

Political Emancipation and Modern Jewish National Identity

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Following the rise of liberalism and nationalism during the nineteenth century, Jewish national identity varied across countries. While Western European and American Jews mainly came to think of themselves as nationals of their country of citizenship, a growing number of Eastern European Jews claimed to be a separate nation with a legitimate claim to self-government. Comparing the evolution of Jewish identities across North America and Europe and leveraging a regression discontinuity design based on the differential treatment of Polish and Russian Jews under Tsarism, I find that their divergent national identities responded to the extent to which Jews were politically emancipated in the country where they lived over the long century that followed the Atlantic Revolutions. Social and economic modernization played a weaker role, suggesting the need to think about national identity formation as endogenous to political and constitutional transformations marking the birth of the contemporary era.


“and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.”
(Derek Walcott, *The Schooner Flight*)

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Jews did not conceive of themselves as a political nation. Dispersed across Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, and North Africa, and occupying a subordinate position in the societal and political structures of the time, they saw themselves (and were seen by Gentiles) as, at most, a cultural community defined by distinctive religious beliefs and practices and partly bound by informal personal networks. A few decades later, however, they were sharply divided over their national identity. A growing number of Jews, especially in Eastern Europe, had come to understand themselves as a distinct nation in the political sense of the word: a community of people with a legitimate claim to a separate state. By contrast, American and Western European Jews mainly thought of themselves as nationals of their respective country of citizenship and, even among those who were sympathetic to the plight and emancipatory claims of Eastern European Jews, any personal commitment to the construction of a Jewish homeland remained low.

Broadly speaking, the current literature on the rise and persistence of national identities explains modern nationalism as either the result of state-led nation-building (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006; Darden *N.d.*; Weber 1976), including the construction of an educated labor force and national markets (Gellner 1983), or the formation of an “imagined community” defined by pre-existing administrative or linguistic discontinuities (Anderson

1983). However, these theoretical arguments do not account well for the Jewish national formation experience. As discussed later, economic modernization and the functional needs of industrialization cannot explain easily the crystallization of a modern Jewish national identity and its uneven distribution across space. State-led nation-building (in all its variants, from schooling and indoctrination to direct coercion) cannot either: its application varied in its intent (that is, targeted population and content) and rate of success. Finally, even though the effects of pre-existing (administrative or ethnolinguistic) discontinuities mattered, they only did when (and in ways) informed by political processes that are only partially modeled in the literature.

Accordingly, I offer here an account that sees the varying nature of Jewish national identity as determined by the interaction of two factors: the rise of “liberal” ideas and institutions; and their varying degree of success. First, the Enlightenment and a wave of Atlantic revolutions promoted a political order based on the idea of equal citizens living under the same set of laws and a single sovereign power. These new political principles transformed, in turn, the concept and boundaries of political membership, giving birth to the idea of (different) national communities governed (or entitled to be governed) by their own institutions and, with it, to nationalism or the “political principle [that] holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner 1983, 7). Second, the successful reception of that new constitutional order and, with it, the legal emancipation of Jews (as well as other historically subordinate groups) varied by region and over time—mostly along a West-to-East spatial gradient. The triumph of a liberal order (in North America and most of Western Europe) ultimately led to the recognition of Jews as citizens equal, at least in formal rights, to non-Jews. By contrast, in most parts of Eastern Europe, where close to two-thirds of the world’s Jews still lived at the turn of the twentieth century, their discrimination was ubiquitous and systematic—often aggravated by

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ominous waves of pogroms abetted by state authorities. Political emancipation had to wait, if it happened at all, until the end of World War I.

The political treatment of Jews informed, in turn, their national identification. Politically emancipated Jews self-identified with the political community that had emancipated them, that is, they understood themselves as American, Dutch, or French nationals first of all. By contrast, in those countries where they were not recognized as equals to their co-citizens (due to the failure of the classical liberal program or to the weakness of revolutionary parties offering emancipation in a future socialist system), a growing number of Jews were attracted to two alternative strategies. They migrated to more liberal polities, where they would hopefully become a part, as full citizens, of their nation of destination. Alternatively, they strove to establish a separate state that, treating them as a national community of equals, would free them from all ancient bondages.

I examine the process of Jewish national identity formation and its political roots as follows. After describing the social and political status of Jews at the end of the eighteenth century, I detail their legal treatment, ranging from complete emancipation to full exclusion, during the long century that stretched from the Atlantic Revolutions to World War I in the first section (“The Problem of Emancipation”). I then discuss how those different political solutions triggered different responses (mainly, the adoption of the national identity of their country of citizenship or a claim to a separate national identity) across the Jewish communities living in Europe and North America (“Jews’ National Identities”). In both sections, I rely on comparative historical work, capped by a cross-country quantitative analysis of the association between political emancipation and the diffusion of Zionism.

Because those results could be affected both by the heterogeneity of Jews across the regions under analysis and by the potential endogeneity of the political treatment they received, in the section “The Russian Pale Border,” I zoom in on the Jewish population living in the area of (interwar) Poland, employing a regression discontinuity design that exploits the border between the part of the Pale of Settlement (the overall area where Jews were allowed to live under tsarist rule) under direct Russian rule before 1918 and the rest of the country. After Poland’s partition in the late eighteenth century, Jews were governed by separate politico-administrative structures, resulting in different legal regimes (defining how Jews were treated) in the last decades of the nineteenth century. While the margrave of Congress Poland (under Russian control but with some autonomy) and the regions ruled by Prussian and Austria-Hungary decreed their legal emancipation in the 1860s, discrimination became much harsher in the section of the Pale under direct Russian administrative control after the pogroms of 1881–84. In line with the thesis of the paper, the absence of any legal emancipation fostered the rise of a claim to having a separate national identity, which I proxy by the distribution of Zionist activity.

I conclude by considering three additional questions. In the section on “Alternative Explanations,” I review

and assess the existing main theoretical explanations on nationalism and national identity formation in relationship to the paper’s empirical findings on Jewish national identification. The section on “Political Recognition and Jewish Modern National Identity” then complements those theories by offering a tentative conceptual framework on the political mechanisms (defined by political choices or, to use the language of historical institutionalism, politically determined historical junctures) behind the Jewish divergent national experiences. The last section speculates briefly on the potential extension of the paper’s empirical and theoretical insights into other processes of national identity formation.

THE PROBLEM OF EMANCIPATION

At the advent of the age of liberal revolutions in the late eighteenth century, Jews were widely distributed, in varying numbers, across Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East and North Africa region. Despite their geographical dispersion, they shared similar social norms and institutions (Eisenstadt 1992; Lacqueur 1972). Judaism maintained its relatively unified character as a cultural community with distinctive religious beliefs and practices throughout the Diaspora territories at least until modern times. Most Jews lived in spatially segregated communities characterized by their own welfare institutions and by an informal political hierarchy presided over by rabbis and other notables that acted as intermediaries between those “corporate” communities and the prince, monarch, or sultan of the state where they resided. State rulers granted Jewish communities permission to live in their territories in exchange for a monetary contribution, protected them from non-Jewish populations, and generally allowed them to regulate their family and religious life according to their own norms of conduct. Jews were seen and treated as “different” (and generally inferior) by the Christian or Muslim populations surrounding them.

The Emancipatory Treatment. The emancipation of Jews, that is, their legal recognition as equals to the rest of society, figured prominently in the Enlightenment project and the political debates surrounding the Atlantic revolutions of the late eighteenth century. In January of 1790, six months after the storming of the Bastille, France’s National Assembly voted to grant full citizenship to “all Jews of Portuguese and Spanish origin,” mostly wealthy traders and merchants concentrated in the towns of Bordeaux and Bayonne, and those living in Avignon. A year and a half later, in September of 1791, it emancipated the rest of French Jews, including Alsatian Jews, who lived in ghettos similar to the shtetls of Eastern Europe.¹

To the revolutionaries supporting it, the emancipation of French Jews was a self-evident truth. As Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, one of its most ardent

¹ For an analysis of the two-phased extension of citizenship rights, see Maignial (1903), particularly pages 146–91. Napoleon’s *décret infâme*, which partially reversed emancipation for Alsatian Jews, expired in 1818 (Sorkin 2019, 213).

defenders, put it before the National Assembly, “it is enough to be a man and to be a civilized man to enjoy the rights of the citizen.” Accordingly, Jews should be citizens “because they are men and French, and because you have decreed that every French man is a citizen” (Clermont-Tonnerre 1791b, 34). Yet, even to the count of Clermont-Tonnerre, granting them full citizenship came with a non-negotiable price or condition: their dissolution as private individuals within the French nation.

Jews, Clermont-Tonnerre argued, “could be considered as a nation or as individuals” (Clermont-Tonnerre 1791b, 47). As the former, “we should ... deny everything to Jews” because they would be negating the very precondition of their freedom: the French nation (Clermont-Tonnerre 1791a, 226–7). “If they presented themselves as a nation,” Clermont-Tonnerre insisted in the debate preceding the second emancipation decree, “if they told you: we have our civil laws to which we intend to subject ourselves; we have created powers which we intend to obey, and yet we ask to be part of your society; we ask to be judged by your courts before which we will not litigate; to be members of administrations to which we will not subject ourselves ... then we should without any doubt reject those absurd claims” (Clermont-Tonnerre 1791b, 39–40). By contrast, when considered as individuals, the National Assembly “should ... grant everything to Jews,” that is, the same rights of non-Jews (Clermont-Tonnerre 1791a, 226–7).

The full social and political integration of French Jews took decades to achieve, resting on fragile foundations until the end of World War II—besieged by the anti-Semitism of the French Right, exposed by the Dreyfus affair, and then resurrected under Pétain. Nevertheless, the level of Jewish involvement in national politics was already notable by the end of the nineteenth century. Over 50 Jews served as deputies, senators, or ministers during the Third Republic—among them, six as ministers of the police—all committed to “maintaining the republican order par excellence” and “the ‘strength’ of the state” (Birnbaum 1995, 115).

As in France, the United States granted legal and political equality to Jews qua citizens—provided the latter conceived of themselves and behaved as such.² In his address to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport in 1790, Washington would stress that “the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no factions, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support” (quoted in Eisenstadt 1992, 124–5) Again, as in France, the American constitutional commitment to political equality and to the

disestablishment of religion did not prevent the presence of strong discriminatory practices at the private and corporate level—from housing practices to many universities’ hiring policies—well into the twentieth century. But a leveled political playfield made full integration eventually possible.

Under the direct influence of French ideas, the Netherlands emancipated Jews in 1796.³ In Italy, legal equality came with the French army in 1799, only to disappear with Napoleon’s defeat in 1815. However, Piedmont granted citizenship rights to its Jewish population in 1848, extending them to the rest of Italy with unification. Britain’s path to equality proceeded in a more piecemeal fashion. Jews were given the right to naturalize in 1825 and the right to own property, vote, and appeal in courts in the following two decades. By the 1850s, legal equality was complete. In 1866, all restrictions to enter into Parliament were abrogated.

