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Abba Hillel Silver, Zionism and the Rescue of the European Jews,
Aaron Berman, 1979.

Center for Israel and Jewish Studies

WORKING PAPERS, II

Columbia University
Spring 1979

Aaron Berman.....Abba Hillel Silver, Zionism and
the Rescue of the European Jews

Allan Kagedan Kage..The American Jewish Committee's
Attitude Towards Anti-Semitism,
1919-1921

Edited by Paula Hyman

With an Introduction by Arthur Hertzberg

INTRODUCTION

The theme that is common to the two papers that are here being published together is the eternal question of human motivation. Why did the leaders of the American Jewish Committee respond to post World War I American anti-Semitism by insisting that it was of foreign origin? It is Allan Kage's contention that they were constrained to argue this way because to take another position would question their self-image as Jews already fully integrated and accepted on the American scene. Of course they all knew better, because academic quotas were all around them and some of those leaders, as Mr. Kage makes clear, had personally experienced anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, their dearest desire was to persuade America and themselves that in this new land anti-Semitism was not possible and what remained was part of the dross of Europe that the American ideal was melting out.

Aaron Eberman's problem is again motivation. Such passionate defenders of the Jews as Abba Hillel Silver knew at least as much as anyone else during the years of World War II of what was happening in Hitler's charnel house. Why did he put all his energies into pushing for the Zionist state rather than in rescue operations? It is at least conceivable that, had the talents and the energies that went into the propagation of Zionism been used to save Jews, much more would have happened. The ovens in Auschwitz might have been obliterated by an American bombing raid at least in mid-1944.

A caution needs here to be added. The very people who were the leaders of Zionism in the United States in the 1940s, chiefly

Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise, were also deeply involved in the World Jewish Congress and in the Joint Distribution Committee. These bodies worked straight through the war to save Jews and did a far better job than their present critics would allow. Historians must continue to remember that, even as the Holocaust was happening, not one -- not even as well-informed a Jewish leader as Chaim Weizmann -- could believe its totality. Jews continued to think of it as a large-scale pogrom until the end of the war, when the tragic evidence was before their eyes. Silver reacted as a Zionist to a pogrom by arguing that the way to make an end of the possibility of pogroms was to create a Jewish state. Nonetheless, the tragic fact remains that during the war years, the American Jewish community was not mobilized primarily for rescue; it was arguing about Jewish nationalism.

Berman is quite right in maintaining that the explanation is the Zionist -- and, in reaction, the non-Zionist and the anti-Zionist -- casts of mind of its principal leaders. Both of these papers are thus attempts to get behind the facts to explanation; not to condemn, but to understand. The historian must ultimately make up his mind, and indeed pass judgment, but he must always begin with thinking and feeling his way into the past situations in their own terms. Both these papers are good beginnings for young historians.

Arthur Hertzberg

ABBA HILLEL SILVER, ZIONISM AND THE RESCUE OF THE EUROPEAN JEWS

Aaron Berman

Uriel Tal's recent book, Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870-1914

brilliantly integrates the fields of political and intellectual history. Tal examines the ideology, perception and actions of different groups of Germans and Jews, illustrating the dialectical relationship between these three factors. In a parallel way, this paper attempts to prove that American Zionists developed an ideology based upon their conception of Jewish history, and that this ideology dictated the way in which they perceived and reacted to the Holocaust. This study will serve as a basis for a broader, more detailed study of American Zionism and Zionist ideology, which I plan to undertake.

Introduction

Before the Second World War, Zionism had gained few adherents among the five million Jews living in the United States. This situation changed drastically during the war years, as American Zionist leaders, spurred on by the persecution of their European brethren, undertook a militant campaign to win both supporters and political influence. Membership in the Zionist Organization of America, the largest but by no means the only American Zionist organization, increased from 8,400 in 1932 to 43,000 in 1939, and to over 200,000 in 1945.¹ The American Zionist Emergency Council, established in 1943, quickly became a most efficient political lobby. Under its auspices, hundreds of local emergency committees were set up by Jewish communities throughout the country.

These committees made contacts with the editors and publishers of local newspapers, and flooded congressmen with letters demanding United States support for the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine.² The American Zionists' success in recruiting in Congress, played a crucial part in the establishment of Israel in 1948, and in the survival of that state during the following decades.

