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Jewish Autonomy in Interwar Estonia and the Life Trajectories of Its Leaders

Abstract

This article tries to diversify the understanding of the Jewish experience in interwar Europe by analysing the work of Jewish Cultural Self-Government in interwar Estonia. Estonia's Jews were granted self-government in 1926, and the institution worked until the summer of 1940 when the Soviet Union occupied Estonia. The institution created a public law forum for the Estonian Jewish community where they could independently manage cultural and educational affairs. The authoritarian turn in spring 1934 meant increasing control over minority autonomies, but the institution survived until summer 1940 without any significant restrictions. Finally, by focussing on some members of the Jewish Cultural Council, the article discusses the possibility of using prosopographic methods to study the history of Jews of Estonia.

Introduction¹

In many ways, the Jews of Estonia have been “on the margins” – to borrow the book title of Anton Weiss-Wendt. The Jews of Estonia were only a tiny fraction of the broader Russian Jewry, they lived outside the Pale of Settlement and far from big metropolises. Moreover, the Estonian Jewish community was small: according to the census of 1922, 4,566 Jews lived in Estonia, while the overall population was only a little over a million.² This relative smallness is among the reasons why, as Ezra Mendelsohn observed in 1987 and what still largely holds today, the Estonian Jewish community “has received virtually no scholarly attention”.³ As a result, the history of Jews in Estonia tends to be only a sidenote to the broader history of Jews in Eastern Europe.⁴ However, despite this numerical minuteness, it has much to offer for broader Jewish history. Not only is the entire Jewish community of the state, due to its size, graspable for the scholar, but it also offers a case of a somewhat different Jewish experience in the interwar era of nation-states. What makes it exceptional among other countries is the autonomy granted by the state in 1926, which the Jews of Estonia enjoyed until Estonia lost its independence to the Soviet Union in 1940, and which was preserved in a restricted form even after the authoritarian coup in 1934. Many Jewish rights activists in interwar Europe praised it as an exemplary model to protect

1 This article was written during my term as a Junior Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), partially relying on the research that I have conducted in the project Non-Territorial Autonomy as Minority Protection in Europe. An Intellectual and Political History of a Travelling Idea, 1850-2000 (NTAutonomy) funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 758015.

2 1922 a. üldrahvalugemise andmed: Résultats du recensement de 1922 pour toute la République. Tome II, Tableaux synoptiques. Vihk 2: Üleriikline kokkuvõte: tabelid (Tallinn: Riigi Statistika Keskbüroo, 1924), 65.

3 Ezra Mendelsohn, “A Note on Estonian Jewry”, in *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 253.

4 Anton Weiss-Wendt, “Eestijuudi ajalugu ja juutide ajalugu Eestis”, *Vikerkaar*, no. 1–2 (2018): 148.

minorities and proposed its broader application. In 1928, in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* published in Berlin, Simon Dubnov, Nachum Goldmann, and Jacob Robinson maintained that Estonia had implemented the idea of autonomy most consistently. They argued that, in terms of how the autonomy operated, it was an example for other states.⁵ Furthermore, the European Nationalities Congress, the most important minority organisation in interwar Europe, advocated a broader application of the Estonian autonomy model.⁶

This article aims to analyse the Jewish Cultural Self-Government (in Estonian *Juudi Kultuuromavalitsus*, in Yiddish *idishe kultur-zelbstfarvaltung*) in interwar Estonia based on scrutiny of the minutes preserved in the Estonian National Archives. It will start by surveying the Jewish Cultural Self-Government's establishment, institutions, and functioning. After that, the article will analyse how the authoritarian turn in the mid-1930s influenced its work and how the autonomy was ultimately dissolved in the Sovietisation process in 1940. By analysing this specific case, the article aims to shed some light on the diversity of Jewish experiences in interwar Europe. It also aims to show that, together with an overarching trend of increasing discriminatory measures against minorities and Jews in East Central Europe, there was an overall climate towards minorities that was more favourable in some states, particularly in Estonia. More specifically, as this article argues, although the work of the Jewish self-government in Estonia was restricted under authoritarian rule, its daily functioning was hardly affected by this. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that, since the overall level of Antisemitism was relatively low in Estonia, it also had virtually no effect on the work of Jewish self-government.

The Estonian minority protection system, the 1925 Law on Cultural Self-Government, was based on the non-territorial autonomy model. According to this group rights model, individuals dispersed across the country would form a collective autonomous body. They would be registered (in different projects either voluntarily or involuntarily) in a central register and have the right to autonomously decide over their national-cultural affairs. The bodies would have the right to tax the registered members who would also have the right to benefit from what such autonomy would provide, for instance to send their children to autonomous schools. This model is usually juxtaposed with national-territorial autonomy, in which a specific territorial unit of the state is autonomous since the non-territorial autonomy model is not tied to a specific territorial unit of the state. There were intense debates over the model at the turn of and in the early twentieth century in the Habsburg and Romanov empires as it was proposed for ethnically diverse regions and diasporas.⁷

The Holocaust is the central theme in twentieth century Jewish history and, in one way or another, all members of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government in Estonia were affected by it. It is thus worth asking what happened with the leaders of Jewish autonomy in Estonia. As an epilogue, and as an attempt to bridge the Jewish autonomy in the interwar years and the experience of its leaders in the Holocaust and the Soviet system, the final part of this article zooms in on some members of the Jewish Cultural Council. From the roughly eighty individuals who were members of the

5 Simon Dubnow et al., "Autonomie", in *Encyclopaedia Judaica: Das Judentum in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Eschkol A.G, 1928), 762.

6 David Smith, Marina Germane, and Martyn Housden, "Forgotten Europeans: Transnational Minority Activism in the Age of European Integration", *Nations and Nationalism* 25, no. 2 (2018).

7 For the background to this, see, for example, John Coakley, "Introduction: Dispersed Minorities and Non-Territorial Autonomy", *Ethnopolitics* 15, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 1–23. For an overview of the Austrian context, see, for example, Ian Reifowitz, "Nationalism, Ethnic Identity, and Jews in the Socialist Ideology of Otto Bauer", *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 30, no. 2 (2017): 147–155.

council during the years of its existence, I have chosen a small group of individuals. The selection of each of these individuals is based mainly on the two following criteria: that they represent one of the trajectories that other members of the council – or the Jews of Estonia in general – also experienced, and that there is enough information to trace them through these years. Based on this information, the last section of the article explores three broader life trajectories: murder in the Holocaust, emigration to Palestine, and survival in remote areas of the Soviet Union and return to Estonia. These trajectories are sketched as broader stories rather than detailed individual biographies. As such, this approach is an attempt to tell the story of the members of the Cultural Council drawing on group biography.⁸ It also helps to get a more personified account of the tragedy of the Holocaust, which is often told as a story of nameless victims.⁹ Such an approach on groups (or, in future studies, even focussing on the entire Jewish population) rather than on an individual can be fruitful for studying the Jews of Estonia. There are currently virtually no academic biographies of Jews from Estonia, and there are potentially only very few Jewish individuals from Estonia about whom there are sufficient sources – and whose life would have broader relevance – for studies in the form of a biographical monograph. Group biographies or prosopographic studies could be thus fruitful for understanding Jewish experiences in Estonia and helping to bridge this discrepancy.

