to determine a minority without excluding the possibility of abuses.”³⁸

Camouflaged changes to the legal status of Jews

Without officially classifying Jews as a separate nationality or race, the Jewish quota could only be introduced by creating a legal contradiction. Under the law in force in 1920, the concept of “Israelite” had an exclusively religious meaning and therefore could not be used in the nationalities-based system of quotas. The law on nationalities (Law No. XLIV of 1868) regarded language as the sole test of belonging to a nationality, and the law governing freedom of religion (Law No. XLIII of 1895) specifically stated that a religious classification could not be “of a national or racial character.”³⁹ The lawmakers in 1920, therefore, could only introduce a Jewish quota by classifying the Jews in the implementation decree as a nationality—in direct contravention of the prevailing laws.

37 Márton Békés, “Az ellenforradalom két arca Vas megyében,” *Vasi Szemle* 62, no. 6 (2008): 698.

38 The Hungarian Government’s Submission to the League of Nations, May 19, 1925. Quoted in Nathaniel Katzburg, *Hungary and the Jews: Policy and Legislation, 1920–1943* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1981), 68.

39 Gábor Gángó, “Az 1868. évi nemzetiségi törvény és következményei,” *Korunk* 20, no. 5 (2009): 3; and Andor Ladányi, “A kisebbséggé nyilvánítás kérdéséhez: A történelmi előzmények,” *Múlt és Jövő* 17, no. 1 (2006): 100.

Thus, the change in the legal status of the Jews ended up being implemented without due parliamentary process, debate, or new legislation. The whole thing consisted of three words added to a table in the implementation decree: “Israelites are [to be] treated as a separate nationality.” The cynicism behind the framing and the implementation of the law foreshadowed the political atmosphere of the new era. True, only a few years later, the minister of education, Kunó Klebelsberg, called this process “desultory lawmaking,” but he never rejected—neither at the time, nor later—the political goal behind the “desultory” law.⁴⁰

The proportions for the nationalities quota created by the *numerus clausus* were based on the language data of the census. Each “minority” could enter higher education in the proportion in which the relevant language was used by people among the overall population of the country. But for the Jews—and only for the Jews—there was a separate rule. Right from the introduction of the *numerus clausus* law, a person belonged to the Jewish “nationality” if their religion was Judaism, even if their native language was Hungarian. In their case, therefore, language counted for nothing. By making religion and not language the test for belonging to a “nationality” in the case of the Jews, the law took a big step towards introducing origin as a determining factor.

“Jewish by birth, by origin, and by race”

In theory, Jews who had converted should not have been subject to the restrictions imposed by the quota, since the quota applied to people belonging to “the Jewish religion.” The application of the quota was therefore characterized by much debate and many conflicting practices. The University of Pécs, for example, did not count Jews who had converted as Jews. In some cases, when it came to converted Jews, even different faculties of the same university sometimes had different practices.

The presidential council of the University of Budapest pointed out in 1922 that it would be problematic to include converted Jews within the 6 percent limit, since this limit was adopted by the makers of the *numerus clausus* law

40 Kunó Klebelsberg, “Explanatory memorandum to the bill amending Law No. XXV of 1920 on the regulation of enrollment at the universities of arts and sciences, the University of Technology, the Faculty of Economics of the University of Budapest, and law academies,” November 18, 1927, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére összehívott országgyűlés felsőházának irományai*, vol. 4: 398–400.

on the basis of the number of people of the Jewish religion in the country, and therefore—if it was to apply to those who had converted as well—the limit should have been set by looking at a larger section of the populace in the first place. The council went on to say that the calculations on which the Jewish quota was based were questionable, since “there is no data on Hungarian Jewry as a racial group or nationality.” Furthermore, “if persons of the Christian religion but Jewish race had been counted as Jews as well, the proportion of Jews nationwide would have been greater than 6 percent,” and in that case, more “Jews” would have had to be admitted to the universities.⁴¹ The presidential council, therefore, was inclined not to have the university apply the quota to Jews who had converted.

By contrast, the Faculty of Medicine decided firmly upon the test of origin since, as the dean of the faculty said: “changing religion changes neither your origins nor your race.” Therefore, applicants whose parents were “of the Mosaic faith belong to the Jewish race, even if they later adopt the Christian faith . . . and we will consider them still to be Jewish by birth, by origin, and by race, though they have changed their religion.”⁴²

Minister of Education Kunó Klebelsberg considered the attitude of the Faculty of Medicine to be correct: “It is quite clear that the intention of the legislature at the time [in 1920] was to declare Jews a race . . . Here was an explicit intention, which was included in the Hungarian Corpus Juris.”⁴³ Despite the frequent claim in Hungarian historiography, that differential treatment based on ethnic origin first began in Hungary with the so-called Second Jewish Law of 1939, we can see that it started with the explicitly anti-Jewish quota of the numerus clausus law in 1920.

The use of the concept of “race” ran counter to the law then in force. Klebelsberg himself spelled out how this tension should be dissolved. It is always the most recent “law” that is in force, he said. “Since Law No. XXV of 1920 was introduced later than Law No. XLII of 1895, the former could change the

41 ELTE Archives, Rector’s Office, Minutes of the University Council, 1922/I., ordinary meeting.

42 ELTE Archives, Rector’s Office, Minutes of the University Council, 1922/I., ordinary meeting.

43 Minutes of the parliamentary session of February 23, 1928, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 9: 198. Klebelsberg, during the amendment of the law in 1928, highlighted that with the repeal of the Jewish quota the “clear legal viewpoint” of Law No. XVII of 1867 and Law No. XLIV of 1895, that in Hungary “Judaism is a religion and nothing other,” would be “reinstated.” *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 9: 198.

way the law stood, and in fact, did precisely that.”⁴⁴ This meant that the one-line instruction in the implementation decree—“Israelites are [to be] treated as a separate nationality”—was enough to change the legal status of the Jews. This was spelled out by none other than the country’s minister of the interior, who later became minister of religion and education.⁴⁵

Supporters of the Jewish quota were bothered by neither the invalid legislative procedure nor the contradictions within the law. Their point of view was expressed most clearly by Pál Teleki, prime minister at the time the law was passed, who argued against the repeal of the Jewish quota a few years later. Anyone, he argued, who considers the repeal of the racial clause a return to the rightful legal position of the autumn of 1920 is mistaken, because “the chief characteristic of the law is not that it represents reality, but that it expresses a will.”⁴⁶ Such measures—he said later, in support of the Second Jewish Law—express a “will” that with time became “part of the popular opinion of the nation, part of its popular sentiment, and thereby part of the Constitution.”⁴⁷ In contrast, then, with the commonly accepted judgement that Teleki’s basic political orientation was generally conservative, we can see that his detailed moral rejection of constitutionality and the principle of equality before the law puts Teleki closer to the radical right of the time.

Proponents of the Jewish quota ended up bridging this constitutional gap by not providing any kind of detailed definition of “racial group” in the law. How Jews should be distinguished from non-Jews on the basis of their “racial group” was ultimately decided at the level of university committees only. Practice, however, varied between universities. The admissions panel at the Faculty of Medicine in Budapest, for example, considered as Jewish anyone born Jewish, whether they belonged to the Jewish religion or not.⁴⁸ The decisions of these

44 Minutes of the parliamentary session of February 10, 1928, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 9: 126.

45 Klebelsberg was minister of the interior between December 3, 1921, and June 6, 1922, and minister of education from June 16, 1922, to August 24, 1931.

46 Speech in the Upper House “On the amendment of the numerus clausus,” March 13, 1928, in Pál Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, ed. Balázs Ablonczy (Budapest, Osiris, 2000), 197.

47 Speech in the Upper House “On the Second Jewish Law,” April 15, 1939, in Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, 384.

48 The practice of the University of Szeged differed, as is evident from the characterization of applicants in one of the 1923 records: “Those who applied to the medical faculty included five Christians, one who is a Christian after his mother [but] a Jew after his father and who later converted to the Roman Catholic faith. The other nineteen are Jews.” Records of the Fifth Extraordinary meeting of

committees were made after 1921 within a new conceptual framework; in their reports, they listed those students who were “born Jewish” separately. Thus, the Jewish quota was applied unequivocally on the basis of origin and not on the basis of an individual’s current status (taking into account their possible conversion).⁴⁹

This, however, meant that the racial clause restricted the civil rights of Jews in another way as well. For by treating Jews who had converted to the Christian faith not as Christians but as “born Jewish”—or in other words, as Jewish—they were denying the legal force of their conversion, which was contrary to Law No. XLIII of 1895 on the freedom of religion.

The racial clause, then, ran counter to both the principle of equality before the law and the law then in force. This was spelled out by the Royal Curia itself, four years after the law entered into force, when it declared the classification of the Jews a “nationality” illegal: “Jews have no separate native language, but have always spoken the dominant language of their environment, and their native language changes accordingly. From a legal standpoint, we cannot speak of a Jewish nationality in Hungary today.”⁵⁰ The Curia’s decision surprised no one, since it was not a question of its lawyers having come to some new conclusion on a difficult point of law in those four years, but of the Curia coming out and stating something that was common knowledge when the law was introduced. As one member of parliament, József Pakots, put it:

even the people introducing this law felt that there was something to hide in this measure, and that it would be best therefore to couch it in general-

the Medical Faculty of the Royal Hungarian Franz Joseph Scientific University, held on January 12, 1923, Szeged University Archives, Papers of the Faculty of Medicine.

49 N. Szegvári, *Numerus clausus rendelkezések*, 130. At the universities of Szeged and Pécs, students were classed as Jewish not on the basis of their origins but rather their religion.

50 In its judgement of September 23, 1924 in the specific case of the far-right journalist Lehel Kádár, accused of incitement, the court ruled against the second circuit court’s judgement quashing his conviction and with the first circuit court’s sentence of a year’s incarceration. In its justification, the Royal Curia established that “according to our laws, Hungarian Jewry is neither a separate nationality nor a social class. Given that on the basis of Law No. XLIV of 1868, concerning the equality before the law of citizens from various nationalities, the criterion for differentiating between nationalities is the mother tongue, a ‘separate nationality’ is to be understood as a cohesive ethnic group unified around a common language, with a common history based on that language and a commitment to maintaining it . . . therefore, from a legal perspective, we cannot talk of a Jewish nationality in Hungary today. . . . For the word ‘Jewish’ in its generally accepted meaning is used to denote the Mosaic faith and those who belong to it and does not signify any other notions.” Ladányi, “A kisebbséggé nyilvánítás kérdéséhez,” 100.

ties and try to elevate its dubious measures onto the moral high ground. The *numerus clausus* law is not honest. Even a child knows that the point of the law is to restrict, insofar as possible, the presence of the youth of the Jewish religion within higher education. . . . The law, however, makes no mention of the word religion or denomination, but hides its ulterior goal under the cloak of “racial group or nationality.” If someone unfamiliar with the background were to read the law, it would appear that the measures by which “the proportion of young people belonging to a given racial group and nationality residing in the country shall preferably reach the national proportion of the racial group or nationality concerned, but shall at least be nine-tenths of the national proportion” had some sort of protective purpose. But the aim is quite the opposite, i.e., the restriction of the enrollment of Jewish youth in higher education. If the law had wanted to be honest, it would have said the proportion of young people in higher education whose number exceeds the proportion of their ethnic group—viz., religion—within the population of the country as a whole, should be brought into line with that proportion.⁵¹

Pakots effectively highlighted the reason why the anti-Jewish quota system was formulated in terms of a sort of principle of ethnic/demographic equality. The body of the text did not speak about restrictions on the Jews, rather it said that every nationality had a “right” to take part in higher education in the same proportion at which it was represented demographically within the population of the country as a whole. The main body of the text essentially disguised the anti-Jewish nature of the measure behind a facade of “positive discrimination” for Slovaks, Ruthenians, Germans, and other nationalities, while the actual Jewish quota was hidden in the ministerial decree implementing the law.

At first glance, it is impossible to understand why—when leading politicians, including those in government, stated quite openly in parliament and in the press that the goal of the law was to restrict the rights of the Jews—the law itself nonetheless tried to create the illusion of impartiality. Who was trying to fool whom, and why?

51 Minutes of the parliamentary session of November 26, 1925, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 37: 473.

“Positive discrimination” or a foreign policy maneuver?

The answer to this question is to be found in Hungary’s situation on the international stage and its foreign policy goals. Although the far right persistently demanded the introduction of the *numerus clausus* from the autumn of 1919 on, it was unclear right up until the autumn of 1920 whether the law would contain openly anti-Jewish restrictions. This was a crucial year from the point of view of Hungarian foreign policy. Right up until the spring of 1920, the Hungarian leadership was hopeful of being able to convince the Great Powers to take a more lenient view on the question of the country’s new borders. The government received the final text of the peace treaty on May 5, 1920, and signed it on June 4. But the country’s international standing remained important for Hungarian foreign policy, since the peace treaty left several territorial questions open and the Hungarian government did not abandon its longer-term plans for having the border revised even after signing the treaty.⁵²

In this context, the introduction of the racial quota was clearly risky from a foreign policy standpoint, since it ran counter to the fundamental principles that underpinned the peace treaties, and especially their provisions on the protection of minorities. Years later, Kunó Klebelsberg’s recollection (in a private letter to István Bethlen) was that the minority protection clauses of the Trianon Peace Treaty were formulated specifically with the Hungarian *numerus clausus* law in mind. What is more, they were formulated so as to be incompatible with the racial clause of the Hungarian *numerus clausus* law—which had been passed by then—and thereby allow the League of Nations to act against the law: “Hungary created the *numerus clausus* law before the Trianon Peace Treaty was signed. Lucien Wolf himself says that he personally exercised his influence over the throwing together of the religious and racial clauses and thus it is natural that—being acquainted with our law, which had kicked up a lot of dust—he formulated the religious and racial clauses in such a way as to be opposed to the third clause of our own law.”⁵³

Article 58 of the minorities clause of the peace treaty did indeed explicitly prohibit the restriction of the rights of national, religious, or racial minor-

52 Ignác Romsics, *Bethlen István: Politikai életrajz* (Budapest: Magyarságkutató Intézet, 1991), 127–28.

53 Szinai and Szűcs, *Bethlen István titkos iratai*, 256–57. Lucien Wolf represented Anglo-Jewry through the Board of Deputies of British Jews in the British delegation at the Paris peace conference, and was later active in the minority rights cases concerning Jews.

ities, in that it stated that every Hungarian citizen, regardless of differences of race, language, or religion, was equal before the law and enjoyed equal civil and political rights.

