



29.05.1938

The first anti-Jewish decree comes in effect

After the death of Gyula Gömbös, István Bethlen's followers expected the radical right to be pushed farther away from the public sphere and balance to be restored; Gömbös's followers, on the other hand, were already clamouring for the implementation of extreme measures. The task of restoring balance to Hungary's internal political scene while also stabilising foreign affairs fell to Kálmán Darányi, the conservative prime minister appointed by Horthy. Darányi was forced to manoeuvre the treacherous waters of the narrow isthmus carved out by the situation in foreign affairs: not only was Germany's influence on Central Europe increasingly significant following Hitler's rise to power, the Abyssinian conflict had also pushed Italy into recognising Germany's supremacy. Once the Western powers' attempts at pacification failed, Central Europe's small nations remained completely at the mercy of Germany. In addition, Germany took full advantage of the region's conflicts. Another threat endangering the region was that of the strengthening Communist state of the Soviet Union. At first, Darányi's position in foreign affairs was one of maintaining a slight distance from Germany while simultaneously cultivating Hungary's famous friendship with Italy and carefully edging closer to Western powers. Meanwhile, Darányi also needed to continue pushing for revision of Hungary's borders. Among the nations located in Central Europe, Poland remained Hungary's best connection. When Regent Miklós Horthy traveled to Poland in 1938, the aim of this visit was to advance foreign trade between the two countries: this plan, however, soon ran into numerous difficulties.



In his speech given on 5 March 1938, Prime Minister Darányi announced a plan outlining large-scale armament. In five years, one billion pengős were to be invested in the military. While most of this sum was to go directly to military expenses, a smaller amount was intended to improve the nation's readiness for war via more indirect means, such as through road and railway construction, improvements in sailing, development of telecommunications, etc. The funds for the Győr Programme were to come from taxes and various loans. Justification for this armament programme was provided not only by Hungarian ambitions for revision, but was also grounded in the fact that Hungary was surrounded by a Europe racing to stockpile arms, yet still possessed an army restricted by conditions laid out in the Treaty of Trianon and therefore incapable of carrying out any serious military mission. While the military programme's positive effect on the economy was already palpable at its inception, the army's level of modernisation did not improve very much: the continued presence of hussar—light cavalry troops of admittedly great historical fame—and bicycle units



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After first occupying, then annexing Austria in March 1938, Germany's position grew even stronger. It became obvious that Hungary's territorial ambitions could be satisfied with the help of Germany, the nation's new next-door neighbour thanks to the Anschluss. Germany meanwhile made no attempt to hide the fact that it opposed Hungary's territorial claims in connection to Yugoslavia and Romania, but would support claims regarding Czechoslovakia. Darányi therefore proved incapable of maintaining his chosen path in international affairs; from this point on he, too, had to contend with the fact that a growing number of Hungarians—not at all unaffected by the aggressive Nazi propaganda sweeping the country—felt that entering into unconditional alliance with Germany represented the only means of revoking the Treaty of Trianon. Darányi joined the shift to the right.

While legalising discriminatory measures against Jews can be viewed as a direct consequence of Germany's influence, modern antisemitism—in which Jews are seen as and projected as one, undifferentiated group—had already reared its ugly head in Hungary while World War One was still underway. Many at the time blamed Jews for the nation's collapse as well as the wresting away of power into the hands of Communists and Social Democrats that had occurred in 1919. As absurd as it sounds, Jews were also viewed as being responsible for the Treaty of Trianon since the Jews—so it was said—had been conspiring in the background to manipulate the Entente's decisions. Hungary's Jews found themselves targeted by the National Christian government which—as its very first move—attempted to drive Jews out of institutions of higher education. In comparison to their overall, national average as 6% of Hungary's population, Jews were significantly over-represented in certain university departments, such as the fields of medicine, law and engineering. The purpose of the numerus clausus, or 'closed number', law passed by the Teleki cabinet in September 1920 was to restrict the number of accepted university students in adherence to the average percent of 'race and ethnicity' registered nationally. While the law's main text did not actually name Hungary's Jewish population, the law was quite obviously directed toward the exclusion of Jews, who were referred to in the directions on how to execute the law. The following years saw a significant drop in the number of Jewish university students, particularly in institutions found in Budapest. Before the People's Alliance, the Hungarian government justified this measure as a means of bolstering Hungary's middle-class, which had found itself in much worsened conditions as a result of the Treaty of Trianon. Later on Bethlen—under international pressure and to the objection of right-wing parties—was forced to modify the law, which resulted in the gradual increase of Jewish students attending university. The spirit behind the numerus clausus law, however, remained present throughout the Horthy era; it comes as no surprise that the later Anti-Jewish Decrees referred to this precedence.