Although progress toward emancipation was more contentious, Germany formally treated Jews as equal citizens at the time of unification. As in Italy, Napoleon’s army dismantled discriminatory laws in western Germany. Yet most German territories reinstated the old regime after 1815. The failure of the liberal revolution of 1848 delayed Jewish emancipation until the 1860s in northern Germany and 1870–71 in southern Germany.⁴ In Austria-Hungary, an Edict of Toleration of 1782 introduced a modicum of religious and professional liberties for the Jewish population but the latter’s status remained unchanged in many essential dimensions, ranging from the lack of freedom to settle to the maintenance of special taxes paid by Jewish communities.⁵ As in Germany, the revolution of 1848 led to a brief emancipatory period but full formal equality only took place in 1867.

Continuous Subordination. The evolution in the legal status of Jews in Western and Central Europe contrasted with their fortunes in Europe’s periphery. The Russian Empire, with the partial exception of the territory of Congress Poland after the mid-1860s, maintained a harsh discriminatory regime until its collapse. Russian Jews, confined to urban areas, needed permission to move and resettle, could not own land, were excluded from a long list of occupations, and were limited in their access to education through the imposition of an exacting “*numerus clausus*” system. Their life condition only worsened after a wave of pogroms in the 1880s following the assassination of tsar Alexander II.

In the Balkans, Jewish emancipation only followed from the explicit intervention of Western powers. The recognition of Bulgaria’s independence was made conditional on new country granting equal civil rights to all members of religious and ethnic groups. Similar clauses were demanded and obtained from Serbia and

² As should be clear from this discussion, legal emancipation was separate and did not necessarily imply a lack of social discrimination. Here I only examine the identity effects of legal emancipation. Throughout the paper I refers to Jews’ formal (legal) equality in relationship to the treatment of similarly situated non-Jews—particularly (albeit not exclusively) in terms of their gender. For example, women were not allow to vote regardless of religion or ethnicity until the turn of the twentieth century or later.

³ The following discussion of political emancipation across the world relies on Katz (1998) and Birnbaum and Katznelson (1995).

⁴ For an examination of the growth of administrative and social discriminatory practices in the last decades of the nineteenth century, see Mosse (1995, 90 ff).

⁵ On Austria’s emancipatory measures in the later eighteenth century, including its Italian territories, see Sorokin (2019, 63–71).

Romania. Still, domestic resistance was considerable. While formally including the language of the Congress of Berlin, the Romanian constitution was written to limit full civil rights to a few hundred Jews (Gelber 2018).

In the Ottoman Empire, which had a “millet” system in which religious minorities were allowed to govern themselves internally in religious and civil matters, legal equality and citizenship were introduced for all non-Muslims in 1856 and 1869 respectively. Even then, Istanbul maintained a separate legal system for civil affairs, a poll tax, and restrictions on internal migration and land ownership in Palestine until late in time (Benbassa 1990). In French North Africa, with the exception of those living in Algeria’s coastal departments, who were granted French citizenship in 1870, the majority of Jews were assimilated into colonial “indigenous” populations.

JEWIS’ NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Jews’ national identification varied with the political treatment they received.⁶ In those countries that granted them equal rights, Jewish identity and religion became privatized and Jews thought of themselves as American, French, or Dutch first. As early as 1806, an Assembly of Jewish Notables convened by Napoleon asserted that “the Jews no longer form a separate people but enjoy the advantage of being incorporated with the Great Nation (which privilege they consider as a kind of political redemption),” adding that “a French Jew considers himself, in England, as among strangers, although he may be among Jews” (quoted in Sorokin 2019, 123). In 1891, Joseph Reinach, former personal secretary of the Radical leader Léon Gambetta, declared in the Chamber of Deputies that Jewish statesmen “worship the religion of the French Revolution in their hearts” (quoted in Birnbaum 1995, 116). In the United States, Yiddish-speaking migrants from Eastern Europe set up relatively active and influential Zionist organizations. However, the latter did not crystallize into a separate national identity or even a permanent political movement (Halpern 1979).

By contrast, when emancipation did not take place, Jewish communities had three main political options (besides coping with the precarious subordinate existence they bore under Ancien Régime societies). They could migrate to liberal states. They could join non-Jewish individuals and organizations in the destruction of the old regime—an option that, at the turn of the twentieth century, normally took place through the enrollment in socialist and/or communist parties that promised the universal extension of formal and material rights and, therefore, the treatment of all as equal citizens. Finally, Jews could affirm themselves as a nation with a right to political self-determination.⁷

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of the concepts of nationalism and national identification, see Mylonas and Tudor (2023, 5, 22). I follow them in defining the latter as having an “imagined community as locus of loyalty” and a “desire for self-rule.” For a recent discussion on their measurement, see Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) and Cederman et al. (2023).

Already in 1862, Moses Hess, declaring that “we shall always remain strangers among the nations,” pushed for the creation of a Jewish homeland (Lacqueur 1972, 50). Still, the Zionist movement only took root after the Russian pogroms of 1881–82. Hovevei Zion (the “Lovers of Zion”) convened its first Congress in 1884 with representatives from 50 towns across the Pale calling for the Jewish settlement of Palestine. Theodor Herzl’s book *The Jewish State* galvanized the Zionist movement, which organized its first World Congress in 1897. One-third of all the delegates came from the Russian Empire. In the Duma elections of 1906, five of the 12 Jewish deputies were Zionists (Schechtman 1966). In the 1917 elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly, Jewish nationalist parties received an overwhelming majority of the votes for Jewish parties (Rabinovitch 2014, 229–34).

Proxying Jewish national identification by the strength of the Zionist movement around World War I, Figure 1 shows its relationship with the time at which political emancipation was enacted in the previous century across Europe, Turkey, and the Maghreb.⁸ The vertical axis plots, in logged terms, per capita financial effort (in British shillings) to the World Zionist Organization in 1922.⁹ The contribution is estimated in real terms and adjusted by the level of per capita income in 1920 to take into account different levels of development.¹⁰ The horizontal axis indicates the proportion of years after states granted legal equality to Jews between 1800 and 1920. For example, political emancipation was decreed in parts of Germany after the invasion of Napoleon until 1815, then again briefly in 1848–49, and finally across the whole territory in 1871. That results in 65 years of emancipation or 54 percent of all the period.¹¹

Figure 1 plots the fitted line based on estimations reported in Table A.1 (Model 1) in Supplementary Appendix A. The level of Zionist mobilization, which, again, measures the distribution of national self-identification

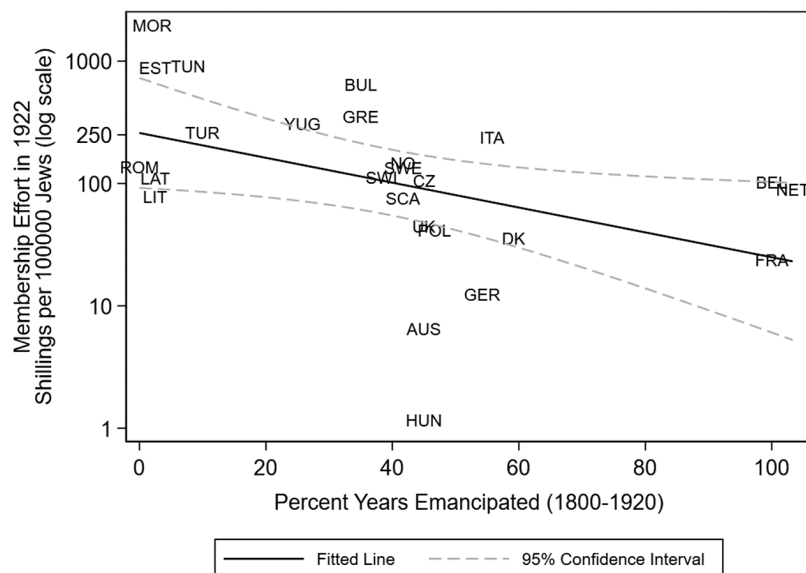
⁷ In some instances, the aspiration to a sovereign state was replaced by a call to have local autonomy in the areas where they lived. For an examination of this debate within the Jewish Zionist movement in Poland and Russia, see Mendelsohn (1981) and Rabinovitch (2014) respectively.

⁸ The universe of countries excludes American, Australasian and sub-Saharan territories that received a substantial number of Jews emigrating from the Russian Empire. It also excludes Egypt because Ashkenazi Jews started to settle there at the turn of the twentieth century. Although Jewish immigrants often made substantial financial contributions to the Zionist cause, they did not mobilize to affect the institutions and laws of the countries of reception—and certainly did not consider themselves to be a separate nationality (Halpern 1979; Raider 1998). Data from Russia were unavailable to the World Zionist Organization for political reasons (WZO 1923, 38).

⁹ The data come from WZO (1923, 45–50, Table 1).

¹⁰ The adjustment takes place by estimating each national contribution relative to British per capita income. Adjusting national contributions by the real wage of a building laborer delivers similar results. The latter are available on request. The wage data are taken from de Zwart, van Leeuwen, and van Leeuwen-Li (2014).

¹¹ For Poland, the years of emancipation are calculated by weighing by population the different emancipation dates in the separate territories under the control of Austria, Prussia and Russia. For Morocco and Tunisia, they are calculated weighing the proportion of Jews of French citizenship and the year those territories came under French control.

FIGURE 1. Emancipation and Zionism

among Jews, was negatively correlated with the length of Jewish emancipation. The estimated contribution level in a country that had not granted equal rights at the end of the war was, at close to 240 shillings per 100,000 Jews, almost 10 times larger than in a country where emancipation had taken place in the late eighteenth century. The result is robust to defeat in World War I, which probably reduced the capacity of Jews to pay membership dues, and to the exclusion of Maghreb territories, where information on the number of Jews with French citizenship is imprecise.

THE RUSSIAN PALE BORDER

To minimize the heterogeneity of Jewish populations examined so far and the potential endogeneity of their legal and political status, I turn to a regression discontinuity design that leverages the fact that, after the partition of Poland among its neighbors, its Jewish population lived under separate legal and administrative units: the Pale of Settlement (roughly coinciding with the area of pre-partitioned Poland given to Russia), itself divided between Congress Poland and the provinces under direct administrative control of the tsarist authorities, and former Polish territories appropriated by Austria and Prussia. These different units had, as described shortly, distinct consequences on the overall rights of their Jewish populations starting in the late 1860s.¹²

¹² Around 1880, about one million lived in the territory of Congress Poland, three million in imperial Russia proper, that is, in the area extending from the border of Congress Poland to the eastern boundary of pre-partitioned Poland, and about three quarters of a million in the Austrian and German former Polish areas. A minority of Russian Jews, approximately about one in five, lived outside the Pale area, mainly in large cities (DellaPergola 1992; Kupovetsky 2010).

