



*Ada Kaleh on the Danube*

# **Jewish politics in Southeastern Europe: new insights from the field**

**International workshop**  
**Center for Jewish Studies, University of Graz**

**Organiser: Dr. Noémie Duhaut**

**Wednesday, 26 January 2022**

**Online | Please register under: [office.cjs@uni-graz.at](mailto:office.cjs@uni-graz.at)**

## Jewish politics in Southeastern Europe: new insights from the field

This workshop explores the history of Jewish politics in Southeastern Europe in the modern period. It will bring together new voices in this field to create a space for meeting, discussing, and future networking. It will therefore be small and discussion oriented.

The workshop seeks to address and reflect on several lacunas. Jewish nationalism in the neighbouring Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires and their successor states, as well as Western European Jewish internationalism, have dominated the historiography of Jewish politics. Moreover, historians working on Romanian and Yugoslav lands are rarely in dialogue with each other. However, these two regions and their Jewish communities have evolved in parallel in the modern period. Among others, the gradual withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans, the Great Powers' involvement in the region, the rise of antisemitism as an organised political movement, the protection of minority rights as a growing international concern, the establishment of fascist regimes, and the post-war rebuilding of the community under communism posed a similar set of questions to local Jewish political actors. This workshop will offer the opportunity to discuss these and other issues across national lines. It also aims to give greater visibility to a history that has fallen into the cracks of different historiographical fields – Jewish politics, national history writing in Southeastern Europe, and the history of Jews in this region.

## Programme

**10:30 Greetings**

**10:45 Introductory remarks:** Noémie Duhaut (Graz / Mainz)

**11:00 Nineteenth century**

**Discussant:** Constantin Iordachi (Vienna)

- Andreas Pfützner (Vienna)  
*Against the tide: The exclusion of Jews from Romanian citizenship and the emergence of political antisemitism at the margins of Europe (1864-1866)*
- Noémie Duhaut (Graz/Mainz)  
*The international crucible of early Jewish nationalism*

**12:00 Lunch break**

**13:30 Interwar period**

**Discussant:** Michael Miller (Vienna)

- Željka Oparnica (London)  
*'Ermanos Sefardi!': The Sephardi movement in the Balkans in the 1920s*
- Philippe Henri Blasen (Iași)  
*Wilhelm Filderman: fighting antisemitism in its first phase (1938-1940)*

**14:30 Coffee Break**

**15:00 Wartime and post-war**

**Discussant:** Ari Joskowicz (Vienna / Nashville)

- Marija Vulesica (Berlin)  
*Towards a history of the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia through a Jewish-Croatian collective biography*
- Emil Kerenji (Washington, D.C.)  
*Between Justice and Rebuilding: Albert Vajs and Post-Holocaust Jewish Politics in Yugoslavia*

**16:00 Concluding remarks**

## Participants' biographies and abstracts

**Philippe Henri Blasen** is a researcher with the A. D. Xenopol Institute for History, Romanian Academy, Iași, as well as with the Centre de Documentation sur les Migrations humaines, Dudelange, Luxembourg. His work has focussed on religious and ethnic minorities in Bukovina, Transylvania, and Romania in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His PhD dissertation, *La « primauté de la nation roumaine » et les « étrangers ». Les minorités et leur liberté du travail sous le cabinet Goga et la dictature royale (décembre 1937 – septembre 1940)* will be published in winter 2021-2022.

### **Wilhelm Filderman: fighting antisemitism in its first phase (1938-1940)**

After antisemitism had gradually increased in Romania throughout the 1930s and the citizenship rights of the Jews had already been called into question, in December 1937, King Carol II of Romania appointed the first openly antisemitic Romanian government. Led by the Romanian poet and far-right politician Octavian Goga, this government initiated several antisemitic measures, mainly directed against Jewish civic and working rights. In February 1938, King Carol II established a personal regime, known as “Royal Dictatorship”. This regime continued Goga’s antisemitic policy and, in August 1940, enacted the first openly antisemitic laws in Romania. Opposition to Goga’s and Carol II’s antisemitic measures came partly from international Jewish organisations, and partly from the Jewish politicians in Romania. The most prominent such politician was Wilhelm Filderman, chairman of the political party “Union of the Romanian Jews”, as well as of the Federation of the Unions of Jewish communities.

