What's Next in Polish-Jewish Studies: Prospects and Challenges[1]

A surge in research and exponential growth of scholarly production in all academic areas and disciplines often creates the impression of spectacular development. This applies to Jewish studies as well. In Poland alone, around 100 books concerning Jewish subjects appear in Poland every year alongside several hundred articles. Three universities offer BA and MA programs in Jewish studies, two others in Hebrew studies. There are seven scholarly journals specializing in Judaica. There is also a significant, and growing, presence of Jewish topics in mainstream academic publishing houses and periodicals in various fields, including history, literature, sociology, and anthropology.

Does it all mean that we live in the golden age of East European Jewish studies? What is the state of the field and where are we heading? Let me respond to these questions by considering the most recent developments, their implications and where these are possibly leading. In order to do so I will depart however form a well-trodden paths of impressionistic appraisal and will do a bibliometric analysis of the dominant research interests in East European Jewish studies today, then, using the same quantitative method, I will ask about possible future developments and will conclude with a short reflection on what might be needed for the betterment of the state of research on East European Jewish history and culture. To be sure, I offer no authoritative diagnosis. Without more extensive quantitative and qualitative research, without thorough comparative analysis of the whole field of Jewish studies, it is impossible to arrive at any unequivocal conclusions. The intention of this essay is, thus, not to give a definitive answer, but merely to invite further debate.

1. **Research interests**

[1] This paper uses sections of my two forthcoming articles: "East European Jewish Studies: The Past Thirty Years," Jewish Quarterly Review 112 (2022) No 2; "Prospects for Jewish Studies in Poland: An Update for a New Decade," in: Studies in Contemporary Jewry, vol. 32: After Totalitarianism: Jews in Post-Communist Europe, ed. Eli Lederhendler (Oxford University Press, 2021).

So, what are the main areas of interest in the field of East European Jewish studies, and why? The chart below compares the most popular topics among the articles registered in Rambi in five East European countries – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Russia – between the years 1990–2020.[2]

