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# Increase of Antisemitism in the Czech Republic in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Present Issues Explained on the Bases of Traditional Historical Stereotypes and Prejudice

## Introduction

*“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”*  
George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (1905)

This famous quote from Spanish philosopher Santayana has been known as an example of the timeless wisdom that can be applied as a warning to many contemporary issues and situations. While some suggested applications of this statement may be rather exaggerated, the others serve quite well to the original message. Without a doubt, the historical experience with antisemitism with its infamous peak in the tragic events of the Holocaust has been particularly strong in Europe. Hitherto unseen atrocities committed by Nazi Germany on Jews starting with the loss of their civil rights and gradual exclusion from the society, continuing with the forced transport to the concentration and extermination camps resulting in more than 6 million deaths and suffering of countless many others, altogether, they have made an important part of European collective memory.

Almost 80 years since the end of the Second World War (WW2), nevertheless, it seems that the phenomenon of antisemitism is still present in the societies of many European countries, including the Czech Republic. Even though in the Czech case the phenomenon is, at least in comparison to some other countries, still rather marginal, the Federation of the Jewish Communities of the Czech Republic has been annually reporting the increase of antisemitism in the society. Whereas some of these antisemitic incidents and proclamations may be unique to the contemporary Czech society due to the specific local characteristics and circumstances of the development since the fall of communism in 1989, on average, most of the current trends in antisemitism in the Czech Republic can be explained on the bases of the traditional stereotypes and prejudices reflecting the history of Czech-Jewish relations.

This article aims to introduce and explain the current trends concerning the increase of antisemitism in the Czech Republic associated with the covid-19 pandemic. The new disease brought numerous new and unprecedented challenges to the society, such as the social isolation due to governmental restrictions, lockdowns, and last but not least also the not negligible health risks. Such a stressful situation made many people search for explanations and rationalizations of what was going on. While many accepted the scientific arguments, some others preferred to develop/embrace various conspiracies, including those based on antisemitism. These anti-Jewish conspiracies and the increase of antisemitism during the covid-19 pandemic, apparently, can be observed in many countries; this article aims to interpret them by analysing the unique

specifics of the case study of the Czech Republic in 2019-2021 based on the historical perspectives and experience of the Czech nation with antisemitism.

## History of Czech postwar antisemitism

Czechoslovakia was one of the European countries that had a first-hand experience with Nazism and the brutality of this regime on the occupied territories. According to the available estimations, there were more than 360,000 Czechoslovak victims of Nazi persecution<sup>1</sup> while the Jews were the group most targeted by Nazi repressions. As result, the Czechoslovak Jewry was devastated as the horrific events of the Holocaust led to the extermination of more than 85% of the prewar population. Hence in the first postwar years about 20,000 of the survivors decided to move to Israel or other Western countries where they hoped to start a new life far from the horrors of the past;<sup>2</sup> the remaining Jewish community in Czechoslovakia was quite small. According to the estimations, there are about 15,000 to 20,000 people of Jewish origin living in the Czech Republic today.<sup>3</sup>

The postwar fate of Czechoslovak Jewry was closely connected with the important political affairs of the time. At first, the communist regime - that had taken over Czechoslovakia fully in February 1948 - provided a good treatment of the Jews as actually many of them were active members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, including the top leaders such as Rudolf Slánský, Bedřich Reicin, and some others.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, in the late 1940s, Czechoslovakia supported the establishment of the State of Israel with the expectation of having a potential ally in the geostrategic region of the Middle East. Soon, all these hopes for having the Jewish state as the loyal satellite of the Eastern Bloc were in vain due to the unambiguous pro-Western orientation of the Israeli government. The split between Israel and the Eastern Bloc in the early 1950s had serious consequences for the Jews in the communist countries in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

While the former top leaders, such as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Rudolf Slánský and his coworkers, Romanian politician Anna Paulke, and some others, lost their political power and in some cases even their lives in the purportedly made show trials, there was also a massive wave of antisemitism in the communist media presenting the stereotypes and prejudice not very different from

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<sup>1</sup> KUBÁTOVÁ, Hana and Jan LÁNÍČEK. *The Jew in Czech and Slovak Imagination, 1938-89. Antisemitism, the Holocaust, and Zionism*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Territorial Departments - Secret, Israel 1945-1954. *Návrh na úpravu vzájemných vztahů mezi ČSR a Izraelem*. Box 1, Call No. 414306, 5 July 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Federace židovských obcí v ČR, <https://www.fzo.cz/o-nas/statistika/> [accessed on 4 January 2020].

