

Ireland's Jews: Past, Present, Future

Rory Miller

- Irish Jews have historically played a role in Jewish life out of all proportion to their numbers, despite the fact that they were on the margins of the Jewish world. Before 1948 the Irish Jewish community, which had come overwhelmingly from Lithuania in the period from 1880 to 1914, was one of the most pro-Zionist in Western Europe and a major per capita supporter of the Jewish National Fund (JNF), as well as other Zionist organizations and institutions.
- Irish Jews have played a significant role in all sectors of Irish society including national political life, but since the early 1950s when it peaked at 4,500 members the community has been shrinking in size and influence. According to the 2006 census there are 1,930 Jews in Ireland, with about 1,250 residing in Dublin and the remainder scattered across the country.
- Although there have always been sporadic anti-Semitic incidents, Ireland has provided a safe haven for Jews. But the current widespread support for a boycott of Israel among civil society groups is a worrying development, as is the potential of the growing Irish Muslim community to become radicalized.
- The economic boom since the 1990s provided a number of opportunities and challenges for Irish Jewry. The strong economy led to an increase in the number of Jews who have settled in Ireland for economic reasons. It also, however, turned Ireland into a multicultural and multiracial society that has challenged Irish Jewry's status as the major non-Christian minority in the country.

In May 2008, the Dublin City Council organized a walking tour of "Little [Jerusalem](#)," the section of central Dublin historically at the heart of Irish Jewish life. In line with similar events, the organizers expected forty to seventy people to attend but were astonished when over two hundred turned up in the rain to hear about the history of Dublin's Jewish community.

The popularity of this event clearly highlights that as a subject of historical interest and cultural curiosity the Jews of Ireland are thriving. This has been further evidenced recently by the success of two books on the history of Irish Jews: the scholarly *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History*, by Professor Cormac Ó Gráda, and the more popular photographic coffee-table book, *Jewish Dublin: Portraits of Life by the Liffey*, a bestseller in Ireland on its publication in late 2007.[1]

The Historic Irish Jewish Community

The first Jews arrived in Ireland from Spain and Portugal in the early sixteenth century. The first synagogue was opened in Dublin in 1660 and the first Jewish cemetery opened in the early 1700s, by which time Dublin was the only city in the British Isles outside of London that could claim a Jewish community of any note. But this did not last long. As Ireland lost significance in the British Empire, the Jewish community shrank. The Irish census started recording religion in 1861, and in 1881 there were 353 Jews in Dublin and 61 in Belfast.

The ancestors of the current community were Lithuanian Jews who began arriving in Dublin, Belfast, and Cork in the mid-1870s. This resulted in an immediate rise in the population, with 1,500 Irish Jews in Dublin in 1891 and an estimated 3,000 a decade later.

This was still numerically insignificant. As Ó Gráda has shown in his socioeconomic history of Irish Jewry in the early twentieth century, Ireland only absorbed about 0.15 percent of the pre-1914 Jewish exodus

from Eastern Europe. On the eve of World War I, there were 3,000 Jews in Dublin compared to 11,000 in Liverpool, 30,000 in Manchester, and 180,000 in London.[2]

Thus it is hardly surprising that the only encounter most people will have had with Irish Jews in this early period is through reading James Joyce's iconic novel *Ulysses*, which follows the fictional Leopold Bloom through Dublin city on one day in June 1904. Bloom, the baptized son of a Hungarian Jewish father and an Irish Protestant mother had little in common in terms of religious upbringing or daily life with the conservative, traditional, and hard-working Lithuanian Jews who made up the Irish community at the time.

These new immigrants were all from the same part of the northern Russian Empire and they settled near each other in urban areas. They had close ties with coreligionists in Manchester, London, and Leeds but as Ó Gráda has shown there were some noticeable differences. Dublin Jews lived in better conditions in "Little Jerusalem" than the Jews of the East End of London or many of the provisional Jewish communities of Britain. A lower percentage of Jewish women worked outside the home and the community was less strictly segregated from their neighbors than the Jews of Britain.[3]

The biggest difference was that almost immediately upon arrival this new immigrant group overwhelmed the preexisting Jewish community, swept away their influence, and marginalized what passed for an established Irish Jewish elite. This allowed the new immigrants to proceed to establish, unfettered, a highly nationalist community like the one they had left behind in Lithuania, thus arguably building the most Zionist-oriented community in Western Europe.