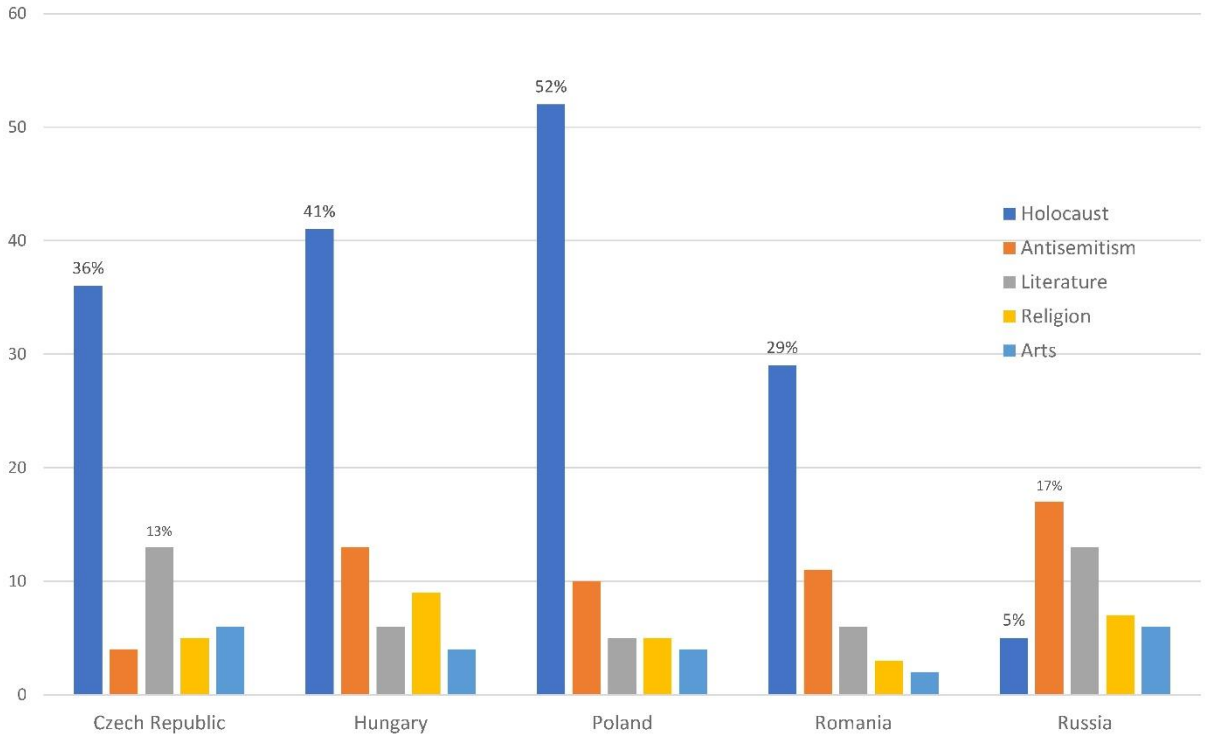

Chart 1: Main topics of articles on East European Jews, 1990–2020, in percentages

Source: Rambi Index of articles on Jewish studies.

[2] Hits for Czechia – 1,641, Hungary – 2,014, Poland – 9,330, Romania – 2,000, Russia – 3,656. It needs to be added that results for Rambi search for thematic categories only vaguely repeat results, so they need to be interpreted with utmost care. The categories employed here are disciplinary--literature, arts, and religion--but exception has been made for two topics that overshadow all others, i.e., the Holocaust and antisemitism. Categories mostly follow those in the Rambi catalogue, but aggregate a number of smaller sub-categories; for example: 'literature' merges results for 'Hebrew literature', 'Holocaust, in literature', etc. This means that the number of hits is higher than number of articles. It also means that categories might overlap, e.g. 'Holocaust, in literature' has been listed in both 'literature' and 'Holocaust'. This has no relevant consequences for the results of this sample. Also, the data should not be taken at the face value because of their specific foci and conceptual categories in the topical questionnaire or individual preferences of the Rambi team. With all those qualifications, the index seems wide and non-partisan enough to warrant indicative outcomes of the search. The search conducted on 21 March 2020. (https://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/infochannels/Catalogs/bibliographic-databases/rambi/Pages/rambi.aspx).

The two most striking characteristics of the data presented here are the absolute dominance of articles on the Holocaust and significant differences in topical interests for the five countries under discussion here. The hegemony of the Holocaust as a topic is all the more telling when compared to the low numbers for other composite topics, such as literature or religion, which rarely exceed 10 percent. This tendency finds confirmation in other datasets, too, and is especially true for Poland, where 52 percent of articles in Rambi deals with some aspect of the Shoah. In some ways, it is understandable that the Holocaust as a topic is so often connected with Poland, on whose territory most of the atrocities actually happened. But, in comparison, studies of Yiddish literature, for example, a subject that may justly be considered the pride of Polish-Jewish studies, are, quantitatively speaking, hardly visible. Women as a topic barely register at mere 2 percent. Research on religion does not fare much better. On a macro scale, this might communicate the relative insignificance of these topics for East European Jewish studies. The dominant topic for East European Jewish studies is the Holocaust.

Strikingly similar results appear from the analysis of the research *in* Poland, as indicated by the distribution of research topics in published articles and research grants of 2010–2020. Among 907 articles published in the six Judaic journals and 140 research grants for the topics related to Jewish studies as awarded by the two leading research institutions in Poland (NCN and NPRH), as many as 29 to 33 percent cope with the Holocaust. This is followed by articles and research grants pertaining to relations between Jews and non-Jews (12-13 percent). Other somewhat significant categories include memory and commemoration (often related to the Holocaust), literature (7-9%), Yiddish (4%), or the Karaites (3-5%).

