Louis Marshall and the White Terror in Hungary, 1919–1920

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Introduction

Following the overthrow of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in August 1919, a wave of terror erupted in Hungary. It was directed primarily against Jews, allegedly as a retaliation for crimes committed by the Communists, among whose leaders Jews were prominent. The terror in Hungary gave rise to sharp reactions abroad, particularly on the part of international labor (the trade unions and the socialists were also persecuted) and Jewish organizations in the Western countries. Among the latter, the Joint Foreign Committee of British Jews, the Alliance Israélite in Paris, and the American Jewish Committee interceded with their respective governments on behalf of the persecuted Jews of Hungary. The following documents relate to the action taken by the president of the American Jewish Committee, Louis Marshall.

The terror in Hungary caused deep indignation in the United States, especially among those of Hungarian origin, both Jews and non-Jews. One of the central organizations of Hungarian-Americans, the Hungarian-American Federation, called the attention of the State Department to the situation, expressing its "horror at and condemnation of the persecution of the Jews in Hungary as reported in the newspapers" In its reply the State Department stated that "although some mistreatment had occurred it could not be attributed to the Hungarian authorities who were doing their best to prevent such occurrences and were severely punishing offenders." The department, as was usual in such cases, was relying on reports by its officers on the spot, in this case Ulysses S. Grant-Smith, head of the American Mission in Budapest. The Hungarian-American Federation, not having its own sources of information, was satisfied by what it was told by the State Department.³

Meanwhile, however, the situation in Hungary deteriorated, and the first months of 1920 saw some of the worst acts of violence against Jews. This caused grave concern, especially among American Jews of Hungarian origin, many of whom resided in New York City. Consequently, they appealed to the acting mayor, Fiorello H. La Guardia, to intervene with the State Department. Accordingly, La Guardia cabled on February 27, 1920, to Acting Secretary of State Frank L. Polk, asking for information on "news just received New York City, that there are pogroms and general massacre of Jews in Hungary."4 Replying on the following day, Polk pointed out that "Department has received no information to indicate pogroms and massacres of Jews in Hungary. Reports indicate that Hungarian Government is making every effort to keep order and to prevent possible outbreaks of popular feeling against those connected with former Bolshevik regime."5 In fact, the State Department reiterated what it had said five months earlier, endeavoring to exonerate the Hungarian government and to deny the existence of enmity toward the Jews. The reference to this effect in the draft of Polk's cable (the italicized passage in the preceding quotation) was deleted in the text sent to La Guardia. The Hungarian Jews in America were hardly satisfied with this statement, and it was felt that more energetic measures should be taken. It was at this stage that Louis Marshall, as president of the American Jewish Committee, stepped in.

On May 20, 1920, Marshall had an interview with Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby and delivered a formal protest against the persecution of Jews in Hungary, thus indicating the severity with which the American Jewish Committee viewed the situation in that country (Document 1). Thereupon the State Department instructed Grant-Smith in Budapest to report on the situation and also to make clear to the Hungarian government "that American sympathy for Hungary will depend largely on fair treatment given to minorities" (Document 2). At the same time the department pointed out to Marshall, as it had on previous occasions when intervention was sought, that the Hungarian government "is endeavoring to prevent the oppression of Jews" (Document 3). As a proof thereto, Marshall was provided with a copy of a British White Paper entitled *Report on the Alleged Existence of 'White Terror' in Hungary* (Cmd. 673, London: His Majesty's Sta-

tionery Office, 1920). This is a collection of despatches by British diplomatic and military representatives in Hungary, obviously published in response to public protests and questions in Parliament. The documents in the *Report* supposedly indicated that there was no terror in Hungary, although acts of violence had taken place. It was a clear attempt to minimize the scope of the terror. From the documents there emerged a distorted picture of the real situation. For considerations of foreign policy, mainly with a view to backing up the anti-Bolshevist regime, the British were not desirous of compounding the difficulties of the Hungarian government, which, in fact, did not exercise effective control over the wild elements in the army that maintained the reign of terror.

