When “God Save the King” and “Hail Hitler” Collide: Demonstrating the Affective Limits of Imperial Identity in Canada Through Case Study of Anti-Semitism in 1930s Toronto

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HIS466
Winter 2018
INTRODUCTION

Canada’s national identity has endured a transformation in the last half-decade, as the country reimaged herself into a proper nation independent of the Crown. More pointedly, she went from being a *bona fide* Dominion—made in the Mother Country’s image—to a Dominion only in name, enjoying her own political institutions, values, and identity. This evolution began in earnest in the 1960s, and culminated, in large part, in the adoption of the Canadian multiculturalism policy in 1971. With this, Canada began the process of claiming herself different from the British North America of yore, adopting an identity of her own based upon diversity and multiculturalism. Prior to this time, however, Canada’s national identity was thoroughly British. As a member of the British Commonwealth, Canada’s national identity was, for all intents and purposes, the imperial identity shared by her fellow Dominions and Colonies. While multi-faceted, the foundational ideology of this identity was that of “British fair play,” which espoused such qualities as tolerance and equality. Given the time periods in which this identity prevailed, however—viz. those years preceding Canada’s aforesaid adoption of multiculturalism, wherein social racism was rampant—one questions the affective power of this imperial identity in Canada. That is to say, one wonders whether Canadians’ identification with “fair play” at all influenced their behaviour, especially that in relation to minorities. Throughout this paper, I will explore this question in the context of Canada’s Jewish population, using their social treatment in 1930s Toronto as a case study.

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Ultimately, I will conclude that Canada’s imperial identity had little affective potency to compel equality or inclusion for its country’s Jews in the 1930s. This begs the question of the affective power of the imperial identity in Canada, more specifically, and national identity as a concept, more generally.

Extensive scholarship has focused on the meaning of British imperial identity in Canada, as well as its affective power vis-à-vis immigrants. As far as the author can tell, however, such studies tend to focus on immigration policies at a policy level, to the exclusion of the treatment of these immigrants—or, more accurately, minorities—in the social sphere. Moreover, where these studies do exist, few, if any, focus on Jews as their subject minority.\(^6\) \(^7\) \(^8\) This paper, thus, seeks to redress an oft-overlooked facet of Canada’s history of race. As historian David Rome argues, this is significant; after all, “[t]here is no possible good, and certainly much possible harm, in sweeping [Canada’s anti-Semitic history] under the carpet. Our self-respect as a nation forbids an image based upon incomplete truth about our past.”\(^9\) Moreover, this novel framing of the question of national identity, both imperial and general, helps us to better understand, and critically analyze, the meaning and power of national identity, both then and today.

The paper will proceed in four parts. First, we will briefly explore Canada’s national/imperial identity in the 1930s. Second, we will discuss the anti-Jewish social discrimination experienced by Toronto’s Jews during this time. Third, we will consider the ways in which said imperial identity figured into popular discussions of anti-Semitism, both amongst its

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\(^7\) Uberoi, "Do Policies of Multiculturalism Change National Identities?"


perpetrators and its victims. We will conclude with brief remarks regarding Canada’s national identity today, and the implications of this research’s findings for our understanding of the history of race in Canada, as well as of the general concept of national identity.

**CANADIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE THIRTIES**

Canada in the 1930s was a true British Dominion. That is to say, she was, with the exception of Quebec, “visibly a British country.” Generally speaking, many—and, indeed, most—Canadians considered themselves to be loyal British subjects. They conformed to the “Anglo-Saxon model,” and compelled new immigrants to do the same; held British institutions and values in high esteem; and, generally speaking, cherished their British heritage, seeking to maintain it from alleged ethnic encroachment. It should come as no surprise, then, that many Canadians considered their national identity to be that of their Mother Country—that is, grounded in “fair play.” Per former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, this term encompasses “treating people fairly, rewarding hard work, [and] encouraging self improvement.”