The reasons for and consequences of such a structure of popular and scholarly interest in the Holocaust have been already well documented and widely discussed. Without going into a specialist debate, the most important reason is the transformative power of the Holocaust experience for the contemporary world. Together with this, the institutionalization of Shoah memory plays an increasingly prominent role today in both academic and public discourse. Museums and institutions responsible for maintaining the memory of the Holocaust, research institutes and university programs, state-run ceremonies, monuments, specialist

journals and book series: all this results in the massive presence of Holocaust memory, overshadowing by far any other aspect of Jewish history. As for the consequences, one must start, again, with the same transformative experience that changed the self-understanding of European societies. Yet it seems important that we not allow the thousand-year history of Jewish life in Eastern Europe to be overshadowed by the paradigmatic twentieth-century event, even if as important as the Holocaust. Certainly, one must fully agree that the Holocaust or anti-Jewish violence are topics that do require extensive new research—which, therefore, cannot be deemed objectionable in itself. But few would argue that development in the research on the Holocaust and antisemitism should take complete precedence over other subfields of Jewish studies. Hence my question whether academia does enough to contextualize and problematize this situation. How will this develop in the next ten or twenty years? What are the possible side effects of institutionalized Holocaust memory? Is the distribution of topics in academic papers, as discussed above, already too narrow, in effect limiting the actual choices of academic pursuit? Can it be that academic scholarship is following and strengthening, rather than challenging, popular stereotypes?

The way in which other topics are distributed between the five countries under scrutiny here is equally telling. For the Czech Republic, the second main topical category after the Holocaust is literature. For Hungary, Poland, and Romania, it is antisemitism, which is number one for Russia. All other categories, including Yiddish literature, Hasidism, politics, or women, are, quantitatively, invisible, which is all the more surprising considering their qualitative flourishing.

But the differences between these secondary topics reveal one more interesting feature. The second highest topical category for the Czech lands, as noted, is literature, followed by arts, but not religion or antisemitism. For Russia, it is antisemitism and, again, literature. For Poland it is only the Holocaust and antisemitism that score high; all other topics are minor. This seems to closely correspond with popular stereotypes of, say, Russia as a country of anti-Semites and great literature or the Czech lands as the secular, antisemitism-free country of Franz Kafka and modern arts. If this diagnosis is correct, it suggests the possible, and formative, influence of popular stereotypes on the structure of academic research of East European Jewish communities.

This could be interpreted in a favorable light as an expression of historiography striving for relevance. As Carl Becker warned us in his classic 1931 address, "Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities."[3] In other words, historians need to tell their stories in a way that makes them relevant for the wider society. Otherwise, Mr. Everyman "will leave us to our own devices." History is useful as long as it allows for expanding our "specious present," i.e., creating historical narratives of our present with an eye on the future. This pressure for relevance might be felt by historians even more strongly today than was the case ninety years ago, when Becker wrote it, because of the general crisis of the humanities and the diminishing importance of historical knowledge. Both general and Jewish historians strive to make history "useful" as a tool for either creating expert knowledge on social processes or shaping identity quests in which the public at large recognizes itself. While it is easy to sympathize with such attempts, the downside of such an approach is the possible loss of a critical eye as to the fundamental question about what is relevant and why. An unintended consequence might be that academia, on the macro level, absorb and fortify stereotypes instead of challenging them.

[3] Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian", American Historical Review 37.2 (1932): 234.

