

The Chosen Many: Population Growth and Jewish Childcare in Central-Eastern Europe, 1500-1930

By

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Abstract:

The paper documents the growth of the Jewish and non-Jewish populations in the regions of Germany-Austria (GA) and Poland-Lithuania (PL) from 1500 to 1930. Although borders changed considerably, we attempt to maintain comparability throughout the period. We summarize evidence that a large proportion of the Jewish population in PL originated from GA and find no significant evidence for the immigration of Khazars or any other Jewish group from the East. While the proportion of Jews in the total population of PL was only 0.13% in 1500, this figure reached more than 17% by 1880 and the Jewish population in PL constituted more than 75% of the global Jewish population in that year. This population grew at an annual rate of about 1.4% from 1500 to 1930 while the Jewish population in GA grew at a rate of 0.88%. Meanwhile, the total populations of GA and PL grew at about the same annual rate of approximately 0.40%. The main reason for the higher growth rate of the Jews is their lower death rate. Thus, while their birth rate was about the same as that of non-Jews, infant and child mortality among Jews was much lower in both PL and GA. We claim that Jewish childcare, as manifested, for example, in the duration and methods of breastfeeding and in the Jewish practice of remarriage, is among the primary reasons for the exceptional population growth of the Jews. In future research, we will examine the question of why this occurred in the PL community rather than any other.

Keywords: breastfeeding, child mortality, Germany-Austria, infant death rate, Jewish population, Poland-Lithuania, total population

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