Historian Lisa-Rose Betcherman argues that in the thirties, specifically, British fair play was the “arbiter of all actions[,] …] constantly invoked by all Canadians.” Indeed, it is for this reason that this paper has focused on the thirties as case study. As an indication of the pervasiveness of this identification, the term “fair play” was cited 1,186 times in *The Globe and Mail*, one of the country’s leading newspapers, during the decade. Moreover, various ethnic groups framed their pleas for equality in this language, understanding that complaints which

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invoked imperial identity would, likely, fare better than those that did not.\textsuperscript{16} As further such indication, “the public celebrations on Empire Day [and] the oaths that schoolchildren took for the British Empire” are telling of the extent of Canadians’ identification with the imperial identity.\textsuperscript{17} Historians have debated the degree to which Canada’s connection to the British Crown waned in the wake of the First World War; evidence uncovered by more recent scholars, however, seem to have swung the debate to the negative. Philip Buckner, for example, argues that “loyalty to the Empire remained a cornerstone of Canadian society” in the interwar years, as demonstrated by the strength of such organizations as the Canadian Legion, which counted 400,000 Canadians as members at the time.\textsuperscript{18} John Herd Thompson, for his part, affirms this position, declaring the 1930s to have been “the height of Canada’s Britishness.”\textsuperscript{19} Evidence substantiating this point is even stronger in Ontario—and, in particular, in Toronto—wherein 81% of people were of “British stock” in 1931.\textsuperscript{20} As a “stronghold of Anglo-Saxon nativism” wherein the “best characteristics of British civilization”\textsuperscript{21} were allegedly manifest, Toronto’s citizens might have been better categorized as being “British Canadians,” rather than mere “Canadians.”\textsuperscript{22}

To be sure, “Britishness” was, and is, not a monolithic idea, varying according to such divisions as “English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh Anglo-Celtic.”\textsuperscript{23} In Canada, however, “Britishness” was a more or less unified identity, given its being an “invented identity, defined as

\textsuperscript{17} Mann, “The introduction of multiculturalism in Canada and Australia, 1960s-1970s,” 483.
\textsuperscript{19} MacPherson, \textit{Women and the Orange Order: female activism, diaspora and empire in the British world, 1850-1940}, 185.
\textsuperscript{20} Betcherman, \textit{The Swastika and the Maple Leaf: Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties}, 47.
\textsuperscript{21} Davis, \textit{Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation}, Waterloo, Ont, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 113.
\textsuperscript{22} Betcherman, \textit{The Swastika and the Maple Leaf: Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties}, 47.
a broad historical connection to Great Britain and rooted in the belief that those of British ‘stock’
had built the Canadian nation, settled and civilized the country, and built institutions founded on
the principles of British democracy.” 24 While this was by no means historically accurate, it was
deeply-felt—especially in Toronto. No doubt, then, in the 1930s, Canadians, in general, and
Torontonians, in particular, nominally identified themselves with British free play and the
tolerance and equality that it entailed. Whether they practiced what they idiomatically preached,
however, is another question entirely.

ANTISEMITISM IN TORONTO

As this section will show, despite the deep connections felt amongst Torontonians to their
imperial identity in the thirties, anti-Semitism was rampant. This demonstrates the affective limits
of Canada’s imperial identity.

Toronto’s Jewish community during this time period was not at all insignificant. In a city
of approximately 630,000 people in 1931, 25 Jews constituted roughly 5.7% of the population. 26
This number had been growing steadily since 1900, at which time the city’s non-Jewish citizens
began to fear their “new citizens.” 27 Throughout the next three decades, as the number of Jews
grew, the incidence of anti-Jewish hate and discrimination increased proportionally. 28 By the
1930s, social anti-Semitism had grown increasingly “blatant” and overt. 29 Such racism might be
categorized into four categories: exclusion, boycotting, stereotyping, and violence. This paper will

25 Statistics Canada, “Natural increase in cities and towns of 10,000 population and over, 1931 to 1935, and
averages, 1926 to 1930 and 1931 to 1935,” Statistics Canada, March 31, 2008, accessed March 13, 2018,
https://www65.statcan.gc.ca/acyb02/1937/acyb02_19370191033-eng.htm.
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com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/docview/1323704068?accountid=14771.
28 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 116.
29 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 118.
focus on exclusion—given its being the most pervasive form of social anti-Semitism in Toronto in the thirties—and violence, inasmuch as this was the most overt form of social anti-Semitism experienced by Jews at this time.