Nevertheless, the State Department recommended the British White Paper to Marshall as a reliable document that supported its own findings. However, a sharp-eyed and experienced jurist like Marshall was not taken in by the British document. He put it to a penetrating analysis, criticizing particularly the anti-Jewish prejudices reflected in the despatches (Document 5).

While the American Jewish Committee and Marshall were concerned about Hungarian Jewry as a whole, they took a special interest in the case of Rabbi Dr. Immanuel Loew (1854–1944), the chief rabbi of Szeged, the country's second-largest town, and a scholar of international reputation. Rabbi Loew was arrested in April 1920, after an interview with a journalist in which he allegedly made unfavorable observations about the regime and about the regent of Hungary, Admiral Horthy. The case aroused wide interest. The British Foreign Office and the French government were requested to intervene. The case was brought to the attention of Marshall by William N. Loew (1847–1922) of New York, a brother of Rabbi Loew. After a detention of thirteen months the rabbi was set free, and in October 1921 the case was dropped.

The interventions of the American Jewish Committee, like those by the European Jewish bodies, were from the outset of limited effectiveness. This was mainly due to the strong anti-Bolshevist position of the Western powers and their consequent attitude of "understanding," toward Hungary. The lack of political stability in Hungary during the years 1919–1921 and the government's lack of control over the army

were also factors which limited the effect of external pressure for the cessation of violence. The intervention by the Jewish bodies did, however, have some degree of influence, for it motivated the representatives of the powers to take action, and it was made clear to the Hungarian government that it would have to impose its authority. The acts of violence lessened at the end of 1920, and the organized terror ceased at the beginning of 1921.

Documents 1–5 are reproduced from the originals in the National Archives of the United States, Washington, D.C. The reference number is in brackets at the upper left-hand corner of each document. Document 6 is from the papers of the late Leopold Loew, son of Rabbi Immanuel Loew. None of the documents have previously been published.

1. Louis Marshall to Secretary of State

[864.4016/9] May 21, 1920.

Dear Mr. Secretary:

At the interview which you were good enough to accord to me vesterday, I communicated to you the information that had been received by the Joint Distribution Committee relative to the persecution to which the Jews of Hungary have been recently subjected. For many years the Jews of that country were free from the discrimination from which their brethren suffered in Romania and Russia. During the past six months, however, conditions have changed to such an extent that today the Jews of Hungary are in a most unfortunate plight. There have been frequent outbreaks conducted by sections of what is termed the White Army,6 which have resulted in the murder of many Jews, in the looting of their property, and in the perpetration of the most shocking indignities. They have been humiliated and libelled, the newspapers have sought to make them responsible as a body for the actions of Bela Kuhn [sic] and his associates, with the result that conditions have been intolerable and the Jews have been practically driven to despair.

I am quite sure that at this time, when the fate of Hungary is dependent upon the action of the Great Powers and the attitude of the Supreme Council, when she is seeking to rehabilitate herself and expects to be relieved from the obligations which she is about to assume under the Treaty of peace, an indication from the Great Powers or from the Supreme Council that these anti-Semitic demonstrations must cease, will not be disregarded.

As President of the American Jewish Committee I am in receipt of numerous telegrams and letters from Jews of Hungarian birth residing in various parts of the country, in which I have been urged to bring these facts to the attention of our Government, which they justly believe will not hesitate to exert its influence in behalf of their suffering brethren. It is for that reason that I turn to you in this emergency, knowing that we shall have your entire sympathy and assured that you will leave nothing undone that can lead to an immediate cessation of this recrudescence of medieval brutality.

I am, very cordially yours, [Sgd.] Louis Marshall

The Secretary of State, Washington, D.C.

2. State Department to U.S. Commissioner,* Budapest

Cable

[864.4016/9] May 26, 1920.

The President of American Jewish Committee has formally protested to Department against alleged mistreatment of Jews in Hungary by sections of National Army. You will send full report on this subject to Department by mail with such comments on present situation as you wish to make and you should informally make clear that American sympathy for Hungary will depend largely on fair treatment given minorities in Hungary by Hungarian officials.