While Zionism was gaining strength within the American Jewish community, Nazi Germany was systematically exterminating the Jewish population of Europe. The United States government, claiming that only Allied military victory would end Hitler's cruelty, did little to rescue the doomed six million.³ Major American Jewish organizations publicized the plight of European Jewry and initiated campaigns to gain support for rescue efforts, but generally refused to divert resources from the effort to create a Jewish state to the rescue movement. Petitions and plans for rescue put forth by American Jewish leaders usually contained a plank calling for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. While pleas to rescue European Jewry could be presented to the Roosevelt Administration as a humanitarian necessity, the demand for statehood was implicitly political. Great Britain, the Mandatory power in Palestine, adamantly refused to discuss the political future of the Middle East until after the defeat of the Axis. Roosevelt and Churchill could thus easily resist rescue demands by citing the need to preserve the unity of the Atlantic Alliance.

American Zionist leaders cannot be accused of callousness or indifference to the murders in Europe. Emanuel Newman, Louis Lipsky, Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver all valued East European Jewish culture and were truly grieved by the Nazi massacre. Wise, in particular, was a leader of the World Jewish Congress, an organization with an admirable

record of attempts to save European Jews. Yet, for reasons that will be discussed, they found it impossible to distinguish between the need of world Jewry for a state and the need of European Jewry to survive. An analysis of one of these leaders' conception of Zionist ideology and response to the Holocaust may help to illuminate their actions.

II Silver and the Early Response to Hitler's Persecution

Abba Hillel Silver was born in Lithuania in 1893, and emigrated to the United States with his family in 1902. Ordained a Reform rabbi in 1915, Silver spent two years in Wheeling, West Virginia before assuming leadership of a Reform Jewish congregation in Cleveland, a post he held until his death in 1963. Silver was active in American Jewish affairs, particularly the American Zionist movement. His gift for oratory brought him to the attention of Zionist leaders and he assumed increasingly greater positions of responsibility. In 1938, he became chairman of the United Palestine Appeal, the major Zionist fundraising organization in America, as well as co-chairman of the United Jewish Appeal. In 1943, he and Rabbi Stephen Wise became co-chairmen of the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC), which was responsible for spearheading the Zionist campaign in America. Following a policy dispute with Wise, Silver resigned from the AZEC in December 1944, but public pressure forced his recall in July 1945. Silver became the undisputed leader of American Zionism in 1946, when he was appointed chairman of the American Section of the Jewish Agency.⁴

During the war years, Abba Hillel Silver was perhaps the most militant and politically astute leader of American Zionism. An early advocate of the need for a Jewish state, he gave of himself whole-heartedly

in the struggle for its creation. Unlike Stephen Wise, Silver was not above attacking Franklin D. Roosevelt for the President's reluctance to give full backing to the Zionist program.

Silver was an early opponent of German anti-Semitic policies and declared that the sporadic pogroms and economic sanctions directed against the Jews by the new Nazi regime were "deadlier than those of the Czars."⁵ In retaliation for a 1933 German boycott of Jewish stores and businesses, the American Jewish Congress and various other groups organized a boycott of all German goods. Silver played a leading role in the boycott movement, becoming first vice president of the American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights.⁶ He hoped that the boycott would disrupt the German economy and force the Nazis to curb their anti-Semitic policies.

As Nazi persecution intensified and the anti-Hitler boycott proved to be ineffective, a large number of Jews sought to escape oppression through emigration. They faced the problem of a world community unwilling to give them sanctuary. Strict enforcement by the State Department of American immigration quotas kept the flow of refugees to the United States to a trickle.⁷ Great Britain and other European countries allowed some refugees to enter their borders, but refused to open their doors wide to the mass of Jews in need of a home.⁸ In 1936, following an Arab anti-Zionist riot, the British began a severe restriction of Jewish immigration into Palestine.⁹ The Evian Conference of July 1938, organized by President Roosevelt to deal with the Jewish refugee problem, and attended by representatives of thirty-two nations, failed to come up with any significant solution.¹⁰ The British White Paper of May 1939 placed an immense roadblock in the path of Jews wishing to enter Palestine. The White Paper allowed only 75,000 Jews to enter over a five year period.