2. Chronology

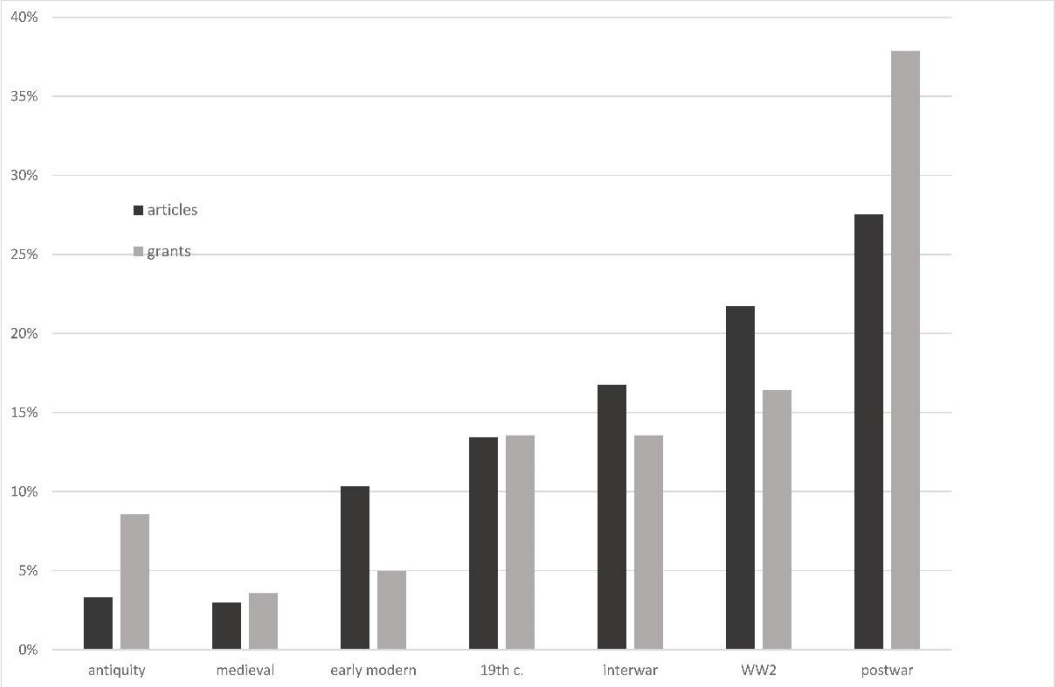

Chart 2: Articles in Judaic journals and grants in Poland, 2010–2020, by period studied

Apart from a focus on the Holocaust and Jewish–non-Jewish relations, there is another, and interrelated trend of a rapid shift in research interest toward contemporary issues. This is, again, especially prominent in Poland. Let us look at the distribution of Polish articles and research grants on Jewish topics, 2010-2020.

Clearly, distribution of articles and research grants is highly disproportional. Antiquity and Middle Ages are hardly visible. Early modern history is a bit better represented in the category of articles, but not in the research grants, which might be an indication of future trends. The most significant trend is a huge—and growing—interest in wartime and post-Holocaust topics. Every second grant and article deal with either the Second World War or the postwar period. This is a significant change relative to the state of affairs twenty years ago, when the very concept of post-Holocaust Jewish history in Europe was controversial. Today, studies of the Holocaust, and especially its aftermath, dominate the field. It seems this reflects a global turn from history to memory studies and cultural studies, alongside an

increasing focus on the 20th century and non-historical analyses of contemporary cultures and societies. This is not the place to discuss the long-lasting consequences of the decline of historical thinking for the intellectual condition of the modern world. But it is worth noting that this tendency seems to have reached alarming proportions in Poland, especially when we take into account the extensive political interference of state authorities, executed under the rubric of "historical policy," that heavily promotes research on the Second World War and postwar topics.

3. The future

When one wants to determine where a given academic field is likely to be in ten or twenty years from now, the most useful exercise is to look at doctoral dissertations. What fields or research topics are doctoral students choosing? Which areas have fallen out of favor?

The most convenient venue to examine the prospects for the field might be the Polin Museum's Global Education Outreach Program (GEOP), a multi-year program of academic and semi-academic activities aimed at the global community of scholars researching East European Jewish history and culture. Among its numerous activities is a monthly seminar for doctoral students writing their dissertations on aspects of Polish Jewish history and culture at Polish universities.[4]

The great variety of topics, methodologies, and approaches notwithstanding, a clear thematic-temporal pattern emerges from these lists. Of the total of 141 dissertations, not one deals with medieval Jewish history; only four dissertations (3 percent of the total) are devoted to the early modern period. This confirms the contemporary focus observed above, but this is also troubling given the central role of early modern studies for methodological innovations in contemporary historiography. Despite the fact that the field of early modern Jewish history boasts an exceptionally high number of excellent senior and mid-career scholars, and despite continuous efforts at raising interest in early modern history, the