Exclusion

Anti-Semitic social exclusion took on various forms during the thirties, including, for one, bans from public and private spaces, both residential and social. It was “customary,” for example, for “Gentiles Only” signs to appear in the Greater Toronto Area during the summertime, when the “countryside” was a popular residential destination for Torontonians. In one 1939 report drafted by the Public Relations Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress, several complaints of such signs are recorded, including a sign at Pine Grove Park, which reappeared after having been taken down the year before; one at Lakeside Point, which had “been up for some years,” despite persistent efforts to the contrary; and, inter alia, one at Highland Creek Park, which had been newly-erected that summer. These signs attempted to exclude Jews wholesale from certain popular summer destinations.

This indiscriminate—and, no doubt, racist—form of social ostracism often resulted from “restrictive covenants,” which were legally binding contracts that denied the sale of land to those the “vendor might find objectionable,” or “unwritten ‘gentleman’s agreements’ among neighbours.” To be sure, such restrictions were not limited to “resort districts,” but were also found in “desirable residential areas” sought by the “Anglo-Saxon upper-middle-class.” Given the government’s inability—or, perhaps, unwillingness—to rectify these social wrongs, one

31 "Summary of Current Cases and Advocacy Activities."
32 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 121.
33 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 120-121.
34 "Summary of Current Cases and Advocacy Activities."
reasonably presumes that these exclusionary measures were a result of grass-roots activities by Toronto’s non-Jewish residents. Likely, they sought to preserve their Anglo-Saxon spheres from “Joosh [sic.] moneybags” who, it was thought, would bring with them “excessive noise, beer drinking, women parading through the village in shorts,” and other such “undesirable behaviour.”

Such exclusion was not limited to residential areas, however. In even greater numbers, “recreation areas,” such as hotels, resorts, restaurants, dance halls, swimming facilities, sporting clubs, social clubs, and bathhouses, banned Jews. For instance, a certain resort in Oshawa, “Pleasant Valley Ranch,” bore the sign “Jews not allowed” and, moreover, “had a sound truck going around Town advertising [the] resort and using the word ‘gentiles only.'” In another such instance, Musselman’s Lake in North York featured “several signs […] indicating that the beach is for Gentiles only,” and another reserved the benches on said beach for “Gentiles only.”

These exclusions were similarly seen in sports’ facilities throughout the decade—such as when the Hudson Tennis Club, a Jewish club, was denied entry into the Toronto Tennis League in 1937—as well as in public bathhouses, as when two Jewish women in Toronto were “approached by someone and told to get out [of Harrison Baths] because they were Jews.”

37 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 121.
40 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 121.
42 “Musselman’s Lake,” 1938, Ontario Jewish Archives Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, Series 5-3, File 158.
43 “Hudson Tennis Club, Toronto” 1937, Ontario Jewish Archives Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, Series 5-3, File 112.
44 “Harrison Baths, Toronto” 1939, Ontario Jewish Archives Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, Series 5-3, File 104.
numbers of incidents such as these throughout the thirties,\(^45\) as Jews increasingly found themselves banned from various facets of Toronto life.