The Autonomy Law in Estonia

The historical Jewish experience with autonomy can be traced back several centuries. Estonian Jewish historian Abe Liebman, whose life and activity will be treated later in this article, argued in 1937 that Jewish autonomy emerged as early as in ancient Babylonia and remained alive as an idea and practice throughout the centuries.¹⁰ In the modern era, it was at the beginning of the twentieth century when the demand for Jewish autonomy started circulating among Russian Jews. Non-territorial autonomy was theoretically the most suitable autonomy arrangement for Jews because, due to their dispersion, there was no bigger Jewish territorial unit where they would have numerically dominated. In 1897, Simon Dubnov was one of the first advocates of autonomy for Jews in Russia.¹¹ This idea started circulating widely: Dubnov advocated it in his liberal party, the Folkspartey, and Vladimir Medem did so in the Jewish Labour Bund.¹² This form of autonomy found increasing resonance in national and political movements and, by 1917, all major Russian parties on the political left – except for the Bolsheviks – adopted non-territorial autonomy into their programmes.¹³ Apart from experiments with autonomy, such as Jewish relief

8 For methodological discussions, see, for example, Krista Cowman, "Collective Biography", in *Research Methods for History*, ed. by Lucy Fare and Simon Gunn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 85–103.

9 Anton Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins: Essays on the History of Jews in Estonia* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 147.

10 Abe Liebman, "Ajaloolised ja kultuurilised eeldused juudi koguduste tekkimiseks ja arendamiseks Eestis", Master's thesis (Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 1937), 127–133.

11 Simon Rabinovitch, *Jewish Rights, National Rites: Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 2–3, 17–18; Roni Gechtman, "Jews and Non-Territorial Autonomy: Political Programmes and Historical Perspectives", *Ethnopolitics* 15, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 69–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1101843>.

12 Gechtman, "Jews and Non-Territorial Autonomy", 73–77.

13 Sara Barbieri, "National Minorities in Post-Revolutionary and Soviet Russia (1917–1932): Theoretical Framework and Institutional Arrangements", PhD dissertation (Università degli Studi della Repubblica di San Marino, 2011), 50–56.

efforts during the First World War and the attempt to convene an all-Russian Jewish Congress in 1917, non-territorial Jewish autonomy was never implemented in Russia.¹⁴ The powers of self-government that different advocates of Jewish autonomy proposed varied but, in broad terms, national-cultural affairs such as schooling and cultural societies (hence the name “national-cultural autonomy” in Russian discourse) stood at the heart of these powers. Some advocates suggested that social welfare questions and emigration to Palestine should also be part of the powers of autonomy.

Achieving legal arrangements that enabled the autonomy of minorities in independent Estonia was a long process, yet this promise was part of the foundational documents of independent Estonia. Following extensive debates over non-territorial autonomy model in 1917, the Independence Manifesto of 24 February 1918 – with which Estonia declared itself independent from Russia – included this as a core promise for minorities: “[a]ll ethnic minorities, the Russians, Germans, Swedes, Jews, and others residing within the borders of the republic, shall be guaranteed the right to their cultural autonomy.” However, the German occupation started only a day after the declaration, on 25 February 1918, and thus it was initially a mere symbolic declaration impossible to implement practically. The actual discussion over implementing minority autonomy started in the spring of 1919 in the Estonian Constituent Assembly. This body drafted the constitution for the state, which specified the promise of autonomy. Paragraph 21 of the constitution declared the following: “[m]embers of minority nationalities living within the borders of Estonia may set up autonomous institutions in their national cultural and welfare interests, as long as they do not conflict with the interests of the state.” However, it took several years to agree on the specificities of the autonomy and to overcome the opposition among some Estonian politicians, most notably Jaan Tõnisson of the national-liberal Estonian People’s Party. Finally, on 12 February 1925, the Estonian parliament passed the law enabling minorities to establish self-government, which allowed all minorities with more than 3,000 citizens to set up their autonomy.¹⁵ The powers of these bodies were limited to cultural affairs, most importantly schooling but also, more broadly, the organisation of the cultural life of the minority. A closer look into the institutions based on Jewish self-government is presented later in this article. It was mainly the Baltic Germans, the historical cultural, political, and economic elite in the Baltic provinces, who campaigned for the Estonian minorities law. Two minorities put the provisions to use: the Germans established autonomy in 1925, and the Jews did so in 1926. Many scholars have stressed that this law was one of the best examples of non-territorial autonomy and of Otto Bauer’s and Karl

14 Rabinovitch, *Jewish Rights, National Rites*, 167–247.

15 Achieving the legal provisions have been analysed in numerous studies. See, for example, Kaido Laurits, *Saksa Kultuuromavalitsus Eesti Vabariigi 1925–1940: monograafia ja allikad* (Tallinn: Rahvusarhiiv, 2008); Kari Alenius, “The Birth of Cultural Autonomy in Estonia: How, Why, and for Whom?”, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 4 (1 December 2007): 445–462; Michael Garleff, *Deutschbaltische Politik zwischen den Weltkriegen: die parlamentarische Tätigkeit der deutschbaltischen Parteien in Lettland und Estland* (Bonn-Bad Godesberg: Verlag Wissenschaftliches Archiv, 1976); David James Smith and John Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State: National Cultural Autonomy Revisited*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory 44 (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); and Martyn Housden, *On Their Own Behalf: Ewald Ammende, Europe’s National Minorities and the Campaign for Cultural Autonomy 1920–1936* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014). The law was published in numerous translations in international outlets, such as “Law on the Cultural Autonomy of Racial Minorities in Esthonia”, *League of Nations – Official Journal*, no. 6 (1925): 788–791, and “Das Gesetz über die Kultur-Selbstverwaltung der völkischen Minderheiten in Estland”, *Zeitschrift für osteuropäisches Recht*, no. 1 (1925): 114–121. See also my doctoral dissertation which deals extensively with the intellectual genesis of the minority rights system in Estonia.

Renner's – the foremost theoreticians of non-territorial autonomy – ideas in practice.¹⁶

There were hardly any other examples of fully functioning non-territorial autonomies in interwar Europe, and historians have offered several possible explanations for Estonian exceptionalism in this regard. It was mainly Baltic-German members of parliament who actively fought for achieving this law, and as a result, it was largely drafted according to their needs and not, for instance, according to the interests of the more territorial Swedish minority.¹⁷ It is mainly because of this German persistence in advocating autonomy that Anton Weiss-Wendt has argued that the law was introduced in order to appease the Baltic landowners whose property had been nationalised by the Estonian government. According to this explanation, the Jews were only “unintended beneficiaries” of this arrangement.¹⁸ Other scholars, such as Kari Alenius, have put forward a more multi-causal explanation, mentioning among other reasons the experience that Estonians had had in being a minority in the Russian Empire, and that autonomies were without significant political and economic powers and thus seen as relatively harmless.¹⁹ However, it would be misleading to consider the Jews as having passively taken advantage of this arrangement. The Jews had been the most important advocates of non-territorial autonomy in late tsarist and revolutionary Russia; the Jews of Estonia also actively voiced their interest in non-territorial autonomy to the Estonian authorities and thus had an impact on the overall political discourse, demonstrating also that the minorities had an interest in a non-territorial arrangement.²⁰

Jewish Autonomy in Estonia

The territories that made up the Republic of Estonia in 1918 were outside the Pale of Settlement, and the Jewish community in Estonia was thus relatively new. It had largely formed on the basis of former soldiers who remained in Estonia in the nineteenth century, and gradually as the representatives of different professions moved to Estonia. In the interwar years, Jews were the most urbanised ethnic group in Estonia, as 98 per cent of them lived in towns and cities. As an urban group, they were socio-economically active in industry as owners, in medicine, but also in commerce and small enterprises. Furthermore, the Jewish students had a remarkably high share in the student body of some fields such as law, economics, and medicine at the University of Tartu.²¹ Linguistically, the Jews of Estonia were mainly speakers of Yiddish and Russian, but also of German and Estonian.²² Politically, the Jews of Estonia gravitated towards Zionism and had little support for Orthodox Jewish parties.²³

16 Coakley, “Introduction”; David J. Smith, “Estonia: A Model for Inter-War Europe?”, in *Non-Territorial Autonomy in Divided Societies: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. John Coakley (London: Routledge, 2017), 89–104.