After March 1, 1944 additional Jews could enter only with the consent of Palestine's Arabs.¹¹

The plight of the homeless Jewish refugees and the limiting of immigration into Palestine radically affected the Zionist ideology and program. In the years between the First World War and the Nazi rise to power, Zionists concentrated on building the framework for an agrarian-based society in Palestine. The time, effort and hardship involved in settling and cultivating Palestine's neglected land meant that this would be a slow, costly project. Zionist leaders did not plan to bring masses of Jewish immigrants into Palestine. Their hopes for the future rested with the small, idealistic groups of East European youth who came to Palestine to be halutzim (pioneers). In this context, statehood was, at best, a long-range goal of the Zionist movement.¹²

The need to accommodate large numbers of homeless refugees, forced Zionist leaders to compromise on their agrarian dream. The population of Tel Aviv grew quickly, as many of the refugees had no desire to leave the type of urban environment to which they had become accustomed. British attempts to appease Arab unrest by restricting Jewish immigration raised the possibility of a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Great Britain had given support to the development in Palestine of a Jewish homeland. Zionism found itself in an increasingly threatened position.

The possibility of statehood as a way out of the crisis was first suggested by the British Peel Commission report of 1937. The Commission planned to end Arab-Jewish conflict by partitioning Palestine into a Jewish state, an Arab state and a British-administered area. The report won the qualified support of David Ben Gurion, chairman of the Jewish

Agency in Palestine, and Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization.¹³ Although the Commission report was rejected by the British government, and was opposed by the Arabs and many Zionists who were adverse to any suggestion of partition, it planted a seed that would germinate at the Biltmore Convention of May 1942. The Biltmore Program made the creation of a Jewish commonwealth the central goal of the Zionist movement.

Abba Hillel Silver was an early advocate of Jewish statehood. At a United Palestine Appeal meeting in Washington in January 1941, Silver said that the Zionist aim was a Jewish Commonwealth, preferably included within the British Commonwealth.¹⁴ Believing that many Jews would be left homeless by the Second World War,¹⁵ Silver called on American Jewry to contribute generously to the United Palestine Appeal, so that Palestine could be prepared to absorb five million refugees at the war's end.¹⁶

Two months before the Biltmore Conference, Silver, at the request of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs (later to become the American Zionist Emergency Council), journeyed to London to discuss the refugee and Palestine problem with British leaders.¹⁷ He would return to the United States in time to attend the Conference, where he and David Ben Gurion would champion the cause of Jewish statehood.

II The Biltmore Conference

When the Extraordinary Zionist Conference opened at New York's Biltmore Hotel on May 9, 1942, the Nazi slaughter of European Jews had been in progress for almost a year. Zionist leaders at the conference were unaware of this tragic fact. While there had been reports of Nazi pogroms and massacres, no one imagined that a plan existed for the syste-

matic extermination of the Jews of Europe. It would be another seven months (until the end of November), before this was generally known.

Held under the auspices of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, the conference was attended by five hundred and eighty-six delegates, including representatives of all of the major American Zionist organizations, as well as by Chaim Weizmann, David Ben Gurion and Nahum Goldmann, of the World Zionist Executive.¹⁸ Rabbi Stephen Wise opened the Conference, calling on all Zionists to work together to ensure the creation of a Jewish commonwealth at the war's end.¹⁹

A number of conference speakers addressed themselves to the suffering of European Jewry. Chaim Weizmann,²⁰ president of the World Zionist Organization, predicted that twenty-five per cent of the Jews in Eastern and Southeastern Europe would be "liquidated" as a result of starvation and Nazi atrocities. Foreseeing the post-war homelessness of between two to four million Jews, Weizmann believed that only Palestine, the Jewish Commonwealth, would be willing and able to absorb them.²¹

Nahum Goldman,²² representative of the Jewish Agency in Washington D.C., warned the conference not to take Weizmann's prediction of destruction for twenty-five per cent of East European Jewry lightly, saying:

Who can foretell what the Nazi regime, once brought into the position of the surrounded killer, will do in the last moment before it goes down to shame? Do to Europe or the Jews under its command in the last moment before the downfall? But even as it is today, sometimes news reaches us, a glimpse of the situation is given, and every time it is a new horror and a new shock. One reports 800 being killed a day in the Warsaw ghetto. I think it is exaggerated because, if it would be true, then in the course of two years, the total of a half million Jews in the Warsaw ghettos may be wiped out...

Now, you don't have to be a great mathematician to figure out what will be the result of such a process, if it goes another year, two years, three years.