The Border

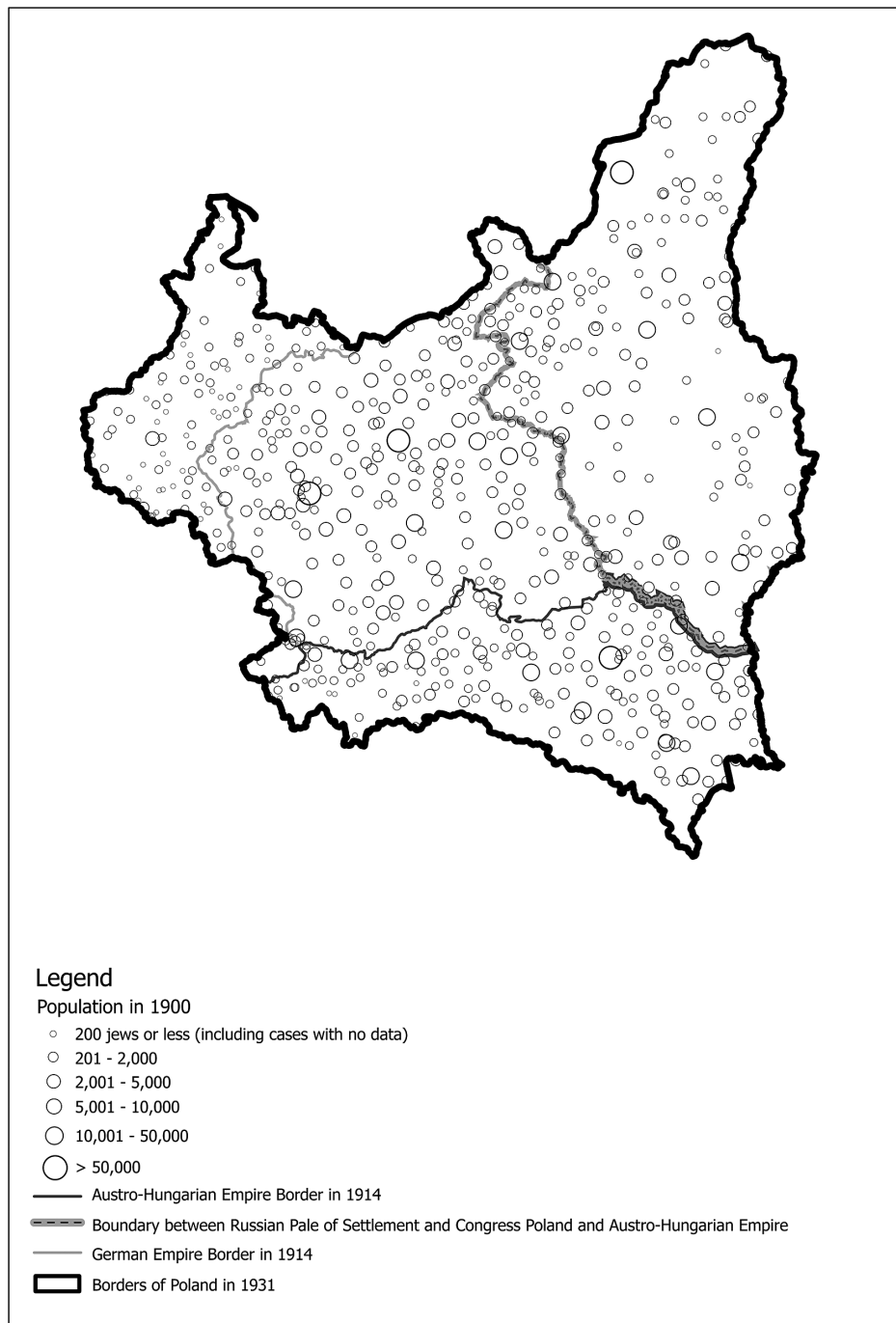
The borders of the territories under each imperial power (as well as the boundary between Congress Poland and the area of the Pale under direct Russian imperial rule) derived from Poland's third partition of 1795, partly altered by the creation of the semi-sovereign Duchy of Warsaw by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1807 (then expanded in 1809). After Bonaparte's defeat, the Congress of Vienna ceded most of the Duchy, which came to be known as Congress Poland, to Russia in the form of a personal union with the tsar.

The definitive borders of 1815 were determined by the relative military strength and strategic considerations of the imperial powers that had partitioned Poland—with natural boundaries, especially small rivers, partly acting as focal points to establish its exact placement (Grosfeld, Rodnyansky, and Zhuravskaya 2013; Lukowski 1999)—and they neither coincided with the administrative divisions of pre-partitioned Poland nor followed any ethnic or religious boundaries. As tested later (Figure 6), no biogeographic, demographic, or economic discontinuities marked the boundary of the Russian Pale of Settlement—the object of the regression discontinuity analysis performed here.

Besides depicting the borders of the territories under each imperial power, Figure 2 shows the distribution of the Jewish urban population around 1900 based on the Russian census of 1897 and German and Austrian data for 1900 (in some cases, 1905) for the territory of interwar Poland. Almost three-quarters of Jews lived in urban concentrations in the territories that would become part of an independent Poland.

In turn, Figure 3 plots the (smoothed) distribution of the Jewish population in towns in 1900 and 1921 with respect to the distance of each locality to the boundary of the Russian Pale. (See footnote 22 for sources.) The distribution (running from left or west [German side] to

FIGURE 2. Jewish Urban Population Around 1900 (within Borders of Interwar Poland)



Data source: Russian census of 1897 and German and Austrian censuses of 1900. See main text.

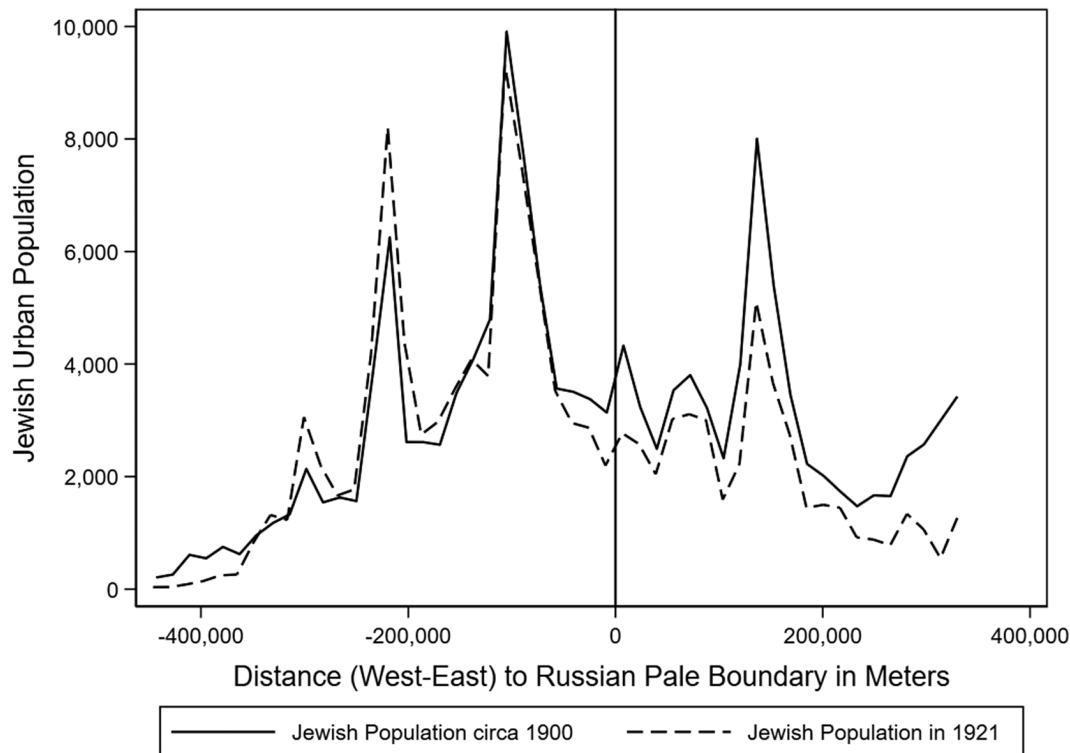
right or east [Russian side]) is estimated according to a local polynomial function for separate bins with an equal number of observations.

Differential Treatment

Until 1862, the legal status of Jews living in Congress Poland was similar and in some respects even more

disadvantageous than the one suffered by their Russian co-ethnics (Wandycz 1974, 126; Weeks 2015, 307).¹³ Following a wave of political unrest (unrelated to the Jewish condition) in several Polish towns in 1861, the

¹³ The lack of equality between Jews and other social categories (nobles, magnates, the Christian bourgeoisie, the peasantry) did

FIGURE 3. Spatial Distribution of Jewish Population in 1900 and 1921

Data sources: Virtual Shtetl database. See main text.

tsar agreed to a program of moderate liberalization, which included a set of measures to grant legal equality to Jews. Even though emancipation was not “full and unconditional,” Jews were now allowed to live anywhere in Congress Poland, purchase land except peasant land (a restriction also applying to other non-Jewish groups), engage in any economic activity (except for the production and sale of liquors), and act in legal and criminal proceedings on the same basis as Christians (Dyner and Wodziński 2015; Eisenbach and Polonsky 1991). Even after the autonomy of Congress Poland was definitely abolished in 1867 and the area was renamed as “Privilinsky krai” (also known as “Vistula Territory”), the new legal status of Jews was not reversed. In line with the evolution of Russia’s Polish territories, Prussia and Austria emancipated their Jewish subjects in 1861 and 1867 respectively (Wandycz 1974).

Initially, Alexander II attenuated some of the most discriminatory measures in effect in the Russian part of the Pale. However, his assassination in 1881 led to a quick deterioration of Jews’ condition in the Russian Pale. By the early 1890s, Jews could neither settle anew

outside of towns and townlets (a measure that dislodged them from nine-tenths of all Pale’s territory) nor purchase any rural land and were completely barred from participating in municipal elections. Both the proportion of Jewish aldermen in municipal councils, to be appointed by the local governor, and the number of Jewish students admitted to secondary and higher education were capped at 10 percent (Dubnow 1916, 336–53). The “Supreme Commission for the Revision of Current Laws in the Empire Concerning the Jews,” convened in the late 1880s, reported that Jews in the Russian Pale “look with envy upon the Jews in the adjacent province of the kingdom of Poland, who are almost entirely emancipated, though living under the jurisdiction of the same State” (quoted in Dubnow 1916, 368).

Following the Russian Revolution of October 1905, Nicholas II signed a manifesto promising the political liberalization of the tsarist regime. In the elections to the first Russian Duma held a few months later, Jewish men were granted the right to vote. Five of the 12 elected Jewish deputies were Zionists (Schechtman 1966, 12). Still, no civil rights were extended to Russian Jews during the two-year semi-democratic interlude that followed. The tsar himself vetoed a bill expanding Jewish rights submitted by his own prime minister, Stolypin (Kofanov and Boix 2024). The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the decision of the now-independent Polish state to comply with the provisions

not mean “that the principles of legal equality appl[ie]d to other inhabitants of the state.” Each group had its own particular rights derived from the fact that “the Duchy continued to be a political entity based on the estate order” (Oniszczyk 2015, 86). On the status of Jews in pre-partition Poland and the reduction of their corporate “privileges” after the second and third partitions, see Sorkin (2019).

of the Minorities Treaty it signed in 1918 resulted in the formal emancipation of all Jews living in the former territories of the Pale of Settlement.