The paper discusses in which ways Filderman took action against the antisemitic measures through petitions, meetings with ministers, and public speeches, using legal, but also humanitarian arguments in order to preserve the rights of the Jews. It examines how the Romanian state responded to Filderman’s pleas in order to defend its antisemitic policy. It highlights that the Romanian state, convinced, as it was, that an antisemitic policy was necessary, not only rejected the humanitarian arguments, but also refused to abide by its own laws.

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**Noëmie Duhaut** is a member of the history department at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz and currently holds the Kurt-David-Brühl guest professorship at the Centre for Jewish Studies of the University of Graz. Her research focuses on the history of Jews in modern Europe, Jewish politics, and international law. She received her PhD from University College London and has

been awarded fellowships from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Posen Foundation, the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Central European University, and Dartmouth College. Her work has appeared in *Archives juives* and *French Historical Studies*. She is currently completing a book manuscript provisionally entitled *Defending Balkan Jews, Shaping Europe: French Jewish International Advocacy in the Nineteenth Century* and working on a biography of the French lawyer, politician, and Jewish leader Adolphe Crémieux.

### **The international crucible of early Jewish nationalism**

This paper traces the trajectories of individual Romanian Jewish political activists in the second half of the nineteenth century and seeks to reintegrate them into the history of Jewish politics. Historiography on this topic has chiefly focused on Western European Jewish internationalists on the one hand and Jewish nationalists from the Russian Empire and Austro-Hungary on the other. By expanding the narrative to include voices from Southeast Europe, we get a better understanding of the evolution of Jewish politics in this period. While various Jewish international organisations did collaborate with one another, Jewish internationalism was not immune to hierarchies. Scholarship often reproduced self-aggrandising Western European Jewish narratives about the international campaign for the emancipation of Romanian Jews. By focusing on political praxis, this paper highlights Romanian Jewish participation and innovation in debates over international law. It also explores how the failure of the 1878 Berlin Congress in the short term impacted the development of Jewish nationalism.

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**Emil Kerenji** is an Applied Research Scholar at the Mandel Center with expertise in modern Jewish and East European history. He has authored and co-authored several volumes of Jewish Responses to Persecution, the Mandel Center source-volume series featuring Jewish primary sources from the Holocaust. He also designed, with Leah Wolfson, *Experiencing History*, a digital platform offering primary sources for college-level instruction. He is currently working on a source volume on postwar war crimes trials in Yugoslavia after World War II.

### **Between Justice and Rebuilding: Albert Vajs and Post-Holocaust Jewish Politics in Yugoslavia**

This paper situates the early work on the theory of genocide and international law by Albert Vajs in the broader context of his work as a Yugoslav delegate at

the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, and his work for the State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes in Yugoslavia. It also juxtaposes this work with Vajs's work as one of the most important leaders of the project of rebuilding of Jewish communal infrastructure in Yugoslavia, which coincided with the first wave of Yugoslav postwar justice.

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**Željka Oparnica** is Jewish History Fellow at the Institute for Historical Research (University of London). She has recently defended her thesis entitled 'Jewish Politics in a Sephardi Key: the Balkan Sephardim (1900–1940)' at Birkbeck College, University of London. The thesis followed the trajectories of Sephardi politics in the Balkans, with the accent on Sarajevo-based Sephardi Circle. In 2019/2020 she was a Leo Baeck Fellow. Her new project deals with minority politics in the Adriatic in the interwar period.

#### **'Ermanos Sefardi!': The Sephardi movement in the Balkans in the 1920s**

Starting with the 1890s, Sephardi Jews in the Balkans started to formulate their specific political and cultural programme. Over the course of the first two decades of the twentieth century, defining period for European and Jewish politics, the Sephardi-led politics garnered support across the Balkans. Largely led by European-educated Sephardi intellectuals, Sephardi politics in the Balkans was a politics of representation but also, inherently, a politics of self-questioning and self-affiliation. It aimed to establish Sepharad as an entity and a factor in Jewish politics.