Surprisingly, Goldmann didn't propose any program to come to the immediate aid of those threatened with annihilation. Instead, he called for the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth that could absorb two million Jewish refugees in the decade following the war, and he urged Zionists to prepare "to enlarge the spheres of Jewish life" in post-war Europe. He specifically demanded new efforts to reach the Jews of the Soviet Union, whose removal from the Zionist world he called the most harmful "blow" directed against the Jewish people since the end of the First World War.

The case for a Jewish Commonwealth was presented most forcefully by David Ben Gurion, the chairman of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, and by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver.²³ Both spoke of the need for a post-war home for millions of Jewish refugees. Silver said that it was impossible to argue for large scale Jewish immigration to Palestine on "philanthropic" (i.e. humanitarian) grounds alone while ignoring statehood. Unless a special Jewish claim to Palestine was recognized, Silver believed Great Britain could justly claim that Palestine had done its humanitarian part by absorbing more Jewish refugees in the pre-war period than any other nation or territory. But both Silver and Ben Gurion declared that the immediate problem of Nazi persecution was not the only factor pushing Jews to statehood. Anti-Semitism pre-dated Hitler, and the defeat of the Nazis would not be the final cure to this affliction. The one final and absolute end to the persecution which had plagued the Jewish people for two thousand years, was the

re-establishment of the Jewish state destroyed two millennia before by the Roman Empire. Silver counseled:

We must make them (the American public) understand what has been the basic fact in Jewish tragedy right through the ages, the fact of our national homelessness, of our abnormal political status in the world, and that now, after a second World War, in which Jews by the millions are already casualties, in which Jews are fighting on every battle line of the free peoples, now, in a war in which Jews suffer doubly and trebly in relation to every other people, that, as a result of this second World War, the ultimate solution of the Jewish problem must finally be sounded, and the ultimate solution is the establishment of a Jewish Nation in Palestine.

Silver and many other Zionists expected the Second World War to follow the pattern of the First. A post-war peace conference, like the Versailles Conference, would redraw national boundaries and create new nation-states. Just as the Balfour Declaration during World War I had pledged British support for a Jewish homeland, the Second World War, Silver prophesied, would lead to the creation of a Jewish state, if Zionists acted with courage and daring. American Zionists would have to be particularly effective, as Silver foresaw the future dominance of America in the post-war world.

The Eiltmore Conference ended with the passing of a declaration demanding full Jewish Agency control of colonization in and immigration to Palestine. Most importantly, the delegates had called for the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth. American Zionists were now fully committed to the idea of statehood.²⁴ Two distinct sets of ideas had led them to this policy. The need for a post-war haven for Jewish refugees would become the major Zionist argument when dealing with the Christian world. When news of the Holocaust was released in November 1942, one would have expected a radical

rethinking of this proposition. Nazi gas chambers threatened to solve the "post-war refugee problem" in a most grotesque and cruel manner. Yet, this did not happen, for the second belief leading Jewry to statehood had great emotional and intellectual force. Anti-Semitism, delegates at Biltmore had acknowledged, was an inescapable fact of life in a world where Jews were stateless. They had resolved to take the revolutionary step of putting a permanent end to anti-Semitism by initiating a well organized campaign in support of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. Information about Hitler's death camps would shock and grieve Silver and the other delegates, but it would also strengthen their commitment to work for immediate statehood as their own final solution to the problem of anti-Semitism and persecution.

III Reaction to the News of the Holocaust: Towards the American Jewish Conference

In August 1942, Gerhard Riegner, representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland, informed Rabbi Stephen Wise that a Nazi plan existed for the systematic extermination of the Jews of Europe. Riegner's report made clear that this plan was already in operation, and that poison gas was being used against the Jews. Riegner had heard this startling information from a German industrialist in Switzerland. Wise contacted Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, and presented him with Riegner's message. When Welles requested that Wise wait for State Department confirmation before publicizing news of the extermination, the Rabbi felt he had no choice but to comply. Confirmation finally came at the end of November.²⁵

Upon receiving the State Department's approval, Rabbi Wise released Riegner's message to the press. The New York Times on November 25, 1942 saw fit to carry news of the murder of two million people on its tenth page. The Times informed its readers of the existence of special Nazi extermination camps, and reported that the State Department confirmed the accuracy of Wise's statements.²⁶

American Jewry initially reacted to the Nazi murders with a sense of horror. December 13 was declared a day of fast and mourning by Stephen Wise.²⁷ Abba Hillel Silver called on Jews to defy the Nazi killers by settling a dunam (a quarter acre) of land in Palestine for every Jew murdered.²⁸ Silver told his Cleveland congregation:

The life of our people was never a calm and placid one. It was always a life of swords, of conflicts, of strain. The very name Israel was given to our Father Jacob, because he wrestled with angels and men, and was not alone...