The Zionist Connection

Irish Jews' profound attachment to Zionism in the period before Israel's establishment can be traced back to the 1890s, when Irish Zionist Associations and branches of Chovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) were among the most active in Europe. In 1900, the Dublin Daughters of Zion (DDZ) was founded. This was the first women's Zionist society in Western Europe. To put this in context, it was not until February 1912 that Henrietta Szold convened the first meeting of the American Daughters of Zion, the first women's Zionist group in the United States.

The Jewish National Fund (JNF), Dublin Commission, developed into a not insignificant branch of the worldwide JNF and, from the late 1930s, its per capita contributions were higher than those made by communities in Leeds, Glasgow, and London. In his autobiography, Chaim Herzog, the Irish-born two-term president of Israel, recalled how during his childhood in Dublin and Belfast "the concept of a Jewish state emerged in our collective consciousness [and] added considerably to our sense of pride. As that consciousness expanded, it strengthened our entire community." [4]

The consequences of this could be seen after the birth of Israel. According to the political scientist Michael Brecher, in terms of individuals who occupied posts of head of an operational department or higher within the Israeli Foreign Ministry or related civil or military branches, Irish Jews equaled the contribution of [Iraqis](#) and Austrians, played a larger role than Jews from Hungary, Italy, or Egypt, and were only surpassed by Jewish immigrants from eight nations including Russia, Germany, and the United Kingdom.[5]

However, the vast majority of Irish Jews chose to stay in Ireland and by the mid-1950s, the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs estimated that only fifty Irish families resided in Israel. Those who remained made a mark on almost every area of life, from literature and art to medicine and law.

Most notably, Irish Jewry has played a role in the political life of the country out of all proportion to its size. There has been a Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin three times (Robert Briscoe in 1956 and 1961 and his son Ben Briscoe in 1988) and of Cork once (Gerald Goldberg in 1977). Robert Briscoe, a founding member of the *Fianna Fáil* political party, represented that party in the Dáil (the Irish parliament) for three decades. Even in the 1990s, when the community was only 1,400 strong, there were three Jewish members of parliament (compared to one Protestant parliamentarian out of a community numbering well over

100,000). The sole current Jewish member of the Dáil, Alan Shatter, holds the distinction of having had more private members' bills passed than anyone else in the history of the state.

In the pre-1948 era Irish nationalists embraced Zionism as a national movement for self-determination and greatly admired the revival of Hebrew, which they saw as Zionism's greatest achievement. As a member of a Zionist delegation from Jerusalem wrote home during a visit to Dublin in 1931, Irish leaders were "greatly inspired" by the rebirth of Hebrew and confessed that Zionists had "more idealism" than the Irish.[6]

However, since Israel's establishment there has been a lack of diplomatic and political support for the Jewish state. In 1975, Ireland became the last member of the EEC to exchange nonresidential ambassadors with Israel, and in 1993 it was the last member of the enlarged EU to allow Israel to establish a residential embassy.

This slow move toward full diplomatic relations was due to a number of factors including the role of the Catholic church in influencing Irish foreign policy, the negative impact on Irish-Israeli ties of clashes over Irish troops serving with the United Nations in [Lebanon](#), and the fact that the Irish beef industry, a major supplier to the Arab and Muslim world, was concerned that improved relations with Israel would damage this trade.

However, current Irish government policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict is in line with general EU policy and on a bilateral level is primarily concerned with further developing trade ties that have grown significantly since the mid-1990s.[7]

Support for Boycott

A far more worrying factor is the growing support for a boycott of Israel among Irish civil society groups. The Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC), the Irish branch of the International Solidarity Movement, is one of the most sophisticated anti-Israel groups in Europe. It organizes numerous events and has a state-of-the-art website that it uses to relentlessly promote the boycott of everything from Israeli agricultural products and football matches to flights to Israel and cultural and academic exchanges.[8]

In 2004, the IPSC collected twelve thousand Irish signatures in favor of a boycott, and its efforts have gained some support from supposedly apolitical NGOs such as Christian Aid and **Trócaire**. The IPSC also played a role in the call by sixty-one Irish academics for an academic boycott of Israel.[9]

Since entering the mainstream of Irish political life following the peace process in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), has become an outspoken critic of Israel in Irish political circles. However, this may actually improve Israel's standing in Ireland as the vast majority of Irish voters are suspicious of Sinn Féin's position on most domestic and foreign policy issues.