To be sure, this social exclusion was not reserved solely for luxury spaces such as sporting and social clubs; it took form in Jewish exclusion from access to education—both at the lower and higher levels—and from certain spheres of work. As historian Irving Abella describes, with reference to a 1938 study by the Canadian Jewish Congress, “banks, insurance companies, and the large industrial and commercial interests […] excluded Jews from employment” at this time.\(^46\) A Jewish Toronto Member of Parliament at the time, Sam Foster, gave voice to this exclusion, asking rhetorically, “How many Jews are there in high posts and on the boards of bank, trust companies, insurance firms, railroads and governments? Have we not men of ability? We can’t get these positions because we are Jews.”\(^47\) Moreover, few teachers—and none of Canada’s school principals—were Jews, as parents feared so-called Jewish subversion and, thus, fought for a 1% quota on Jewish teachers.\(^48\)

Further, while Ontario universities—and, most relevant to this paper, the University of Toronto—accepted a disproportionate number of Jewish students due to institutional policies that promised to accept “any citizen of Ontario who presented the requisite qualifications,”\(^49\) Jewish students faced anti-Semitism both once admitted and once graduated. Indeed, per historian W.P.J. Millar, “[t]here was undoubtedly anti-Semitic feeling in the university community, which showed

\(^{45}\) Davis, *Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation*, 120-121.


itself particularly over the question of hiring Jewish faculty.50 Medical faculty in the thirties also made points of documenting the number of Jewish students in their midst, thus, perhaps, indicating that they were paying them particular—and, likely, negative—attention.51 Post-graduation, too, “Jewish doctors could not get hospital appointments”52 and internships. This meant that Jews were de facto barred from practicing medicine in hospital environments.53

To be sure, Jewish medical students in the thirties faced objectively less anti-Semitism, given that they were accepted to study in the first place; Jews seeking study in private institutions (viz. at the lower level, of high school and elementary school) were not always so fortunate.54 Indeed, Jews were largely excluded from such institutions as Upper Canada College, Jarvis Collegiate, and Northern Vocational School, amongst others.55 Moreover, even where they were allowed, many public schools displayed anti-Semitism towards their Jewish students. In one particular incident noted by the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1938, a public secondary school teacher at Harbord Collegiate Institute told his Jewish students that they were a “grasping race and that he would find something of particular importance to teach on Shevuoth,” a Jewish holiday whereon Jewish students would be absent from school.56

50 W. P.J. Millar, “‘We wanted our children should have it better’: Jewish Medical Students at the University of Toronto, 1910-51,” Journal of the Canadian Historical Association 11, no. 1 (2000): 120, doi:10.7202/031133ar.
51 Gerald Tulchinsky, Canada’s Jews: A People’s Journey (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 318.
52 Abella, “Presidential Address: Jews, Human Rights, and the Making of a New Canada.”
53 Millar, “‘We wanted our children should have it better’: Jewish Medical Students at the University of Toronto, 1910-51,” 124.
54 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 120-121.
Violence

While not nearly as ubiquitous, violent social anti-Semitism was the most overt, and frightening, form of anti-Semitism experienced by Jewish Torontonians in the 1930s. At the start of the decade, anti-Jewish violence was “sporadic and unorganized.” This changed coincident with the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933, as violence became much more widespread and, as it were, political. The most prominent of these incidents was the Christie Pits riot of 1933. 

In 1933, fascist movements were taking root in Toronto. These often consisted of “bands of Anglo-Saxon youths” who had joined together to form swastika clubs—that is, groups of oft-disaffected young men who adorned the Nazi symbol, promoted Jewish exclusion from various spaces, and sought, apparently, to ensure law and order in the regions in which they resided. One particularly violent manifestation of these associations figured at Balmy Beach, into a group which called itself the Balmy Beach Swastika Club, in the spring of 1933. This group “beat up, harassed, and chased Jews from the boardwalk along Lake Ontario” and were the cause of several violent clashes with young Jews troubled at the sight of their anti-Semitism. While these clubs did not, in effect, engender a notable amount of physical violence, there is no doubt that their presence and rhetoric were intimidating and compelled Toronto’s Jews to be more conscientious and decisive about the environments in which they decided to situate themselves. To be sure, these swastika