My dear friends, our people today face another crisis - perhaps the greatest in history, the crisis of mass slaughter, the crisis of extermination. This is the time to draw consciously and deliberately upon the undefeated optimism of our people, based upon confidence in a just God, based upon the conception of the noble ministry of suffering, and based upon the perfectibility of human society.²⁹

On March 1, 1943, a "Stop Hitler Rally" was held in New York City to protest the Nazi murders. Over twenty one thousand people entered Madison Square Garden to hear speakers sponsored by the American Jewish Congress, the American Federation of Labor, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations.³⁰ An eleven point rescue program was presented at the rally, requesting the United Nations to:

1. Negotiate with Germany and her satellites through neutral states in order to win freedom of emigration for Jews under Hitler's control.

2. Open sanctuaries and havens in Allied and neutral countries for any Jews who might be released by the Axis.
3. Liberalize American immigration practices, so that existing American quotas would be completely filled.
4. Open England's door to as many Jewish refugees as would not constitute a danger to her national security.
5. Urge Latin American countries to modify their restrictive immigration policies.
6. Open the doors of Palestine to Jewish immigration thereby ending the White Paper limitations.
7. Guarantee financial assistance to neutral countries that provide sanctuary for refugees, and promise to provide the refugees with a permanent haven as soon as possible.
8. Devise a system to provide food to starving Jews under Nazi control.
9. Establish an intergovernmental agency to implement a rescue program.
10. Provide financial guarantees for the execution of the rescue program outlined.
11. Establish a war crimes commission that would outline the procedure by which Nazi war criminals would be brought to justice.³¹

The governments of the United States and Great Britain responded to the news of Nazi extermination, and the cries for help from American and British Jewries, by organizing yet another conference to deal with the refugee problem. This one was to be attended solely by American and British delegations. Originally scheduled for Ottawa, Canada, the location was changed to the island of Bermuda. Bermuda was an ideal location for the conference, in the opinion of the Americans and the British, since the island's isolation would preclude extensive press coverage and would prohibit various Jewish delegations from trying to attend.³²

Abba Hillel Silver feared that nothing constructive would emerge from the discussions at Bermuda. He expected Great Britain and the

United States to remain adamant in their refusal to alter their restrictive immigration policies. In spite of this, he advised the American Jewish Congress to place primary emphasis on the importance of Palestine as a refugee haven, in the memorandum it was preparing for the Bermuda delegates.³³

Silver's pessimistic view of the Bermuda Conference proved to be all too justified. The American delegation was headed by Harold Willis Dodds, president of Princeton University. Senator Scott Lucas (D., Ill.) and Representative Sol Bloom (D., N.Y.) also attended for the American side. The conference (April 19-29, 1943) was handicapped from the day of its opening by American refusal to consider any solution involving a breaching of the immigration quota wall. The British were equally committed to the White Paper of 1939 and its limit of 75,000 Jewish immigrants to Palestine over the five years from 1939-1944. The conference failed to change the fate of the millions doomed to Auschwitz.

Even as news of Hitler's murders emerged in the press, American Zionist leaders continued on the course set at the Biltmore Conference. With the union of Zionist organizations around the commonwealth issue, the next step was to win approval from those non-Zionist organizations that represented the bulk of American Jewry.³⁴ Henry Monsky, president of the Jewish fraternal organization B'nai B'rith, on January 6, 1943 invited representatives of thirty-four national Jewish organizations to meet with him in Pittsburgh to discuss American Jewry's war-time goals.³⁵ At the Pittsburgh meeting of January 23-24, it was decided to organize a full-fledged American Jewish Assembly (its name was later changed to American Jewish Conference), where delegations from all major

Jewish organizations and communities would attempt to reach a consensus on a number of issues, including the Palestine question.³⁶

The Emergency Committee for European Jewish Affairs was also established at Pittsburgh. The Committee was to coordinate the rescue efforts of American Jewish organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith, and the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs. Unity of action however, was never achieved, and the Emergency Committee went out of existence in less than a year.³⁷