17 Mart Kuldkepp, “The Estonian Swedish National Minority and the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Law of 1925”, *Nationalities Papers*, 31 May 2022, 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.86>.

18 Anton Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins: Essays on the History of Jews in Estonia* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 69–93.

19 Alenius, “The Birth of Cultural Autonomy in Estonia”.

20 I will further elaborate on the genesis of the law in my dissertation.

21 Tõnu Parming, “The Jewish Community and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Estonia, 1918–1940”, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 10, no. 3 (1979).

22 Anu Põldsam, “Juudi keeletulist Eestis”, in *Eesti Evangeelne Luterlik Kirik 100: Kirik, teoloogia, mälestused*, ed. Atko Rimmel and Priit Rohtmets, vol. 26, EELK Usuteaduse Instituudi toimetised, (Tallinn and Tartu: EELK Usuteaduste Instituut, 2017), 222.

23 Anton Weiss-Wendt, *Murder Without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 7.

In the early days of Estonian independence, in 1919, the Jews of Estonia drafted their autonomy programme and tried to influence politicians to pass an autonomy law.²⁴ After the parliament passed the law, in the early summer of 1926, Estonia's Jews decided to establish autonomy. The elections for the highest organ of self-government, the Jewish Cultural Council, took place in May 1926, and the Council convened in early June. The nature of this institution will be discussed later in this article. The Council passed a univocal decision to establish Jewish Self-Government, and on 16 June the Estonian government approved the decision and declared the work of Jewish Self-Government to be opened.²⁵

The historian Abe Liebman has argued that establishing Jewish autonomy was possible not only due to the deep historical roots of Jewish autonomism, but also because the Jews of Estonia managed to swiftly readjust from being a part of the broader Russian Jewry to being a Jewish community of a small Estonian state, as well as to politically mobilise.²⁶ This happened thanks to the active work of some leading figures of the Jews of Estonia. One of the main campaigners for Jewish autonomy was Hirsh Aisenstadt (1885–1963). While managing an oil company was his main activity, already in 1919 he propagated Jewish autonomy²⁷ and, after its establishment, was its leader until its dissolution during the Soviet occupation. Politically, Aisenstadt was a Zionist but, as the head of Jewish self-government, he tried to moderate between the opponents and supporters of Zionism.²⁸ Another figure who was active in the early committees establishing autonomy was Afroim Rochlin (1886–1964). In later years, he was the leader of the oppositional Yiddishist faction in the Cultural Council. Also for him, work in the Jewish self-government was largely voluntary since his main occupation was dentistry.

After the first meeting of the Council, work started to set up the institutions.²⁹ Estonian Jews had initially proposed an autonomy model whereby the existing Jewish religious communities (*kehilla*, *obshchina*) would have been modernised and secularised and united into an autonomy body – something similar to the autonomy in Lithuania.³⁰ However, through parliamentary discussions, Estonia was designed as a secular state. Thus, the powers of minority autonomies, which were essentially bodies of public law integrated into the state apparatus, did not include religious affairs. Jewish religious communities therefore remained separate entities outside of the structure of Jewish self-government.

One of the core elements of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government was the national register (in Estonian *rahvusnimekiri*, in Yiddish *natsional kataster* or *reshime*). The Estonian constitution had determined that each individual was free to determine his or her ethnic belonging. Based on this principle, registering with the national list was the free decision of an individual. Registration meant obligations such as paying taxes to the self-government budget, but also benefits such as the possibility to send one's children to self-government schools. In the 1930s, Haia Itskovits (1883–1955),

24 Smith and Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State*, 33.

25 "Eesti Vabariigi Juudi I kultuur-nõukogu avamiskoosolek protokoll", 6 June 1926, Estonian National Archives (ERA) 40.1.6885, 26–27.

26 Liebman, "Ajaloolised ja kultuurilised eeldused", 106–120.

27 Smith and Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State*, 33.

28 For a short biography, see Anna Verschick, "Eisenstadt, Hirsch", *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed 25 November 2021, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Eisenstadt_Hirsch. See also Aisenstadt, Hirsh, Estonian Cultural History Archives (EKM EKLA) f. 193, m. 58: 19.

29 For an overview of the structure of (German) self-government, see David J. Smith, "Estonia: A Model for Inter-war Europe?", 89–104; Laurits, *Saksa Kultuurimavalitsus Eesti Vabariigis 1925–1940*, 69–85.

30 For Lithuanian Jewish autonomy see Šarūnas Liekis, *A State within a State?: Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania 1918–1925* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2003).

a member of the Cultural Council and Cultural Government, was responsible for maintaining the national list of the self-government. She had won her seat in the Council by running on the same Zionist list as Aisenstadt. In the task of administering the national list, she was assisted by Malka Silberstein (1903–1941; until 1935 Schlieffstein).³¹ Silberstein had won a seat in the Jewish Cultural Council in 1932 and ran on the same list as Itskovits. Being a lawyer (and only one of the few practising female lawyers in interwar Estonia) by training, she also provided legal advice for the self-government. Silberstein's fate will be traced later in this article.

Regarding the national register, the Jewish autonomy managed to encompass the vast majority of the Jewish citizens of Estonia. In 1935, there were 3,305 Jewish citizens in Estonia.³² At the same time, slightly fewer citizens were registered in the autonomy list: 3,156.³³ The Jewish autonomy thus managed to reach a very high participation rate, around 96 per cent. However, even a small number of individuals who did not register or deregistered had a financial impact on the autonomy in terms of a loss of income from taxes. Several families had not registered or deregistered in order to be able to send their children to other schools, for instance, German or Estonian schools.³⁴ The self-government tried various measures to encourage people to register, such as by organising campaigns in which they personally approached individuals and tried to convince them to register.³⁵

Registered Jewish citizens elected the Jewish Cultural Council (in Estonian *Juudi Kultuur nõukogu*, in Yiddish *idisher kultur-rat*), consisting of twenty-seven members with a term of three years. The Council, or the “Jewish Parliament”, as the Jews of Tallinn liked to call it,³⁶ was the “legislative” arm that decided on all major issues. These included electing members of the Cultural Government, members of the cultural curatoria, and approving the budget.

The Cultural Government (in Estonian *Juudi Kultuurvalitsus*, in Yiddish *idische kultur farvaltung*) was the executive organ of the autonomy; it consisted of seven members and was headed by the president. It was Hirsh Aisenstadt, the businessman who was the leading advocate of autonomy, who held the position of president throughout the existence of autonomy. Whereas the Cultural Council convened when necessary, sometimes only after several months, the Cultural Government met more often, managed day-to-day affairs, and implemented the decisions of the Council. All the positions of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government were unsalaried and entirely voluntary. Only the secretary and assistant secretary were remunerated positions.³⁷ As some of the individuals mentioned above demonstrated, all active members of Jewish Cultural Self-Government did this work in addition to their main field of activities.