4 Online at: https://polin.pl/en/geop-doctoral-seminars (accessed 18 January 2021). For the years 2015–2019, there were 141 applications from all academic centres in Poland, accounting for the vast majority of doctoral candidates writing on Polish Jewish history and culture. This is certainly a sufficiently indicative sample.

number of doctoral candidates interested in this period is low and seems to be decreasing. This seems to be reaching proportions that actually endanger the generational chain of scholarly transition, indicating a drastic loss of specific linguistic and technical skills cultivated through generations.

The long nineteenth century fares somewhat better, as it makes up 11 percent of the total, with the interbellum period comprising 22 percent of doctoral dissertations. The remaining 60+ percent of doctoral students applying to the GEOP seminars decided to spend several years of their life studying the Holocaust or the post-Holocaust period. The distribution here is indicative and very close to what we have seen in the articles and research grants: 30 percent are working on the Shoah and 34 percent on the post-Holocaust period. Even if many or indeed the majority of the dissertations on the post-Holocaust period are in fact related to aspects of the Second World War and the destruction of European Jewry, this is a significant transfer of research interest, showing the possible direction of further scholarly engagement with East European Jewish history and the Holocaust. On the one hand, the numbers confirm the centrality of the Holocaust as a research topic. On the other hand, for a sizable cohort of young scholars, it is not the Holocaust itself that captures their attention, but rather post-Holocaust memory, commemoration, and the use of Holocaust-related themes in the arts, literature, and popular culture. This indicates a shift to the study of contemporary topics, shunning history as the primary discipline of East European Jewish studies.

4. **Where to go?**

So, are we in the golden age of East European Jewish studies? Yes and no. The field has impressively developed in many areas of scholarly pursuit. Research on Jewish Eastern Europe is increasingly present in the top academic publishing houses and Judaic periodicals. Yet, the bibliometric analysis of the current publications, research interests and the doctoral dissertations indicate the field might be developing into somewhat unbalanced dominance of the contemporary history, the Holocaust studies, and antisemitism studies. While these are all laudable developments in themselves, it is imperative not to abandon a balanced development of the field with sustained research in the medieval or early modern history. It is equally important to reflect on possible methodological needs of the field. Spatial analysis,

visual anthropology, geopoetics and cultural poetics, discourse analysis, queer studies, one could bring an endless lists of research practices and methodological theories that might refresh studies of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Few of them are present in current research in East European Jewish studies. Of these methodological innovations, I would like to suggest four postulates that in my opinion might bring some new life into our field. These are the postulates for more digital, material, egalitarian approaches to Jewish history in Eastern Europe as well as for stronger inclusion of public history.

a. Digital.

Today the digital humanities represent some of the most frequently used and overused concepts in the academic world. Voices in debate range the gamut from enthusiastic eulogists of revolution to frustrated seekers of global conspiracy. This is hardly surprising. The digital humanities arouse both the greatest hopes for radically new discoveries and new lines of academic inquiry, and the greatest fears for the future of the humanities and their institutions of higher learning.

What is important is that rich and valuable quantitative resources exist and, with the advent of digital humanities, might be available for research of historical and contemporary Jewish life and culture. Their potential use in the study of East European Jewish history is almost limitless. To give you a small example from my research area, the mainstream of intellectual history of Hasidism could greatly profit from relatively simple frequency analyses determining the predilection of specific authors for certain terms and phrases, their chronospatial variables, clustering, and so on. Think what we would gain with a simple frequency analysis of the phrase *avodah begashmiyut*, tabulated by periods, authors and dynasties, regions, and genres, or from a stylometric analysis of the canonical Hasidic texts, microcitations and text filiations across large corpora of Hasidic texts and authors. But even without these advanced research tools, one can easily imagine that an automated corpus of Hasidic stories could (and will) provide an authoritative list of all the narratives in all versions and all collections for any given topic, place, and Hasidic figure, large or small. With such basic tools it would be far easier to move forward in all areas of Jewish studies.