After the economic crisis experienced throughout the 1930s, the Jews were once more used as scapegoats while the anti-Jewish decrees passed under Nazism echoed through the Hungary's administration of justice. In 1938 the cabinet led by Darányi submitted a proposition for the first so-called 'Jewish law' to Parliament. According to this motion, the percentage of those Jews employed as members of the press, the Chambers of Engineering or Medicine, or as employees of business or trade was not to exceed 20%. While the proposal defined Jews as being members of the Israelite religion, it also contained the inclusion that individuals who had left Judaism in favor of Christian baptism after 1919 could also be viewed as Jews. Needless to say, this description laid the groundwork for future racial discrimination.

Many influential thinkers—including the composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, or the writer, Zsigmond Móricz, to mention a few—raised their voices in protest of the Anti-Jewish decree, but to no avail. The law was ratified by Parliament under the even stronger pro-German cabinet led by Prime Minister Béla Imrédy.

The Imrédy cabinet proposed another anti-Jewish law—what came to be the Second Anti-Jewish Decree—before Parliament. According to this version, anyone with at least one parent or two grandparents belonging to the Israelite religion was to be considered Jewish. Furthermore, the law forbids Jews from attaining citizenship, employment in state or public institutions, or working as newspaper editors or publishers. In addition, the previous 20% laid out for membership of Jews in the bar association or the Chambers of Medicine, Engineering, the Press, Theatre and Film Production was reduced to 6%. As a consequence of the First and Second Anti-Jewish Decrees, Hungary's Jews suffered severe financial losses while also facing great uncertainty in supporting themselves and their families.

After Hungary joined World War Two on the side of Germany under the government led by Prime Minister László Bárdossy from April 1941 to March 1942, the Hungarian Parliament ratified the Third Anti-Jewish Decree as well. This third, anti-Jewish law from 1941 was written in the spirit of the racially-based Nuremberg Laws. A Jew was defined as anyone with two grandparents who had been born in the Israelite religion. The law also forbids miscegenation—in other words, marriage between Jews and non-Jews—and described extramarital sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews as 'a vilification of race'. The law, however, cannot be called consistent because it did not penalise sexual relations between Christian men and Jewish women.

While modern antisemitism in Hungary grew in strength beginning with the First World War and resulted in increasingly severe discrimination against Hungarian Jews, until Germany occupied Hungary in 1944 it can be claimed that Hungary's Jews fared better compared to those Jews living under Nazi leaders. The First Anti-Jewish Decree primarily differentiated Jews based on religion, while the restrictions it contained were still not blatantly discriminatory. In addition to significantly expanding and increasing previous restrictions, the Second Anti-Jewish Decree discriminated based on race. Whether it was actually said or not, the precedent for this move can be clearly traced back to the *numerus clausus*, which claimed to aid Hungary's middle class at the Jews' expense. As a consequence of this law, society's privileged classes were frequently able to attain comfortable livelihoods without any effort of their own and thanks to a government system that offered its support while discriminating against Jews on the basis of race. While the restrictions laid out in the Third Anti-Jewish Decree had little effect on everyday life, they still added to antisemitism and the racial discrimination of Jews, thereby offering a prophetic spectre of the deportations and terror caused by the Arrow Cross Party that occurred under German occupation.

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