But the chronology that Klebelsberg presents is not accurate. The peace treaty was signed by the Hungarian government on June 4, 1920, but the very first official draft of the numerus clausus law was sent out to the universities only on July 4, exactly a month after the signing of the treaty. The law was only passed in September 1920. Moreover, the July draft contained no mention of the racial clause or the nationalities quota, stating merely that the minister of religion and education was getting ready to introduce a fixed number system in university enrollment.⁵⁴ Klebelsberg, therefore, could presumably not have been thinking of the law as passed.

Lucien Wolf, referred to in Klebelsberg's letter above, could not have been familiar with the draft law when the minorities clauses of the peace treaty were being drawn up. At most, he would have known what was accessible in the press. From this source, he could have known about the recommendation made on December 4, 1919, by the University Council of the University of Budapest, which really did already contain the plan for the racial quota: "If we do move to a numerus clausus system, then the admission of students to the faculties of applied subjects from the various religions and . . . races should be limited to their proportion within the overall population of the country."⁵⁵ Wolf may also have known that when the recommendation was made within the university, it already had an anti-Jewish edge, because—as Professor of Law Alfréd Doleschall said when presenting the recommendation to the University Council—"the real thrust [of the draft] is directed against the plethora of Jews." The "basic inter-

⁵⁴ The complete text of the recommendation reads:

1. Only so many students may enroll in the secular faculties of the universities of science and arts from the start of the 1920–21 academic year that can be assured of receiving a thorough education.
2. The number of students to be taken for each faculty will be established by the Ministry of Public Education on the basis of the recommendation of the faculty in question.
3. This law does not affect the right to enroll for those who had been enrolled as full-time students in previous years or as special students for at least two semesters.
4. Enrollment must be sought by written submission to the relevant faculty, on which the full assembly of professors of the faculty will decide. Their decision shall be final.
5. This measure does not apply to those wishing to enroll for pharmaceutical sciences or the public finance course of the faculty of law and political science. Nonetheless, the minister, on the recommendation of the faculties in question, may limit the number of students here as well." Ladányi, *Az egyetemről* 146.

⁵⁵ ELTE Archives, 500/1919–20, ET.

ests of self-defense” of Hungarian society, he continued, “justify, nay demand, that destructive elements, whether they are so by nature of their nationality or their race, . . . should be forced into the background.”⁵⁶ We cannot therefore rule out that the “law” mentioned by Klebelsberg in his letter and which came to Lucien Wolf’s attention in Paris was not, in fact, the law as passed, but rather the press reports of the University Council meeting in Budapest.

Nonetheless, it is a fact that between the autumn of 1919 and the autumn of 1920, the debates around the numerus clausus could not be settled, primarily because of foreign policy concerns. Successive Hungarian governments did not wish to face the international repercussions of passing an anti-Semitic law. Professor Doleschall himself expressed doubts whether a quota imposed on Jews “is something that would be admissible in our present and future international situation” and whether “it would not be preferable to leave the practical implementation to the admissions committees of the faculties, instead of openly propagating the principle?”⁵⁷

The foreign policy concerns were exacerbated when, in March 1920, the head of the Hungarian peace delegation in Paris, Count Albert Apponyi, wrote to the government, warning them that the conditions in the country, the news of anarchy, anti-Semitic paramilitaries, and violence filtering out abroad were doing untold harm to the delegation’s negotiating position. It was impossible to argue in the interests of retaining or regaining areas with mixed populations or more lenient borders that the Hungarian state was patient and tolerant of the ethnically non-Hungarian population when news of violence and the planned restriction of the rights of the Jewish minority followed each other thick and fast.⁵⁸ Referring to the referendums that were expected to take place, Apponyi warned that “the attraction of a state will naturally wane if it is incapable of defending the basic freedoms of its citizens and where the rule of law is placed in question by the violence of individuals.”⁵⁹ He asked the government to restore the rule of law immediately and thereby allow the delegation’s work to progress.⁶⁰ Prime Minister Sándor Simonyi-Semadam read the letter in parliament.

56 ELTE Archives, 500/1919–20, ET.

57 ELTE Archives, 500/1919–20, ET.

58 Minutes of the parliamentary session of March 17, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 124.

59 *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 124.

60 *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 124.

Its reception was scandalous: shouting broke out from the extreme right. “Please accept,” Simonyi-Semadam called through the tumult, “that Jew-hatred, antipathy towards the Jews, is not worth sacrificing Hungary’s integrity. Please put aside this mood, put aside all antipathy at this crucial moment. . . . Please tell those young men that it is not some heroic deed to assault, beat up, or harass someone in the street, on the tram, or in a cafe, because they think he looks Jewish . . . because by doing so, they are putting at risk our most sacred efforts.”⁶¹ Simonyi-Semadam’s muddled speech is a kind of testimony to how the country’s leaders were aware of the strictures of the country’s situation abroad. Following his argument, the reason why it is wrong to beat someone up on the tram who looks Jewish is not because that person has done nothing wrong, but because it puts Hungary’s international standing in danger. The radicals have to accept that Hungary cannot afford to introduce anti-Semitic legislation, because this runs counter to the country’s international interests.

It was the same logic—one appealing to the country’s international interests—that defined the statements concerning the numerus clausus of Minister of Religion and Public Education István Haller, who was well known for his anti-Semitic views. In the spring of 1920, Haller hemmed and hawed for months before committing himself on the question of the Jewish quota. Haller’s original reasoning was that the numerus clausus in itself—even without a Jewish quota—would be enough to prevent the enrollment of Jewish students, since the university admissions councils would of themselves—in their exercise of the right to make the admissions decisions the law arrogated them—enact the anti-Jewish conception behind it.⁶²

The extreme right-wing forces outside government, however, were not troubled by international concerns. They saw these as an excuse that the government used against them to buy themselves time. The Association of Awakening Hungarians and other anti-Semitic organizations demanded that the politicians they had supported in the electoral campaign of the winter of 1919 (including Haller, the minister of religion and education) make good on the campaign promises they had made to the associations in exchange for their support. The radical right was not afraid of violence either. Groups from the Turul Alliance and the Awakening Hungarians occupied the entrances to the universities and

61 *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 124.

62 Ladányi, “A numerus clausustól a numerus nullusig,” 56.



Figure 6. Demonstration by the Association of Awakening Hungarians against the ratification of the Trianon Peace Treaty in front of the National Museum in Budapest the fall of 1920.
Source: Fővárosi Szabó Ervin Könyvtár Budapest Gyűjtemény.

prevented the start of teaching. They inspected the papers of professors and students heading to university and prevented Jewish students from entering, even for exams. They announced that they would keep occupying the universities until the numerus clausus law was passed.⁶³ “Christianity’s life and death struggle will be decided at the universities,” Dezső Szabó declared in March 1920, hinting that the numerus clausus law was in fact to be the dress rehearsal for a series of anti-Jewish measures planned by the far right.⁶⁴

The radical right made it clear that foreign policy considerations could not deflect them from pressing for anti-Semitic laws. In parliament, Béla Fangler replied on behalf of the Association of Awakening Hungarians to Apponyi’s words calling for restraint, by saying:

63 “As long as we do not see,” wrote the right-wing student paper, “the institutional defense of the nation being guaranteed at the colleges, we do not want the status quo. We renounce the blessings of functioning universities.” *Ifjak Szava* [Voice of youth], November 30, 1919, 7. Quoted in Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 125.

64 Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 136.

Threatening us with the Entente Powers to keep us from daring to speak out and daring to act against the Jews, saying that if we do, we'll get a damaging treaty from them, is nothing but hollow words. The Entente would give us a treaty just as damaging even if the cabinet here were made up entirely of Jews, it would give us the same treaty if the ministers who sat here had legs that were not quite the same length as each other, if they had crooked noses and beards and moustaches so vivid in hue that sparks could fly out of them. The Entente is guided not by sentiment, but by the desire to ruin us totally.⁶⁵

The deputies representing the Association of Awakening Hungarians produced a whole string of submissions in April 1920 demanding that parliament introduce anti-Jewish measures without delay. "The main goal," they wrote, "is the nationwide defense of the breadwinning professions."⁶⁶ They demanded that the state introduce a numerus clausus for the market in raw materials and for the Jews working in the ministries that allocated them.⁶⁷ They also demanded the expropriation of Jewish shops, the introduction of the numerus clausus "in the commercial sphere as well," and "that there be only so many Jewish merchants as are entitled to shops according to their overall proportion in the population."⁶⁸ They further demanded the introduction of the numerus clausus in higher education, its extension to secondary schools, and that Jews should be banned from teaching "subjects that are especially useful in developing a sense of national and Christian spirit."⁶⁹

István Haller rejected the introduction of a Jewish quota in higher education as late as the spring of 1920, citing foreign policy concerns. He made it understood that he agreed with "the main goal," but that the country's international situation did not allow for it.

65 Minutes of the parliamentary session of April 10, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 55.

66 MNL OL, K636, item 257/10. Submission of the United Christian National League, the Turul Alliance, and the Association of Awakening Hungarians to parliament, September 1, 1920.

67 Motion by Károly Ereky on April 27, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés irományai*, vol. 1: 281.

68 Béla Fangler's address on the parliamentary session of April 19, 16, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 65.

69 Motion by Gyula Zákány, April 28, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés irományai*, vol. 1: 381. A few weeks later, on June 2, deputy Balázs Szabó asked whether the government was willing to restrict the role of Jews in all economic, industrial, mercantile, and scientific fields "to a point equal to their proportion of the population." Minutes of the parliamentary session of June 2, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 3: 212.



Figure 7. Picture of the first Teleki government (July 1920–April 1921), with Prime Minister Pál Teleki (sitting in the middle, third from the right) and Minister of Religion and Public Education István Haller (sitting first from the left). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

At the moment we must pay careful attention in all our actions to certain considerations that we may be able to ignore sometime in the future, but which at the moment . . . represent a danger for us. . . . It was for this very reason that I did not consider a hasty solution and final settlement of this question to be opportune, and tried to persuade those concerned to seek a solution which would achieve the end itself, but which would be unassailable and for which the country and the nation would not face any difficulties anywhere.⁷⁰

The Ministry of Religion and Public Education wanted to calm the debate raging around the numerus clausus. This explains why it took nine months from the genesis of the universities' recommendation for a fixed number system for the ministry to finally send the universities the draft of the planned numerus clausus law at the beginning of July 1920. The ministry at this point also presented the draft law to the cabinet.⁷¹

70 Minutes of the parliamentary session of April 29, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 2: 395.

71 The cabinet debated the recommendation on July 21, 1920.

There was no reference to the Jewish quota in the text, which merely foresaw a fixed number system to be introduced in higher education admissions. Haller knew that this draft would be a disappointment for the extreme right, since—as he pointed out—the draft “contained no mention of a numerus clausus in the sense that a lay person might understand it.”⁷² And indeed, the draft was greeted with vociferous outrage from the anti-Semitic side. “They’ve robbed us of our numerus clausus,” the journal *Virradat* (Dawn) wrote, because “the draft operates on the principle that in the context of the peace treaty there can be no restrictions on the advancement of any race or religion.”⁷³

A breakthrough: A decision from the government

Events only gathered pace after Pál Teleki’s investiture as prime minister in July. In his speech outlining his political program, he promised that his government would take steps “institutionally to defend the interests of Christian society.”⁷⁴ He made it clear that as prime minister he would support the state-sponsored restriction of opportunities for Jews. At the same time, Teleki expressed willingness to end street violence and bring the anti-Semitic paramilitary groups under control. At this point, he was still keen to dispel the impression that his government was going to take a tough stance with the extreme right in order to improve Hungary’s international standing since (as he said in his speech) foreign observers “are once again completely mistaken in their perception of an alleged white terror.”⁷⁵

But it was not a position he could maintain for long. Five days after his speech, on July 27, a group of supporters of the Awakening Hungarians forced their way into a cafe on Budapest’s main boulevard, beat the Jewish guests bloody, and killed a bank director and a Jewish lawyer.⁷⁶ Teleki reacted forcefully. He promised that the perpetrators would be caught and punished, since (as he said) the murders put the country in a bad light internationally; as if this were not precisely the connection he had been denying only a few days before. “The

72 Ladányi, *Az egyetemi iffúság*, 146.

73 *Virradat*, July 13, 1920, quoted in Ladányi, *Az egyetemi iffúság*, 146.

74 Balázs Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál* (Budapest: Osiris, 2005), 172. Teleki presented his program on July 22, 1920.

75 Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál*, 171.

76 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 72.