A far more troubling development occurred in June 2008 when the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) issued a report calling for a boycott of Israeli goods and services and disinvestment from Israeli firms. ICTU is the largest civil society body in Ireland, representing 832,000 workers and with fifty-five unions affiliated to it including IMPACT, the largest public-sector union in the Republic of Ireland and NIPSA, the largest public-sector union in Northern Ireland, both of which have also endorsed the call for a boycott.

There is no support for a boycott of Israel in Irish government or diplomatic circles and two primarily non-Jewish groups, the Ireland-Israel Friendship League and the Irish Christian Friends of Israel have worked hard to oppose the boycott. But that is little comfort given the fact that boycotters are making good ground in their effort to further demonize Israel across Irish society.

Anti-Semitism

The relentless call for the boycott of Israel is part of an effort to demonize and delegitimize the Jewish state and its supporters across the world. This creates an uncomfortable environment for an Irish Jewish

community that remains openly supportive of Israel. However, traditional anti-Semitism is not widespread and community spokesmen like to say that Ireland is the only country in Europe in which no Jew has died or been killed because of their religion. This is debatable, and indeed some historians believe that in 1923 a twenty-four-year-old Dublin Jew, Emanuel Kahn, was shot dead because he was Jewish.[10]

Moreover, there have been some unpleasant nonfatal incidents. The most notorious case occurred in Limerick in 1904-1905 when a Catholic preacher, Father John Creagh, led a boycott of several Jewish traders among the 170 Jews in a city with a population of forty thousand, which only ended when a number of Jewish families were driven out of the town. An IRA campaign against moneylenders in the mid-1920s focused primarily on targeting Jews, which caused significant concern in the community despite a number of IRA denials that any anti-Semitism was involved.

For the most part Jews who have settled in Ireland have found a safe haven. Recently, overt anti-Semitism has been a lot less prevalent than the racism encountered by new immigrants from Asia and Africa. From 2001 to 2003, according to the Jewish community's own statistics, there were no incidents of "extreme violence," "assault," or "damage or desecration of property" and only sixteen recorded cases of "abusive behavior." In 2002 alone, however, members of the Asian and African communities reported one hundred racist incidents to the authorities.[11]

But anti-Semitic incidents do continue. From November 2004 to July 2005, there was on average one recorded anti-Semitic incident per week in Dublin and these included the daubing of the Jewish school, an Orthodox synagogue, and the Irish Jewish museum with anti-Semitic slogans. In response the then justice minister Michael McDowell met with a delegation from the community and there was cross-party condemnation of these incidents in the Dáil. Again in May 2008, an Italian Jewish man living in a small town outside of Dublin had "Go Home Jew" and a swastika daubed on his wall and suffered two arson attacks on his car.[12]

One of the darkest chapters in Irish-Jewish relations was the refusal of neutral Ireland to provide a haven for Jewish refugees attempting to escape Nazi extermination in the late 1930s and 1940s. This was followed by the infamous decision of Irish leader Eamon de Valera to sign the book of condolences in the German legation in Dublin following the death of Adolf Hitler.

In 1995, then-Irish premier John Bruton acknowledged Ireland's failure in responding to the Holocaust and 2005 saw the establishment of the Holocaust Educational Trust of Ireland. This body has contributed significantly to Holocaust awareness, with 450 schools involved in one of its projects. It also organizes a high-profile annual Holocaust memorial event that is attended by politicians and public figures.

Communal Size and Structure

The size of the Irish Jewish community peaked in the late 1940s at about 4,500 members. From that point on it fell in size until 2002 when the census recorded 1,790 Irish Jews. According to the 2006 census there are 1,930 Jews in Ireland, with about 1,250 residing in Dublin and the remainder scattered across the country.[13] The present community is elderly and the historic pattern of emigration to Manchester, London, and Israel continues among young people looking for partners or pursuing career opportunities and their parents who follow them.

The rise in the Jewish population by 7.8 percent from 2002 to 2006 is due to the arrival of Jewish economic migrants into Ireland as part of the "Celtic Tiger" economy. The Jewish community has attempted to capitalize on the Irish economic boom to advertise for immigrants from other Jewish communities across the world, especially those in Argentina and South Africa. Named Operation Springbok, the plan has had limited success for two reasons: those in charge of the project have only looked to attract observant Jews; and the Irish authorities will not waive standard visa requirements for what are essentially economic migrants.