The Outcome: National Identification and School Networks

To identify the effect of these two different political “treatments” on Jews’ national self-identification, I leverage observational data corresponding to the area of interwar Poland, which, after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918 and the Polish-Soviet war, subsumed Congress Poland, part of the Russian Pale, and some of the territories previously controlled by Austria-Hungary and Germany.¹⁴

Politically speaking, Jews belonged to three main party families, defined by different ideological programs and national commitments. Conservative, non-Zionist Jews pivoted around Agudat Yisrael candidates. Making religion “a central part of Jewish existence” (Bacon 1996, 69), they did not question their national identity as Polish citizens, accepted the constitutional status quo, and supported, at most, a “politics of intercession” that consisted in lobbying for specific regulations such as allowing business to close down on the Sabbath or subsidizing Jewish private schools (227–31). Espousing an internationalist agenda, the Bund rallied socialist Jews opposed to Zionism. Finally, the Zionist movement, divided (on religious and redistributive issues) between several organizations such as the General Zionists, P’o’alei Tsiyon, and Mizrachi, pushed for an “autonomous concept of Jewish self-identity” as “the basis of the new Jewish politics” (Polonsky 2003, 40) that entailed redefining Jews as a national community with the right to establish a sovereign country.

Unfortunately, data availability reasons make it unfeasible to use Jews’ vote choices to determine their political and national preferences. Although there are municipal-level data on both party votes and the number of Jewish electors, we cannot calculate the proportion of the latter who voted for Zionist parties due to the type and composition of electoral lists. In the elections of 1922, several Jewish parties, both Zionist and non-Zionist, ran for office together under the

“Bloc of National Minorities” (BNM) list.¹⁵ In the elections of 1928, Agudat Yisrael fielded its own candidates while some Zionist parties stayed within the BNM list. However, several Belorussian and Ukrainian parties joined the BNM list, making it impossible to attribute the votes cast for BNM as Zionist votes and then divide them by Jewish electors.¹⁶

Accordingly, I examine the political commitments of Polish Jews by looking at the nature and distribution of Jewish schools. Mirroring the Jewish political landscape, there existed several Jewish educational networks directly connected to different partisan organizations and educating, together, about one-third of Jewish children of elementary school age (Cohen 2002). About half of the children attending Jewish institutions enrolled in traditional schools, mostly integrated into the “Chojrev” network, linked to Agudat Yisrael. There, schooling relied on the active use of Yiddish, a passive use of Hebrew, and the operational learning of Polish. About 9.5 percent of all children attending Jewish schools went to the educational institutions of “Tsysho” (for Central Jewish School Organization), a school network that provided a secular curriculum in Yiddish and worked under the auspices of the Bund. Finally, within the Zionist movement, there were two main educational networks—“Tarbut” and “Yavne,” comprising 25 and 8.5 percent of all the students attending Jewish schools in 1934–35 respectively. Tarbut, identified with mainstream Zionist parties, offered a secular education that emphasized the use of Hebrew as the language of instruction (Eisenstein 1950). Yavne schools, linked to Mizrachi, taught in a combination of Hebrew and Yiddish or Hebrew and Polish.¹⁷

Besides the fact that both the curriculum and the language of each school network reflected the ideological alignment of its corresponding political family or bloc, giving us credible information about the distribution of the latter’s supporters, attendance at Jewish schools arguably provides a costly signal of the degree to which Jewish communities were committed to Zionist ideals. A February 1919 decree established compulsory education in Poland until the age of 14 while stating that this requirement “may be satisfied in general public schools or any other schools ... provided that the range of information” was equal to the one taught in state schools

¹⁴ As fully discussed in Tomaszewski (1994, 121–5), the Polish constitution of 1921 guaranteed full equality of rights, adding that no bill may contradict its provisions. In February 1924, Poland’s Supreme Court ruled that the constitution had abolished all the anti-Jewish regulations automatically. Still, because the Polish constitution entrusted the Polish parliament to pass legislation to bring all laws in conformity with the constitution, some Polish interwar jurists claimed that all the existing discriminatory laws in place in the Russian part of the Pale now under Poland continued to be valid until they were not explicitly repealed—a position adopted, for example, by the top court for administrative law. Due to several governmental crises and delaying tactics from right-wing parliamentarians, specific legislation to abrogate any anti-Jewish regulations was only approved in 1930. This might have caused some lingering legal discrimination on the eastern side of the boundary of interest until late during the first Polish republic.

¹⁵ The 1919 elections were held in the former territory of Congress Poland only.

¹⁶ Kopstein and Wittenberg (2011) use ecological behavior techniques to estimate Jewish support for the BNM. However, for the election of 1928, census data (on proportion of Jews) are only available at the county level.

¹⁷ According to Eck’s (1947) and Kijek’s (2016) history of Jewish schools, there did not seem to be any legal restrictions on Zionist schools in Congress Poland. After WWI, the legal regime governing the educational system was identical across all Poland. Since the turn of the twentieth century, Zionist education through the teaching of Jewish history and Hebrew as a living language was introduced in so-called “reformed” primary schools across the Pale (and in afternoon schools in Galicia). In 1913, a Conference of Zionists meeting in Minsk adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of elementary schools where all subjects were to be taught in Hebrew. The first secular day school of this kind opened the following year. The Tarbut network was officially established in 1917.

(Levin 2002, 63). Two years later, the Polish state recognized explicitly the right of national minorities to establish their own schools (63). However, whereas state elementary schools were free, private schools (including those of ethnic minorities) were to be established and maintained “at their own cost” (63)—contravening the clauses included in the Minorities Treaty signed by Poland. In turn, secondary schools required paying an annual fee. Tuition for state educational institutions, which was subsidized, ranged between 200 and 300 zloty in 1934. Tuition for private secondary schools was two to four times higher (Kijek 2018, 240). Besides their dissimilar financial costs, attending public and private schools had different consequences for the educational and employment opportunities of their students. Schools whose language of instruction was Polish and followed the national curriculum received full state accreditation and their school-leaving certificates were accepted for admission at Polish universities. By contrast, students at Jewish schools had to take a second, external matriculation exam to continue their education in Poland (Kijek 2016; 2018). In addition, a “good knowledge of the national language ... [going beyond] a limited technical fluency in the language ... was considered crucial for employment and made it possible to be active in public life” (Kijek 2018, 243–4). Indeed, Jewish students were aware of the advantages of a full Polish education, as revealed by the autobiographies written by the cohort born between 1910 and 1922 and collected in three competitions run by the Vilna YIVO (Yiddish Scientific Institute) in 1932, 1934, and 1939 (Kijek 2018, 245–9).

To determine the location of Zionist schools, I rely on two separate sources. In the first place, I compile the presence of all Jewish educational institutions for all the Polish municipalities that had the administrative category of town (*miasta*) according to the information gathered in the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust* or *Pinkas Ha-kehilot*. This gives up to 587 observations. Relying on town information has two advantages: it covers 71.4 percent of Polish Jews, who were a highly urbanized population;¹⁸ and, it focuses on Jewish communities that were sufficiently large to bear the costs of building and funding permanent educational institutions.

In the second place, I employ the information recorded in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education censuses of 1925–26 and 1931–32 (*Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia 1927; 1933*). Both censuses indicate the name and location of every school and, in the 1931–32 census, their adscription to a particular educational network. On the one hand, those educational censuses have a crucial advantage over the *Pinkas Ha-kehilot*. Whereas the latter is based on written records as well as personal memoirs that may be incomplete, the former report systematic information collected by Poland’s Ministry of Education. On the other hand, the educational censuses suffer from one weakness. The identification of the network is only feasible for Tarbut schools in 1925–26 and both Tarbut and Yavne schools in 1930–31. Other Zionist schools that were either

independent or affiliated with other educational networks cannot be identified due to the generic nature of the terms (e.g., Communal Jewish schools) under which they were listed.

Figure 4 plots the location of Zionist schools (as reported in *Pinkas Ha-kehilot*). There were twice as many towns with those schools on the eastern side than in the old Congress Poland territory. Figure 5 plots the location of Tarbut and Yavne schools. About half of all towns had a school registered as part of either the Tarbut or the Mizrahi networks on the eastern side of that border. By contrast, only one in 20 towns on the western side did.

Identification Strategy

The object of interest is the impact of the heightened direct exclusion by Russian authorities in the Russian Pale on Jewish national identity or τ at the boundary:

$$\tau = \lim_{x \downarrow c} E[Y_{i,D=1} | X_i = x] - \lim_{x \uparrow c} E[Y_{i,D=0} | X_i = x]$$

where τ identifies the effect of the Russian Pale treatment, Y_i is the outcome of interest in each locality i , D is the treatment indicator and is 1 for the former Russian Pale area, X_i is the distance from the geographic center of the locality to the boundary line, and c is the location of the boundary. For the purposes of the estimation, $X_i \in [c-h, c+h]$, where h is the bandwidth.¹⁹

To obtain a point estimate for the outcome of interest, I adopt a nonparametric approach and use local linear regression following best practices (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019). I adopt a triangular kernel function that weights observations close to the cutoff more heavily. Results are robust to using higher-order polynomials and to the choice of both uniform and Epanechnikov kernels. The choice of the bandwidth h is done according to the mean square error (MSE) criterion that minimizes the sum of the square bias and the variance of the estimator. To construct confidence intervals, I use robust bias correction that relies on removing the estimated bias term from the point estimator (Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik 2019).

In what follows, I take two steps. First, I evaluate the extent to which the border of interest may coincide with any spatial, demographic, or economic differences other than our variable of interest (Zionist schools). Second, I estimate the effect of the treatment on the distribution of Zionist schools.

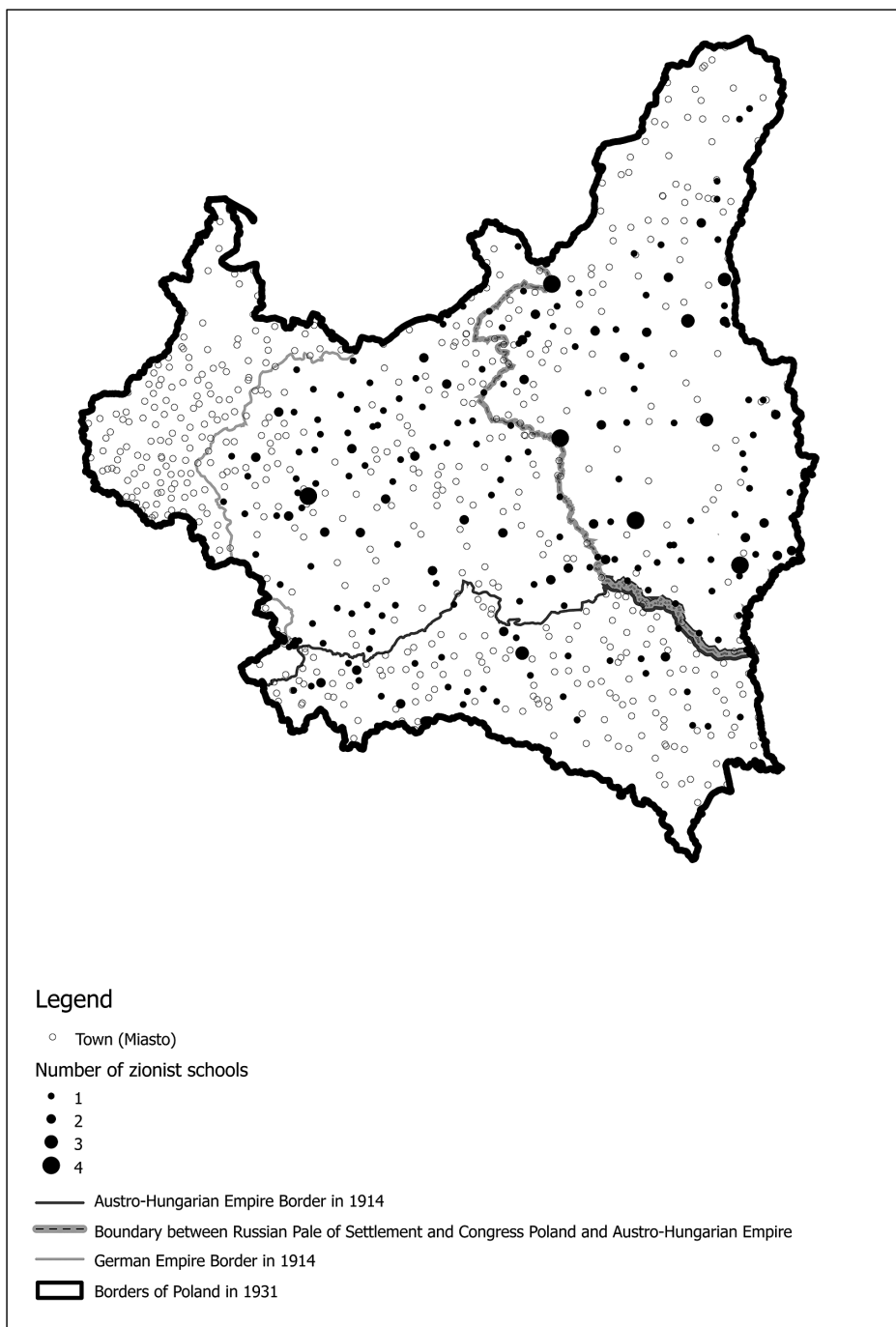
The former boundary of interest can be plausibly seen as established exogenously and identifying well the political treatment of interest in the light of the estimated discontinuity of 21 spatial, economic, demographic, and social covariates plotted in Figure 6:²⁰