3. Department Of State to Louis Marshall

[864.4016/9] Mr Louis Marshall, 120 Broadway, New York City. May 26, 1920.

Sir:

In acknowledgement of your letter of May 21, 1920,9 in which you refer to statements made during a personal conversation concerning the alleged mistreatment of Jews in Hungary, I beg to inform you that a cable has been sent to the American Commissioner in Hungary requesting a detailed report on this subject.10 The American Commissioner has also been instructed to make clear to the Hungarian Government that it can hope for American sympathy only as it makes every effort to assure fair treatment to the minorities in the state.

In this connection I may point out that all reports received by the Department of State would indicate that the present Government of Hungary¹¹ is endeavoring to prevent the oppression of Jews and that such cases as have been verified, with one or two unfortunate exceptions, occurred before the accession to power of the present Hungarian Government.

I am, Sir, Your obedient servant, For the Secretary of State: Bainbridge Colby¹²

4. Department of State to Louis Marshall

[864.4016/9] Mr. Louis Marshall, 120 Broadway, New York City. May 27, 1920.

Sir:

With reference to my letter of a few days ago concerning the opinion of the Department as to the alleged mistreatment of Jews in Hungary, I beg to enclose for your information a British report on Alleged Existence of "White Terror" in Hungary. The letters printed herein and presented to Parliament seem to confirm reports received by this Department that the present Government is making every effort to guarantee to all classes of people fair and equitable treatment.

I am, Sir, Your obedient servant Bainbridge Colby

Enclosure: Copy of Report Above Described.

5. Louis Marshall to Secretary of State

[864.4016/10]

May 27, 1920.

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am in receipt of your letters of the 26th and 27th instant, concerning the mistreatment of Jews in Hungary.¹⁵ I thank you for the interest that you have taken in the subject and for your prompt action.

I have carefully read the British report on the "Alleged Existence of 'White Terror' in Hungary". The latest document contained in this report is dated March 8, 1920. Most of them are of previous date, one so long ago as October 7, 1919. It seems to be conceded that there

have been outbreaks resulting in murders and in the ill-treatment of the Iews, but it is claimed that the instances are not as numerous as has been asserted. Some of the expressions contained in the documents, as, for instance, in the letter from Brigadier-General Gorton¹⁶ to Mr. Hohler, seem to indicate a rather non-judicial frame of mind. Thus he speaks of "complaints of ill-treatment of Jews and other communists". 17 To say the least, that is an unfortunate attempt to imply that the Jews of Hungary are communists. In the letter of Admiral Sir E. Troubridge¹⁸ to Mr. Hohler there is likewise an attempt to charge the Jews with responsibility for the acts of Bela Kuhn [sic].19 He shows, however, that there were serious outrages in certain districts and that the victims were practically all Jews.²⁰ Without apparent reason, in describing the present government of Hungary, he makes the statement "It is a Christian Government in a Christian country".21 One might deduce from that remark the inference that he was reflecting a state of mind entertained by his informants evincing hostility to the Jews.22 This insidious and subtle insinuation that all Jews are Bolsheviks finds an echo in certain avowedly anti-Semitic London newspapers.23

As bearing on present conditions in Hungary, the newspapers of a few days ago gave an account of a serious anti-Semitic outbreak in Budapest that had just occurred.²⁴

As further indicating the seriousness of conditions in Hungary, I take this opportunity of calling your attention to facts which I have just learned regarding the arrest of Mr. Emanuel Loew, who is Chief Rabbi of Szegedin [sic], Hungary. He is the uncle of Mrs. Rosalie Loew Whitney, the wife of Travis H. Whitney, until recently a member of the Public Service Commission of New York. He is a man of international reputation as a great scholar. His father, before him, was one of the great rabbis of Hungary, whose memory was honored in 1911, on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, by naming a street in Szegedin, whose population is predominantly Catholic, for him. Both of them were known throughout the world as ardent patriots. Both of them were champions of assimilation, and delivered their sermons in the Magyar language. The charges against Chief Rabbi Loew are that, in an interview with a Jewish newspaper reporter, an apostate Jew, he had declared that Hungary no longer existed and had