The Sephardi movement had a paradoxical place in Jewish national politics. The paradox was present from the beginning of Sephardi-focused positioning in Jewish national politics in the late nineteenth century. In contrast, the ever-expanding, polycentric Jewish political stage at the turn of the century had a myriad of political actors proposing a myriad of political options for Jews worldwide. The tension between the two: the Sephardi-oriented and the all-Jewish options reached peak in the 1920s in the Balkans.

In light of this tension, this paper will address ideological aspects and practical moves of the Sephardi politics in the Balkans in the 1920s, when the Sephardi movement reached its peak across the Mediterranean. I aim to address a larger debate centred around Jewish centres of Zagreb and Sarajevo: first, the so-called 'Ashkenazi-Sephardi conflict' that arose in Sarajevo and lasted for four years (1924–28) and, second, the ideological aspects of the Sephardi movement, their contacts and conversation with the Eastern European Jewish movements, and the broader political positioning of the Sephardi Jews in both Jewish and non-Jewish politics in the Balkans.

**Andreas Pfuetzner** was born in Austria. He studied History and Political Science in Salzburg and Paris and worked several years as an international media analyst. In 2021, he completed his doctoral studies at the history faculty of the University of Vienna, where he wrote a transnational-comparative history about Romanian Jewry, reconstructing the developments from 1770 till 1870.

#### **Against the tide: The exclusion of Jews from Romanian citizenship and the emergence of political antisemitism at the margins of Europe (1864-1866)**

The presentation will reconstruct briefly the political developments of the Jewish emancipation issue in Romania from 1864 till 1866. This period was crucial for the issue of Jewish emancipation per se as Romania became arguably the first country in Europe in which modern political antisemitism emerged as a significant political force. The constitution of 1866 which declared Jews to be collective legal foreigners in Romania was the climax of a wave of deliberate antisemitic mass mobilisation in this European border country. This event ran on a transnational level completely against the tide of Jewish emancipation taking place during the constitutionalisation of Central Europe between 1867 and 1871. Seen comparatively, Romania became 1866 a European anomaly. The presentation thus sets out to establish what some basic facts about the position of Jews in Romania was before 1866, how that changed after 1864 and what the developments of 1866 were really about. In contrast to an all too often apologetic Romanian historiography, we will see that the exclusion of Jews was neither based on long-established legal traditions of "Jewish foreignness" on Romanian soil nor streams of "illegal mass migration" of Jews from neighbouring Empires. The findings will show on the contrary that Jews in Romania were in their majority legal natives before 1866, that there was no mass migration of "foreign" Jews provoking the constitutional exclusion and that the whole construction of Romanian Jews as "legal foreigners" was a product of the antisemitic politics of the 1860s itself.

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**Marija Vulesica** is Alfred Landecker Lecturer at the history department at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Her research deals with the history of antisemitism and the Holocaust in Southeastern Europe, with a focus on the former Yugoslav territories. She is the author of *Die Formierung des politischen Antisemitismus in den Kronländern Kroatien und Slawonien 1879-1906* (The formation of political antisemitism in the crown lands of Croatia and Slavonia 1879-1906) and has co-edited volumes on the history of Jews in Southeastern Europe in the modern period, the Second World War and its memory. She has also extensively published on the history of Zionism in Yugoslavia.

## **Towards a history of the Holocaust in the Independent State of Croatia through a Jewish-Croatian collective biography**

Hinko Gottlieb (1886-1948), Aleksandar Licht (1884-1948), Lavoslav Schick (1881-1941), and Aleksa Klein (1898-1974) were four of the 75.000 Yugoslav Jews who faced persecution and annihilation after the German attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941. Their biographies – i.e. their life paths, familiar and professional backgrounds, experiences, thoughts and feelings have been neglected for decades. Just as the Jewish individual in general within the historiography of the Holocaust in Southeastern Europe.

With this research project I aim to spotlight the Individual and to examine the history of the Holocaust in the former Yugoslav regions through the lens of a collective biography. I argue that a meaningful commemoration of the Holocaust requires a profound knowledge about the individual's fate. *Collective Biography* as a micro-historic approach enables us to tell a complex history of a certain time and space through individual and yet shared circumstances and conditions.

In my presentation I am going to talk about my new research project and present my approach as well as first thoughts and results.

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