Figure 8. The leadership of the Association of Awakening Hungarians in the 1920s, with László Budavéry (in the middle). Source: MNM Történeti Fényképtár.

country is presently engaged in a monumental struggle,” he announced in parliament, “one fought both internally and externally. . . . I can say with conviction that these efforts to disturb the peace are nothing short of treason. This is how I see this question, and that is why I have ordered the most thorough investigation possible; this is also how I want all those who will be involved in this case to see it.”⁷⁷

The day after the murders in the cafe, on July 28, one of the leaders of the Awakening Hungarians, deputy László Budavéry, submitted a motion for a comprehensive Jewish law, more radical than ever before, which more or less presaged the main points of the Jewish laws brought twenty years later, in 1939 and 1941. Budavéry said that “after eleven agonizing months of waiting” since the fall of the Soviet Republic, the legislature must now bring anti-Jewish measures not only in higher education but in all fields of life. He called his motion a “racial defense” law, one not designed to conform to a concept of justice, but to pro-

77 Minutes of the parliamentary session of July 30, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 4: 122.

tect Hungary from the “gravest danger,” namely Jewry.⁷⁸ The motion encompassed all aspects of economic and social life. It would have deprived the Jews of their political rights and their right to own or rent land, would have expropriated all property exceeding one house in Jewish hands, and would have banned Jewish immigration, deported all Jews settled in the country since 1914, and expropriated their assets without compensation. It would have introduced a Jewish quota in every school, public office, factory, workshop, and bank, would have nationalized one part of the country’s theaters and forbidden Jews from heading any of the rest, would have banned Jewish schools, and would have barred Jews from the higher management of newspapers. Government tenders and trading licenses from the government would have been available only to “Christian” businessmen. Foreshadowing the Third Jewish Law of 1941, it would have banned “Jews [from employing] Christians for personal service (servant, cook, driver, butler, etc.).”⁷⁹ Budaváry’s motion was considered fit for debate by a majority of the members of parliament present at the time. But Budaváry’s motion was not the deciding factor in the racial quota of the *numerus clausus* law; it merely served to radicalize the atmosphere.

The solution: A hidden Jewish quota

The breakthrough came with the work of Ottokár Prohászka, president of the governing party, the Christian National Union Party (KNEP). It was Prohászka who, a few days after Teleki’s appointment, found a framework for incorporating the anti-Jewish element into the *numerus clausus* law then being drafted in such a way as to minimize the level of international risk to which the Hungarian government would be exposed. As it turned out, Prohászka’s calculations were not without basis: though the international reception of the *numerus clausus* law was very bad, the Hungarian government was able to successfully delay its being strictured for racial discrimination under the principles of international law for six or seven years.

The plan for the hidden Jewish quota was presented by Bishop Prohászka on August 5, 1920, at a meeting of the far-right university student organization,

78 László Budaváry’s speech, see the minutes of the parliamentary session of August 7, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 4: 280–89.

79 For the full text of the motion, see the Appendix to this volume.

the National Union of Hungarian University and College Students (Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolai Hallgatók Országos Szövetsége, MEFHOSZ). The meeting was attended by a number of parliamentary deputies. Some argued that it would not be proper to include racial or religious elements in the law, given the terms of the peace treaty. The position that absolutely no reference should be made in the law to race, religion, or nationality was all but set to win at the meeting. At this point, however, Prohászka had an idea to “save the day.” The law should specify that university admission limits should apply not only to Jews, but to all the “races” and “nationalities” in the country, according to their proportion within the overall population in the country. Prohászka wondered whether “we couldn’t phrase it so that admissions would be based on the numbers of the ‘races and nationalities’?”⁸⁰ In this way, the law would not explicitly deal with the restriction of admission rights for Jews, but the end result would be the same—university places for Jews would be limited to their 5 percent proportion within the population overall. The meeting adopted Prohászka’s recommendation. They also determined that their student activists would approach deputies involved with the law individually and encourage them to support the “Prohászka formula.”

The recommendation was discussed twice by the governing party in August, in both cases with Prohászka presiding. At the second discussion, on August 24, the assembly accepted the formula and decided that it should be introduced to parliament as an amendment by Nándor Bernolák (professor of law in Debrecen) on September 3. In the end, it was the Prohászka-Bernolák amendment that contained the racial paragraph, clause three of the law, which read:

When granting admission, in addition to the requirements of loyalty to the nation and moral reliability, on the one hand, consideration shall also be given to the intellectual ability of the applicant, on the other, and to the requirement that the proportion of young people belonging to a given racial group and nationality residing in the country shall preferably reach the national proportion of the racial group or nationality concerned, but shall at least be nine-tenths of the national proportion.⁸¹

80 Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 150–51.

81 Parliamentary session of September 3, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 184.

When the law was passed, it was the implementation decree for this amendment that actually brought the Jewish quota into being. Nándor Bernolák left no room for doubt that his amendment was aimed at restricting the Jews:

The current distribution of university places between the races is not equitable. . . . Under these circumstances, I cannot deny that in the motion I lay before you there is the intention that the Jews should not participate in the professional fields in such overwhelming numbers. Yes, that is what I want—and I will say it quite clearly—it is profoundly in the interests of the Hungarian nation, as it is in the interests of the Jews living in Hungary, that the proportion of Jews in higher education should come down.⁸²

The parliamentary debate on the law was then mostly dominated by the restrictions on the Jews. The majority of deputies who spoke supported Bernolák's motion, while seven argued against it, pointing out that the amendment contravened the principle of the citizen's right to equality before the law. It is worth noting that the opponents of the racial clause made a number of predictions that in the coming years were to become a reality. They said that the racial clause would hurt Hungary's international standing, that it would create counter-selection and lead to a "brain drain," and yet would not improve the chances of higher education for the children of the poorer classes. Being able to foresee the consequences, however, was of little use; rational arguments were overruled by anti-Semitic feeling.

Passing the law

The law, which represented a historical watershed for Hungarian Jews, being the first step in the destruction of the equality before the law they had been granted by their emancipation, was passed by parliament in an unusual manner on September 21, 1920. Most of the government and 71 percent of the deputies, including István Bethlen, absented themselves from the vote. Klebelsberg left the chamber before the vote, something he explained years later, saying that

82 Parliamentary session of September 3, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 185, 187.

he thought the wording of the law was unfortunate right from the start.⁸³ The prime minister, Pál Teleki, was also absent, being also foreign minister until the day after the vote. Of the 13 members of the government, a mere three were present, two of whom—István Haller (minister of religion) and Gyula Rubinek (minister of trade)—voted against the law. Only István Szabó de Sokorópátka, the Smallholder minister without portfolio, voted for it.⁸⁴

Nonetheless, Minister of Religion and Public Education István Haller's contribution to the debate provides a good summary of the Teleki government's change of position in July and August. Haller, who as late as April had rejected the idea of an anti-Jewish quota for foreign policy reasons, was by September (in the debate before the passing of the law) saying that this question was "of no interest internationally" because "they're looking for a firm hand, and if our hand proves firm, they'll want it, without bothering about what else is going on here."⁸⁵ During the course of the debate, Haller became more and more open in his support of the Jewish quota, which he had earlier opposed out of foreign policy considerations. He then proceeded to vote "no" to the law which his own ministry had introduced. The motive behind his voting is presumably the same as that behind Prime Minister Teleki's absence from the vote (on a law he otherwise agreed with). Haller later (in 1926) published a monograph in defense

83 Ilona Újszászi, "Időutazás a Délmagyarral: Perpatvar és numerus clausus," *Délmagyar.hu*, October 17, 2008 (accessed December 1, 2009).

84 Voting "yes" were: János Nagy, Dániel Oláh, Imre Örfly, Géza Paczek, Dénes Patacs, György Perlaki, Ottokár Prohászka, Vilmos Próhle, Móric Putnoky, Richárd Reischl, János Sabel, János Sallay, Károly Schandl, Henrik Schiessl, István Somogyi, Balázs Szabó, János Gy. Szabó, István Szabó (de Sokorópátka), József Szabó (Budapest), Jenő Szabóky, Ferenc Talányi, Béla Taszler, Ferenc Thomas, Béla Türi, Ferenc Usetty, Elek Avarffy, János Bartos, Imre Bárány, Béla Bernáth, Nándor Bernolák, László Budaváry, Imre Csontos, János Czákó, Béla Dánér, Antal Eberhardt, Károly Ereky, Gyula Fáy, István Gerencsér, Miklós Griger, Jenő Gunda, József Haller, Miksa Herrmann, Imre Héjj, Tivadar Homonnay, Zoltán Hornyanszky, János Huber, Károly Huszár, János Iklódy-Szabó, Antal Javos, Jenő Karafiáth, Emil Kovács, József Kovács, András P. Kuna, Pál Legeza, Albin Lingauer, Pál Lipták, and Viktor Mátéffy. Voting "no" were: Attila Orbók, Sándor Pető, Gyula Rubinek, Ernő Bródy, István Haller, István J. Kovács, and Zoltán Meskó. Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 21, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 482. Absent from the vote from the government were: István Sréter (Minister of Defense), Ágost Benárd (Minister of Health and Employment), Jakab Bleyer (Minister without Portfolio for National Minorities), Gyula Ferdinandy (Minister of the Interior), Frigyes Korányi (Minister of Finance), József Vass (Minister of Food), Vilmos Tomcsányi (Minister of Justice), and István Szabó de Nagyatád (Minister of Agriculture). Pál Teleki was also Foreign Minister on a temporary basis until the day of the vote, the office being handed over to Imre Csáky only on the following day, September 22, 1920.

85 Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 21, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 464.

of the Jewish quota, called *The Fight over the Numerus Clausus*.⁸⁶ Haller's "no" vote was nothing more than a tactical stroke, just like Teleki's absence, since they were both vociferous supporters of the Jewish quota.

For some deputies who were not present at the debate, the law clearly was not an important issue. Of 219 members of parliament, only 64 were present.⁸⁷ Others, however, like many Smallholder deputies, walked out before the vote because although they did not wish to support the law, they also could not vote against it, for the sake of their cooperation with the Unity Party.⁸⁸

The number of "yes" votes was 57 overall. The law was therefore passed by barely more than a quarter (26 percent) of the members of parliament. Those who had voted for the law were in fact 18 fewer than had signed the (Prohászka-Bernolák) amendment to introduce the racial quota only a few weeks before.⁸⁹ There were those who had signed the Prohászka-Bernolák amendment but had changed their minds a few days later, such as Károly Rassay. Rassay had signed the amendment in the belief that it was intended to correct the practices of the previous academic year, when no Jewish students at all had been admitted to the universities, and that the 5 percent quota it wanted to introduce was aimed at guaranteeing that at least some Jewish students would be admitted. Rassay realized that this was not the case before the vote and did not attend.⁹⁰ It is conceivable that there were some who did not attend because they took it for granted that the law would be passed without them. Yet, others did not consider the law stringent enough, and therefore refused to vote for it. Finally, there were those

86 Haller, *Harc a numerus clausus körül*.

87 The precise number of deputies was not stated on September 21, 1920. The number of deputies in parliament changed frequently during the course of 1920 because the distribution of mandates was continuous due to the disorganization in electoral districts. In April 1920, the house consisted of 168 deputies. The number of deputies given in the parliamentary diary closest in date to the vote in September 1920 was 208 in February 1921. Klebelsberg said in 1927 that the parliament had 219 members in September 1920. Ladányi, "A numerus clausus-törvény 1928. évi módosításáról," 1128.

88 Bethlen, *A magyar zsidóság almanachja*, 60. Address by Miklós Forgács. The Unity Party (*Egységes Párt*), officially known as the Christian Peasant, Smallholder, and Civic Party (*Keresztény-Keresztény Földműves-, Kiszgazda- és Polgári Párt*), was—under various names and following several transformations—the ruling government party in Hungary from 1922 to 1944.

89 The law introducing corporal punishment, which also carried some political risk, was approved by more than a hundred deputies. There were 167 deputies on June 17, 1920, and 208 in February 1921. Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 16, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 3: 446.

90 Minutes of the parliamentary session of May 13, 1927, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 4: 94. At this point, Rassay was still a member of the KNEP, but went on to found the Independent Smallholders' Party.

who presumably made their decisions contingent on what the leading politicians would do—and they absented themselves from the vote to a man. During his political career, Teleki absented himself from unpleasant or risky events more than once, for example when—as foreign minister—he decided not to go to Paris to receive the terms of the peace treaty. On the day of the final vote on the *numerus clausus* law, he was apparently recuperating in a sanatorium.⁹¹ Nonetheless, we have no reason to suppose that Teleki (who two months before the vote had promised the institutional “defense” of “Christian society,” and who later—in the 1920s—as an ardent supporter of the racial clause, fought for the maintenance of the anti-Semitic law) had any objection to the racial clause. As prime minister, ultimate responsibility for the passing of the law still lies with him, even if he spent the day itself resting in a sanatorium in Buda.

The fact that Teleki, Bethlen, and Klebelsberg all stayed away suggests that they were all aware of the risks associated with the law. They knew that the law represented a break with the traditions of the constitutional state, and that politicians who voted for the law might easily lose their standing on the international scene. At the same time, neither Bethlen nor Klebelsberg were willing to vote against the law and thereby come into conflict with the political forces pushing for the Jewish quota and their supporters. Teleki himself agreed on principle that the Hungarian parliament should legislate to “restrict” the Jews.⁹²

As a result of the Bernolák–Prohászka amendment and the implementation decree issued by István Haller, the *numerus clausus* became an anti-Jewish law inscribed on paper. With that, the government took unnecessary international risks even from the standpoint of its anti-Semitic supporters, since it would have been enough to create boards of admission in order to restrict Jews from higher education. It is worth noting that both Ministers of Religion and Public Education Haller and Kunó Klebelsberg were of the opinion that the boards of admission, whose creation was mandated along with the fixed number system, would have been sufficient for the restriction of Jews without any further racial paragraph or quota system.

Many people at the universities were of the same opinion. Among them was Károly Hoór, professor of ophthalmology, who tried to dissuade the government from introducing the racial clause on behalf of the Faculty of Medicine,

91 Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál*, 180.