also referred to the reported atrocities of which the Hungarian Jews had been the victims.26 These charges were made the subject of parliamentary interpellation, with the result that this eminent and venerable man, who has been criticized by his own people as being a chauvinistic Magyar, is in peril of his life. In the prevailing atmosphere of suspicion and prejudice against Jews there is serious doubt as to whether a fair trial will be accorded to him. His relatives here are in consequence in a state of profound anxiety. If anything can be done to impress upon the Hungarian Government the fact that, for the reasons stated, our Government is greatly interested in the fate of this man, it is quite certain that a great calamity may be averted. The enemies of the Jews everywhere would welcome the conviction of one who occupies the prominent position that Chief Rabbi Loew does in the Jewish world, on a charge of treason; just as they did when Dreyfus was convicted in France and when Leo Frank was convicted in Georgia.27

I am confident that you will not fail to recognize the commanding importance of this episode and that you will do all that is possible to avert any injustice.

Very cordially yours [Sgd.] Louis Marshall

The Secretary of State, Washington, D.C.

6. Louis Marshall to William N. Loew

May 28, 1920.

Dear Sir:

I am in receipt of yours of the 24th instant, with enclosures.

On May 20th I had an interview with the Secretary of State in Washington,²⁸ with regard to the anti-Semitic outbreaks in Hungary, which had been brought to my attention as the President of the American Jewish Committee and in connection with the work of the Joint Distribution Committee. At the request of Mr. Colby I wrote to him fully on the subject on my return,²⁹ and have since received two

letters from him in regard thereto, in one of which he informed me that he had cabled to the American Commissioner in Hungary requesting a detailed report on the subject of the maltreatment of the Jews there, and that he had instructed the Commissioner to make clear to the Hungarian Government that it can hope for American sympathy only if it makes every effort to assure fair treatment to the minorities in the State.³⁰ In another letter he sent me a copy of a report by British officials, in which they somewhat minimize the charges that had been made as to the existence of white terror in Hungary.³¹ This report, however, was made in February last and bears intrinsic evidence of an unfriendly disposition on the part of those who made the investigation, the Jews being spoken of as Communists and Bolsheviks.³²

I have taken advantage of the opportunity afforded me by these letters to write further on the subject to the Secretary of State, and, in connection with an analysis and criticism of the report to which I have referred, have presented to him additional facts, and especially those pertaining to the case of your brother, Dr. Emanuel Loew.³³ I referred also to the interest that your daughter is taking in the case of her uncle, being quite sure that Mr. Colby is acquainted with her and her husband.³⁴ I have requested him to have this case investigated, and have emphasized its importance as affecting not only your brother, but Jews in general.³⁵

Very truly yours [Sgd.] Louis Marshall

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Notes

- Hungarian-American Federation to Secretary of State Robert Lansing, September 30, 1919, National Archives, Washington (hereafter cited as NA) 864-4016/-.
- 2. Alvey A. Adee, Second Assistant Secretary, to Eugene Pivany, Secretary, Hungarian-American Federation, October 1, 1919; NA 864-4016/1.
 - 3. Hungarian-American Federation to A. A. Adee, October 24, 1919; NA 864-4016/3.