¹⁹ As drawn in Figures 4, 5, and 9, the analysis relies on the full border of the Russian part of the Pale and the western side (where Jews were legally emancipated in the 1860s). Estimates do not change (and remain statistically significant) if we drop the localities on the Austrian segment and constrain the analysis to Congress Poland and the Russian part of the Pale.

²⁰ Appendix B reproduces separate RD plots for the variables reported in Figure 6.

¹⁸ By contrast, only 22.1 percent of Polish non-Jews lived in towns.

FIGURE 4. Location of Zionist Schools in Interwar Poland's Towns



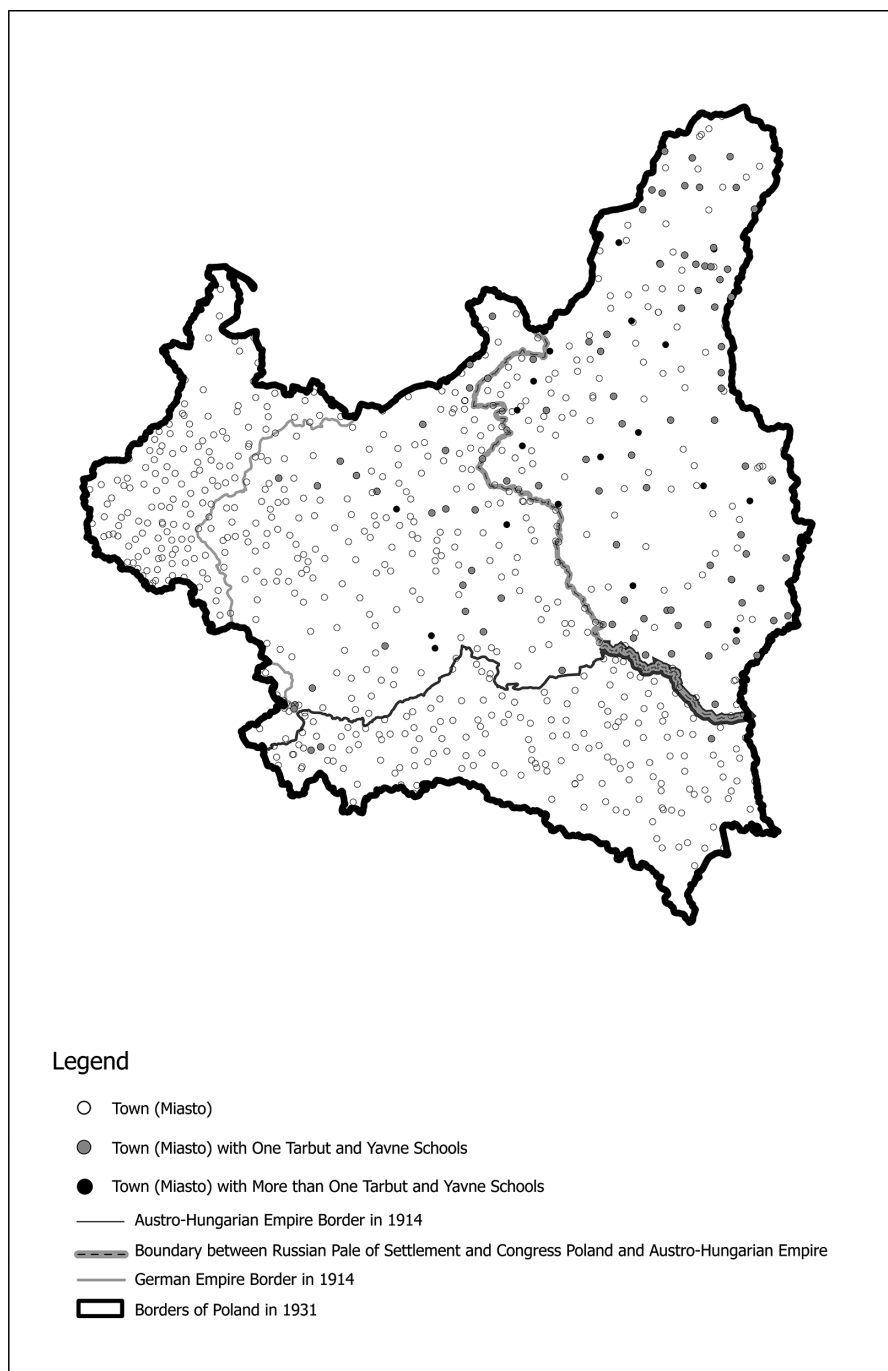
Data source: Pinkas-Ha-kehilot. See main text.

(1) Neither geographic (altitude and ruggedness) nor economic conditions (pasture, cropland, shortest distance to railroads in 1920) varied at the border.²¹

(2) Likewise, there are no demographic discontinuities, as measured through the total population in 1921 and Jewish population from 1750 through 1921.²² The border appeared not to have been determined by the location of Jews as of 1750 or

²¹ The geographic, pasture and cropland data are based on Klein Goldewijk, Beusen, and Janssen (2010). Distance to railroads in 1890 and 1910 produces similar, statistically not significant results. Distance to railroads relies on data in Martí-Henneberg (2013).

²² Population for 1921 is taken for the Polish census of that year. The census of 1921 did not cover all Poland. It was not conducted in

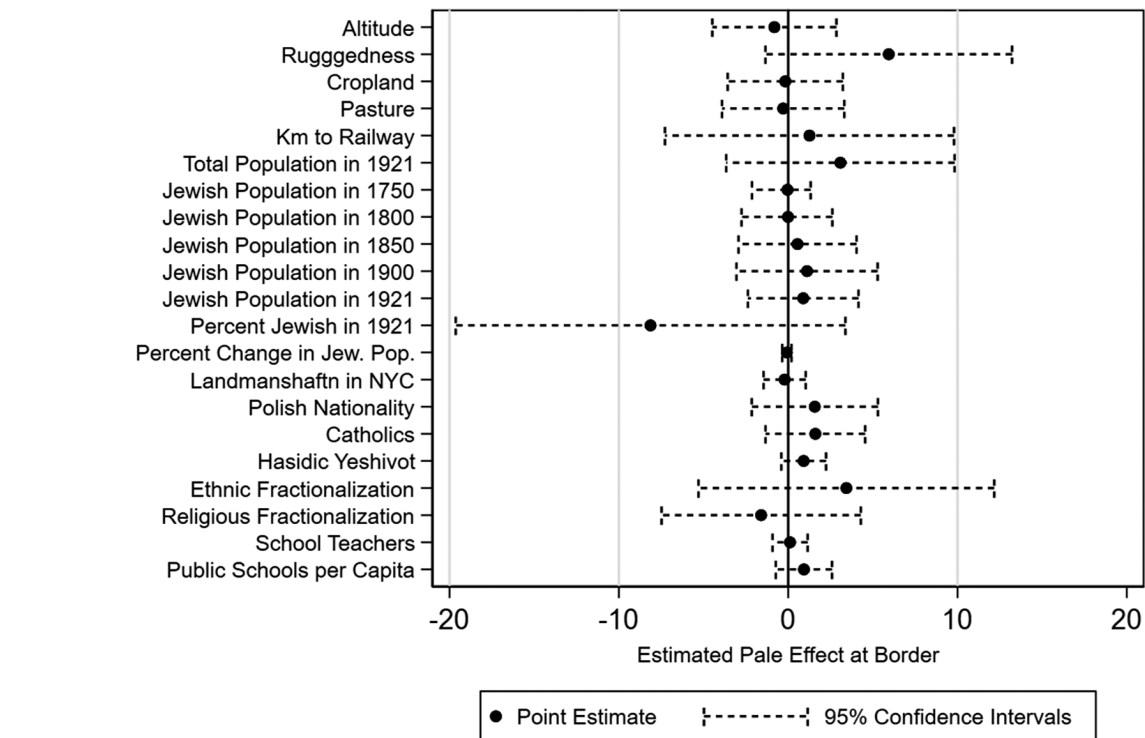
FIGURE 5. Location of Tarbut and Yavne Schools in Poland's Towns in 1925-26 and 1930-31

Data sources: Polish Educational Census of 1925–26 and 1930–31. See main text.

northeastern Poland (around Vilnius) and in the southwest, in Silesia. Jewish population for 1750, 1800 and 1850 comes from Leitenberg (2008). Jewish population for 1900 comes from the censuses ran by Russia in 1897 and Austria and Prussia in 1900, reported by the Virtual Shtetl database (<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns>) and complete with JewishGen (<https://www.jewishgen.org/>).

1800. It was not associated either with any discontinuity in the distribution of the Jewish population throughout the nineteenth century—not even after the treatment of Jews in the Russian Pale grew much harsher in its second half. The stability of the results is, in fact, unsurprising given the strict rules enforced by the Russian state to prevent the mobility of Jewish communities. There was a slight

FIGURE 6. Spatial and Demographic Discontinuities at the Border



Note: Each coefficient is the estimated discontinuity at the former border of the Russian Pale, using an MSE optimal bandwidth. Confidence intervals are based on robust bias-corrected errors. Altitude is given in multiples of 10 meters. Ruggedness is the standard deviation of altitude in a 20-km-radius buffer. Cropland and pasture are the number of squared kilometers in a 20-km-radius buffer used for crops and pasture respectively. The total population, Jewish population, population with Polish “nationality,” and Catholics are given in thousands. Percent Jewish refers to the census of 1921. Percent change in Jewish population refers to the period 1900–1921. Landmanshaftn or mutual benefit organizations refer to the location of origin of their members. Yeshivot are per 100,000 Jews. Ethnic and religious fractionalization are calculated from the census of 1921 as an index from 0 to 100. School teachers are teachers per 1,000 inhabitants. See the sources for each variable in the main text and footnotes.

decline in the number of Jews on the Russian side and a small increase in the Warsaw area between the censuses of the late nineteenth century and the census of 1921—probably due to migration to America and to the disruptions generated by World War I and the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1920. Nevertheless, that population drop did not lead to any discontinuity at the old border.