92 Péter Tibor Nagy, “A *numerus clausus*—hetvenöt év után,” *Világosság* 36, no. 2 (1995): 72–80.

precisely with the restriction of Jews in mind. Since, as Hoór wrote to the minister of religion, the faculty was “mostly composed of members who are fully aware that the reduction of the Jewish element in the faculty and in the medical profession is an immediate necessity.” It was, therefore, unhelpful to “bind the hands” of the university boards of admission by any sort of quota under the law, because the boards needed the flexibility to be able to deviate from the proposed 5 percent “either upwards or downwards.”⁹³

Hoór was most probably right. Constituted with the appropriate political bias (as they could well have been), the university boards of admission would have been able to work to prevent the admission of Jewish students without the need of any kind of legislation. This assumption is supported by the fact that at the polytechnics which were not subject to the *numerus clausus* law, the proportion of Jews was reduced just as much as at the other universities and polytechnics. At the College of Veterinary Medicine, the proportion of Jews decreased from 24 percent in 1914 to 4 percent in 1925, while at the College for Economics, it went from 8 percent in 1918 to 1.8 percent in 1925.⁹⁴ In other countries, such as the United States, where certain elite universities and medical schools were just deciding to restrict the number of Jews they would admit, it was precisely the system described by Hoór that was employed without reference to any state initiative or legislation.

Barely eight years later, when István Bethlen amended the racial clause, it was this same technique that was brought into being in Hungary. The universities did not admit a significantly larger number of Jewish students than when the racial clause had been in force. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to suppose that had the *numerus clausus* law been limited to mandating that all applications to universities be decided on by university admissions boards (without a racial quota), the exclusion of Jewish students from the universities would have begun just the same.

The ideology behind the Jewish quota: Prohászka

Prohászka proposed the idea of an anti-Jewish *numerus clausus* in May 1918, even before the left-wing revolutions. In a high-profile article, he counter-

⁹³ Haller, *Harc a numerus clausus körül*, 73.

⁹⁴ Haller, *Harc a numerus clausus körül*, 146.

posed Christian youth doing its duty at the front with Jews sitting at their university desks.

Let us go through the winding fronts and we will see that the closer one gets to danger, the more Christians there are, and the farther one gets from the front, the more Jews. The one keeps dying while the other saves his skin—much to the benefit of our future Hungarian culture, of course! . . . Let us help our youth in their studies, let us help them succeed, or else we will have lost the battle after their victory! These insights illuminate the statistical data like watch-fires, and at the same time come to us like tongues of flame from the fires of Pentecost, to ensure that we don't exchange this world war for the extinction of our nation, heroism for slavery. . . . Our university-age youth are out shouldering the great and heavy burden of defending the homeland and have no time to study, while their space at the universities and polytechnics is taken up by others who are all too plentiful at home—who could stay home because (there is no other conclusion I can reach, so I will say it) they are degenerates.⁹⁵

The bishop explained several times during the course of 1918 that the new political movement, christened by him “Hungarizmus,” aimed for the comprehensive restriction of the economic rights of the Jews.⁹⁶

“What exactly is my so-called anti-Semitism?” he asked in his article “Have We Had Enough?” His reply was that “it is not about going out and committing violence against Jews, no—it is about waking up the Hungarian people, with the whip of statistical data if need be, from their torpor and make them take back and hold on to what they have—all that to which their being, their faith, and their traditions tie them, and which they are in danger of losing.”⁹⁷

But what purpose was Prohászka's “whip of statistical data” really meant to serve? We are presented with numbers concerning the proportion of Jews in various branches of the economy, and how they relate to the proportion of

95 Ottokár Prohászka, “Pro Juventute catholica,” in *Iránytű*, ed. Antal Schütz (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1929), 184–86. First published in *Alkotmány*, May 26, 1918; and Máté Gárdonyi, “Az antiszemizmus funkciója Prohászka Ottokár és Bangha Béla társadalom- és egyházképében,” in *A Holokauszt Magyarországon európai perspektívában* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2005), 195.

96 For example, *Népújság* [People's Paper], September 15, 1918.

97 Ottokár Prohászka, “Elég volt-e?,” in *Iránytű*, 190. The article appeared on September 11, 1918, in the journal *Alkotmány*.



Figure 9. Bishop Ottokár Prohászka.
Source: Wikimedia commons.

Jews in the country overall. This includes data on bankers, landowners, businessmen, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and students at universities and polytechnics. These, then, are the fields in which the proportion of Jews will have to be measured using statistical data. And from this data will have to be made that “whip” which will help to change the inner balance of economic life.

The idea of a Jewish quota was complete in Prohászka’s writings before the left-wing revolutions. He had introduced the theme of the proportional overrepresentation of Jews, or, in other words, that although Jews made up only 5 percent of the country’s population, their proportion in certain economic fields was much higher. He had also outlined a program that would “cure” this overrepresentation

of Jews. He said that “Christian Hungarians” must be “roused” to “take their rightful place,” to stop and reverse the growth of the proportion of Jews.⁹⁸

Following the revolutions, Prohászka merely adapted the thoughts he had previously laid out. It was not, therefore, a case of his radical anti-Semitism being a product of the left-wing revolutions. The bishop now incorporated the program for the Jewish quota into the ideological framework of the struggle between the races. It was in this same ideological framework that he found explanations for the revolutions. According to this ideology, the “Jews” “tricked” the “Hungarians” and dragged them into revolution. The victims of this “trickery,” the “Hungarians,” were therefore absolved of blame. All responsibility lay with the “Jews”:

I ask you, what is revolution? This revolution is totally alien to Hungarian thinking, alien to all Hungarian feeling. This revolution has cursed us with some sort of moral blood poisoning. It has plunged us into a world of alien

98 Prohászka, “Elég volt-e?”

ideas, or if you'll allow me to say so within quotation marks, an odd sense of morality. It has given us new insights, but I would say that if a Zionist caravan from Tarnopol were to tramp its way across Hungary on its way to the Holy Land, and were to stop at the edge of some village to cook and wash there, its culture and morality would be just as far from the thought and feeling of the people of the village as this revolution was from the spirit of the Hungarian people. . . . All sorts of ideas formed in curly or un-curly heads have confused the public feeling. But if there was a Hungarian revolution and I ask, where was there anything Hungarian that revolted, it was most certainly not in the Károlyi or so-called Red revolutions, but in the crucible of reactionary Christian nationalism. . . . This is the reaction, the revolution that I can boldly and openly call, in the name of morality, a national Christian revolution.⁹⁹

Prohászka kept the program of institutional anti-Semitism alive throughout the twenties. In his 1922 article, "The Christian Hungarian Way in Business," he wrote that Hungary needed a comprehensive change, which "by making every part of social activity part of the nation concentrates the society of the nation itself."¹⁰⁰ The article does not say what makes a "concentrated" society, but this much is clear: the anti-Jewish state intervention that Prohászka thought necessary goes far beyond the walls of the universities and affects every branch of the economy. Prohászka outlined a similar program in his article entitled "Awakening Hungary." There, he wrote: "It's not about beating the Jews to death—this is a purely defensive war. What we want is to stay here, to be the lords of our own manor. . . . That is not the case today. Whoever does well in trade is the real lord of the manor. Money talks, dogs bark. . . . The foundations have to be laid in the economy, otherwise the work we do will be like building a house from the first floor down."¹⁰¹ Once more we are told that the purpose of the anti-Jewish measures is nothing other than to rearrange the conditions prevailing in the economy at the time.

99 Minutes of the parliamentary session of February 26, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 1: 63.

100 Ottokár Prohászka, "A magyar keresztény irányzat a kereskedelemben," in *Iránytű*, 297. First published in *Fejérmegyei Napló*, February 21, 1922.

101 Ottokár Prohászka, "Ébredő magyarok" [Awakening Hungarians]. In *Iránytű*, 288.

This is the broader connection that Prohászka brought to the attention of his audience during the parliamentary debate on the numerus clausus law as well. “It is very important,” he said, “that we ourselves should be clear about what it is precisely that we want.”¹⁰² It would not be right to see the numerus clausus as merely a little “tweaking” of the higher education issue. The numerus clausus was a much more significant issue. It was just the “beginning” of a wide-ranging program that would transform all of Hungarian economic life. “It is clear that we have to begin the reorganization of Hungarian national upbringing right across the board. We are not quite ready for that yet, but are starting with the universities.”¹⁰³ Prohászka thus considered the numerus clausus part of a longer process whose significance went far beyond the world of the universities.

Prohászka was brutally frank about the possibility of the introduction of the numerus clausus leading to violence. The processes that the numerus clausus had set in train, he said in parliament, contained the hidden risk that they could spill over into racial persecution. But, he continued, the Jewish quota had to be introduced nonetheless, even if the risk of it giving rise to “racial persecution” existed, although that was something that he, personally, would not support. “To my Jewish fellow-citizens, I say that you should not take this [the numerus clausus] as a sign of hatred, nor as racial persecution. It might spiral into that, but I would neither encourage nor praise its doing so.”¹⁰⁴ Prohászka, then, saw the political risk associated with the numerus clausus as the process it had initiated could “spiral out of control” and lead to outright “racial persecution.” He nonetheless recommended that the law be passed even after taking this danger into account, because he considered the great “national interest,” which spoke for the law, to outweigh the risk.

Prohászka—in contrast to what he said in parliament—did not, in reality, condemn the persecution of Jews. A host of his personal comments serve as excellent examples of how support for the numerus clausus law and support for anti-Jewish street violence were not mutually exclusive. In fact, they were more interrelated in nature. Prohászka himself was a leading member of the Association of Awakening Hungarians (ÉME), which organized the anti-Semitic violence. As a bishop, he gave the Catholic Church’s blessing to the

102 Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 16, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 344.

103 *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 344.

104 *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 347.

organization's existence. It was in Prohászka's presence that the ÉME members of parliament made their "Christian-National" oath. Prohászka defended and encouraged the organization against the government's efforts at postwar stabilization even in 1921:

They accuse the Association of Awakening Hungarians of being an organization bent on the destruction of Jewry. This is not the case—the Awakening Hungarians do nothing more than defend the Hungarian race. It does not matter, then, that this or that great person may say that the rule of law and equality wants everyone to be equal before the law. Is that even possible? Let me give just one example. The skunk is an animal, just like any other. As such, skunks could well demand a place in the henhouse. Whoever has that image in their mind's eye is ready to respond to the philosophers' piffle. . . . My dear awakening brothers! I want the rising Hungarian people to organize, to march together side by side, and organize consciously, in every street, like a [National] guard.¹⁰⁵

In light of the above, any interpretation which would have Prohászka seeing the numerus clausus as a temporary crisis measure limited to higher education in order to take the wind out of the sails of street violence against the Jews becomes untenable. He saw it precisely for what it was: a watershed, the start of a new era in which—just like in the period before their emancipation—the restriction of Jewish rights would be possible once again. As he put it in his English language pamphlet *The Jewish Question in Hungary*, Hungarian society had in the past the means of defense and security against the Jews, but only as long as the legal rights of the Jews were circumscribed.¹⁰⁶ This security could only be reinstated if Jewish rights were restricted once again. In Prohászka's thinking, then, the interests and true security of Hungarian society could only be secured by a vast process of redistribution in every sector of the economy and society; something which it was imperative to undertake, even if that pro-

105 "Ébredő magyarok: Beszéd az ÉME nagygyűlésén, 1921. október 22," *Fejérmegyei Napló*, October 30, 1921. Quoted in András Nyerges, "Kis Prohászka-breviárium—Szemelvények a püspök megnyilatkozásaiból," *Mozgó Világ* 35, no. 2 (2009): 49–54.

106 "The legal restrictions placed on the Jews up until then—which protected and reassured Hungarian society—ceased, and with the extension of their rights, the country was suddenly exposed to the unrestricted advance of an intelligent and cunning race." Ottokár Prohászka, *The Jewish Question in Hungary* (The Hague: 1920), 3.



Figure 10. The Jesuit theologian and journalist Béla Bangha.
Source: Fortepan, 100296, Jezsuita Levéltár.

cess involved the restriction of the rights of the Jews and indeed could lead to their persecution.

The leading figure in the voluble Catholic press campaign for the introduction of the *numerus clausus*, the Jesuit Béla Bangha, shared Prohászka's views. The origin of Bangha's anti-Semitism, like Prohászka's, considerably predated the left-wing revolutions.¹⁰⁷ Bangha's tours of Kecskemét in May 1917 and Kiskunfélegyháza in May 1918, during which he spoke about the need to restrict the Jewish press, were followed by anti-Semitic disturbances.

Bangha considered a comprehensive anti-Jewish program (or "clean-up") necessary and supported the *numerus clausus* law in the hope of realizing this wider agenda. He wanted to restrict the participation of Jews in the banking sector, trade, the press, and cultural life, while he also planned to completely exile the Jews from the villages: "Above all, we must clean the villages of their Jewish liquor merchants and general traders, taking away their shopkeepers' and

¹⁰⁷ Péter Bihari, "Antisemitizmus az első világháború Magyarországnán," *Beszélő* 13, no. 2 (February 2008), <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/antisemitizmus-az-első-világháború-magyarországnán> (accessed September 24, 2009).

liquor licenses, putting cooperatives (consumer, credit, agricultural, and produce cooperatives) in their place all the way down the line. In fact, it would be best if the villages never even so much as set eyes on a Jew.”¹⁰⁸

In order to “solve the Jewish question,” Bangha (in his own words) advocated the use of “radical” institutional means, which would break with the “naive,” “short-sighted,” and “soft” philosophy of liberalism and the principle of Jewish equality. Although Bangha would not, in principle, have opposed the “complete sidelining” of the Jews, he did not think it possible for two reasons. Firstly, because it would lead to economic disaster, and secondly, because the Jews also had to support themselves somehow since, as he wrote (though his words now sound naive to us), “it is nonetheless physically impossible to deport more than a million Jews from the country.”¹⁰⁹ As it turned out two and a half decades later, Bangha’s judgement of what was and was not possible had been mistaken. . . .