In East Central Europe, the leading pioneers and propagators of Jewish autonomy and democratisation before the First World War were mainly leftist and liberal pro-Yiddish circles. Paradoxically, in later years, in Jewish institutions in Ukraine, Lithuania, or Latvia, it was various Zionist and Orthodox forces who managed to

31 Juudi kultuurvalitsuse protokoll nr 24, 13 September 1932, ERA.40.1.6902, unpaginated.

32 American Jewish Committee, *The Jewish Communities of Nazi-Occupied Europe* (New York: H. Fertig, 1982), section on Estonia, 5.

33 Revideerimisprotokoll, 30, 31 July ja 1, 2 August 1935, ERA.40.1.6908; Rahvusnimekirja revideerimise protokoll, 16 November 1933, ERA.40.1.6903, unpaginated.

34 Smith and Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State*, 62–63.

35 Juudi kultuur nõukogu protokoll nr 09 (39) 2 October 1939, ERA.40.1.6913, unpaginated; Kultuurvalitsuse protokoll nr 7, 13 October 1938, ERA.40.1.6914, unpaginated; Kultuurvalitsuse protokoll nr 12, 14 December 1938, ERA.40.1.6914, unpaginated.

36 “Die jüdische Autonomie in Estland”, *Die Neue Welt*, 1 March 1929.

37 Revideerimisprotokoll, 30, 31 July ja 1, 2 August 1935, ERA.40.1.6908.

outmanoeuvre the Yiddishists.³⁸ A similar trend took place in Estonia as it was the Zionist and pro-Hebrew forces that dominated the institutions. Already after the first elections, the Zionists won a majority with fifteen seats in the Council.³⁹ Over the years, they increased their support, and in the elections to the third Cultural Council in 1932, the Zionists achieved 75 per cent of the votes and gained twenty seats out of twenty-seven.⁴⁰

This tension also emerged in the Cultural Council, since schooling was the most important field that the autonomy dealt with. The pro-Zionist and pro-Hebrew majority in the Cultural Council started implementing its policies, which triggered a harsh ideological fight over language. The fight between the supporters of Yiddish and those of Hebrew, which Jews of other states fought, lasted in the Estonian Jewish autonomy institution during the entire duration of its existence. The opening session of the Cultural Council decided that Hebrew would be the main language of instruction: existing schools had to gradually switch to Hebrew, and new schools had to teach only in Hebrew.⁴¹ Yiddishists, in turn, put forward an agenda which was hard to compromise with the agenda of the supporters of Hebrew, as the former set full instruction in Yiddish as their goal.⁴² Although the overarching aim was to move towards teaching in Hebrew, the language of instruction varied by school and level and classes were taught in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian and, to a smaller extent, in Estonian.⁴³

The fight took many forms: in election campaigns, on the pages of newspapers, Yiddishists occasionally boycotting Council meetings, and the handing of petitions to state institutions and Estonian newspapers in the hope of garnering support. However, there were also moments when tensions eased, as occasionally someone from the Yiddishist faction was co-opted into the Cultural Government. Afroim Rochlin, the leader of this faction, often took up such a role. Ultimately, the parties reached an agreement and, starting from the 1931/1932 school year, there were parallel classes at the Tallinn Jewish Gymnasium.⁴⁴ While this was an important moment of détente, the tensions never fully disappeared. Aisenstadt, the head of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government, was a Zionist and a supporter of the Hebrew language, but at the same time tried he to maintain a balance between these two factions and hold the community together.

These ideological conflicts concerned matters far broader than just the question of the language of instruction. Leftist advocates of Yiddish advocated far broader powers of autonomy, including social welfare issues, and proposed creating Jewish vocational schools and providing assistance for Jewish workers.⁴⁵ Zionists, in turn, framed the very autonomy experiment in the broader Zionist project. Not only did they explicitly state that Jewish autonomy in Estonia was part of a broader Zionist project, but they also participated in various Zionist organisation meetings and sent official delegates elected by the Cultural Council. For instance, one such meeting was

38 Joshua M. Karlip, *The Tragedy of a Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 10, 163, 306.

39 Poale Zion won one, Yiddishists seven, and non-affiliated candidates for seats. "Di organe fun kultur-zelbstfarvaltung", *Biuletten fun der idisher kultur-zelbstfarvaltung in esti*, no. 1 (1927): 3–4; cf. Pöldsam, "Juudi keeletülist Eestis", 225. In this article I use the term "Yiddishist" that the faction itself used and which is used in the sources.

40 Juudi III kultuurnõukogu koosoleku protokoll nr 1. 3 July 1932, ERA.40.1.6901, unpaginated.

41 Pöldsam, "Juudi keeletülist Eestis", 226.

42 Ibid., 228.

43 Ibid., 226.

44 Ibid., 230.

45 Juudi III kultuurnõukogu koosoleku protokoll nr 1. 3 July 1932, ERA.40.1.6901, unpaginated.

the World Jewish Congress in Geneva in 1936.⁴⁶ These steps raise the question of the powers of autonomies. When the lawmakers passed the law, they limited the powers of minority autonomies only with cultural affairs and political affairs were left for the state parliament. Although sending official delegates to political organisations and participating in such efforts are arguably far from apolitical, the state, under administrative supervision procedure, never raised that question. The Yiddishist opposition, however, was critical of such moves and thought that autonomy had lost its nature as a public law body and had been turned into a tool of Zionists.⁴⁷

The Impact of Authoritarian Rule

The authoritarian coup d'état by Konstantin Päts, one of the leading politicians from the conservative agrarian party, and Johan Laidoner, the commander-in-chief of the Estonian armed forces during the Estonian War of Independence, in March 1934 meant increasing restrictions for minority autonomies, including Jewish autonomy. Although Päts argued that with his coup he had saved the state from threat of the radical Estonian War of Independence Veterans' League, it actually meant strict limitations on basic democratic rights, and parliament did not convene and Päts ruled with his decrees.⁴⁸

Regarding the restrictions on minority self-governments, however, a gradual departure from liberal minority protection had started already earlier, when the state limited the right of autonomies to issue decrees, introduced restrictions on determining nationality, and started observing more closely the content of teaching and, in 1933, temporarily suspended the work German Cultural Council due to the spread of National Socialism.⁴⁹ More specifically, during the democratic years, the state limited the right of ethnic Estonians to declare themselves as Germans.⁵⁰ In 1934, new, stronger Estonianisation and essentialising measures meant that citizens whose ancestors had been official residents of municipalities (*vallakogukond*) with an Estonian majority were automatically considered to be Estonians. Furthermore, in a mixed family, when a father was Estonian, the children were automatically deemed Estonians. If the mother was Estonian, then the agreement of the parents determined the child's ethnic belonging.⁵¹

In addition to restrictions on determining ethnic belonging, several new restrictive measures were introduced. The Ministry of Interior Affairs carried out unannounced inspections (*revideerimine*) of autonomies with the aim of checking if documentation was kept correctly and in accordance with laws and norms. The Jewish Cultural Self-Government was inspected by the ministry officials in the summer and autumn of 1935. Officials later provided a list of changes that the Jewish autonomy had to implement, mainly technical aspects such as the better organ-

46 Juudi IV kultuurnõukogu koosoleku protokoll nr 31 (1). 12 July 1936, ERA.40.1.6909.

47 Juudi kultuurvalitsuse protokoll 10, 21 June 1931, ERA.40.1.6900, 4.

48 For a fresh study on authoritarianism see Liisi Veski, „Towards Stronger National Unity: Statist Ideas in Estonian Nationalism during the “Era of Silence” (1934–1940)”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, no. 0 (16 March 2023): 1–23.