(3) I check the possibility of compositional change in population due to migration across the two territories and/or to differential outmigration to other countries, and therefore selective sorting along the border, in several ways. In addition to previous tests on the distribution of the Jewish population from 1750 onward, I estimate, in the first place, the relative change in the Jewish population between 1900 and 1921 at the border. (Supplementary Appendix C reports additional tests for different time periods.)²³ In the second

place, I examine outflows from the Pale relying on the work of Spitzer (2021), who leverages the number of *landmanshaftn* or mutual benefit organizations of Jewish immigrants in New York (the main area of residence of Jewish immigrants) in the early twentieth century to determine the geographical origin (and causes of migration) of Jewish populations leaving imperial Russia between 1881 and 1914. Landmanshaftn, which had around half a million affiliates in 1919–20, grouped Jewish immigrants by town of origin. According to Spitzer (2021), landmanshaftn data correlate well with individual-level data (aggregated to the district level) obtained (for a shorter period of time) from the passenger lists submitted by shipping companies to U.S. immigration. I take the list of organizations from the Jewish Genealogical Society Burial Society

²³ For a discussion of internal migration across imperial gubernia (provinces) and uezd (counties) based on the census of 1897 (and showing low numbers of individuals born in a different county), see Stampfer (1995). At the turn of the century, a fraction of Lithuanian

(Litvak) Jews moved to large cities such as Warsaw and Lodz (Corrsin 1989). Migration numbers are unavailable. As an additional test, I drop the so-called “Lite” areas from my analysis (Polish powiats claimed by Lithuania in the interwar period). Results do not vary from the main estimations (reported in the paper) and are available upon request.

Database.²⁴ In line with Spitzer's findings that the origin of Jews followed a spatial, west-to-east chain migration pattern over several decades, there is no evidence of differential outmigration at the border.

- (4) The internal ethnic and religious composition of towns did not differ at the boundary. I measure it through: the population of Polish nationality (as opposed to German, Ruthenian, Russian, etc.); number of Catholics; number of Jewish individuals (based on religious faith) in 1921;²⁵ the Alesina ethnic fractionalization index (based on the proportion of different nationalities in the census of 1921 and multiplied by 100); and the index of religious fractionalization (based on the proportion of different confessional groups in the census of 1921).
- (5) Hasidism, antagonistic to Zionism at least until the Holocaust, and proxied here through Hasidic schools (per 100,000 Jews) listed in Wodziński (2018), was not distributed discontinuously at the border.
- (6) An important literature, to which I come back in the section on "Alternative Explanations," relates national identity to state capacity and the nation-building process done by state authorities through education (cf. Gellner 1983; Weber 1976). I consider this possibility through two measures: number of public school teachers per 1,000 inhabitants and number of public schools per 10,000 inhabitants. The data come from the educational census of 1925–26. None are discontinuous at the border, implying that the differential educational penetration of Zionist schools is not related (that is, does not seem to be a response) to potential differences in public education infrastructures.

The unequal status of Jews in the Russian Pale may have contained a bundled number of treatments: the legal regime (imposed by Tsarist authorities) strictly speaking as well as a set of discriminatory attitudes and practices at the societal level (backed up by the laws in place). Those social practices could have ranged from widespread bias in dealing with Jewish individuals to the application of violence in the form of pogroms. I examine those possibilities through discontinuity tests (reported above) on differential access to education and the ethnic and religious composition of the population (under the assumption that bias could be more widespread in communities with large non-Jewish majorities). In Supplementary Appendix C, I report additional discontinuity tests on party vote (to determine whether there was any discontinuity on support for anti-Semitic parties and hence anti-Semitic attitudes) and pogrom violence. None of these tests show any difference at the border. I interpret these results as pointing to the independent

effect of the legal treatment per se on Jewish national identification.²⁶

Zionist Schools

Our theoretical outcome of interest Y is number of schools—total and per 1,000 Jews. Figure 7 displays the number of Zionist schools (counted from Pinkas Ha-kehilot) per thousand Jewish inhabitants on both sides of the border (aggregated by bins with an equal number of observations) and a global polynomial. Zionist educational activity was higher on the Russian Pale side of the border—with a strong discontinuity at the cutoff point. Figure 8 displays the number of Tarbut and Yavne schools per thousand Jews according to the educational censuses of 1925–26 and 1930–31. At the border, the discontinuity is equally sharp although smaller in size.

Table 1 reports the results of the RD test for the number of Zionist schools from Pinkas Ha-kehilot (Model 1) and the number of Zionist schools (Tarbut, Yavne networks) according to the Polish census of 1925–26 and 1931–32 (Model 3). The two models include a control for Jewish population. Models 2 and 4 then examine the effect of being under direct Russian rule in the Pale of Settlement by looking at the number of schools per 1,000 Jews. Each model reports the total number of observations and the bandwidth number of observation on each side of the cutoff, the point estimate, robust standard error, and the length of the bandwidth.

The predicted effect of having been directly ruled by Russia is almost an additional 0.5 Zionist school (and over 0.3 per 1,000 Jews) (measured from the Pinkas source). The effect is large: the average number of Zionist schools was 0.4 in the Polish area. The predicted Russian Pale effect on having a Tarbut or Yavne school (according to the censuses) is close to 0.4—a substantial effect in light of an average 0.1 Zionist school on the Polish side. As a Palestinian settler put it, in Congress Poland, Jews were either "too Jewish" (that is, too Orthodox) "or too left-wing" while in the Russian Pale, "the Jewish are understanding, highly developed, and they know quite a bit about Palestine and Zionism" (quoted in Mendelsohn 1981, 213)

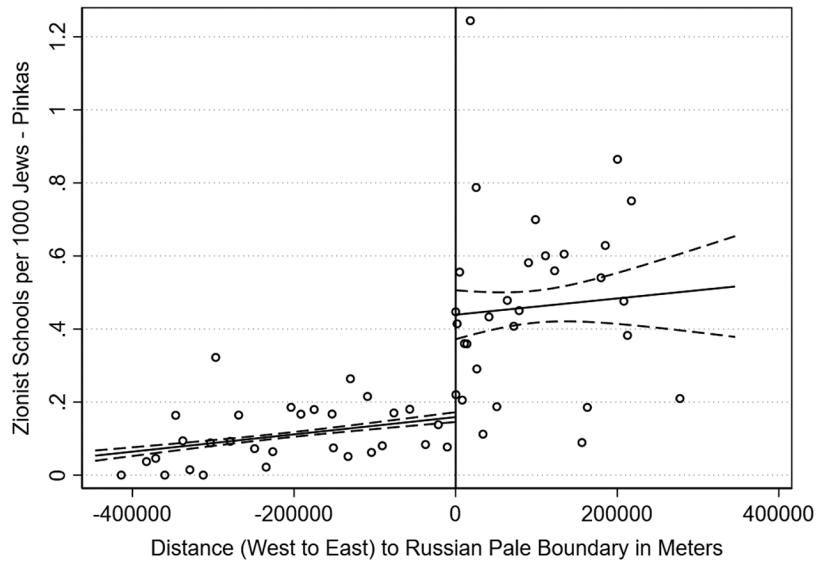
Zionist schools do not appear to have simply filled a void in the supply of education. As shown in Figure 6, public schooling (proxied by either school teachers or public schools) was not different at the boundary. Moreover, Models 5 and 6 in Table 2 show that there was no significant discontinuity at the former border in the total number of Jewish schools (Zionist and non-Zionist), even when adjusted per 1,000 Jewish individuals. These results fit with the information we have

²⁴ The data can be accessed in: <https://jgsny.org/searchable-databases/burial-society-databases>. For a more detailed discussion of this measure, see Appendix D.

²⁵ Results are similar using proportion of Polish nationals and Catholics.

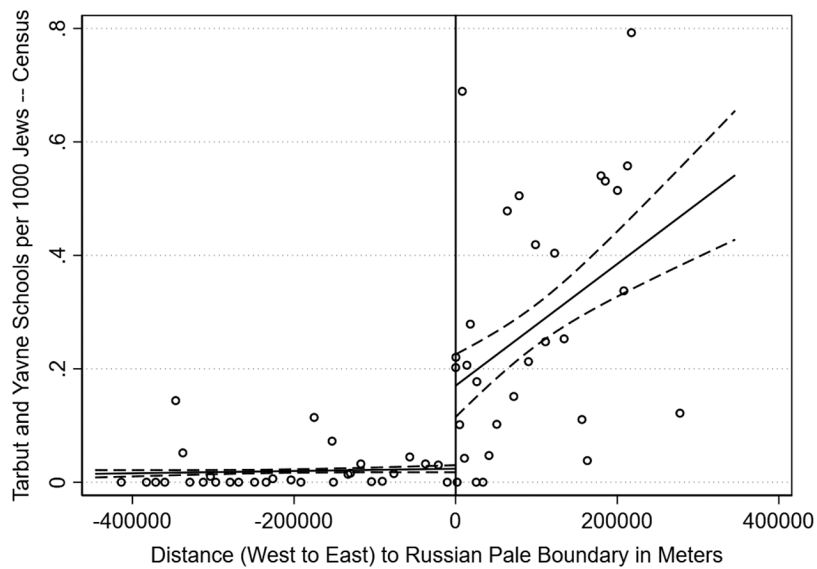
²⁶ Appendix C includes additional discontinuity tests for literacy rate in 1931, turnout in the election of 1922, quality of information retrieved from Pinkas Ha-kehilot, free loan societies (gmiles khesed kases), traditional heders, Jewish public libraries, and potential population shocks from evacuation orders by Russian authorities in frontline areas in 1915. The results are robust to narrowing the bandwidth to 50, 25, and 10 km and are available from the author.

FIGURE 7. Zionist Schools in Towns



Note: Schools aggregated in bins with an equal number of observations. Source: Pinkas Ha-kehilot.

FIGURE 8. Tarbut and Yavne Schools in Towns



Note: Schools aggregated in bins with an equal number of observations. Source: Polish Educational Census of 1925–26 and 1931–32.

(at the county level) on educational outcomes. In 1921, illiteracy rates of urban Jews were low across most cohorts: below 20 percent for men younger than 50 and around 35 percent for those older than 60 (Abramitzky and Halaburda 2020). The illiteracy rate of Jewish adult males was almost identical across the old boundary.²⁷ A central claim in the literature is that state-led schooling was a key driver of national identity formation (Gellner 1983; Darden N.d.; Balcells 2013). Applied to this case, it would imply that a separate

²⁷ The illiteracy rate was 26.7 and 26.3 percent in the former Russian and Congress towns respectively. Based on the census data of 1921, illiteracy rates were almost identical across both territories at each age cohort. Based on sparser data from the Russian census of 1897, Perlmann (1996) also shows Jewish illiteracy to have been already relatively low across all cohorts at the turn of the century. According to Estraiikh (1999, 8), Jewish males had the highest educational-attainment indices in the Empire in 1897 and literacy in Russian among Jews was higher than average literacy in Russian across the Empire as a whole.