- 4. NA 864-4016/4.
- 5. Polk to La Guardia, February 28, 1920; NA 864-4016/4.
- 6. The Hungarian national army, under the command of Admiral Miklós Horthy, who was elected regent of Hungary on March 1, 1920.
 - 7. Supreme Council of the Peace Conference.
 - 8. Ulysses S. Grant-Smith.
 - 9. Document 1.
 - 10. Document 2.
 - 11. Formed on March 15, 1920, headed by Sándor Simonyi-Semadam.
 - 12. Colby succeeded Robert Lansing as Secretary of State on March 22, 1920.
 - 13. Document 3.
- 14. The White Paper referred to in the Introduction. As a rule, such papers are presented to Parliament "by Command of His Majesty" and may be debated in the House of Commons.
 - 15. Documents 3 and 4.
 - 16. Reginald G. Gorton, British member of the Inter-Allied Military Mission, Hungary.
- 17. Report on the Alleged Existence of 'White Terror', p. 3. The report by Gorton, dated February 18, 1920, was prepared at the request of Thomas B. Hohler, British high commissioner in Hungary.
- 18. Ernest C. Troubridge, chairman of the Inter-Allied Commission for the Control of Navigation on the Danube.
- 19. In his report, dated February 20, 1920, Troubridge refers to Béla Kun and the "Jewish leaders" of the Communist revolution, which in his opinion was not really a labor movement; ibid., p. 9.
 - 20. Ibid.
- 21. Ibid., p. 10. The new regime in Hungary called itself Christian, but the meaning was political rather than religious, and it implied the exclusion of the Jews.
- 22. Marshall's deduction was not far from the truth. The British diplomats in Hungary, particularly the chief political representative, Hohler, displayed a strong pro-Hungarian sentiment. They largely adopted the Hungarian position with regard to the terror; in fact they tended to justify it: "That patriotic Hungarians should desire to punish those who were in any way, however slight, implicated in events entailing such disastrous consequences cannot be regarded as surprising" (Hohler to Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, February 21, 1920; Public Record Office, London, file FO 404/1 p. 80). On the great sympathy of Hohler for the Hungarians and their cause, see Harry Hill Bandholtz, *An Undiplomatic Diary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), p. 31 n. 77. Major-General Bandholtz was the American member of the Inter-Allied Military Mission in Hungary, 1919–1920.
- 23. In the early months of 1920 an anti-Semitic campaign was conducted by some British newspapers, especially by the right-wing *Morning Post*, following the publication of the English translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.
- 24. The reference is probably to the riots which took place in Budapest on the night of May 8, 1920, reported by Grant-Smith on May 25, 1920; NA 864.4016/13.
- 25. Leopold Loew (1811–1875), from 1850 chief rabbi of Szeged. His son Immanuel succeeded him in 1878.
- 26. The alleged pronouncements were made on April 19, 1920, and Rabbi Loew was arrested a few days later.
- 27. Leo Frank of Atlanta, Georgia, was accused in 1913 of murdering a Christian girl, found guilty, and sentenced to death. The fact that he was a Jew was believed to be an important ele-

ment in the trial. The death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, but Frank was lynched in 1915. Marshall was one of the defense counsels in the appeal to the Supreme Court. He regarded the case "almost as a second Dreyfus case." See Morton Rosenstock, Louis Marshall, Defender of Jewish Rights (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), p. 92.

- 28. Document 1.
- 29. Ibid.
- 30. Document 2.
- 31. Document 4.
- 32. Document 5.
- 33. Ibid.
- 34. Mrs. Rosalie Loew Whitney, wife of Travis H. Whitney, referred to in Document 5.
- 35. The State Department cabled on May 29, 1920, to Grant-Smith in Budapest, and pointed out that "Rabbi Loewe [sic], a man of international reputation, is well connected in America and condemnation would create most unfavorable impression and arouse deep feeling." Grant-Smith is requested to "report facts immediately." NA 864.4016/10. He reported back on June 17, 1920, saying that he had taken the matter up with the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In order to repel American and probably other foreign intervention in this case, the Hungarians resorted to a counter-action of slander against Rabbi Loew, furnishing the American diplomat with extremely malicious information: "I am informed that he [Rabbi Loew] is not considered mentally sound by a number of his acquaintances, and according to information received, there would appear to be insanity in his family" (Grant-Smith to Secretary of State, June 17, 1920; NA 864.4016/18). Needless to say, this "information" had no foundation whatsoever. After his release Rabbi Loew resumed his office as chief rabbi of Szeged. In 1927 he was elected one of the two representatives of the Hungarian Jewish community in the upper house of Parliament. Rabbi Loew was a member of the council of the Jewish Agency for Palestine.