49 Smith and Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State*, 93–97.

50 *Ibid.*, 94.

51 Triin Tark, *Rahvuskuuluvuse tähendus riigi ja üksikisiku perspektiivist Eestist Saksamaale 1941. aastal ümberasunute elulooliste andmete põhjal*, *Dissertationes historiae Universitatis Tartuensis* 53 (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2021), 139–140.

isation of finances and the national list.⁵² Autonomies were renamed so that the term “minority” was included in the official name (*Eesti Vabariigi Juudi Vähemusrahvuse Kultuurivalitsus*), stressing the minority status. New rules also affected language policy. Until the authoritarian years, the official letterhead and stamp of Jewish Cultural Self-Government were in three languages: Estonian, Yiddish, and Hebrew. In November 1935, the Ministry of Interior Affairs instructed the Jewish Cultural Self-Government that multilingual letterheads and stamps were not in accordance with the language law and demanded them to be changed only to Estonian.⁵³ Thereon, the Jewish Self-Government had to use letterheads and stamps in the Estonian language on its official documents. Although these changes may seem merely symbolical, they deprived autonomies of important symbolical power, which bears particular importance in the political context. Stricter language policies also affected internal documentation during the authoritarian years. For instance, the Tartu Cultural Curatorium started to compile minutes also in Estonian.⁵⁴

To a certain extent, the authoritarian state structures offered some new opportunities. For instance, in 1937, the Jews of Estonia managed to send their delegate Heinrich Gutkin (1879–1941), a member of the Jewish Cultural Council and the chairman of the Jewish Co-Operative Bank, to the new National Assembly (*Rahvuskogu*).⁵⁵ This body was convened by Päts to draft a new constitution that would give a legal basis for his authoritarian-corporatist regime. Paradoxically, during the work of this body, the political status of the Jews as a group was highest than ever before since, in the democratic years, due to their smallness, they were unable to win seats in the parliament and, in the parliaments formed after the new constitution, it was the German minority that took the minority seat.

Overall, the restrictions introduced for minority self-governments were a part of broader Estonianisation campaign and not directed specifically against the Jews. To a far larger extent, the mindset of interwar Estonian politicians was anti-German and they tried to counter the appeal of German culture since Germans, the former noble elite with a strong kin-state, were seen as a potential threat. In comparison with other minority protection and autonomy arrangements in the Baltic region, in Estonia the minority self-governments continued their work and were preserved under the authoritarian regime. The work of Jewish self-government was affected by the new system, but not considerably, and the archival documents of Jewish self-government do not hint at a greater interference by the state in the daily work of the self-government. As a comparison, in Lithuania, Jewish autonomy was abolished in 1925, even before the end of democracy.⁵⁶ In Latvia, Kārlis Ulmanis abolished the schooling autonomy only a couple of months after the coup, in July 1934.⁵⁷

52 “Meie vähemusrahvuste asjaajamise heideti pilku”, *Uus Sõna*, 16 August 1935; Revideerimisprotokoll, 30, 31 July ja 1, 2 August 1935, ERA.40.1.6908, unpaginated; Protokoll Tartu juudi vähemusrahvuse kultuurhoolekogu revideerimisest, 18 September 1935, ERA.40.1.6908, unpaginated.

53 Omavalitsuste osakond Juudi vähemusrahvuse kultuurvalitsusele, 18 November 1935, ERA.40.1.6908, unpaginated.

54 Tartu Cultural Curatorium minutes from 1935, ERA.2273.1.2; Narva Curatorium minutes, 1935–1939, ERA.2278.1.7.

55 Juudi Kultuurivalitsus Siseministeeriumile, 14 January 1937, ERA.40.1.6909, 255–256; “Riigivanema käskkiri nr 3 26. jaanuaril 1937”, *Riigi Teataja Lisa*, no. 10 (2 February 1937): 481.

56 Liekis, *A State within a State?*, 105.

57 Smith and Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State*, 99.

Antisemitism and Autonomy

There is a general scholarly consensus that there was no considerable Antisemitism in Estonia during the interwar years.⁵⁸ Scholars have stressed that, among the reasons for this lack of strong Antisemitism, was the small size of the Jewish community in Estonia, a lack of strong Jewish economic influence, and the pragmatic approach of Estonians.⁵⁹ Also, the Jewish autonomy documents confirm the low level of Antisemitism because, in the minutes of the Jewish Self-Government, Antisemitism rarely emerges as a topic. Among these rare occasions when self-government dealt with the topic were when the Jewish Cultural Government decided to turn to the Estonian newspapers in 1928 due to the fact that, in crime reports, the nationality of Jewish criminals was always stressed, whereas the nationality of non-Jewish criminals was never mentioned.⁶⁰ Furthermore, occasionally the Cultural Government and Cultural Council discussed Antisemitic publications and their countermeasures against them and, once, in the spring of 1940, representatives of the Cultural Government visited Prime Minister Jüri Uluots and handed over a memorandum on Antisemitic publications and organisations.⁶¹

Also, the most important radical right-wing political movement in interwar Estonia, the Vabs (*Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit*, Estonian Veteran's League), did not express any Antisemitism. Until Hitler seized power, their publications did not mention Jews and, after this, they occasionally expressed their disapproval of German anti-Jewish policies.⁶² This is in stark contrast with the analogous but more extreme nationalist movement in Latvia. The Latvian *Pērkonkrusts*, an ultranationalist fascist political organisation, relied in its ideology on *völkisch* nationalism, and Antisemitism formed its core.⁶³ In its activities, it was more militantly Antisemitic and called for discriminating against Jews, boycotting their businesses, and also physically attacking Jews on the streets.⁶⁴

The forms of Antisemitism present in Estonia included occasional Antisemitic publications, but also Antisemitic sentiments among politicians and military officers. Some Antisemitic publications appeared but only for a handful of issues, and none of these managed to survive over a longer period of time. These publications reproduced common othering Antisemitic tropes, such as attacking the Jews for being moneylenders, bankers, Marxists, and communists, or untrustworthy and immoral persons.⁶⁵ In the early 1920s, there was generally a sceptical attitude towards Jews in society and among the political elite, which was sometimes also reflected in official policies, such as the monitoring of Jewish non-citizens by the state

58 Kari Alenius, "Estonian Anti-Semitism in the Early 1920s", *Zeitschrift Für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung/Journal of East Central European Studies* 54, no. 1 (2005): 36–55; Andres Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*, Studies in Russia and East Europe (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 73; Weiss-Wendt, *Murder Without Hatred*, 9–12; Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins*, 76.

59 Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins*, 76; Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*, 174.

60 Kultuurivalitsuse protokoll nr 22. 26 October 1928, ERA.40.1.6895, 310.

61 Kultuurivalitsuse koosoleku protokoll nr 16. 24 October 1929, ERA.40.1.6896, p. 444; Juudi II kultuurnõukogu koosoleku protokoll nr 2. 10 November 1929, ERA.40.1.6896; Juudi II kultuurnõukogu koosoleku protokoll nr 4. 29 June 1930, ERA.40.1.6897; Kultuurivalitsuse protokoll nr 03, 25 April 1940, ERA.40.1.6916; Juudi kultuurivalitsus peaministrile, 16 April 1940, ERA.989.1.2810, 1–2.