TABLE 1. Repression and Zionist Schools

| | | Observations | | Russ.Pale | Robust | Bandwidth |
|--|------|--------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| | | Total | Bandwidth | effect | std. error | in km2 |
| MODEL 1 Number of Zionist Schools | West | 509 | 161 | 0.472** | (0.221) | 142 |
| | East | 116 | 83 | | | |
| MODEL 2 Zionist Schools adjusted per 1,000 Jews | West | 495 | 130 | 0.349*** | (0.105) | 116 |
| | East | 116 | 72 | | | |
| MODEL 3 Number Tarbut and Yavne Schools | West | 431 | 173 | 0.369** | (0.151) | 109 |
| | East | 168 | 103 | | | |
| MODEL 4 Tarbut and Yavne Schools adjusted per 1,000 Jews | West | 431 | 176 | 0.250* | (0.129) | 118 |
| | East | 173 | 105 | | | |
| MODEL 5. Number of Jewish Schools | West | 509 | 109 | -0.124 | (0.455) | 99.9 |
| | East | 116 | 66 | | | |
| MODEL 6. Jewish Schools adjusted per 1,000 Jews | West | 495 | 92 | 0.082 | (0.250) | 86.4 |
| | East | 116 | 62 | | | |

Note: Models 1, 3 and 5 control for Jewish population. Bandwidth selection based on the MSE criterion that minimizes the sum of the square bias and the variance of the estimator. Robust standard errors following Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik (2019). ***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1.

Sources: Models 1, 2, 5 and 6: Information collected from Pinkas Ha-kehillot. Models 3 and 4: Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia 1927; 1933.

TABLE 2. Hebrew as the Language of Instruction

| | | Observations | | – | Russ.Pale | Robust | Bandwidth |
|--------------------------------------|------|--------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|-----------|
| | | Total | Bandwidth | effect | std. error | in km2 | |
| MODEL 1. Number of Hebrew Schools | West | 561 | 113 | 0.854*** | (0.270) | 73 | |
| | East | 192 | 87 | | | | |
| MODEL 2. Hebrew Schools per 1,000 J. | West | 547 | 102 | 0.253** | (0.126) | 64 | |
| | East | 192 | 80 | | | | |

Note: Model 1 controls for Jewish population. Bandwidth selection based on the MSE criterion that minimizes the sum of the square bias and the variance of the estimator. Robust standard errors following Cattaneo, Idrobo, and Titiunik (2019). ***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.1.

Source: Education Census (Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia 1927; 1933)

Jewish national identity would have emerged in areas where public education was undersupplied. This does not seem to be the case here.

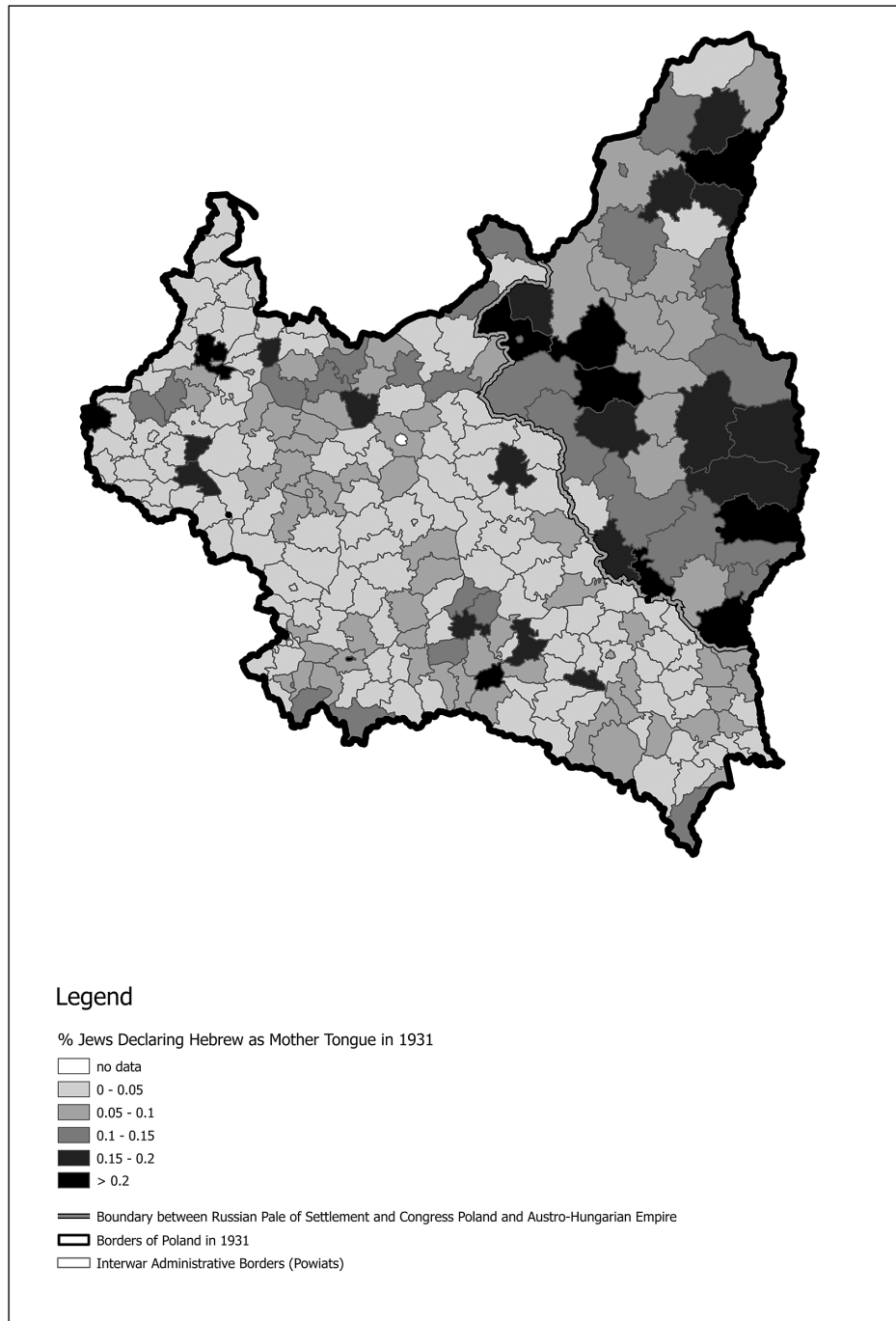
Hebrew as an Identity Marker

At the turn of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of Polish and Russian Jews had Yiddish as their mother tongue and primary language of communication. According to the census of 1897, 97 percent of Jews in the Russian empire and 96 percent of those in Congress Poland were native speakers of Yiddish. A fraction of those living in Congress Poland and the territories controlled by Germany and Austria-Hungary before World War I, particularly if they belonged to the upper-middle class, had adopted either Polish or German as their family language. By contrast, Hebrew “was no one’s native language in Eastern Europe in this period” (Corrsin 1998, 140). Although “some, perhaps many, women could read a vocalized

Hebrew text ... few women understood any Hebrew, and when they took a book in their hand, it was in Yiddish and not in Hebrew” (Stampfer 1993, 133–4).

With the rise of Zionism, language became a fundamental bone of contention within Jewish communities. While Orthodox Jews defended Yiddish as their natural language, limiting the use of Hebrew to the study and practice of religion, and Haskallah or pro-Enlightenment Jews often called for the substitution of the state vernacular (German, Russian, and so on) for Yiddish, Zionist activists clamored for the transformation of Hebrew into both the colloquial and literary language of the Jewish community (Bartal 1993). By the interwar period, “the role of Hebrew had changed radically ... the purchasers of Hebrew books were the members of a subgroup in the Jewish community with a specific nationalistic outlook ... Their language indicated their location in society—not as a scholarly or socioeconomic elite but as a self-conscious national group” (Stampfer 1993, 137). Indeed, as soon as the

FIGURE 9. Percentage of Jews Declaring Hebrew as their Mother Tongue in 1931



Data source: Polish Population Census of 1931. See main text.

Polish authorities decided to collect information about linguistic practices, the choice of the language to report to census enumerators became the object of heated political discussions. While part of the Zionist movement pushed for Hebrew, several Jewish parties (including smaller Zionist groupings) called “upon Jews to declare in the census that Yiddish was their mother tongue,” denouncing “Chauvinist Hebraism” as “reactionary” (Mendelsohn 1981, 203).²⁸

Figure 9 uses information collected on religion and mother tongue (including Hebrew and Yiddish) in the

²⁸ A poll conducted in Kiev among close to 1,000 Jewish students in 1910 reveals a strong correlation between their party affiliations and position on Jewish national languages. Whereas the ratio of Zionist students considering Hebrew their national language (relative to Yiddish) was 7 to 1, among socialist Bundists the ratio was 1 to 8 (Estraikh 1999, 19).

census of 1931 and published at the powiat (county) level to plot the proportion of individuals that declared Hebrew to be their mother tongue, which I take as a proxy for the prevalence of Jewish national self-identification, over the number of individuals that declared to be of the Jewish faith. The thick gray line in Figure 9 shows the border of interest. The gray thin lines mark the borders of interwar counties.

The average proportion of Jews declaring Hebrew as their mother tongue in 1931 was 7 percent—with a standard deviation of 7 percent and a proportion of 16 percent in the county at the ninetieth percentile of the distribution. The fraction of Jews declaring Hebrew as their mother tongue was 13 percent in counties to the east of the border of interest versus 6 percent in the rest of Poland. In a simple linear regression set-up, a powiat in the former Russian Pale was associated with an 8 percentage-point increase (and a p-value below 0.01) in the proportion of Hebrew-maternal-tongue speakers.

To identify the effect of repression more precisely, I look at the number of schools that employed Hebrew as a language of instruction in full or in combination with Polish. Although we need to be cautious about the interpretation of the instruction language (some traditional schools or cheders reported Hebrew as the language of instruction), the use of Hebrew may be taken as a plausible proxy for national consciousness (given the identity discussions that surrounded the choice of language). The information is collected from the educational censuses of 1925–26 and 1930–31. The analysis follows the same empirical design used for the type of school, as shown in Table 1.

As reported in Table 2, the estimated effect of the Russian Pale area is 0.85 additional Hebrew schools (against a mean of 0.64 Hebrew schools in the rest of Poland area) and 0.25 additional Hebrew schools per 1,000 Jews (against a mean of 0.09 in the rest of Poland). In short, the differential political treatment by Russian authorities triggered divergent national self-identifications, then resulting in different schooling strategies.

Robustness Tests

Results in Tables 1 and 2 are robust to narrowing the bandwidth to 75, 50, and 25 km (Supplementary Appendix E). Placebo tests show that displacing the border under investigation to the west and east by 10, 20, 30, 40, and 50 km reduces the point estimate and leads to the loss of its statistical significance (Supplementary Appendix F). Reestimating the cutoff line at the two variations of the Curzon Line (proposed by the British Foreign Office as the line of demarcation between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1919 and approximating the distribution of “ethnic” Poles) results in statistically not significant estimates—with the exception of the number of Hebrew schools for Curzon Line B (Supplementary Appendix G). Finally, the estimations are robust to adding all villages with at least 500 Jews (according to the census of 1921 and defined by religion) in the powiat around the border (raising the coverage of Polish Jews in that area from 69.4 percent to 82.8 percent) (Supplementary Appendix H).