<sup>4</sup> See SEDLICKÁ, Magdalena. *Není přítel jako přítel: Židé v národním státě Čechů a Slováků, 1945–1948*. Prague: Academia, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See KRAMMER, Arnold. *The Forgotten Friendship. Israel and the Soviet Bloc, 1947-53*. Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1974.; TATEROVÁ, Eva. *Československá diplomacie a Izrael v letech 1948-1967*. Brno: Mendel University Press, 2017.

the Nazi propaganda.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly, the Jews were portrayed as a foreign element in the society that would hardly ever be loyal to the major society. For these reasons, the consequent trials were blaming many Czechoslovak Jews for espionage in service of the western countries, especially USA and Israel, attempts to undermine the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia, and last but not least for treason. Simultaneously, there was the emphasis on showing the Jews as supporting capitalism as this economic system should have been more compliant with greediness, selfishness, and obsession with money - traditional typical features of the Jewish character according to antisemitic propaganda - rather than the system of the socialist economy.<sup>2</sup>

Holocaust still resonated in Czechoslovak society, but the Jewish experience was rather downplayed while the life stories of the comrades such as Július Fučík, Antonín Zápotocký, and Antonín Novotný had a privileged status in communist Czechoslovakia. The WW2 stories of the Jews were not fully eliminated from the public space but the opportunities to publish them were conditional to the current political situation. While in the 1960s, more of these projects could have been realized due to the partial political relaxation culminating in the events of the Prague Spring (1968), the period of normalization (1969-1989) saw the renewal of the strict censorship typical for the first decade of communism in Czechoslovakia.<sup>3</sup> Altogether, it resulted in the absence of the Jews in the public space and lack of knowledge of the Jewish topics by the major society.

State antisemitism, traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes and prejudices together with gaps in education and biased interpretation of modern history contributed to the fact that antisemitism still exists in some parts of Czech society even after the end of communist rule. While in some cases, this antisemitism might be rather latent, in some other cases, the antisemitic proclamations may have the form of various anti-Jewish conspiracies, verbal assaults, and in the worst case even physical attacks on presumed Jewish property or Jewish individuals. Conspiracies about the ambitions of the Jewish elites to rule the Czech Republic and eventually also the whole world have been appearing in Czech society since the Velvet Revolution (1989), however, their origins can be traced back to the old communist and in some cases also the Nazi narratives.

## Current issues and traditional stereotypes

Various antisemitic conspiracies blaming the Jewish elites, represented in the first place by US businessman and philanthropist George Soros, who allegedly wish to establish a global rule, have been a common narrative used by the Czech antisemites. Probably the most coherent attempt to explain the Jewish influence on Czech politics

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<sup>1</sup> See KAPLAN, Karel. *Kronika komunistického Československa: Klement Gottwald a Rudolf Slánský*. Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2009; STRÖBINGER, Rudolf. *Vražda generálního tajemníka: poslední Stalinův exemplární proces, soud s Rudolfem Slánským*. Brno: Petrov, 1991; LONDON, Artur. *Doznání: v soukolí pražského procesu*. Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> SOUKUPOVÁ, Blanka. 'Antisemitismus v Českých zemích po druhé světové válce a jeho vizualizace' In: HAUSER, Jakub and Eva JANÁČOVÁ, (eds). *Obrazy nenávisti. Vizualní projevy antisemitismu ve střední Evropě*. Prague: Artefactum, 2020, pp. 204-209.

<sup>3</sup> See SNIEGOŇ, Tomáš. *Vanished History. The Holocaust in Czech and Slovak Historical Culture*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014.