The “proportionality” program: Alajos Kovács

The more prosaic version of the program so vehemently propounded by Prohászka and Bangha was worked out by Alajos Kovács. Kovács was a well-respected statistician of the day, department head, and later director (from 1925) of the Central Statistical Office, and a close colleague of Pál Teleki.¹¹⁰ Kovács not only took part in the preparatory work for the numerus clausus, but was also one of the drafters of the 1938 Jewish law. It was his work that created the “whip” envisioned by Prohászka from the “statistical data” that was to be used to “whip up” public opinion to support action against the Jews.

Alajos Kovács—like Prohászka—thought that statistics had to be made into a tool of political mobilization. “In the struggle of self-defense,” he wrote in his 1922 work *The Jewish Takeover of Hungary*,

which has now begun against the expansion of the Jewry, we have to have a good knowledge of the battle stations of the Jews if we want to succeed. Let us take in turn, therefore, the positions that Jewry occupies, so that we

¹⁰⁸ Béla Bangha, *Magyarország újjáépítése és a kereszténység* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1920), 161–62.

¹⁰⁹ Bangha, *Magyarország újjáépítése és a kereszténység*, 161–62.

¹¹⁰ Alajos Kovács and István Bethlen both took part in the work of the office created in August 1919 by Pál Teleki tasked with preparing for the peace talks.

can see where and with what force we have to take up the struggle, which must put the Christian Hungarian people into a position concomitant with its proportion and importance against Jewry, which is even now endangering the existence of the Hungarian nation.¹¹¹

For this great undertaking, considered Kovács in 1922,

we either need an operation that goes right to the root of the problem, or long but regular treatment. The choice of treatment is a matter for the politicians. It is a matter for the politicians in whose hands the fate of the country is today placed in trust. Their task, that of solving the Jewish question in such a way as not to bring down upon our heads philosemitic international opinion while nonetheless allowing the Hungarian people—now suffering repression and exclusion in its own homeland—to succeed in accordance with its proportion, will not be easy.¹¹²

The “solution to the Jewish question,” then (just like in Prohászka’s thinking), was to restrict their position in society and the economy by means of the state and to take over some portion of the material goods in Jewish hands. In Kovács’s



Figure 11. Alajos Kovács.

Source: MNM Történeti Fényképtár.

mind, the “Jewish question” would have been “solved” if the Hungarian state had—using official means—been able to ensure that the Jews did not take a greater part of the benefits of, or positions in, the economy than their proportion within the overall population of the country. Since, according to Kovács’s calculations, the part of national wealth and income in Jewish hands was approximately 20–25 percent, whereas the proportion of Jews within the overall population was a mere 5 percent, the proportionality program effectively meant that about three quar-

¹¹¹ Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 7.

¹¹² Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 53.

ters of the goods in Jewish hands had to be transferred somehow into non-Jewish ownership. In other words, this would entail a large-scale program of expropriation for which, logically, there would need to be a string of newer and newer Jewish laws modeled on the university *numerus clausus*.

This ideology was not born during the crisis years of the 1914–18 war nor was Hungary the first place where it appeared. It first appeared in Germany, decades before World War I, as a reaction to the emancipation of the Jews. The starting point for the German “process of normalization” program was that the Jews derived disproportionately large benefits from the privileged positions created by capitalist economics and urbanization and that this disproportionality was constantly creating further disproportionality in the opportunities for the Jews to improve their social position. It was this situation that the policy of “normalization” wished to put an end to (without much success). As part of this policy, the government urged Jews to change professions and the circumstances of their employment, with the intention of directing them towards the handicrafts sector and agriculture especially. It was from this intellectual background of the 1870s that the ideology of modern political anti-Semitism developed by the turn of the century, which suggested that “by solving the Jewish question, all current [economic and social] problems would be resolved as well.”¹¹³

It was this German anti-Semitic tradition that Alajos Kovács applied to Hungary when he outlined the longer-term considerations behind the *numerus clausus*. Kovács’s views were echoed by that influential supporter of the *numerus clausus* law, Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, who—during the debate on the draft of the law—came out and said: “Hungary only needs a certain percentage of Jews.”¹¹⁴ According to Kovács, the Jews’ share of the national wealth and the national income was disproportionately high, at 20–25 percent. This percentage needed reducing by means of state intervention to that 5.9 percent of the overall population of Hungary that the Jews made up. In order to achieve this goal, there would have to be “measures” brought in against the Jews in all those fields of the economy where their share was disproportionately high. This was the view that prevailed in the Jewish Laws introduced after 1938, in

¹¹³ Reinhard Rürup, “Die ‘Judenfrage’ der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und die Entstehung des modernen Antisemitismus,” in *Emanzipation und Antisemitismus: Studien zur ‘Judenfrage’ der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975), 82–83, 91.

¹¹⁴ Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 16, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 350.

whose elaboration Alajos Kovács took part, just as he had in the creation of the numerus clausus law.¹¹⁵

The key concept in Kovács's thinking was the principle of "proportionality." This was based on the idea that the relations in a given society are "proportional" when the proportions of the positions filled in various professions and the distribution of goods and capital in general were equal to the proportions that people of the various races and religions made up within the population overall.¹¹⁶ In his own words:

The crux of the Jewish question lies not in the large number of Jews, but in that thanks to their superior intelligence and commercial sense, they flood into those fields and professions that guarantee them intellectual or economic leadership, or at least a predominance well in excess of their proportion within the population as a whole. . . . While the Christian religions are proportionally represented in all the professions and the deviations from the national average in individual professions are insignificant, the Jews, with their 5 percent proportion of the population of the country, make up 11.7 percent of the *de facto* professional class and 15.2 percent of the jobs in industry and trade. Among the latter, the proportion of Jews in industry is 10 percent and 51.8 percent in trade.¹¹⁷

115 The writer Dezső Szabó, whom the members of the anti-Semitic student societies considered their spiritual leader, expressed the same sentiment: "The rule of law can only be guaranteed by a whole and complete system of laws and institutions, where every clause serves to support every other clause; and the resources of each and every institution serve to support all the others. Thus, for example, the principle of the numerus clausus in the polytechnics, on its own as it is, though it may look good, could even be dangerous. For one thing, the well-financed Jewish youth may easily go abroad and get a high-level education, then coming home, settle in thanks to the incredible cohesion of the Jews. Secondly, the Jews could establish a polytechnic here at home. Therefore, we have to extend the numerus clausus to all breadwinning professions, be they public or private. We have to create a system of laws which ensures equal chances for success for each race in the competition. And we must certainly turn the idea of a numerus clausus into law with respect to secondary schools as well." See article in *A Nép* [The People], May 26, 1921. Szabó, like so many of his contemporaries, considered the numerus clausus in higher education merely the first step in a broader "economic war" against the Jews, since—as he said—the Jews must be fought in the field where "the Jewish front is weaker and especially with those tools that are the natural tools of our race. The immediate tool of the Jews is their cunning, while ours is the open force of our protective legal system. Where, then, our cunning falls short, we must make up for it by this open force." See *A Nép*, May 26, 1921. Dezső Szabó clearly and logically expressed at the start of the 1920s how the introduction of the university numerus clausus would eventually lead to the philosophy behind the Jewish Laws introduced after 1938.

116 For the place Jews occupied in the occupational spectrum of the Hungarian population, see Viktor Karády, "Zsidóság és modernizáció a történelmi Magyarországon," in *Zsidóság és társadalmi egyenlőtlenségek (1867–1945): Történeti-szociológiai tanulmányok* (Budapest: Replika Kör, 2000), 7–40.

117 Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 40.

It is not difficult to discover in Alajos Kovács's calculations the signs of demagoguery pursued by statistical means. The strategic choice of his point of departure in large measure forecasts the end results and his conclusions. As the Christian Socialist Sándor Giesswein put it in parliament, this kind of statistical research did not help people see clearly, but rather it obscured their vision: "There are three kinds of lies," he said. "Lies you're forced to tell, lies you tell for comic effect, and statistics. I do not say this because the numbers themselves are deceptive, but because people have produced the greatest tricks and lies by the way they've used them."¹¹⁸

The employment statistics Kovács used served very well in highlighting the role of Jews in the creation of modern Hungarian capitalism and in showing that in several fields, especially connected to banking and modern trade, there really was a remarkably high proportion of Jews.¹¹⁹ But even Kovács himself was aware that underlying this phenomenon were not racial, but primarily historical causes. The ban on Jewish ownership of land, which lasted almost right up to their emancipation, had the effect of steering Jewish businessmen towards retail, modern industry, and the banking sector in the first place. Moreover, the fact that civil service jobs were largely inaccessible to Jews led post-emancipation Jewish youth to seek their fortunes in modern graduate professions.¹²⁰

The relatively low representation of the Jewish professional class in the civil service can be attributed to the fact that as Jews they had very little access to these offices, and as a consequence, Jews who undertook higher education focused on liberal professions. This meant that the proportion of Jews among lawyers was 51 percent in 1920, while among doctors it was 46 percent.

But Kovács interpreted and inflated the process and extent of Jewish "takeover" of the graduate intelligentsia with a political agenda—which is to say, in a way unbecoming a professional statistician. First of all, the concept of the Jewish "takeover" of positions in society and the economy made it seem as if Jewish students and graduates "took away" spaces from their non-Jewish colleagues, whereas until the introduction of the *numerus clausus* in 1920, there

¹¹⁸ Minutes of the parliamentary session of December 22, 1922, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 7: 204.

¹¹⁹ Karády highlights that among independent professionals in the financial lending sector, the proportion of Jews was 85 percent, of those in business 54 percent, and among the owners and directors of industrial concerns, it was 44 percent. Karády, "Zsidóság és modernizáció," 24.

¹²⁰ Karády, "Zsidóság és modernizáció," 23–25.

were no numerical restrictions on university admissions. Anyone with a valid secondary school diploma could enroll. Therefore, insofar as there was anything “disproportionate” in the denominational makeup of the student body at the universities, the question to be asked should not have been why a larger proportion of Jews were trying to get graduate qualifications, but why the youth of the other religions were not doing the same. In any case, in light of the fact that the proportion of Jews with secondary school diplomas was five times as high as that among non-Jews, there is nothing surprising in the fact that a larger proportion of Jews applied to the universities than non-Jews. Later, a few years after the introduction of the *numerus clausus*, it turned out that the spaces that had become vacant thanks to the exclusion of Jewish students were not easily filled with non-Jewish applicants, since the exclusion of the Jews did not in itself alter the attitudes towards higher education of non-Jewish families nor did it change their material circumstances.¹²¹

Second, when making use of the national population figures, Kovács consistently ignored the fact that the “disproportionate” numbers between the religions among graduate professionals was primarily an urban phenomenon. The majority of the Jewish population was urban, while the majority of the non-Jewish population lived in the countryside. It is therefore natural that a comparison of the educational and professional data of the urban population with that of the population in the countryside would show that the proportion of university graduates and those working in the professions is higher in the city than it is in the countryside. In Hungary in 1920, almost two thirds of the Jewish population lived in towns, while almost two thirds of the non-Jewish population lived in the villages. As a demographer, Kovács would have known that this high degree of urbanization among Jews would in itself have meant that there would be a higher proportion of Jews (as city-dwellers) in higher education and, therefore, in the professions and the middle and lower-middle class occupations than the country’s other, less urbanized, denominational groups.

But Kovács chose to explain the Jewish “takeover” of the professions not as a result of these specific historical and demographic circumstances, but as

121 Haller, *Harc a numerus clausus körül*, 144. István Haller complained in 1926 that Catholics and Protestants could not fill up “their” quota of places between 1921 and 1926. The reason for this was that there were not enough applicants for the places left free by the exclusion of the Jews because—as Haller pointed out—those social groups “even today are not in the right financial circumstances to be able to fill the quota allotted to them.”

a result of the “racial” characteristics of the Jews. The “core of the Jewish question,” as far as he was concerned, was that the Jews, because of their inherited racial characteristics, could not, or only in a small minority, be assimilated into Hungarian society.¹²² Kovács thus saw the Jews—in contrast to Nazi racial theory—not as an inferior race, but quite the opposite. The Jews owed their successes, or as he would have it, their “triumphant surge forward,” to “their racial characteristics” and “bodily and psychological makeup.” He considered them to be a race with such advantageous characteristics that the supporters of a Christian “changing of the guard” could only take up the struggle by the use of political force. Kovács tried to make the aggressiveness of the program for “racial defense” acceptable with the use of the word “defense.”

Just as conscious was the use of the term “Christian” society, which had the effect of lumping together the various religions of the non-Jewish population into one category. Kovács was well aware that, in terms of its cultural and material capital, “Christian” society was deeply divided and that there were significant differences between Catholics and Protestants as well. Kovács skated over this problem with unusual ideological tools: “The power relations of the various Christian religions balance each other out and complete each other harmoniously. Their development serves one unitary goal: the numerical, cultural, and financial strengthening of the Hungarian nation.”¹²³

In his study, branded “statistical pulp literature” (*statisztikai ponyva*) by liberal politicians, Kovács simply ignored the demographic and economic factors that did not serve to support his political goals.¹²⁴ This is particularly obvious in his analysis of graduate professionals which was undertaken for the purpose of supporting the racial clause of the *numerus clausus*. Noting that “nowhere else is the Jewish takeover as rapid as in the professional sphere,”¹²⁵ Kovács argued that the data he presented, “which show the terrific flood of Jews in higher education, should easily justify the Christian Hungarian people’s right-

122 “Due primarily to their religious difference, their status as a unitary race, historical traditions, and generally their whole physical and psychological structure, the Jews are an indigestible, unassimilable race, which cannot be measured by the same standards as the other strata making up the nation, especially the Christian ones.” Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 2.

123 Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 2.

124 Dániel Várnai’s comment at the parliamentary session of December 26, 1922, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 7: 36.