North African Jews

The legal status of North African Jews under French rule and their response to decolonization provides a valuable, even if imperfect, “out-of-sample” test of the connection between emancipation and national identification. As detailed in Supplementary Appendix I, in coastal Algeria, which was organized as regular civil *départements*, Jews became French in 1870 and, following Algerian independence, overwhelmingly left for France. Jews in the Algerian Sahara, long under military jurisdiction, were granted French citizenship only one year before independence. They migrated to Israel. Most Moroccan and Tunisian Jews, considered colonial *indigènes* by Paris, made aliyah too.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

The findings so far suggest that the process of Jewish national formation was associated with political conditions (the emancipatory treatment) unfolding over the course of the long century set off by the Atlantic Revolutions. Here I consider two alternative explanations taken from today’s main research on nationalism: accounts that emphasize instrumental considerations to explain the distribution and boundaries of modern national identities; and theories stressing the impact of preexisting (pre-national) administrative and/or cultural discontinuities.²⁹

Generally speaking, instrumentalist theories attribute modern national identities to the (strategic) actions of elites. In Hobsbawm (1990, 80 ff), states spread patriotic sentiments to shore up their legitimacy (see also Linz and Stepan [1993] and, relatedly, Peisakhin [2010]). In Gellner, political elites are key agents in the construction of nations even though they may “know not what they do” (Gellner 1983, 49). Directly in response to the imperatives of modernization and industrialization, they create “something resembling a modern ‘national’ education system” (34) that imposes “a high culture on society” through “a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom” for the purposes of “reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication” (Gellner 1983, 57). Such a national system generates, in turn, a cultural homogeneity that “eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism” (39).³⁰

When applied to the case under analysis, instrumental explanations face two main shortcomings. First, the functional needs of modernizing economies and/or the strategic considerations of states do not seem to explain the nationalist transformation of Jewish identity. As shown in the Section on “The Russian Pale Border,” the markers of economic modernization (type of economy and the investment in modern infrastructures such

²⁹ See Mylonas and Tudor (2023) and Boix (2024) for recent reviews of the literature.

³⁰ See also Darden (N.d.) and Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006). Mainly to explain processes of national consolidation, Wimmer (2018) complements the argument of state capacity with the structure of societal networks and linguistic practices.

as railways) did not correlate well with the trajectories of Jewish national identification. More importantly, educational covariates, which proxy for Gellner's central argument, did not either (see Figure 6). Second, instrumentalist theories conceive premodern non-elites as blank slates or, to use Marx' terms, "the simple addition of homonymous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes," to the point that "their interests form no community, no national bond" (Marx [1852] 1994, 124).³¹ Devoid of any group consciousness (beyond their family and village), governments, the argument goes, instilled in them a national identity through mass education, military conscription, and linguistic standardization.³² If that assumption were true, every state elite should have tried (and eventually succeeded at) ingraining its own national conception in the minds of their (supposedly passive) populations. Yet, things played out differently across Jewish communities. Some of them identified with the country they lived in. Among the rest who did not, a substantial fraction developed, as it were, a "counter-national-identity".

Pre-existing discontinuities play a central role in Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking account about the rise of modern nations as "imagined political communit[ies]" (Anderson 1983, 6). In the Americas, those discontinuities were administrative in nature—the borders of the different provincial units in colonial empires. In Europe, they were linguistic. National divisions and conflict did not become rampant within Britain and France because "there happened to be, by mid-[eighteenth] century, a relatively high coincidence of language-of-state and language of the population" (78). Otherwise, and "Austro-Hungary is probably the polar example, the consequences were inevitably explosive" (78).

Even though Anderson's story moves us closer to understanding the Jewish experience, it is still in need of further elaboration to generate a satisfactory explanation of that case. Consider the impact of linguistic discontinuities first. Over 95 percent of Jews in both Congress Poland and the Russian Pale were Yiddish native speakers, there was a burgeoning press and literary culture in Yiddish, and Russian authorities discriminated Yiddish in schools or any other official business. Nonetheless, the national identification of Jews did not crystallize around "Yiddishim" (Estraikh 1999). In fact, the Zionist decision to "resurrect" Hebrew as a national language followed (rather than preceded) the formation of a singular national self-consciousness. Administrative discontinuities appear to have been more consequential for the formation of different national identifications among Jews—both across and within countries (as attested, in the latter case, by the Congress/Russian Pale and Algerian

departments/Algerian Sahara comparisons). Nonetheless, those administrative discontinuities cannot explain, on their own, the occurrence and content of those divergent national trajectories.

How and why those discontinuities mattered, that is, how they became relevant to define the boundaries of a national community, depended on the particular political and constitutional settlements that governed them.³³ The latter resulted, in turn, from the contemporary destruction or, at least, contested transformation, of Ancien Régime institutions since the end of the eighteenth century. I turn to sketch the overall political "mechanics" that lay behind this process.

POLITICAL RECOGNITION AND JEWISH MODERN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Before the arrival of liberal institutions, traditional societies were, to use the words of French historian François Furet, "broken up into interest groups and founded on inequality (both as a social reality and as collective mental representation)" (Furet 1981, 179). Even in those places where feudal structures had been dead for a long time, the pre-liberal social and political order was, at its core, a conglomerate of corporate bodies, such as estates, guilds, or cities, enjoying some jurisdictional autonomy, with their own laws and adjudication processes. Inwardly, they were stratified—with layers of nobles and servants, masters and apprentices, high and low clergy, and so on. Outwardly, they were integrated into a pecking order of power and influence with a monarchical structure at the top. Those relations of domination (and subordination) had legal, material, and ideational foundations. They relied on a tangle of discriminatory statutes and ordinances, often coincided with an unequal distribution of assets, and defined some individuals as elites demanding to be awarded a particular worthiness by all other social agents. In that world, modern national identities and nationalism did not exist (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). Because of their social place and relationship to power, Jewish communities exemplified the overall nature of the pre-modern political order. Akin to "corporate" bodies, they enjoyed some autonomy in religious matters and family law while depending, often in a precarious manner, on the protection of the sovereign. Their boundaries and (self-)identification were religious and cultural (and sustained by specific social practices).

Enlightenment ideals and, in their political dimension, what we may call, using a shortcut, the "liberal" project offered an alternative social and constitutional blueprint based on the recognition of human agents as free and equal, that is, as having the same standing

³¹ For a recent argument in the same direction, see Darden (N.d.).

³² A variant of these theories claims that individuals transit to a new identity when they take it to be useful to advance socially, normally in the context of coordination games (Laitin 1998). This explanation still begs the question of what structures that game or, in other words, what determines the usefulness of specific languages or behaviors to start with.

³³ In a related way, Anderson' points out (in a cursory manner) that discontinuities had a greater impact when they came with social and political barriers (or "barricades" in his terminology) to upward mobility (Anderson 1983, 56, 58, 90).

vis-à-vis each other, at least formally.³⁴ Traditional relationships of subordination were to be replaced by universal norms applying to everyone equally. In turn, those norms were to be given by a sovereign common to all and over which, again at least ideally, all subjects would have an equal claim. A system of universal laws given and upheld by the same authority implied a common political identity: an identity defined by sharing the same norms and the same lawgiver; an identity that, by virtue of the universality and preeminence of the lawgiver, was superior to all other identities. In other words, the liberal order entailed the dissolution of all previous (and often co-existing) political memberships into one overarching identity and, as a result, led to the construction of a horizontal community of equal individuals—a (modern) nation.

The varying success of that political blueprint in each country defined the nature of the emerging national community across states, that is, the number of competing national claims within the existing sovereign unit. Where it succeeded, even if imperfectly, the old world of corporate interests and social estates ruled by particular laws and jurisdictional bodies disappeared, replaced by a society of politically equal individuals. That entailed, in turn, the formation of a country whose political borders became congruent with a national identity. Jews living in those places adopted their national identity—even while maintaining (as purely private markers) the cultural and religious traits that had defined them previously.

Conversely, when the liberal project was aborted or took too long to crystallize, forging a unified nation congruent with the political borders of the existing state became highly unlikely. Conservative elites, that is, aristocratic, military, and/or religious elites that resisted relinquishing their power and accepting the liberal project, strove either to maintain the old political status quo (the Ancien Régime system of multiple corporations and jurisdictions) or to forge and impose a unified national project on their terms (such as a specific language or religion). Those terms generally implied denying the possibility of emancipation and equality for “aliens”—Jews in our case. The clash between the aspirations generated by the liberal project and the absence of equal (legal and psychological) recognition induced, within Jewish communities, the development of their national claims as a means to achieve the goal of emancipation—as shown empirically above and attested by historical literature on the personal and collective motivations to join Zionism (cf. Avineri 1981; Frankel 2010; Mendelsohn 1981).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper focuses on understanding the multiple political paths taken by different sections of the Jewish

people—stretching from political “assimilation” to Zionism—in their transit to political modernity. At the same time, that variation may be useful to cast some light on the nature of national identity formation in the contemporary world.

The construction of a political community of (at least formally) equal citizens generally entailed that the latter, by self-determining themselves, acquired (and recognized themselves as having) the same common political (national) identity. This was the case of France or the Netherlands, for example.³⁵ By contrast, the failure to forge a political deal based on the idea, however imperfectly implemented, of equal rights was likely to frustrate the formation of a unified national identity. To fulfill the emancipatory expectations unleashed by the Atlantic Revolutions, territorial minorities came to clamor for sovereignty on their own terms.³⁶ The result was often the emergence of contested national identities. Such a historical experience unfolded in almost all of Europe’s eastern, southern, and western peripheries. Irish nationalism was a direct response to the discriminatory policies of Britain. The Habsburg Empire was “an assembly of Irelands,” as fittingly put by Hobsbawm (1990, 86). Spain housed several periphery nationalisms. The Ottoman Empire lost the Balkans over the nineteenth century. The same dynamics applied to the relationship between European empires and their colonial territories overseas. The anticolonial struggle was, at its core, a fight for emancipation and, as such, the forger of new national identities (Lawrence 2013; Memmi 1967). Finally, this framework may be applied to illuminate the political alternatives deployed among Black Americans, ranging from the civil rights movement (directed at completing the liberal promises contained in the constitution) to separatism (Dawson 2001), and how they related to the treatment(s) they received from the American state.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001412>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GGKEQ8>.

³⁵ This point does not imply that the construction of a unified national identity was purely consensual. On the contrary, it implied the application of substantial coercion from the state (in schools, linguistic practices), as attested by the study of Weber (1976) on France. Still, it was “legitimized” by the equality-assimilation *quid pro quo* as stated by Clermont-Tonnerre.

³⁶ An alternative outcome to the development of a separate national self-consciousness in a non-emancipatory or non-liberal regime was the assimilation (through religious conversion, linguistic substitution, and so on) to the dominant national identity. An analysis of this alternative is beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁴ On the “liberal” project as a program of political recognition and its implications (including national identification), see Kojève (1980) and Smith (1989).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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