By May 1943, there was some debate among Zionist leaders as to whether to center their efforts on winning American rescue action or on the Zionist aspect of the rescue program. At a May meeting of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, Nahum Goldmann advocated a campaign against the White Paper of 1939. Since manpower was limited, Goldmann believed that mass meetings protesting the Nazi massacres would have to stop. The failure of the Bermuda Conference necessitated emphasizing the Zionist solution to the refugee problem.³⁸ Goldmann saw the struggle against the White Paper not so much as a fight for free Jewish immigration to Palestine but as a step in the campaign for a Jewish commonwealth. David Wertheim and Rabbi Wolf Gold believed that an anti-White Paper effort could be linked with the agitation for rescue. They stressed that the key to the rescue of European Jewry was the opening of Palestine's door to unlimited Jewish immigration.³⁹

The debate on the nature of the struggle against the White Paper was resumed at a November 29, 1943 meeting of the American Zionist Emergency Council (the new name of the American Emergency Committee for

Zionist Affairs, which was reorganized in August). Abba Hillel Silver clearly sided with the Goldmann approach. Silver criticized the Emergency Council for concentrating on the fight against the White Paper while ignoring the need for a Jewish commonwealth. He explained, "If we say we are fighting the White Paper in order to establish the Commonwealth, that is one thing; if we only say we are fighting the White Paper, that is quite another thing..."⁴⁰ While the White Paper could be attacked solely on the humanitarian need of the Jewish people for a haven in an extremely critical situation, the demand for a commonwealth was clearly political. Silver and Goldmann thus favored the politicization of a potentially important part of a rescue campaign.

Yet Silver condemned the American government's position that the best way to rescue European Jewry was to win the war at the earliest possible date, saying:⁴¹

They counsel us to have patience. The suggestion is even made that anything which may be done for these unfortunate Jews now, might in some way postpone the day of the ultimate liberation. That they may all be dead when the ultimate day of liberation arrives does not seem to arouse these friends of ours to any extraordinary acts of rescue and deliverance.

With the failure of the Bermuda Conference to accomplish anything constructive, Silver called on American Jews to "continue our struggle for survival in the same way as we have had to do throughout the ages - with our own resources, however diminished, with our own unbroken will, our own unshaken confidence in our destiny, and with the help of God." The Zionists, Silver stressed, had been proven correct in their belief that the lack of a Jewish national home led to persecution and murder. He called on American Zionists to remain true to their ideology,

and urged them not to compromise on the commonwealth issue. The Allied powers, according to Silver, would have to provide the Jews with a state in order to achieve a stable post-war world. Anti-Semitism, based on Jewish homelessness, had been used time and again by reactionary forces in their struggle for power and conquests, and unless the Jewish situation was changed, it would be used again.

Silver believed that it was also God's will to put an end once and for all to the primary cause of Jewish misery. In a May 1943 address, Silver described the fight for a Jewish commonwealth in messianic terms, stating:

The inescapable logic of events: When all the doors of the world will be closed to our people, then the hand of destiny will force open the door of Palestine. And that hour is rapidly approaching...

What is really moving us toward Palestine, and why is our movement irresistible? Our sages say that two Arks led the Children of Israel through the wilderness to the Promised land: the Ark wherein lay the dead body of Joseph, and the Ark of the Covenant. Two Arks! The Ark of death and the Ark of faith!

Two million dead are leading us today through the wilderness to Palestine. Our myriad martyred hosts in this last and greatest tragedy of our dispersion--they are leading us on. The horror and pathos and the crushing logic of their needless deaths--they are leading us on. Their bodies lie in unknown graves, but the Ark which enshrines their imperishable memories moves on before us.

(Italicized in original)

Those Jews murdered by Hitler, Silver explained, were just the latest contingent of a great mass of Jews who had died in the countless persecutions which marked Jewish history since the expulsion from Palestine two thousand years before. Their spirits demanded a final end to all persecution.