was the book of Adam B. Bartoš *Obřezaná republika: Chystá se v ČR nový Izrael?*<sup>1</sup> (2014) (A Circumcised Republic: Is a New Israel Coming to the Czech Republic?). There have been endless speculations about the Jewish origin of many Czech leaders and their ties to Israel as well as open calls for a change. For instance, in October 2020, an anonymous leaflet with the following message was found in front of the Jubilee Synagogue in Prague: “Enough of the rule of the Jews in the Czech lands, if you don’t want to be a Czech, move to your pals in Israel! We know how to rule ourselves; and you cuckoo, sling your hook!”<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, George Soros was repeatedly accused of the attempts to destabilize Czech politics by financing the protests against the government of prime-minister Andrej Babiš, who was being investigated for corruption and fraud at that time. In 2019, when the two biggest anti-governmental demonstrations since the Velvet Revolution were organized by the civil movement Million chvilek pro demokracii (Million Moments for Democracy), there was an intense wave of hoax emails and speculations on the Internet that the protestors were paid by Soros, or by his local intermediary Miroslav Kalousek, then leader of the opposition TOP09 political party, respectively. Such practices were, however, never confirmed.<sup>3</sup> The narrative of Jewish influence also resonated in the campaign before the Czech parliamentary elections. Next to hoax emails and anonymous speculations on the Internet, the open criticism of Soros’s alleged activities in the Czech Republic was repeatedly expressed by the members of the SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) political party. As one example out of many, we can use the cartoon titled “George Soros’s long claws in the Czech Republic. Bakala, Schwarzenberg, Pirates.”<sup>4</sup> posted by Radim Fiala, an MP for SPD, in June 2020. The cartoon shows George Soros together with the Czech opposition represented by Czech-American businessman Zdeněk Bakala, founder of TOP09 Karel Schwarzenberg, and the liberal political Pirate Party, as they encourage the migration crisis.<sup>5</sup>

In March 2020, all of a sudden, the covid-19 pandemic paralyzed the world and many countries, including the Czech Republic, implied severe restrictions on the daily activities of the population to prevent the rapid spread of the new disease. While at first, most of the people in the Czech Republic accepted the lockdown as a way to

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<sup>1</sup> See BARTOŠ, Adam B. *Obřezaná republika: Chystá se v ČR nový Izrael?* Bodyart Press, 2014. Brno.

<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Czech original: „Už dost bylo vlády Židů v české zemi, když nechceš Čechem být tak táhni ke svým Izraeli! My dovedem si vládnout sami; a ty kukaččí plémě, ať už si za horami!“ – Federace židovských obcí v České republice. *Výroční zpráva o projevech antisemitismu v České republice za rok 2020*. 2021. P. 31. <https://www.fzo.cz/wp-content/uploads/FZO-VZ20-F4-email.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> TATEROVÁ, Eva. ‘Anti-Semitism in the Czech Republic’ In: RAMET, Sabrina P., DORDEVIC, Vladimir and Christine M. HASSESTAB (eds.). *Civic and Uncivic Values in the Czech Republic Value Transformation, Politics, Education, and Gender Equality*. Chom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 213-239.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix no. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Facebook profile “Radim Fiala – SPD”, 2020  
<https://www.facebook.com/radimfiala.cz/photos/miliard%C3%A1%C5%99-a-globalista-george-soros-m%C3%A1-dlouh%C3%A9-pazoury-a-vliv-uplat%C5%88uje-i-v-%C4%8Desk%C3%A9/3288259524526165/>

protect their health, eventually, their willingness to live under these restrictions was rapidly decreasing. The frustration of many people together with a distrust for both the government and the scientists led to many speculations and conspiracies with regard to the true reasons for launching the global pandemic. Hoax e-mails, fake news, and frequent commentaries, especially on the Internet, aimed not only to point out those who were (allegedly) responsible for making and spreading the new type of virus but also to explain their motives.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that the Jews/Israel were responsible for inventing the new disease to kill thousands of Muslims, the traditional enemies of the Jewish state for more than a century, resonated in some Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey for a while.<sup>2</sup> The accusations of the Jews attempting to harm the non-Jewish populations are not new and have been one of the most popular historical conspiracies. Since ancient times, there was a popular belief that the Jews had the long-term hostile intention to harm the major population by well poisonings, spreading diseases such as plague, blood libel, etc. In this context, the invention of the novel coronavirus was interpreted as a modern way how to retrieve the traditional Jewish dark practices.<sup>3</sup>

This narrative, however, has never been very influential in the Czech Republic. Even though various conspiracy theories started to expand, especially on the Internet, they mostly focused on explaining the artificial origins of the virus as the USA or China designed a biological weapon, the (un)intended consequence of 5G network technologies, and/or the attempts of the global elites, such as Bill Gates, to get the full control over the world population through the implementation of covid-19 restrictions.<sup>4</sup> Still, some minor groups in the Czech society announced the full responsibility of the Jews for the covid-19 pandemic. One of the most active and explicit was the website [www.cd89.cz](http://www.cd89.cz) that identifies itself as proud non-homosexual supporters of National Democracy, a non-parliamentary political party led by the leading Czech antisemite Adam B. Bartoš. At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the website published the following poem titled *The Most Developed Nation in the World*: “They made a virus, then maybe a vaccine. Fortunately, Mr. Adolf did only a half job [in the gas chambers]. Sarin, Soman, Tabun, Toman. All warmongers, fear the day when a virus is made by a Slav!”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> STEM. *Covid-19 a šířitelé konspiračních teorií 15. března 2021. Průzkum postojů české veřejnosti*. 2021. [https://www.stem.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/STEM\\_COVID-19-a-siritele-konspiraci-CZ-verejne.pdf](https://www.stem.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/STEM_COVID-19-a-siritele-konspiraci-CZ-verejne.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> TOPOR, Lev. ‘COVID-19: ‘Blaming the Jews for the Plague, Again’. *Fathom Journal*, 2020. <https://fathomjournal.org/covid-19-blaming-the-jews-for-the-plague-again/>