As such, the largest increase of Jews in Ireland is among Israelis who have moved here to work in the hi-tech sector. Some have no interest in Jewish life, a few are outspoken critics of Israeli policies and have been co-opted into the anti-Israel movement, but a fair few have integrated into the community, attend

synagogue, and enroll their children in the Jewish primary school. Whether this immigration will continue depends almost fully on the future strength of the Irish economy and, to a lesser extent, the willingness of the community to subsidize the settlement of new Jewish families and to invest in communal infrastructure.

Currently there are two Orthodox synagogues in Dublin, one Progressive synagogue, one Jewish golf club with non-Jewish members, one Jewish school, with an all-Jewish primary school and a mixed secondary school, and one Jewish retirement home where accommodation is shared with the Quaker community. The community no longer has its own kosher butcher, and kosher meat and other products are imported from the United Kingdom. Nor is there a Jewish community or sports center, as the Maccabi sports club, one of the best sports facilities in the country, was sold off a number of years ago.

The existing community institutions are overseen by the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland (JRCI), whose members are either elected or appointed. This body has run the community since the late 1940s, when Irish Jews gave up their seats on the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the representative body of Anglo-Jewry, following Ireland's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth.

Irish Jews benefited from the "Celtic Tiger." Historically Ireland was not an industrialized nation and as such there was never a tradition of Jewish industrial grandees or magnates. However, Irish Jews have always had trades and skills, with more self-employed as a percentage of the population and a lower percentage of wage earners than other communities. Thus, by the time of the boom in the early 1990s, although there were very few multimillionaires, the vast majority of Irish Jews were part of the urban middle class.

At the heart of the Irish boom was the property market, an economic sector in which Irish Jews have long been involved. Many members of the community have become wealthy as the value of commercial and residential property has skyrocketed.

Interestingly, this wealth has not been reinvested in the community to any significant extent. Dublin Jewry has always had a much greater tradition of supporting Israeli charities than the needy within their own community. Some members have been reluctant to donate funds because their children have settled abroad. Moreover, major disagreements over the closure and sale of Adelaide Road Synagogue over a decade ago split the community. Whereas the sale of this synagogue along with the Maccabi sports club meant that the community gained some significant capital, this created a disincentive for individuals to give donations from their own pockets.

The Irish Muslim Community

The rise of the "Celtic Tiger" economy meant that for the first time in 150 years, from 1991 to 1996 Ireland saw net immigration rather than net emigration. Society has rapidly become both multicultural and multiracial. This is most clearly seen in the growth of the Irish Muslim community.

Muslims are now the third largest religious group in the country after Roman Catholics, who number 3.7 million or 86.8 percent of the population and the Church of Ireland, which has 125,000 adherents.[14] According to the 2006 census, there are 32,529 Muslims in Ireland, up from 19,147 in 2002, an increase of 69.9 percent in four years. The most obvious sign of this is that the once-Jewish area of "Little Jerusalem" now borders a vibrant and growing Muslim shopping quarter.

Over the last decade many European societies have been challenged by the multiculturalism caused by growing Muslim communities. The same process is now occurring in Ireland. In 2007, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the premier medical school in the country, announced that toilets in all new buildings will face away from Mecca "[out of] respect for the cultural diversity of the student population." [15] In May 2008, the Islamic Cultural Center, which is based at the largest Sunni mosque in Dublin, spoke of the "urgent need" for Sharia-compliant financial services in Ireland. And in June 2008, the government wrote to the heads of four thousand schools across Ireland to seek their views on the wearing of the *hijab* headscarf. [16]

At the time of the Danish Muhammad-cartoons controversy the reaction among Irish Muslims was relatively mild, with a few hundred marching in Dublin with placards carrying the words "Don't insult the Prophet." However, as has been the case in other European countries, much Irish Muslim funding emanates from [Saudi Arabia](#) and this can make the community vulnerable to Wahhabi extremism.

Moreover, there already are a number of groups in Dublin that have alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood. These include the Federation of Islamic Student Societies (FOSIS), the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE), and the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR). This latter group was founded by the controversial Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi in 1997 and is permanently headquartered in the Islamic Cultural Center in Dublin. In 2003, the ECFR issued a fatwa endorsing "martyrdom operations" against Israel "even if the victims include civilians." [17]

On a national level there is growing concern that Ireland could develop into a base for money laundering, document forging, and even a transit base for terrorists. The security services listed radical Islamic extremism as the number one priority for 2006 and in the same year the chief of staff of the Irish army admitted, regarding Islamic extremists, that "there's always the danger that people would use Ireland as a back door to the UK." [18]