A month before the opening of the American Jewish Conference on

August 29, 1943, the issue of whether to concentrate on the immediate problem of rescue or the long-range problem of statehood, was brought into sharper focus by the creation of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. The Emergency Committee was the brain-child of a small group of "emissaries" sent to America from Palestine by the Irgun, a Jewish terrorist group. The Irgun was bitterly opposed by the Jewish Agency, the World Zionist Organization and most American Zionist groups. Led by Peter Bergson (the name assumed by Hillel Kook when he arrived from Palestine) and Samuel Merlin, the Palestinian emissaries were originally engaged in the collection of funds for the Irgun and in building public support in America for the creation of a Jewish army to fight for the Allies in the Middle East. Following the release of news of the Holocaust in November 1942, Merlin and Bergson turned their attention to the problem of rescue and formed the Emergency Committee in July 1943.⁴²

The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe attracted a number of valuable allies. Ben Hecht, the journalist and Hollywood script-writer, prepared many of the newspaper advertisements that the committee specialized in running.^{42A} Congressman Will Rogers Jr. (D., ~~Calif.~~ ^{Calif.}) and Senator Guy M. Gillette (D., Iowa) were the committee's two most valuable Congressional supporters. Implicit in the committee's philosophy was the belief that the rescue of European Jewry superseded all other issues. Although Bergson and Merlin were dedicated believers in the need for a Jewish state, they quickly realized that demanding statehood could have a detrimental effect on the rescue effort. The key to saving large numbers of Jews was, in their opinion, making rescue a major war aim of the Allied powers. While the demand for

rescue, perhaps including the call for free Jewish immigration to Palestine, could be presented as a humanitarian plea, the call for a Jewish commonwealth was inherently political. Such being the case, the British government could easily reject any rescue demand that mentioned statehood, on the grounds that all such political issues could only be decided after the war, when the danger to world security had passed. The rescue program of the Emergency Committee consciously avoided the pitfall of demanding Jewish statehood, as two examples will illustrate.

Shortly after its establishment in July, the Emergency Committee began building public support for a Congressional resolution that it planned to have introduced by Senator Gillette. It would call on President Roosevelt to create a governmental agency charged specifically with the rescue of European Jewry. The Baldwin-Gillette Resolution was introduced in the House of Representatives and the Senate on November 9, 1943.⁴³ At hearings held by the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Stephen Wise, co-chairman of the American Zionist Emergency Council (with Abba Hillel Silver), criticized the proposed resolution. Wise felt that the most serious shortcoming of the resolution was the absence of any demand for free Jewish immigration into Palestine.⁴⁴ Congressman Will Rogers Jr., a supporter of the bill, answered Wise: "This resolution was specifically drawn up to eliminate Palestine. Any time you inject that into the refugee situation it reacts to the harm of the refugees."⁴⁵ Pressures which the Emergency Committee built in Congress in late 1943 proved to be of crucial importance in forcing President Roosevelt to respond at last to the plight of Europe's Jews. In January 1944, the President established the War Refugee Board, an official United States government rescue agency.

During the summer of 1944, Bergson and his colleagues were campaigning for the establishment of emergency refugee shelters in Palestine. Under their plan, Jewish refugees admitted to the shelters would have no legal right to remain in Palestine when the war ended.⁴⁶ The Bergsonites realized that Palestine was in an ideal location to grant shelter to Jewish refugees who might escape from Hungary, Rumania or Bulgaria into Turkey. The emergency refugee shelters plan offered a way around the British White Paper of 1939 and its restrictive immigration policy, and was supported by members of the War Refugee Board.⁴⁷ The plan gained added relevancy with the mid-July offer by the Hungarian government to allow all Jews with visas to Palestine, and all Jewish children with visas to any nation, to leave Hungary. The British and American governments accepted the Hungarian offer on August 11, although there was no specification on how it would be implemented. A Nazi-engineered coup in Hungary on October 14, 1944, brought an end to any hope of implementing the Hungarian proposal.⁴⁸

American Zionists vehemently opposed the concept of emergency refugee shelters. They claimed that Bergson's plan was unnecessary since political and transportation difficulties would only allow a small number of Jews to leave Hungary. Those Jews who did escape could be accommodated within the White Paper limits, since fourteen thousand Palestine visas were still available. Zionists viewed with disfavor the establishment of Jewish refugee camps in the Jewish "national home". While Bergson believed that a Jewish state would be created through armed struggle, the Zionists foresaw statehood emerging out of peaceful negotiations with the Allies. They feared that the opening of Palestine refugee centers, without recognition of the refugees' right to remain

permanently in Palestine, would raise serious questions about the legitimacy of the Jewish claim to Palestine. The American Zionist Emergency Council called on Bergson's backers to support instead free Jewish immigration to Palestine, and the creation there of a Jewish commonwealth.⁴⁹

Delegates gathered at the American Jewish Conference in August, 1943 with the knowledge that at least two million Jews had been killed by the Nazis. It was generally acknowledged that the Nazi murders were continuing, and no one knew when they would stop. The Bermuda Conference had passed with little visible benefit. The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe had raised the banner of "rescue first," while other voices were calling on American Jewry to focus their efforts on the creation of a Jewish state as the only sure way to end anti-semitic persecution forever. It was now up to the American Jewish Conference delegates to set the priorities of the American Jewish community.