58 Stingel, Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism Social Credit and the Jewish Response, 27.
59 Davis, Anti-Semitism in Canada: History and Interpretation, 123.
clubs were one of the reasons for the reactivation of the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1934; Jews needed to protect themselves.\textsuperscript{63}

While there was more bark than bite in the majority of these swastika clubs, one notable incident involving the Swastika Club of Toronto involved significant proverbial bite: the aforesaid Christie Pits riot. On August 16, 1933, at the scene of a baseball game between a self-identified Jewish baseball team and a team from Toronto’s St. Peter’s Church,\textsuperscript{64} violence erupted when a supposed supporter of the St. Peter’s team began “waving a Swastika flag” and yelling “Hail Hitler.”\textsuperscript{65} Apparently, other taunts such as “Kill the Jews” were also used to provoke the Jewish team and their supporters.\textsuperscript{66} Unsurprisingly, given the sensitivity at the time to anti-Semitism given Hitler’s rise, the taunts succeeded, with violence thus arising between Jews and non-Jews. Per a newspaper report from the following day, Jewish youths apparently “rushed” the boy who had sparked the taunts with his Nazi chants and symbol, “knock[ing] him cold.”\textsuperscript{67}

This initial act of violence—retributive, and even justified, as it may have been—was the signal that the boy’s fellow Nazi sympathizers were seemingly awaiting, as they immediately “plied baseball bats and fists in a wild riot.”\textsuperscript{68} This riot spread, as allies on each side joined in, adding not only more people to the riot but increasingly dangerous weapons, such as glass bottles

\textsuperscript{63} Stingel, \textit{Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism Social Credit and the Jewish Response}, 27.
\textsuperscript{66} Stingel, \textit{Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism Social Credit and the Jewish Response}, 218.
\textsuperscript{67} "Swastika Feud Battles in Toronto Injure 4 Fists, Boots, Piping used in Bloor Street War."
\textsuperscript{68} "Swastika Feud Battles in Toronto Injure 4 Fists, Boots, Piping used in Bloor Street War."
and iron pipes.\textsuperscript{69} In all, five people were taken to the hospital, at least three of whom were Jewish.\textsuperscript{70} Apparently, though, this does “not represent a fraction of those who were injured in the melee.”\textsuperscript{71}

Like the foregoing activities of the swastika gangs, the effective consequences of the Christie Pits riot paled in comparison to the violence suggested by the rhetoric flouted therein. That said, there is no question that this—and the general presence of these clubs, as well as the aforesaid social exclusion—contributed to an environment of anti-Semitism and fear in the Toronto Jewish community. These activities “challenged the complacent self-image of ‘Toronto the Good;’”\textsuperscript{72} more pointedly, these activities indicated the affective limits of Canada’s imperial identity as an Anglo-Saxon nation vis-à-vis minorities.

**ANTI-SEMITISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

It is not merely that anti-Semitism existed in Toronto that demonstrates the affective limits of imperial identity in mitigating racism; the fact that both perpetrators and victims utilized imperial rhetoric to frame their actions is also demonstrative thereof.

Jews, for their part, used such nationalist to protest their treatment. In one 1936 letter, for example, written in opposition to various “Gentile’s Only” signs at Musselman’s Lake, Oscar Cohen, Director of the Canadian Jewish Congress, specifically referenced the imperial identity. He said, “It is difficult to believe that such signs would be approved by any groups in Canada where the traditions of British democracy are so deep-rooted.”\textsuperscript{73} In another such letter, Cohen argued that such signs have “no place in Canada, an integral part of the British Empire, which has

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{70} "Swastika Feud Battles in Toronto Injure 4 Fists, Boots, Piping used in Bloor Street War."
\bibitem{71} "Three Held as Willowvale Park Riot Sequel."
\bibitem{72} Philip Girard, \textit{Bora Laskin Bringing Law to Life} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 58.
\bibitem{73} "Musselman’s Lake."
\end{thebibliography}
been founded upon the principle of justice and toleration to all, irrespective of race and creed.”74 Similarly, a newspaper response written by a Jewish doctor from the Greater Toronto Area compares Jews to Anglo-Saxons in pleading for better treatment of his fellow Jews.75 That anti-Semitism continued unabated in the face of these nationalist appeals is indicative of the limited potency of imperial identity.