62 Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*, 73–74; Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins*, 76.

63 Matthew Kott, "Latvia's Pērkonkrusts: Anti-German National Socialism in a Fascistogenic Milieu", *Fascism* 4, no. 2 (2015): 169–193.

64 Paula Antonella Oppermann, "Everyday Antisemitism in Interwar Latvia: Experiences and Expressions through the Lens of Oral History", *S: I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 8, no. 3 (10 December 2021): 48–64.

65 *Juudid*, nr 1–4, 1930; *Kes on juudid?*, nr 1–2, 1925–26; *Valvur*, nr 1–4, 1930, nr 5, 1932.

authorities and the treatment of these Jews as suspicious individuals.⁶⁶ The military is usually among the most conservative institutions in a state, and also, in Estonia, there were no Jews on the staff of the army.⁶⁷ However, at the same time, the state took measures to suppress vocal Antisemitic movements.⁶⁸

Apart from occasional criticism directed towards Jewish autonomy and its leader Aisenstadt in the publications of the nationalists and Antisemites, Jewish autonomy rarely emerged as a topic in these outlets.⁶⁹ Nationalist circles which criticised minority autonomy mostly did so in general terms or specifically targeted the German autonomy.⁷⁰ In February 1934, the Estonian Nationalists' Club sent a memorandum to the State Elder of Estonia regarding minority autonomies. Having doubts about the loyalty of Germans, the memorandum called for stronger restrictions and closer scrutiny by the state.⁷¹ The memorandum spoke about minorities in general and Germans in particular, and it never mentioned Jews explicitly. Occasionally, Germans and Jews were juxtaposed, and Jews were seen as more loyal citizens when, for example, they participated in the celebrations for independence day, which the "Hitler-stunned" Germans had forgotten.⁷²

"Zelbstlikvidatsie" by the Soviets

Jewish Cultural Self-Government was liquidated in the summer of 1940 as a part of the Sovietisation process. Following the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Estonia was placed under the Soviet sphere of influence and, in the summer of 1940, occupied and incorporated into the Soviet Union. As the Soviet constitution, based on which the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was designed, did not foresee the autonomy institutions, Jewish autonomy was dissolved. There were two main reasons for this. First, it was part of the larger attempt to destroy structures of the Estonian state, which Jewish self-government had been a part of. The second reason was a strong ideological rejection of the Austro-Marxist autonomy model by the Soviet state.⁷³

The final act of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government unfolded on 28 July 1940, when the fifth Cultural Council convened for the first and last time and decided to liquidate Jewish Self-Government (in Yiddish *zelbstlikvidatsie*, in Estonian *enese-likvidatsioon*). Preparations for the regular elections had already started well before the Sovietisation, at the beginning of the year, and elections took place at the same time of the Sovietisation. However, the Council's convocation was postponed; by the time it convened, the new Soviet puppet government had already been installed, and the dismantling of the state apparatus was in full swing. In the dramatically changed situation, the Jewish Cultural Council meeting – likely taking place if not under gunpoint, then at least under the close supervision of the Soviet authorities – fiercely attacked the Jewish autonomy institution. Delegates alleged that it was a bourgeois

66 See, for example, the police files in ERA.1.9434.

67 Igor Kopõtin, *Rahvuslus ja lojaalsus Eesti sõjaväes aastatel 1918–1940 vähemusrahvuste näitel*, Tallinna Ülikool, Humanitaarteaduste dissertatsioonid 46 (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikool, 2018), 324–332.

68 Alenius, "Estonian Anti-Semitism in the Early 1920s".

69 "Milleks kasutavad juudid kultuur-autonoomiat", *Kas meie või juudid?*, no. 5 (1929); "Kellel on Eestis hea elada?", *ERK. Üld-, majandus- ja kultuuripoliitiline ajakiri*, no. 6 (1936): 135–136.

70 Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins*, 89.

71 "ERK-ide liidu märgukiri", *ERK. Üld-, majandus- ja kultuuripoliitiline ajakiri*, no. 2 (February 1934): 44–45; Laurits, *Saksa Kultuurimavalitsus Eesti Vabariigis 1925–1940*, 85–86.

72 *ERK. Üld-, majandus- ja kultuuripoliitiline ajakiri*, no. 4 (1933): 108; *Lõuna-Eesti*, 29 February 1928.

73 Erik Van Ree, "Stalin and the National Question", *Revolutionary Russia* 7, no. 2 (1994): 214–238.

institution, and that it had been dominated by a Zionist clique suppressing Jewish mass culture. A delegate from the Yiddishist faction, Simon Perlmann, who had already won a seat in the previous Council, argued that in the new Estonian SSR there would be no nationalist hatred and, thus, a “Jewish bourgeois self-government in the form of cultural autonomy” was redundant, harmful, and must be liquidated. His proposal was accepted univocally and followed by cries praising Soviet rule: “[l]ong live Stalin’s wise nationalities policy!”⁷⁴ A special liquidation committee was formed: it concluded its work in a matter of months and, in November 1940, handed the archive of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government over to the Central Archive of the Estonian SSR.⁷⁵ The rich Jewish cultural life that had developed during the previous years came to an end as all Jewish organisations were banned in the summer and autumn of 1940, the Zionist organisations being the first that were targeted.⁷⁶

An Epilogue: Members of the Council in the Holocaust and under Sovietisation

The aim of the following section is to bridge the Jewish Cultural Self-Government and the years of the Holocaust and Sovietisation by focussing on members of the Cultural Council. Trying to trace these lives in this period poses some major challenges. For instance, regarding the individuals who were the more active figures in the self-government, there are hardly any sources about the later years. At the same time, some individuals about whom the investigation files by the Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police) have been preserved were less active members of the Council or there is little information about their previous activities. I have, nevertheless, managed to assemble a small group of members of the Cultural Council whose lives can be traced through the years of the Holocaust and Sovietisation. The following part will analyse three broader trajectories that the members of the Council (and other Jews of Estonia) experienced: emigration to Palestine, murder in the Holocaust, and survival in remote Soviet areas and return after the war. I analyse each trajectory with some examples of members of the Cultural Council.

One trajectory – arguably the one that only a smaller number of the members of the Cultural Council experienced – was emigration to Palestine as early as in the 1920s and 1930s. Although the Jews of Estonia had a strong Zionist orientation, not everyone was personally willing to settle there. Nevertheless, before 1941, a little over 250 individuals from Estonia settled in Palestine, most of them in the 1930s.⁷⁷ From the members of the Cultural Council, Rachel (Rahel) Klompus (née Sundelevitsch, 1888–1984) exemplifies this trajectory. In her active life, she practised as a dentist, enrolled in law studies at the University of Tartu, was active in the Women’s International Zionist Organisation (WIZO), and was elected twice to the Cultural Council (1926 and 1929) on the Zionist list of the *Nationaler Blok*.⁷⁸ She had emigrated to

74 Juudi Vähemusrahvuse V-da Kultuurinõukogu I-se korralise istungi protokoll nr. 1 (43), 28 July 1940, ERA.41.1.6916, unpaginated.

75 ENSV Riigi Keskarhiiv Juudi vähemusrahva kultuuromavalitsuse likvideerimiskomisjonile, 14 November 1940, ERA.1107.1.214, 1.