125 Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 42.

ful efforts to be represented in higher education and in the professions according to its own proportion.”¹²⁶

Kovács was correct in saying that Jews were present in higher education in a proportion exceeding their proportion of the overall population. The average proportion of Jewish students in higher education oscillated around 24–26 percent between 1900 and 1918. During the war years, it sometimes reached 30 percent.¹²⁷ One contributing factor to the rising proportion of Jews is that Jewish families were more willing than non-Jewish families to send their daughters to university as well, and the growth in female university students itself boosted the number of Jews in higher education.¹²⁸

However, given that half of Hungarian Jewry (52 percent) lived in or around Budapest, it was—from the point of view of statistical analysis—a misleading move to use as a point of comparison for the “proportionality” plan nationwide data from a primarily agrarian population. In the case of Budapest, the disproportionality claimed by Kovács, though considerable in some faculties, such as medicine, was not so great when taken overall. Although Jews did indeed account for 25–28 percent of the university students in Budapest, this, as mentioned earlier, happened against the backdrop of Jews making up around 20 percent of the city’s population.¹²⁹ It is true, however, that seen in this light, the figures would have lost a good deal of their power to motivate politically. At the beginning of the 1920s, 86 percent of all students in higher education in the country studied in Budapest, and the selection of students was strongly influ-

126 Kovács, *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*, 34. In his 1938 work on the Jewish population of post-Trianon Hungary, Kovács described the goal of the numerus clausus thus: “The original goal of the numerus clausus was to partially exclude the Jews from what are practically the professional fields and to bring down their proportions to the level to which they are represented in the population overall. We did not want the Jewry to take a disproportionately large role in the intellectual elite of the country, as it had done before. For it is shameful for the nation that its leading intellectual elite should be drawn in good part from an only superficially assimilated alien element which has forced its own worldview, morality, and business-oriented spirit onto the spiritual life of the nation. Besides, experience has shown that the Jews use this situation to gain power and in possession of that power will lead the nation on an erroneous path, and ultimately to ruin.” Kovács, *A csonka-magyarországi zsidóság*, 20.

127 István Haller supported the necessity of the racial clause with the following data: In the 1917–18 academic year, at the University of Budapest, the proportions of Jewish students were 21.6 percent in the Faculty of Law, 51.6 percent in the Faculty of Medicine, 20–25 percent in the humanities, 34 percent in pharmacology, and 37.1 percent at the Technical University. Haller, *Harc a numerus clausus körül*, 13.

128 Karády, *Iskolarendszer és felekezeti egyenlőtlenségek*, 63.

129 The proportion of Jews in the overall population of Budapest in 1910 was 23.1 percent.

enced by their ability to live at home. The proportion of Jews among students in higher education should therefore have been compared to the religious breakdown of the population of Budapest as well. But such an analysis would have been less helpful in trying to support the racial clause of the numerus clausus.

This biased use of data from the capital and from the country as a whole was immediately apparent to some public opinion makers. Vilmos Vázsonyi, in parliament, pointed to the “fallacy” of the “proportionality” principle when based on national figures:

The Honorable Minister consistently fails to remember when establishing the proportions for the numerus clausus—and herein lies the fallacy—that the majority of Hungarians of the Jewish religion live in the cities. Nearly half of Rump Hungary’s¹³⁰ entire Jewish population lives in Budapest. Only a negligible fraction of Jews live in the villages. So, if I were to be looking to establish the proportion fairly, I should not be looking at the proportions in which the country overall sends its children to university, but the proportions in which the urban population does. This principle, I submit, cannot be put into operation, and the falseness of the numbers [used for] the numerus clausus—not the idea behind it—becomes clear when you consider that a large percentage of the urban population is Jewish. . . . I ask you to take into account location when looking at the proportions of university students in the population.¹³¹

Vázsonyi’s reasons were especially valid because cultural policy in the early 1920s encouraged the universities in Budapest to take students from the capital first and foremost, while the rest of the universities—Pécs, Szeged, and Debrecen—were to fill their rosters from their local catchment areas.¹³²

Vázsonyi pointed to another “fallacy” in Kovács’s thinking, namely, that the “takeover” of spaces in higher education by Jews and their “overrepresentation” until 1920 came about in historical circumstances where, as mentioned earlier, admission to the universities and polytechnics was unrestricted (as long as one had a valid secondary school diploma). Given that every candidate with a valid

¹³⁰ Meaning post-Trianon Hungary.

¹³¹ Minutes of the parliamentary session of December 12, 1925, in *Az 1922. évi junius hó 16-ára hirdett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 38: 220.

¹³² Klebelsberg quoted in Ladányi, “A numerus clausus-törvény 1928. évi módosításáról,” 1137.

secondary school diploma was admitted to university, the Jewish candidates were not, therefore, accepted at anyone else's expense and did not "take away" places from Christian applicants. Even István Haller, the minister of religion, admitted this in his justification of the *numerus clausus*.¹³³

The number of Jewish students increased as a result of legislation following the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which made it possible for Jews to enter professional occupations from which they were previously barred or could enter only by extraordinary permission of the crown (jurisprudence, for example). Responding to these new opportunities, Jewish students enrolled at university, while the career choices for the children of non-Jewish families remained the same as they had been before the Compromise.¹³⁴ If the Jewish students did, nonetheless, appear as competitors to their non-Jewish colleagues, this was not because Jews displaced other people in higher education, but because after starting their professional life, the career paths of the two groups developed differently.

Lastly, when formulating the "proportionality" principle, Alajos Kovács was biased in omitting the fact that Jews were taxpaying citizens in Hungary, just like non-Jews. According to Kovács's calculations, Jews provided 20–25 percent of the country's national income, and their contribution to the national budget was at least as large.¹³⁵ In light of this, the idea that Jews drew "disproportionate" benefits from the opportunities presented in the country's higher education system does not stand up. For if we divide the statistics for the population of the country along ethnic-religious lines, as Alajos Kovács does, then it turns out that Jews took part in higher education in more or less the same proportion in which they contributed to the country's economy.

133 According to Haller's calculations, the number of students at all the universities in 1867, including the law schools, was 3,352, of whom 396 or 11.8 percent were Jewish. In the 1913–14 academic year, the total number of students was 16,700, of whom 3,879 or 23.2 percent were Jewish. Thus, according to Haller's calculations, the number of Jewish students grew tenfold in the fifty years between 1867 and 1917, from 396 to 3,879. If the number of non-Jewish students had grown in the same proportion as the Jews, then there should have been 33,700 students at the universities and law schools by 1917. However, only roughly half this number, some 16,700 students, were at university because the number of non-Jewish students had grown more slowly than those of Jewish students. Haller, *Harc a numerus clausus körül*, 92.

134 M. Kovács, *Liberalizmus, radikalizmus, antiszemitizmus*, 50.

135 The cost of each degree issued was about 15–20,000 crowns. Bethlen, *A magyar zsidóság almanachja*, 97.

The “proportionality” program and the extreme Right

The extreme right anti-Semitic associations, or in Prime Minister Huszár’s words, “provocation parties” (*hecc-pártok*), played a key role in creating the political atmosphere necessary for the racial clause of the numerus clausus.¹³⁶ These associations were very powerful during the disintegration of the traditional political system, the military collapse, and the Romanian occupation and subsequent withdrawal.¹³⁷ Their organized actions—imbued with a military spirit and often in military uniform, with a clear chain of command and making use of the railways—served to significantly boost the strength of these associations and the impression these interventions made during the power vacuum at the end of 1919 and during the weak, short-lived governments that followed.

The Association of Awakening Hungarians, which drew tens of thousands of people, put up anti-Semitic posters in the countryside, and organized terror attacks and pogroms. The Awakening Hungarian leaders and activists were a mix of people from the most varied social backgrounds. They included leading politicians, priests, teachers, instructors, judges, demobilized army officers, refugees, postmen, railwaymen, students, and the unemployed. There were some who had genuinely suffered under the 1919 Soviet Republic, while others had joined the ranks of the “Whites” precisely to wipe away the memory of their role during the short-lived republic, and finally, there were the common criminals, who hid their acquisitive greed behind a convenient political screen. Between 1919 and 1921, the Association of Awakening Hungarians was found to have been responsible for 73 murders. The goods of the mostly Jewish victims were distributed by the association among the local members.¹³⁸ The military leaders of the association, authorized by various types of documents, could stop anyone and inspect their papers, as well as place them under arrest and confiscate their belongings. As Ödön Beniczky, the minister of the interior under the Friedrich government, said in parliament in 1921, a good deal of these actions came about “not from patriotic zeal, but from the simple desire to rob on the part of a band of organized criminals, hidden behind a grandiose

¹³⁶ Gratz, *A forradalmak kora*, 269; and Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 47.

¹³⁷ Following the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which was at war with Romania since April 1919, large parts of the country came under the control of the Romanian army. The Romanians withdrew from Budapest only in November 1919, and from the rest of the country in April 1920.

¹³⁸ Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 41.

facade of suppressing Communism.”¹³⁹ The Awakening Hungarians used university and school buildings for their meetings and in 1920 were tasked with keeping order around the universities, thus exacerbating the anti-Semitic mood already prevalent in the universities.¹⁴⁰ In Budapest, the Awakening Hungarians organized anti-Semitic terror attacks. They checked the papers of passersby on the street, while at night they beat up Jews.¹⁴¹ In the spring of 1920, these nighttime attacks became daytime attacks, and a string of “cafe-attacks” began in the Lipótváros district of the city, culminating in the deadly July 27, 1920 attack mentioned earlier.

By the autumn of 1920, the Awakening Hungarians were operating with more than a hundred local chapters nationwide. They established their own investigation unit, organized their own strikes, established a food distribution network, and received allocated housing. As well as beating up Jews, then, the Association of Awakening Hungarians undertook more and more activities that made it appear to be some sort of shadow government. Taking their cue from the civil service, the association created “departments,” among them an “investigative department,” a “department of food,” a “department of housing,” and so on. Following a decree by the “department of housing” in November, the Awakening Hungarians occupied the Lipótváros Casino and moved people displaced from territories lost after the war who had been living in railway cars into its rooms.

While the government opposed the actions of the Awakening Hungarians, the police response was for some time uncertain and ambiguous. Investigations dragged on and perpetrators were often not found. The Awakening Hungarians also found sympathizers within the police who helped get rid of evidence.¹⁴² The government’s response was weakened by the fact that, with regard to the Awakening Hungarians, there was no agreement between the cabinet and Horthy. In January 1920, Horthy received a delegation from the Awakening Hungarians, and asked them to help maintain people’s “proper behavior” once the peace terms were made public.¹⁴³ By doing so, Horthy himself contrib-

139 Minutes of the parliamentary session of July 15, 1921, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 9: 575.

140 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 59.

141 Gratz, *A forradalmak kora*, 317.

142 The membership figures of the Association of Awakening Hungarians varied through the years, but Tibor Zinner mentions a membership of several tens of thousands around 1920. Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 69.

143 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 55.

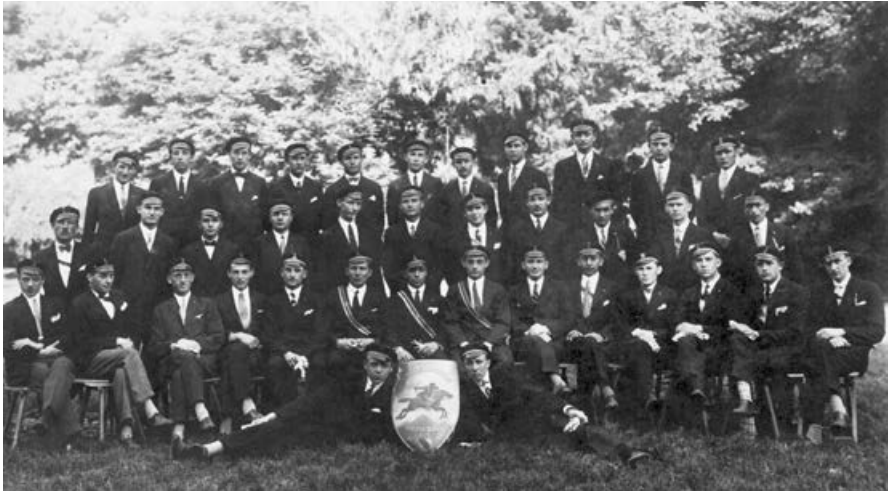


Figure 12. Members of the Turul Alliance, 1922. Source: Fortepan, 31756, István Fodor.

uted to the appearance of the Awakening Hungarians as some sort of law-enforcement body.

The government only cracked down on the Awakening Hungarians and other paramilitary organizations from the autumn of 1920. On November 11, in the presence of Pál Teleki, the police and army surrounded and then arrested the members of the terrorist detachments encamped at the Casino. The government suspended the Awakening Hungarians, and was prepared to respond with martial law in case of future attacks. Following the crackdown, membership began to drop and their illegal attacks became more infrequent—though they did not stop entirely. As late as 1922, they staged a terror attack on the Erzsébetváros Democratic Circle on Dohány Street, which claimed eight lives. In 1923, in protest against the Bethlen government's taking up foreign loans, they organized a bomb attack on the French embassy.¹⁴⁴

The Awakening Hungarians had no political vision, plans for reform, or political program. Their vision of the future was based on raw anti-Semitism with popular appeal. Dezső Szabó summed this up by saying: “We have only one goal—and that is to break the Jewish race down completely.”¹⁴⁵ At the

¹⁴⁴ Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 159 and 165.

¹⁴⁵ Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 60. Dezső Szabó's speech was made on March 28, 1920, in Debrecen, at the statutory meeting of the Association of Awakening Hungarians.

mass meetings of the Awakening Hungarians, the talk was of the expropriation and redistribution of Jewish property, and demands for the introduction of a “social, economic, and cultural ghetto system” for the Jews. They also decided on the restriction of Jewish participation in trade and industry.¹⁴⁶ In order to gain access to Jewish property, deputy László Budaváry recommended in the autumn of 1920 that “every Jew ought to leave the country within 24 hours.”¹⁴⁷

The Awakening Hungarians drew large crowds with their raw anti-Semitism focused on the expropriation of the Jews. But the mood of the crowd was translated into the language of everyday politics by the leading politicians who were members of the Awakening Hungarians. More than a tenth of the parliament of 1920, which is to say 26 deputies, were members of the leadership of the Awakening Hungarians, among them Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, the ideological mainstay of the numerus clausus law and its most influential propagandist.