As a counterpoint to this, the Torontonian perpetrators of the foregoing anti-Semitism also used imperial rhetoric to frame their actions—albeit less explicitly. As one particularly striking example, the first vice-president of the Swastika Association of Canada, Joseph C. Farr, who was an ardent supporter of the Crown and its values, advertised his group as being in accord with Canada’s imperial identity: “We are a purely Canadian organization to foster and encourage unselfishness, good fellowship, truth and loyalty to King and Country.”76 Moreover, the fact that the aforementioned Balmy Beach Swastika Club played “God Save the King” at the end of the town meeting is also so telling.

Regardless of Torontonians’ deeply-felt identification with their imperial identity, then, its norms—which espoused “equality for all citizens”77—failed to make an affective difference on the manifestation of anti-Semitism in the city.

**IMPERIAL IDENTITY AS WHITENESS**

One may refute that imperial identity norms, which suggested treating all with fairness and tolerance, applied only to whites at this time,78 as such, even faithful connection to one’s imperial identity might not have resulted in equal treatment for Jews, who were not considered white. After

74 “Musselman’s Lake.”
77 Klein, 219.
78 Mann, ”The introduction of multiculturalism in Canada and Australia, 1960s-1970s,” 484.
all, even the British had problems with anti-Semitism. While this is certainly a plausible argument, this paper is focused on what the imperial norms espoused, not on how they were articulated in the Mother Country. That is to say, while adherence to fair play, as it were manifest in Britain, would not have realistically mitigated this social form anti-Semitism, its theoretical foundation should have. It on this more theoretical conception of the imperial identity on which this paper has focused.

CONCLUSION

National identities are generally understood as being based on myth; “[t]he real question,” says political scientist David Miller, “is whether they perform such valuable functions that our attitudes, as philosophers [or historians, as the case may be], should be one of acquiescence if not positive endorsement.”

In the case of anti-Semitism in 1930s Toronto, national identity, evidently, did not “perform such [a] valuable function” in mitigating its supporters’ racist actions towards Jews. While only a case study of a singular city, this case of social anti-Semitism seems to suggest the general affective limits of imperial identity in Canada, specifically, as well as national identity, more generally. This ought to be a point of future research for scholars interested in the topic of national identity and nationalism, especially in relation to racism.

Today, Canada’s national identity is no longer that of her Mother Country. As indicated at the outset, Canada’s political transformation in the 1960s and 1970s included the all but formal adoption of a new identity: that based on multiculturalism. While this policy is a clearer articulation of the tolerant principles underlying “British fair play”—including such qualities as “tolera[ce],

80 Miller, "In Defence of Nationality," 8-9.
progressive[ism], colour-blind[ness],” and “goodwill”\textsuperscript{81}—it, like its predecessor, is not without problem or limits. Indeed, just like “fair play,” Canada’s multiculturalist identity, also, sometimes fails to restrain its adherents’ racism. One need only look to the ongoing systemic discrimination and troubles experienced by Canada’s Indigenous population to perceive the affective limits of Canada’s national identity today.\textsuperscript{82} Perhaps, then, national identity is not pervasive enough a concept to affect citizens’ behaviour—no matter their adherence thereto. If the experience of Toronto’s Jewish community in the 1930s is any indication, this seems to be the case.

\textsuperscript{81} Catherine Briggs, \textit{Modern Canada: 1945 to present} (Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press, 2014), 321.
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