<sup>3</sup> GERSTENFELD, Manfred. ‘Anti-Jewish Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories in Historical Context’ In: KARSH, Efraim (ed.). *The COVID-19 Crisis: Impact and Implications*. Ramat Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26356.12>

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic. *Coronavirus: An overview of the Main Disinformation Narratives in the Czech Republic*. 2020. <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/coronavirus-an-overview-of-the-main-disinformation-narratives-in-the-czech-republic.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Translated from the Czech original: „Vyrobili vir, pak možná i vakcínu. Ještě že pan Adolf tenkrát jel na půl plynu. Sarin, Soman, Tabun, Toman. Všichni štváči třeště se, až vyrobí vir

On contrary, some critics of the covid-19 restrictions issued by the Czech government started to use the Nazi-like yellow stars replacing the original title 'Jew' for 'not vaccinated'. Even though this Holocaust symbol abuse started to appear more frequently on the social networks and at anti-covid demonstrations since spring 2021, when the massive public vaccination campaign started, the first media-covered case was reported already in January 2021, when Lenka Tarabová, then ombudsman for senior citizens at the Liberec municipality, used this symbol at an anti-government demonstration in Prague. Later, she also shared her views on social media comparing the covid-19 restrictions by the Czech government to the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany: "It is similar in regulations, bullying and bans. [...] We wanted to point it out so people would realize it. I stand behind it. This 'unvaccinated' means a person who is a class enemy. We are blamed for everything because we don't want to get vaccinated and we don't want to be tested."<sup>1</sup>

The abuse of the Holocaust symbol was immediately condemned not only by the leaders of the Liberec municipality and many politicians, but also by František Bányai, the chairman of the Jewish Community of Prague: "Perhaps due to the current coronavirus pandemic, many people may have a better understanding of what it means to be restricted in motion, shopping, ban on house visits, curfew, and other restrictions. Still, surely no one is hungry or being humiliated, no one's bike, car, radio, or television have been confiscated, it is still possible to go out to the nature, no one's property has been taken off, and no one has been moving anyone to Terezín and farther to the east in the cattle car. We plead the public not to use the yellow star badges, since it is an insult to the victims of Nazism."<sup>2</sup>

Despite this criticism, the Jewish star badge remained to be quite a popular symbol for those refusing the covid-19 vaccines and protesting against the covid-19 governmental restrictions. In general, however, such abuse of the Holocaust symbol cannot be interpreted as antisemitism but rather as the insensitivity to the Holocaust history, and especially gaps in knowledge of many protesters. Still, the debate over the covid-19 vaccines included some antisemitic perspectives. The simple accusations that the global leaders such as Bill Gates and George Soros launched the global pandemic and the consequent massive vaccination simply for the financial profit, were immediately developed into darker speculations on the vaccines containing microchips that would enable to track and control the vaccinated people or even murder them.

Even though these conspiracies were refuted by the leading scientists, they still had some supporters in Czech society. For instance, in December 2020, the radical right-wing group Dělnická mládež (Workers' Youth) published a cartoon on Twitter<sup>3</sup> showing presumably a Jewish-looking man shouting "Get vaccinated!" while holding

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Slovan." - CD 89. *Nejvyspělejší národ na světě*. 2020. <https://www.cd89.cz/nejvyspelejsi-narod-na-svete>

<sup>1</sup> iRozhlas. 'Urážíte oběti nacismu'. *Za zneužití židovské hvězdy při protivládní demonstraci přišla žena o práci*. 2021. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/zluta-hvezda-demonstrace-koronavirus-ombudsmanka-zide\\_2101111316\\_pj](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/zluta-hvezda-demonstrace-koronavirus-ombudsmanka-zide_2101111316_pj)