All this has yet to happen. One may find it discouraging that the “digital turn” is yet to take hold in Jewish studies. But one may also find it exciting to contemplate the changes that digital humanities could bring to the field. Once those changes happen, scholars will be enabled to find radically new vistas, to provide much greater precision to what we already know, and to change the picture of Jewish life in ways that are not yet apparent.

b. Material.

There is a large field of studies of material culture and material heritage in Eastern Europe that is developing on the margins of the mainstream scholarship. For years, the large field of sepulchral studies suffered from the methodological and conceptual stagnation, focusing mainly on documentation and philological text reconstruction. Most fortunately, in recent decades it revived with new concepts and new studies that turn to Hebrew epigraphy as an egalitarian, mass, and non-normative source of information on virtually all aspects of vernacular Judaism in premodern times. This can be analysis of religious value systems, as reflected in the Hebrew epitaphs, or eschatology and concepts of afterlife mirrored in the same textual corpora, or influence of acculturation and secularization processes on the religious practices of the East European Jews. Together with this, new tools of text documentation and text analysis give hope for ‘distant reading’ and digital big data analysis of those enormously rich materials.

c. Egalitarian.

From its nineteenth-century origins, the academic Jewish studies has been marred by the obsession of textual erudition that over-privileged exegetical practices focused on elitist, male, rabbinical corpus of normative (usually Hebrew and Aramaic) texts and their erudite explications. A rapid development of academic Jewish studies and their use of modern methodologies did not severe these textual fascinations which, I dare to claim, inform much of the life of Jewish academy even today. Extensive citing of elitist rabbinical literature and its erudite explication made an ideal bridegroom in premodern Eastern Europe and still for many makes an ideal scholar of Jewish studies. However, to every season there is an end. The traditional textual practices have come under growing criticism of contemporary scholarship and increasingly give a way to new, more self-conscious, and methodologically rigorous approaches. The drive to include a more egalitarian perspective has got certainly

ideological roots in emancipatory rhetoric of postmodern approaches and worldviews. It has thus strong affinity to other postmodern methodologies, such as the turn to the 'missing 52 percent', or feminist criticism, or post-colonial analysis. The drive for the inclusion of digital humanities and the use of big data also naturally opens the field beyond focus on the wealthy, the learned, and the mighty. Altogether, this combined egalitarian turn has and hopefully will have a growing influence on the study of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. What is more, the egalitarian postulate seems to be not only conceptually creative, but in fact underlies much of the other points I have already raised above. In this sense, it can be taken as my diagnosis of possibly the most significant change happening in the field of historical research of East European Jews, or maybe the entire field of Jewish studies.

d. Public history.

Historiography in the twenty-first century has found itself on stranger tides. We are all increasingly uncertain about our social role and functions. Decomposition of communication channels makes our craft increasingly instable. The pressures of the stakeholders, in chase of parametric or media success, undermine the very nature and meaning of traditional scholarship. At the same time there is visible increase in need of public history: museums, online platforms, video games, films, tour routes and guidebooks, blog posts, you name it. In Eastern Europe, recently the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw and Jewish Museum and Toleration Centre in Moscow turned out to be real game changers. And this naturally redefines the role of scholarship. Historians ask questions different than before. Public history is usually more interested in issues such as daily life, children, food, experiences, and emotions, than in traditional great historical questions of the past. Perhaps for the study of Jews in Eastern Europe this is good news. Material and egalitarian approach will certainly benefit. Affective aspects of everyday life might be one such aspect of great importance for public historians. Local synagogues, cemeteries, bath houses – material, local and rooted in specific contexts – will certainly continue to play critically important role for local enactments of public history in countless towns and villages of Eastern Europe. They might also provide an effective antidote to the venom of "historical policies" of increasingly authoritarian political regimes. And might open the field for more attention to local histories, local figures, local contexts, and local, egalitarian experiences. If so, there is a good future for the Polin museum too.

Marcin Wodziński