Although this is a challenge for the whole of Irish society, the rising influence of the Muslim community raises issues particularly for Irish Jews. The first is that the Islamicization of politics has never been good for Jews. There is a strong correlation between anti-Jewish incidents across Europe and a rising focus in domestic politics on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Irish Jewish museum was smeared the day after Yasser Arafat died in November 2004. Second, Irish Jews were historically the largest and most public non-Christian minority. According to the 2006 census, Judaism is now the fifteenth largest religious group out of twenty-three in a country of 4.2 million people. Islam ranks third, Orthodox Christianity is sixth, and Irish Jews also rank behind Buddhists (ninth), Hindus (tenth), and Jehovah's Witnesses (thirteenth). [19]

The 1937 Irish Constitution gave Jews special recognition and protection as the largest non-Christian group in a society overwhelmingly dominated by Roman Catholicism. However, the present marginal position of Irish Jewry could mark the beginning of the end of its influence on a national level. This has not yet happened as evidenced by the fact that in 2007 the Jewish community was one of the religious groups invited to participate in a new framework established by the government to facilitate discussion between the state and religious leaders on various matters. Moreover, symbolically important annual events continue such as the lighting of the menorah candles at the residence of the Lord Mayor of Dublin and the Chief Rabbi's televised address to the nation on the eve of the Jewish New Year.

Nevertheless, the community is undoubtedly at a crossroads. It is financially secure in the medium term but faces the abovementioned challenges without the benefit of any real leadership. This more than any other factor places in jeopardy the future viability of a once thriving community built from scratch by what Max Nurock, the Dublin-born and educated Jew who later became Israel's ambassador to Australia, remembered fondly as an "incomparable generation of Litvak [Lithuanian] pioneers." [20]

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Notes

[1] See Cormac Ó Gráda, *Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce: A Socioeconomic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Asher Benson, *Jewish Dublin: Portraits of Life by the Liffey* (Dublin: A. & A. Farmer, 2007).

[2] O'Grada, *Jewish Ireland*, 10-12, 209.

[3] *Ibid.*, 43.

[4] Chaim Herzog, *Living History: A Memoir* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 9.

[5] Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy of Israel: Setting, Images, Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 440.

[6] See L. Jaffe to the Keren Hayesod Head office, Jerusalem, 18 November 1931, Dublin Jewish Museum Archive, Box 29.

[7] For a detailed study of Irish-Israeli bilateral relations, see Rory Miller, *Ireland and the Palestine Question, 1948-2004* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005).

[8] Rory Miller, "Taking the Peace," *Magill Magazine*, 18 June-14 July 2005, 46-47.

[9] See "Academics Call for Boycott of Israel," *Irish Times*, 16 September 2006.

[10] Katrina Goldstone, "Who Shot Emanuel Kahn?" *Irish Times*, 18 November 2003.

[11] See *Report on Anti-Semitism and Anti-Semitic Incidents in Ireland for the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Inter-Culturalism* (Dublin: Jewish Representative Council of Ireland, 2003), 6.

[12] "Anti-Semitic Acts Call for Tougher Laws," *Irish Times*, 18 June 2005; "Thugs Target Couple in Anti-Semitic Attack," *Irish Independent*, 15 May 2008.

[13] *Census 2006: Principal Demographic Results: Population Classified by Religion* (Dublin: Central Statistics Office, 2007), 85.

[14] *Ibid.*, 85.

[15] "Surgeons Perform Delicate Operation for Muslims," *Irish Independent*, 8 April 2007.

[16] "Pupils' Right to Wear Hijab Is Backed by Almost Half Those Surveyed," *Irish Times*, 9 June 2008.

[17] "'Theologian of Terror' Held Radical Islamic Council Session Here," *Sunday Independent*, 6 March 2005.

[18] "Gardai Crack Down on Islamic Extremism," *Irish Times*, 3 January 2006; see also Interview with Lieutenant General Jim Sreenan, *Irish Times*, 27 December 2006.

[19] *Census 2006: Principal Demographic Results: Population Classified by Religion*, 85.

[20] Letter from Max Nurock to the Joint Palestine Appeal, Dublin, 10 April 1960, Dublin Jewish Museum Archive, Box 14.

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Rory Miller is senior lecturer in Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London where he teaches on U.S. and EU involvement in the Middle East and Mediterranean and on the history of anti-Zionism. He is the author or editor of four books and associate editor of the journal *Israel Affairs*. His articles have appeared in a number of publications including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Irish Times*, *The New Republic*, the *Beirut Daily Star*, and *Commentary* magazine.