Compared to the diffuse but effective anti-Semitism of the Awakening Hungarians, the extreme right-wing student organizations at the universities operated in a more targeted manner. True, the radical student organizations—such as the Turul Alliance for students of law and medicine; the Christian Socialist Centrum; the National Union of Hungarian University and College Students (MEFHOSZ), the umbrella group bringing together older student organizations; and Hungária at the University of Technology—could only mobilize a minority of students, with the exception of the Faculty of Medicine.¹⁴⁸ Thanks to their level of organization, however, they nonetheless had a good deal of influence, since most members of these organizations also belonged to the university public security battalions. The members of these battalions received regular remuneration from the state. Organizationally, they were placed under the leadership of the Budapest Public Security Headquarters and were used, among other things, to break strikes. Their membership stood at 2,400 in December of 1919, while the police force of Budapest had a strength of 3,200.

During the course of the year following the fall of the Soviet Republic, the student organizations kept the issue of the Jewish quota on the agenda with

146 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 44.

147 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 86.

148 For a time, MEFHOSZ served as the umbrella group for the other associations, with the exception of Hungária, but this unity ceased in the spring of 1920 when the Turul Alliance left. See Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 74–78, 96.



Figure 13. Ball of the Foederatio Americana (association of Catholic Hungarian university and college students), 1935. Source: Fortepan, 101583, Miklós Pápay.

street protests right up to the moment parliament passed the anti-Jewish law.¹⁴⁹ They prevented Jewish students from entering the universities and checked the papers of students in the corridors, ejecting those who were Jewish. They did not allow Jewish students to sit for their exams. It was enough for someone to merely look Jewish to fall under suspicion. In October 1919, the government closed the universities because of the anti-Semitic incidents and teaching only resumed the following spring.

Teaching resumed in the spring of 1920, but campaigning by the radical organizations enabled them to appoint two members to each of the five-member committees that vetted applicants and had oversight of admissions.¹⁵⁰ The anti-Semitic student organizations did not give up their anti-Jewish activities even after the racial clause was introduced. They organized a “guard” to ensure that the proportions stipulated by the law were respected and campaigned for the further strengthening of anti-Jewish measures.

149 Gábor Ujváry, “Egyetemi ifjúság a ‘neobarokk társadalomban’: A bajtársi szövetségekről,” *Valóság* 34, no. 5 (1991): 64–65.

150 In the spring of 1920, a total of 12 Jewish students were allowed to enroll at the Budapest university. Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 139.

Pál Teleki's role

A significant part of the political elite in power after 1919 agreed with the fundamental idea behind Kovács's "proportionality" program. At most, they disagreed on the educational and economic sectors in which they should introduce the proportionality principle, and the means by which the program should be pursued.

It is a generally accepted idea in Hungarian historiography that Pál Teleki supported the law as prime minister in order to put the brakes on the wave of anti-Semitic violence that followed the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and to restrict it "within the framework of the law." This, however, is but one side of the coin. For, in Teleki's thinking, the numerus clausus was not merely some forced concession to the far right, but a tool—in itself justified—of a broader-conceived social policy.

Teleki, like Prohászka, considered the emancipation of the Jews a historical error, the careless product of a period awash with prosperity. It was a mistake that now could only be corrected at the price of taking away legal rights. He thought that the Hungarian people had been "corrupted" by the Jews, that it was their fault that the Hungarian middle class had imploded during the post-war revolutions, and that this middle class had to be saved by means of anti-Jewish measures, above all the numerus clausus.¹⁵¹ Accordingly, he frequently expounded the program of "scientific anti-Semitism" from the summer of 1919 onwards, according to which the state had to restrict the rights of the Jews, and "if possible the advancement of the Jews in the professional sphere must be reduced proportionately."¹⁵² In his introductory speech as prime minister in the summer of 1920, he alluded to the "institutional defense of the interests of Christian society," or in other words, he made it clear that as the head of the Hungarian government, he would support the restriction of the Jews by legal means. It was actually as part of this rationale that he supported the introduction of the numerus clausus in higher education.¹⁵³

151 Cf. the speech by deputy János Esztergályos at the parliamentary session of February 21, 1928, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, vol. 9: 123; Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál*, 146–47; and Krisztián Ungváry, "Szobrot Teleki Pálnak?" *Népszabadság*, February 17, 2004.

152 *Pesti Élet*, September 15, 1919, 3; and Géza Malasits's recollections at the parliamentary session of February 16, 1928, in *Az 1927. évi január hó 25-ére hirdetett országgyűlés képviselőházának naplója*, 9: 91.

153 Minutes of the parliamentary session of July 22, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 4: 15.

Teleki made it clear that he thought the racial quota to be appropriate and necessary later on as well. When Prime Minister István Bethlen proposed the amendment of the racial quota in 1927, Teleki defended the racial clause even against him. There was only one aspect of the *numerus clausus* that he was willing to criticize and that was that it defined the area within which the Jews could be restricted too narrowly.¹⁵⁴ It applied only to higher education and did not take in other areas of life. But, he maintained, the higher education law in itself did not accomplish much, since it would not “solve the fundamental problems Christian youth are facing in terms of employment prospects.”¹⁵⁵ He added further, “We cannot think that by merely enacting a law, that law will afterwards act for us, and we can sit back because we’ve passed this law.”¹⁵⁶ Christian youth graduating from university should be able to expect the state to continue to care for them “in life,” and in order for that to happen, the distribution of power then existing in the economic field would have to be changed. “We ask nothing more for Christian society,” he said, “than space for ourselves according to our proportion and importance.”¹⁵⁷

In Teleki’s thinking, then, the *numerus clausus* was just one of the anti-Jewish measures—which were to be welcomed—that he expected with time to reorganize the ethnic balance of the division of property, to the detriment of the Jews. He also expected them to put an end to the preponderance of Jews in certain sectors of the economy, at the price of discriminating against them, if need be.¹⁵⁸ Another eleven years had to pass after the events of 1928 before Teleki, now prime minister for a second time, was able to help bring about an anti-Jewish measure that was more strict and comprehensive than ever before, the so-called Second Jewish Law. In connection with this law, he himself directed attention to the close links between the 1920 *numerus clausus* and the Jewish laws introduced from 1938 onwards, pointing out that the new laws had their roots in the tra-

154 Speech in the Upper House “On the amendment to the *numerus clausus*,” March 13, 1928. In Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, 188–205.

155 Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, 202.

156 Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, 190.

157 Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, 204.

158 Balázs Ablonczy, in his survey of Teleki’s political legacy, reached a similar conclusion. He attributed Teleki’s conviction in this regard to the events of 1918–19: “1918–19 matured in him the thought that there was—in his eyes—a middle class with alien origins, which was blocking the development of the Hungarian Christian middle class, or national elite. Therefore a competitive advantage had to be ensured over them, even at the price of discrimination.” Balázs Ablonczy, “Vázlat a magyar konzervatívizmusról,” *Confessio: A Magyarországi Református Egyház figyelője* 29, no. 4 (2005): 16.

dition created by the 1920 law. As he said, the *numerus clausus* created the conditions, “an intellectual and emotional mood” in Hungarian politics of which the new Jewish law was an almost “necessary” and “natural consequence.”¹⁵⁹ His biographer, Balázs Ablonczy, was right to conclude that though Teleki did not live to see the time of the deportations, he played an active role in starting that process in which “first the status, then the property, later the capacity to work, and finally the very existence of the Jews, became prized targets.”¹⁶⁰

It is therefore erroneous to claim that Teleki supported the *numerus clausus* law merely out of necessity.¹⁶¹ It is true that Teleki did not contribute to the debate preceding the law, nor did he take part in the final vote. But the reason for his absence was not that he objected to the law, but that he did not wish to compromise his international standing.

What is certain is that Teleki did not oppose the *numerus clausus* law. We can also exclude the possibility that Ottokár Prohászka, the leader of the governing party, faced opposition from Teleki when he decided to introduce his amendment on the racial clause. We must also note that Teleki would have had the opportunity to voice his disapproval, had he in fact disapproved of the racial clause. Further, Teleki strenuously defended the Jewish quota during the course of his later career. It is also true that there were several other anti-Semitic measures during Teleki’s premiership, even if they were not enshrined in law. Teleki approved that Jews who had immigrated to Hungary from 1914 onwards should be interned prior to their expulsion from the country, the withdrawal of licenses for Jewish-owned cinemas, and the ban on letters written in Hebrew being carried in the post. Finally, he also took part in the February 1921 decision of the Hungarian cabinet which stipulated that Jews—as unreliable elements—should be placed into separate army units.¹⁶²

159 Teleki, *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek*, 378–79.

160 Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál*, 411.

161 Konrád Salamon’s textbook for fourth-year secondary school students, which is widely used, claims that the *numerus clausus* was only supported by a far right “minority.” Teleki’s name does not even come up in this regard. “In September, the right-wing and far right minority in parliament pushed for a nationalities quota to be included in the *numerus clausus* then being prepared to reduce the overproduction of intellectuals. . . . The measure affected primarily Hungarians of Jewish origin negatively.” Konrád Salamon, *Történelem IV: A középiskolák IV. osztálya számára* (Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 1993), 56.

162 Ablonczy, *Teleki Pál*, 181. The Jewish units ultimately failed to materialize as the peace treaty forbade conscription.

In light of all this, we have to question the idea, so widespread in Hungarian historiography, that Teleki only introduced the government's *numerus clausus* law as a concession to the mood of the streets. It is true that the law was introduced at roughly the same time as the crackdown on extreme right paramilitaries, but this does not necessarily mean that there was a causal link between the two—in other words, that the paramilitaries were able to be brought under control because Teleki had introduced the *numerus clausus*. Teleki did not suppress the paramilitaries with the *numerus clausus* law, but with determined action from law enforcement agencies.

The coincidence of timing does not mean that Teleki's sole aim was to use the law to "disarm" the anti-Semitic mood of the masses after the revolutions and to "take the wind out of the sails" of the radical right.¹⁶³ It is true that the government committed itself to resolute steps to put an end to the attacks in the streets at the time when the law was introduced. This proved that the government could create order in the streets and do away with the anti-Semitic terror groups. But the same government certainly did not do everything in its power to rein in the anti-Semitic students running riot in front of the gates of the universities.¹⁶⁴ Quite the opposite: it made use of the radical student associations as allies. In November 1920, when parliament had to ratify the Trianon Peace Treaty, the government used the university police detachments as garrisons and entrusted them with the guarding of key locations, such as telephone exchanges and the post office.¹⁶⁵

The government did not get in the way of the attacks perpetrated by the anti-Semitic student groups. Twenty days after the *numerus clausus* law was passed, the minister of education had these words of encouragement to say to the anti-Semitic students: "Let the people with the crooked ears take note—only that which is Hungarian can exist in this country and the Jews should be prepared for when the trumpet of the awakening Hungarian people reduces their castles to dust."¹⁶⁶

163 In the words of Ignác Romsics: "Teleki tried to defuse and to some degree satisfy the anti-Semitic mood with the so-called *numerus clausus*." Romsics, *Bethlen István*, 124.

164 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 79. The Association of Awakening Hungarians was at the forefront of the campaigns taking place at the universities.

165 Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 182.

166 Report from the Győr meeting of the Christian Socialist Party, MTI News Release, October 11, 1920.

The Teleki government gave the rector of Budapest University no assistance in stopping the beatings of Jewish students. In October 1920, the rector tried to contact the minister of education on five separate occasions, but the government preferred to talk with the student organizations instead.¹⁶⁷ Nor did the police respond to a call from the prorector of the evacuated universities of Kolozsvár and Pozsony asking for assistance concerning the beatings of Jewish students.¹⁶⁸

Hungarian historians usually explain Teleki's behavior by saying that he needed to introduce the racial quota in order to strengthen his position at a moment when his government was preparing to crack down on the paramilitary groups. This explanation does not take into account the possibility that Teleki of his own free will—and without any special strategic purpose—supported the introduction of the racial quota because he fundamentally agreed with it. It does not take into account that Teleki, as premier, made use of the chaotic period leading up to the restoration of the rule of law in order to preside over the establishment of the institutional framework of political anti-Semitism. This would have been more difficult to do later, since the removal of the paramilitaries from the streets would have meant the disappearance of the sort of violent anti-Semitism that otherwise could have been used to justify the introduction of an anti-Jewish law as part of the postwar stabilization process. By putting an end to the attacks of the extreme right, then, Teleki also put an end to that obvious source of danger which would have served as justification for the introduction of the numerus clausus.

The interpretation which suggests that Teleki introduced the racial clause for the purpose of quieting the far right is further weakened by the fact that the passing of the law did nothing at all to restrict the far right. In fact, quite the opposite is true—the day after the law was passed, Károly Ereky launched a parliamentary attack on the government, saying that “nothing is being done to bring down the Jews.”¹⁶⁹ A few days later, the Association of Awakening Hungarians began

167 Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 171.

168 Zinner, *Az ébredők fénykora*, 173. Prorector Schneller's account of the joint council meeting of the universities of Kolozsvár and Pozsony, October 26, 1920; and minutes of the parliamentary session of October 26, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 6: 143.