<sup>2</sup> iDNES. *Ombudsmanka seniorů musela skončit kvůli hvězdě. Totalitní praktiky, brání se*. 2021. [https://www.idnes.cz/liberec/zpravy/ombudsmanka-liberec-seniori-davidova-zidovska-zluta-hvezda-totalitni-praktiky.A210111\\_120716\\_liberec-zpravy\\_jape](https://www.idnes.cz/liberec/zpravy/ombudsmanka-liberec-seniori-davidova-zidovska-zluta-hvezda-totalitni-praktiky.A210111_120716_liberec-zpravy_jape)

<sup>3</sup> See appendix no. 2.

a hypodermic syringe in his right hand and a knife in his left hand.<sup>1</sup> This was, however, immediately condemned by the broad public leading to the deletion of this post from Twitter.

## Conclusion

Are those who cannot learn from history doomed to repeat it? Surely, insufficient education in modern history is a major issue in some parts of Czech society. Lack of knowledge rather than a dislike of Jews - especially since many Czechs do not know any Jewish people in person as the local community is very small - may be interpreted as the main reason for antisemitism in the Czech Republic, especially in response to the covid-19 pandemic. All the conspiracies against Jewish elites, represented especially by George Soros, attempting to undermine the political regime in the Czech Republic, presumably as part of a bigger plan to rule the whole world, are not new. Such accusations were presented by the Nazi and the Communist regimes, both of them totalitarian regimes that based their legitimacy on having an external enemy, represented by the Jews.

Similarly, the accusations that the Jews/Israel invented the coronavirus to murder the enemies or to make a financial profit comply with the traditional historical stereotypes and prejudice that blame the Jews for the worst possible intentions of harming the major population. Altogether, we may conclude that even though the current issues of antisemitism in the Czech Republic related to the covid-19 pandemic may seem to bring new challenges, in reality, they seem to be just a new disguise for the old type of antisemitism that has never truly disappeared from the Czech society.

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<sup>1</sup> SCHREIBEROVÁ, Zuzana. 'Pandemii provází antisemitismus a zneužívání holocaustu'. *Alarm*, 2021. <https://a2larm.cz/2021/01/pandemii-provazi-antisemitismus-a-zneuzivani-holocaustu/>

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## SUMMARY

The study aims to introduce and interpret the increase of antisemitism in the Czech Republic in response to the new challenges brought by the covid-19 pandemic. The issues such as the spread of the most influential anti-Jewish coronavirus conspiracies, frequent covid-19 vaccine hoaxes, and the abuse of the Yellow Star, globally known as the symbol of the Holocaust, by the anti-vaxxers, have been



resonating in the Czech Republic since spring 2020. Despite the new circumstances, the antisemitic incidents related to the coronavirus pandemic can be explained on the bases of the traditional historical stereotypes and prejudice typical for the Czech post-war society.

**Keywords:** antisemitism, conspiracies, covid-19 pandemic, Czech Republic, Jews.

## RESUMÉ

*TATEROVÁ, Eva: NÁRŮST ANTISEMITISMU V ČESKÉ REPUBLICE V REAKCI NA PANDEMII COVID-19: SOUČASNÉ PROBLÉMY VYSVĚTLENÉ NA ZÁKLADĚ TRADIČNÍCH HISTORICKÝCH STEREOTYPŮ A PŘEDSUDKŮ*

Tato studie představuje a interpretuje současné trendy nárůstu antisemitismu v České republice v souvislosti s novými výzvami spjatých s pandemií covid-19. Problémy jako šíření vlivných protizidovských konspiračních teorií, časté hoaxy ohledně vakcín proti nemoci covid-19 a v neposlední řadě zneužívání židovské hvězdy, jednoho ze světově nejznámějších symbolů Holocaustu, od jara 2020 rezonuje Českou republikou. Navzdory novým okolnostem však lze tyto antisemitské covidové proklamace vysvětlit na bázi tradičních historických stereotypů a předsudků typických po českou poválečnou společnost.

**Klíčová slova:** antisemitismus, Česká republika, konspirační teorie, pandemie covid-19, Židé.

### Appendix No. 1:



Source: Facebook. *Radim Fiala – SPD*. 2020

<https://www.facebook.com/radimfiala.cz/photos/miliard%C3%A1%C5%99-a-globalista-george-soros-m%C3%A1-dlouh%C3%A9-pazoury-a-vliv-uplat%C5%88uje-i-v-%C4%8Desk%C3%A9/3288259524526165/>

Appendix No. 2:



Source: Twitter. *Dělnická mládež*, 2020 (PrintScreen, URL no longer available as the post was deleted).