76 Sisekaitseülema otsus nr. 1742-SK, 29.08.1940, ERA.852.1.2434, 1. For documents on individual organisations, see ERA.2199.

77 “Estonian Jews Who Moved to Palestine before 1941”, Estonian Jewish Museum, <https://muuseum.jewish.ee/Genealogy/Juudid%20Palestiina%20site.pdf> [accessed 19 July 2022].

78 Isikutunnistuse kants, 1920, Estonian National Archives, TLA.186.1.432, no. 6001; Student records, 1924, Estonian National Archives, EAA.2100.1.5412.

Palestine already in the 1920s.⁷⁹ Having left Estonia, she was saved from the Holocaust and died in 1984 in Ashkelon. Some other Zionist members of the Council also emigrated to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s and were thus not directly affected by the Holocaust: Ber Jakobson (1901–1958) emigrated in 1936, Heiman Rubin (1894–1969) in 1928/1929, and Aron Rutstein (1890–1954) in 1935.⁸⁰

Some members of the Jewish Cultural Council experienced repression during the year of Soviet occupation between the summer of 1940 and the summer of 1941. In June 1941, as a part of the consolidation of Soviet power, mass deportations were organised in the occupied Baltic states. From Estonia, in addition to thousands of Estonians, roughly 400 Jews – about 10 per cent of the entire Jewish population – were deported to Siberia. Thus, a far larger share of Jews was deported than of Estonians.⁸¹ Several members of the Cultural Council were among the deportees.⁸² The reasons for such repression were mainly previous political and economic activities. For instance, several Zionists were deported, such as Haia Itskovits, but also Heinrich Gutkin, who had been involved in banking and in the authoritarian National Assembly. Gutkin died in 1941 in a gulag; Itskovits was released in 1946 and died in 1954 in Tallinn.⁸³

When the Nazi army invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, a little under 1,000 Jews had remained in Estonia. A larger share, as we will explore below, was evacuated to inner parts of the Soviet Union. Many decided not to evacuate either due to personal, ideological, or health reasons, or due to concerns about the conditions in the Soviet interior after the experience of one year of Soviet occupation.⁸⁴ The killing of the Jews who remained in Estonia started soon after the arrival of the Nazi forces and mainly took place in the summer and autumn of 1941 with the help of Estonian collaborators. With the exception of only a couple of individuals who managed to survive, all who remained in Estonia were killed in the Holocaust. This allowed the Nazi leaders to declare Estonia 'judenfrei' very soon after the invasion, at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. Ruth Bettina Birn has argued that this total extermination was possible for two reasons: first, because the majority managed to escape to the Soviet Union, and second, due to the overall small number of Jews in Estonia.⁸⁵

As mentioned above, those members of the Council who did not flee were killed. Malka Silberstein's family story reflects this trajectory and the complicated situation between two totalitarian regimes. When the first Soviet occupation started in the

79 The exact circumstances of her emigration are, however, unclear. According to the Estonian Jewish Museum database, and an interview with her, she emigrated to Palestine in 1927, yet she ran again in 1929 and participated in Cultural Council meetings after 1927. See, for example, the minutes in ERA.40.1.406, and the Interv'yu s g-zhoi Rozoi Osipovnoi Klompus, 1977, Estonian Jewish Museum, <https://muuseum.jewish.ee/stories/Klompus.pdf> [accessed 19 July 2022].

80 Estonian Jews who moved to Palestine before 1941, Estonian Jewish Museum, <https://muuseum.jewish.ee/Genealogy/Juudid%20Palestiina%20site.pdf> [accessed 19 July 2022].

81 Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins*, 107–108.

82 So far, there is no systematic list consisting of all of the delegates of the Jewish Cultural Council. The members can be reconstructed based on the election results and Council meeting minutes in ERA.40.1.6885 (1926)–ERA.40.1.6926 (1940). For the victims of Soviet repression, see the database Estonia's Victims of Communism 1940–1991: <https://www.memoriaal.ee/en/> [accessed 2 May 2022] and the list compiled by Vello Salo and Mark Rybak, <https://muuseum.jewish.ee/history/deported.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2022].

83 List of Jews deported by the Soviet authorities, compiled by Vello Salo and Mark Rybak: <https://muuseum.jewish.ee/history/deported.pdf> [18 July 2022].

84 Dov Levin, "Estonian Jews in the U.S.S.R. (1941–1945)", *Yad Vashem Studies*, no. 11 (1976): 280.

85 For recent studies on the Holocaust in Estonia, see, for example, Weiss-Wendt, *Murder Without Hatred*; Ruth Bettina Birn, *Die Sicherheitspolizei in Estland 1941–1944: Eine Studie zur Kollaboration im Osten* (Paderborn: Schoeningh Ferdinand GmbH, 2006); Ruth Bettina Birn, "Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police", *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (July 2001): 181–198, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077301002016>.

summer of 1940, she started collaborating with the Soviet authorities and worked as a lawyer for the NKVD. When the Nazi army invaded the Soviet Union, Silberstein decided not to evacuate with the majority of the Jews of Estonia, probably due to her baby. Her husband Leopold Silberstein, a professor of Czech literature at the University of Tartu who had moved to Estonia only a couple of years earlier, was executed by the Estonian Auxillary Police, the *Omakaitse*, in Tartu. Silberstein managed to escape with her new-born baby but was nevertheless caught and they were murdered, although the exact circumstances of their death are not clear.⁸⁶ Meyer Rogovski (1867–1941) was also among the victims of the Holocaust. Rogovski had owned a shop selling leather products and was active in the Jewish community, being the chairman of the Tallinn Jewish Community. He had been elected to the Cultural Council three times, in 1926, 1932, and 1936, and was part of the Zionist national bloc. On 19 September 1941, the Sicherheitspolizei accused him of “participating in communist activities” and arrested and imprisoned him in the Central Prison in Tallinn, and ultimately he perished in the Holocaust.⁸⁷ The story of Abram Bass (1901–1941), who was elected to the Council in 1929 as an unaffiliated candidate (*unparteischer zetel*), was similar. In September, the Sicherheitspolizei imprisoned him because of his Jewish nationality (*Beschuldigung: Jude*) and was murdered.⁸⁸

One trajectory that a large share experienced was evacuation to remote areas of the Soviet Union. When the Nazi army invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, between June and July, roughly two thirds of Estonian Jews evacuated to inner parts of the Soviet Union. The destinations included numerous places: Siberia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, but also European parts of Russia. It was a complicated process and, initially, the authorities gave preference to different professions. Some could rely on the authorities organising the move, some had to rely on themselves. Some believed that they would be able to return in a couple of months, some tried, without success, to move on to Palestine, while others tried to survive in their new destinations by taking up various jobs.⁸⁹ Due to the harsh conditions and diseases, not all who fled survived, but out of those who did a vast majority ultimately returned to Estonia.⁹⁰

Members of the Jewish intelligentsia who survived and returned to Soviet Estonia after the war faced major challenges in readjusting to the profoundly changed political and ideological setting. The young historian Abe Liebman (1914–1990) illustrates these challenges vividly. Being from the young generation that grew up and acquired education in independent Estonia in the late 1930s, he was on track to become perhaps the leading scholar of the history of Jews in Estonia as he had defended an award-winning thesis on that topic.⁹¹ The work analysed the idea and practice of Jewish cultural self-government in Estonia and gave an overall positive assessment of it. In 1940, he ran for and won a seat in the Cultural Council.⁹² This

86 “The Silberstein Family – Tartu, Estonia”, *Yad Vashem*, no. The Onset of Mass Murder The Fate of Jewish Families in 1941 (n.d.), <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/jewish-families-1941/tartu.asp>; Weiss-Wendt, *Murder Without Hatred*, 211.