169 “While the Association of Awakening Hungarians restrains the awakened crowds who even now wait with clenched fists and see that nothing is being done to bring down the Jews, it is making a huge effort on behalf of the country.” Minutes of the parliamentary session of September 22, 1920, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 5: 504.

making preparations for an anti-government coup.¹⁷⁰ “It has been confirmed,” Minister of the Interior Gyula Ferdinandy told the cabinet, “that in October, the organization in question [the Association of Awakening Hungarians] was actively considering the takeover of power by coup-like means.”¹⁷¹

The anti-Semitic student groups resumed their attacks from where they had left off before the law was passed. In October, they cordoned off the entrances to the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Medicine in Budapest several times, and checked the papers of anyone entering. They took away documents from Jewish students, tore them up, and beat and ejected many of the students from the university.¹⁷² Enrollment had to be suspended on October 14, as it had been the year before. The Árpád and Turul associations demanded that the government make a new law that would take away the “acquired rights” of the Jewish students to continue their education. They also demanded that the admissions boards contain delegates chosen by the right-wing student groups, and that the *numerus clausus* be extended to all higher education institutions.

The *numerus clausus* did not “take the wind out” of the sails of the far right, but rather swelled that wind, just like the Jewish laws of the 1930s. It served to strengthen with legal norms the political ideas behind the anti-Semitic street violence. It contributed to an explicit ideology and policy of racial defense at the universities directed against the Jews which was coming into force throughout this entire period.

István Bethlen and the *numerus clausus*

The dividing line between the conservative and radical right on the issue of the *numerus clausus* was far from as sharp as it could have been. Although it is true

¹⁷⁰ Ferdinandy, the minister of the interior, reported on the planned putsch at a cabinet meeting on November 19. The minister for trade recommended that the organization be disbanded, while the minister of education recommended only new leaders and a change of the basic principles. The foreign minister thought that “insofar as the government is not willing to stand up firmly against the organization, this will be interpreted as a retreat on the government’s part. Even if the organization restrains itself, we’ll be in exactly the same position again within a month as we are today.” In the end, the cabinet decided to suspend the Association’s *Aszód* branch. MNL OL, K27, Minutes of the Council of Ministers, November 19, 1920, 19–22. On November 5, the “foreign policy section” of the Association attacked the government saying it was preparing to ratify Trianon. Two days later, following a resolution from the Association’s “housing department,” its members occupied the Lipótváros Casino and moved displaced persons into its halls.

¹⁷¹ MNL OL, K27, Minutes of the Council of Ministers, November 19, 1920, 19.

¹⁷² Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság*, 169.

that the conservatives differed from the radicals on the question of the *numerus clausus*, the concerns of the former had less to do with the discriminatory, anti-Jewish content of the racial clause and more to do with the negative impact of the racial clause on Hungary's international standing. They believed that it was important to prevent Hungary from sacrificing other important goals on the "altar" of anti-Jewish legislation. These goals included obtaining foreign loans in order to finance economic stabilization and the ability to use foreign policy positions to try and mitigate the repercussions of the Trianon Peace Treaty. As Bethlen put it in 1923, the problem in Hungary was not that some political circles were voicing anti-Semitic demands, since the "Jewish question exists" in Hungary and "has to be dealt with."¹⁷³ However, in Bethlen's reasoning, it would be distinctly improper to allow the domestic political struggles over the Jewish question to cut across the country's foreign policy goals, for (in his words) "the nation has much greater problems than . . . the Jewish question," and the resolution of these greater problems cannot be made subordinate to any "second-tier" problems.¹⁷⁴

Bethlen's objection to the radical right was not, therefore, that they had fought for and labored to maintain the *numerus clausus*, but that they wanted to place their anti-Semitism at the center of Hungarian political life. They wanted to make it "the lone star dominating the firmament of Hungarian political life," and forgot about "the much greater, much more urgent, more grave problems which threaten the very existence of our nation, as if these latter were not the ones that should be the primary guides for the compass of Hungarian political life."¹⁷⁵ Bethlen thought that in dealing with these problems—which he considered more urgent than the Jewish question—it was better not to antagonize the Jews but to win them over as allies.

Bethlen's reasons for not supporting the *numerus clausus* were entirely pragmatic. He believed that obsessive anti-Semitism would paralyze Hungarian

173 Minutes of the parliamentary session of July 27, 1923, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 15: 176.

174 Speech by István Bethlen on the parliamentary session of July 23, 1923, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 15: 176. Bethlen summarized the foreign policy priorities as follows: to restore "balance" in the economy, establish economic ties with neighboring countries, "postpone" the question of reparations—or in other words, delay Hungary's pecuniary obligations, protect Hungarian minorities in the lost territories, and, finally, join the European international framework. See István Bethlen's speech on May 8, 1922, in Debrecen, in *Bethlen István gróf beszédei és írásai*, vol. 1 (Budapest: Genius, 1933), 236.

175 *Bethlen István emlékirata, 1944* (Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 1988), 128.



Figure 14. Prime Minister István Bethlen (center) with Minister of Foreign Affairs Lajos Walkó (second from right) in Geneva, 1926. Source: Fortepan, 217617, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

political life in its ability to solve problems. We have no record, however, of any moral objections to the Jewish quota on his part. What is known is his opinion that the numerus clausus was a tool that could help weaken the position of the Jews in Hungary until the members of the non-Jewish middle class, who “represent the appropriate race in historical tradition . . . will lead the nation once again.”¹⁷⁶ At any rate, it is a fact that Bethlen—while he increasingly distanced his government from political anti-Semitism throughout the 1920s—waited until after the League of Nations started proceedings against Hungary before repealing the racial clause. When he did amend the law in 1928, he approved his minister of education’s recommendations which served to perpetuate the exclusion of the Jews, albeit no longer on a racial basis but through express quotas on certain professions.

¹⁷⁶ Romsics, *Bethlen István*, 201. According to Romsics, Bethlen—though he never spoke publicly on the issue—“probably” agreed with the anti-Semitic measures in the numerus clausus. Romsics, *Bethlen István*, 113.

Bethlen was unequivocally opposed to any escalation of anti-Semitic measures beyond the *numerus clausus*, and in fact there were none during his decade-long premiership. After his appointment as prime minister, he stated on several occasions that Hungary's foreign policy and economic interests both dictated that anti-Semitism quiet down on the domestic political scene. As he said in parliament in 1921 when discussing the need of the rule of law for the economy to function: "equality before the law is a basis and guarantee of the life of the nation that must not be touched or interfered with."¹⁷⁷

Lajos Szabolcsi, the editor in chief of the Jewish weekly *Egyenlőség* (Equality), considered István Bethlen's policy of political and economic stabilization in the 1920s to be, from the point of view of the Jews, "distasteful" but successfully managed. In his 1942 memoirs, he dedicates space to explaining Bethlen's position regarding the racial clause. According to Szabolcsi, Bethlen simply "did not comprehend" the importance of the *numerus clausus* because "his vision, attuned to broader horizons, did not even pick up on the darkness that the *numerus clausus* represented for life here in Hungary."¹⁷⁸

"Count István Bethlen was no philosemite," Szabolcsi wrote.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, despite his political clear-sightedness, Bethlen's thinking about the Jewish question was surprisingly unsophisticated. Referring obliquely to the Jews in 1911, he spoke of a "poison" that under the name of "internationalism" or at other times under the name of "radicalism" was engaged in a "power struggle" with the Hungarian nation.¹⁸⁰ After the 1919 Soviet Republic, he believed, as mentioned earlier, that "a large part" of the Jews had taken part in the revolutions, disregarding the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Jews played no part in the events whatsoever.¹⁸¹ Bethlen ascribed the outbreak of the revolutions to the behavior of the Jews as well, without—as his biographer Ignác Romsics points out—taking into account how much the country's defeat had fanned

¹⁷⁷ April 19, 1921, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 9: 188.

¹⁷⁸ Later historians have a somewhat different view. Ignác Romsics, for example, believes that Bethlen did not repeal the racial clause for years because he generally agreed with it remaining in force. János Gyurgyák has a slightly different take on this, maintaining that Bethlen had committed himself to repealing the racial clause since the early 1920s, but he believed its repeal could not be carried through politically until 1927. However, Szabolcsi, Romsics, and Gyurgyák all agree in detecting ambivalence in Bethlen's words and deeds in connection with the racial clause, and they believe this ambivalence requires an explanation.

¹⁷⁹ Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő*, 333.

¹⁸⁰ Quoted in Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon*, 123.

¹⁸¹ Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon*, 123.

the tensions arising from social inequality and the dissatisfaction of national minorities, completely independently of the Jews.

When talking about Jews, Bethlen—like so many of his contemporaries—meant financially successful Jews, ignoring the poorer Jews who made up the majority of Jewish society: the stonemasons, tailors, skinners, shoemakers, bakers, waiters, junkmen, peddlers, haulers, and workers. Unlike Alajos Kovács, however, he attributed the financial success of the Jews not to racial characteristics but to historical processes, that is, that the Jews were forced into mercantile occupations because the other middle-class professions were closed to them.¹⁸²

Bethlen nonetheless thought that a certain amount of anti-Semitism had to be considered the norm in Hungarian society, so much so that “every good Hungarian” should be anti-Semitic to some degree.¹⁸³ The emphasis, however, was on the degree. “I am opposed to any kind of brash anti-Semitism,” he said in 1921. In this short statement, we find the full extent of Bethlen’s ambivalent rhetoric. His condemnation of “brash” anti-Semitism at the same time implies that one can live with the quieter kind.

Bethlen’s uniquely ambivalent way of speaking came through once more in his 1921 speech to parliament in which he indicated that he considered the Jews to be alien to Hungarian society, while at the same time saying that he condemned anti-Semitic politics. “I accept,” he said, “that a Jewish question currently exists in this country. But the solution to this question is for us to become economically the same without them as we are with them. This is in their interest as well, because at the very moment they are no longer indispensable, harmony will be restored.”¹⁸⁴

Despite his distant and indeed often negative attitude towards the Jews, Bethlen opposed all anti-Semitism that tried to place the Jewish question at the center of political life for pragmatic, or as he put it “sober” reasons. He believed that Hungary had far greater problems to solve than the Jewish ques-

182 See “Bethlen a zsidókérdésről” [Bethlen on the Jewish question], in Katzburg, *Zsidópolitika Magyarországon*, 234.

183 In his memoirs, he wrote when describing Gyula Gömbös: “Gömbös was an anti-Semite at heart, but no more anti-Semitic than any other good Hungarian in response to the times of Mihály Károlyi and Béla Kun, when everyone was disgusted by the behavior of a large part of the Jews.” In *Bethlen István emlékirata*, 128.

184 Minutes of the parliamentary session of April 19, 1921, in *Az 1920. évi február hó 16-ára összehívott nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 9: 189.

tion, and that putting it center stage weakened the country's ability to solve its major issues. As he said in parliament in 1923:

I do not deny that this question bears some topical importance. For I am of the opinion that a Jewish question exists in Hungary. . . . But I would most strenuously condemn our making this the touchstone of our political debate. This question should not be the one around which the different political camps form. For, if it's bad enough that this question has such topical importance then we should not make things worse by trying to split the political parties because of it. If that were to happen, parliament and the entire public life of the country would become a battleground between the anti-Semites on the one hand and those who want to oppose them by bringing Jewish interests into the foreground. This would be a great danger and a great pity from the point of view of the country's broader interests. . . . The fact that we don't want to make the Jewish question the central one, that we do not consider it to be the most important issue facing us does not mean that this party is divided in principle. For the nation has much graver problems than the Jewish question. The chopping up of its territory is a much graver problem, the defenseless position in which we find ourselves is a much graver problem, the pressure with which our neighbors are squeezing us is a much graver problem, as are the eradication of our Hungarian blood in the territory taken away from us and our worsening financial and economic position. These are the questions we must strive together to find solutions for, and we can agree to disagree on issues of secondary importance. . . . Because what we want is a national democracy and we want to protect the country from any form of extremes. We want to protect the country from the kind of shocks which the passions of something like anti-Semitism, on the one hand, and the unreflective revolutionary ideals of radicalism, on the other hand, carry with them.¹⁸⁵

Bethlen condemned Gyula Gömbös and the radical right in general for blowing the Jewish question out of proportion throughout this entire period. He held them heavily responsible for the preponderance of "damaging, hollow slogans and the kind of goals that, pushing aside day by day all other serious

185 Minutes of the parliamentary session of July 23, 1923, in *Az 1922. évi június hó 16-ára hirdetett nemzetgyűlés naplója*, vol. 15: 176.

problems, have obscured our perception of the true state of the country.”¹⁸⁶ He thought the radical right’s efforts to start a campaign of serious expropriation of Jewish property distinctly dangerous, because he believed that the Hungarian economy could not continue to function without the Jews.¹⁸⁷ Bethlen did not support the Jewish Laws of the 1930s, resigning from parliament the day after the Second Jewish Law was passed. In his farewell letter to his supporters, he wrote: “The prophets of our nation today are those who—in the holy name of the nation—eat Jews for breakfast, counts for lunch, and before retiring redistribute all the land and property that doesn’t belong to them. . . . The artificially created waves of radicalism must pass before common sense can have its say. Let us pray that it will not be too late, that when sobriety returns, the wounds and the damage done will not be irreparable.”¹⁸⁸

During the months of the German occupation, Bethlen considered the persecution of the Jews not only to be barbarian, but also a source of irremediable danger to “Christian Hungarian” society. In June 1944, distraught, he asked Horthy to make the government put an end to the raging anti-Semitism,

to that inhuman, idiotic, and brutal persecution of the Jews—unworthy of the Hungarian spirit—with which the current government has besmirched the name of Hungary in the eyes of the world; which has become the source of the most unbridled corruption, robbery, and theft, and into which a significant portion of the country’s intelligentsia have also sadly drifted. Though it will hardly be possible to remove this stain from our good name, we must nonetheless put an end to this barbarity. Otherwise, Christian Hungarian society itself will be incurably infected.¹⁸⁹

186 *Bethlen István emlékirata*, 123.

187 Katzburg, *Zsidópolitika Magyarországon*, 235.

188 Romsics, *Bethlen István*, 277.

189 Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs, eds., *Horthy Miklós titkos iratai* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1972), 460.