87 Meier Rogovski ülekuulamistoimik, 1941, ERA.R-64.4.683; Eesti territooriumil holokaustis hukkunud eesti juutide nimekiri viie lisaga, Estonian Jewish Museum, <https://muuseum.jewish.ee/history/Holocaust/Holo.pdf> [accessed 20 July 2022].

88 Abram Bassi juurdlustoimik, 1941, ERA.R-64.4.1045.

89 Levin, “Estonian Jews in the U.S.S.R. (1941–1945)”.

90 Emanuel Nodel, “Life and Death of Estonian Jewry”, in *Baltic History*, ed. Arvids Ziedonis, William L. Winter, and Mardi Valgemäe, Publications of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies 5 (Columbus (Ohio): Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies and Ohio State University, 1974), 227–236.

91 Liebman, “Ajaloolised ja kultuurilised eeldused”.

92 E.V. Juudi vähemusrahvuse V-nda Kultuurnõukogu Valimiste Peakomitee protokoll nr 10, 22 June 1940, ERA.40.1.6916, unpaginated.

Council, as analysed above, had to convene in an already occupied Estonia to dissolve autonomy. After the war, upon returning from the Soviet hinterland where he had stayed, he tried to adjust to the new system. In 1946, he compiled extensive “critical corrections” to his master’s thesis, which revised ideologically unsuitable statements according to Marxist-Leninist principles. Furthermore, he dedicated a considerable part of the corrections to discredit the Austro-Marxist autonomy model and prove the correctness of Lenin’s theory of self-determination, which promised full secession.⁹³ In the early post-war years, Liebman was included in the team of historians who had to reinterpret Estonian history in the Marxist-Leninist framework and to bring it into harmony with the chronology of the history of Russia.⁹⁴ However, these efforts did not save him from discrimination in the Soviet system. In 1951, he was expelled from the party and fired from his job at the Institute of Party History due to his Jewish descent.⁹⁵ After Stalin’s death, Liebman worked as a researcher at the Historical Institute of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party.

The story of the Aisenstadt family demonstrates a far harsher experience in the Soviet system: deportation to a labour camp.⁹⁶ Hirsh, as previously mentioned, was the leader of autonomy throughout its existence. He was a successful businessman and had sent his son Leo to Basel to study business. It was there where young Leo turned his back on Zionism and became interested in Marxism. On his return to Estonia, Leo was active in the communist movement. When Estonia was Sovietised and all Jewish organisations were closed in the summer of 1940, it was the same communist Jewish circles in which Leo was active (most notably the Society Licht) that were involved in the Sovietisation of Jewish life and the abolition of cultural autonomy.⁹⁷ Leo and Hirsh were among those Jews who fled to the remote areas of the Soviet Union when the Wehrmacht approached, and who managed to survive. Both, however, suffered from Stalinist repression in the 1950s when they returned. Leo was targeted because of a number of allegations: for being from the family of a business magnate, that his father was a Zionist, that he had hidden his social background, and for an abuse of power. Ultimately, in February 1950, he was sentenced to eight years in a corrective labour camp. Hirsh was accused of managing foreign companies, owning a house, being the leader of Jewish autonomy, and a leader of the Zionist-nationalist movement encouraging emigration to Palestine. He was sentenced to ten years, also in a corrective labour camp. Leo was released in March 1953, and Hirsh in the winter of 1955. Hirsh died in 1963 in Riga.

93 Abe Liebman, “Kriitilised parandused oma 1937.a. kirjutatud töös “Ajaloolised ja kultuurilised eeldused juudi koguduste tekkimiseks ja arenemiseks Eestis”, leiduvate väärseisukohtade ja valesõnangute revideerimise kohta”, (Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 1946).

94 Helen Lausma-Saar, “Enne diskussiooni võta 100 g (40°–80°)!”: Gustav Naani kolm kirja Abe Liebmanile”, *Tuna*, no. 4 (2012): 100.

95 Lausma-Saar, 100.

96 The following Aisenstadt family story is based on Olev Liivik, “The Persecution of Jews in Estonia in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s”, in *Estonia 1940–1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity*, ed. Toomas Hiio et al. (Tallinn: Inimsusevastaste Kuritegude Uurimise Eesti Sihtasutus, 2006), 408–411.

97 See, for example, Juudi Kultuuriseltsi Lichte avaldis ENSV Siseasjade Rahvakomissariaadile, 28 August 1940, TLA.11.2.3, 30. Although “Licht” deviates from the YIVO transliteration standard, this was the version that was used in Estonia.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the work of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government in interwar Estonia. Established in 1926, it continued its work until the Soviet occupation in the summer of 1940. Although the main focus of its work was education, it was given relatively broad freedom in deciding on such matters as school affairs, budgets, and taxation. It created a democratic forum, a public law institution to discuss and decide on the internal issues of Jewry. Within this forum, conflicting camps emerged, like the left-wing supporters of Yiddish and the pro-Zionist pro-Hebrew forces, which also dominated the institutions. The authoritarian era restricted the work of minority autonomies, yet autonomies continued their work in the new system. Also, the Jewish autonomy continued its work and main activities, such as administering schools and collecting taxes, which were not strongly affected by the restrictions. Due to several reasons, such as the small size and the lack of economic power of the Jewish population in Estonia, the overall level of Antisemitism was low. Thus, it also had virtually no effect on the work of the Jewish Cultural Self-Government because, as the minutes of the self-government demonstrate, it rarely emerged as a topic. In occasional criticism of minority autonomy, the main target was not the Jews but Germans, the historical elite of the region. Ultimately, the Jewish autonomy came to an end in July 1940, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union and state structures were destroyed and remodelled based on the Soviet model, which did not foresee non-territorial minority autonomy.

In a nutshell, the years of the Holocaust and Sovietisation were the years of the collapse of the small Estonian Jewish community. A large share of the Jews of Estonia was murdered during the years of Nazi occupation, and among these victims were active leaders of the community in the autonomy structures. Many Jewish men died fighting against the Nazis. Indeed, a large share of the Jews of Estonia managed to survive thanks to the vast depths of the Soviet Union which offered a refuge. However, the overall political climate had dramatically changed and the autonomy structures that had helped to hold the local Jewish community together and supported their cultural and educational life were not revived, nor were there any Jewish schools in Soviet Estonia. In addition to these destructive processes, mainly Russian-speaking Jews from the rest of Soviet Union gradually moved to Estonia, which further altered the local community and contributed to the demise of the Yiddish language.⁹⁸ Thus, although in numerical terms the Jewish community in Soviet Estonia recovered, it was significantly changed. The collapse of the community is also largely reflected in the life trajectories that the second half of this article has focused on. Many had been active leaders of the interwar Jewish community but, by the end of the Second World War, they had been either murdered or, if they had managed to survive, they could hardly regain a comparable societal position. This end of the experiment with non-territorial autonomy model in Estonia also reflects a broader trend in the post-war world, when the focus shifted from group rights to individual rights.

98 Anna Verschik, *Estonian Yiddish and Its Contacts with Coterritorial Languages*, *Dissertationes Linguisticae Universitatis Tartuensis* 1 (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2000).

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