V The American Jewish Conference

The original agenda for the American Jewish Conference included only two major topics of discussion: Palestine and the post-war reconstruction of the Jewish communities in Europe. The rescue issue was added only when public pressure demanded it,⁵⁰ -- commissions were created -- although the stand to be taken on the Jewish commonwealth question was clearly perceived by the delegates as the most important decision they would make.⁵¹ According to Joseph Halbert, a conference delegate from Atlantic City, only the commonwealth issue was discussed in his community at the time of the elections to the conference.⁵² The Palestine Commission established by the conference was able to delegate its authority

to the American Zionist Emergency Council, which operated as an independent political lobby. The Rescue Commission had no such option. It never developed into an effective lobby organization. Its function was instead to coordinate the rescue activities of numerous American Jewish organizations,⁵³ of course excluding the Bergson-led Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe.

Unlike the Biltmore Conference, the American Jewish Conference was not attended exclusively by Zionists. A number of delegates, such as those representing the American Jewish Committee, were ideologically opposed to the creation of a Jewish commonwealth. Although the organizers of the conference claimed that it was representative of the American Jewish community as a whole, an overly large portion of the delegates were members of Zionist organizations. Well over half of the delegates belonged to either the Zionist Organization of America, Hadassah (women Zionists), Poale Zion (Labor Zionists) or Mizrahi (religious Zionists).⁵⁴

In spite of the large number of committed Zionists present, it was not at all certain that the American Jewish Conference would give its approval to the Biltmore Program, and support the demand for a Jewish commonwealth. Non-Zionist delegates, under the leadership of Judge Joseph Proskauer of the American Jewish Committee, called on the Zionists not to destroy the unity of the American Jewish community. Proskauer asked the conference to set aside the commonwealth demand, advocating instead a united stand against the immigration restrictions to Palestine set by the British White Paper of 1939.⁵⁵ Rumors spread through the conference that support for a commonwealth would embarrass the American and British governments, and would lead to a more favorable Allied policy towards the Arabs.

As Abba Hillel Silver rose to address the conference on the evening of August 30, it seemed to many as if the conference would end in compromise, with the goal of a Jewish commonwealth sacrificed temporarily for the sake of unity. In fact, a few Zionist leaders had decided to follow this course, even before the Conference opened.⁵⁶ With a masterful piece of oratory, Silver championed the ideal of Jewish statehood, and defeated all those who had sought compromise.

Asking the conference audience to look beyond the war years, Silver opened his speech by declaring:⁵⁷

My dear friends, the Jewish people is in danger of coming out of this war the most ravaged of peoples and the least healed and restored. The stark tragedy of our ravage has been abundantly told here and elsewhere - tragic, ghastly, unredeemed. To rehearse it again is only to flagellate oneself and to gash our souls again and again. But what of the healing? What is beyond the rim of blood and tears? Frankly, to some of us, nothing. We are being comforted at the moment with the hope that the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms and victory will bring the healing of our people. I am afraid that we are again sacrificing cool, albeit bitter reasoning and logic to beguiling romancing in the void. We are again turning away from history to dreams and to apocalypses which some of us amazingly enough choose to call realism and statesmanship.

The rabbi warned that many Jews were falsely hoping that the Second World War would achieve "what an Allied victory failed to give them after the last war, what a whole century of enlightenment, liberalism and Progress failed to give them - peace and security." This hope did not take into account the principal cause of Jewish suffering, "the immemorial problem of our national homelessness." There was only one solution for the "persistent emergency," the "millennial tragedy" of Jewish life. Resettlement programs, refugee havens, these were not

solutions. "There is but one solution for national homelessness. That is a national home!"

There could be no compromise on the commonwealth demand. Jewish statehood was more than ideology. It was the "cry of despair" of a people who had suffered yesterday, were suffering today, and would probably suffer tomorrow if the cry was not answered. The "crucifixion" of the Jewish people must end. Silver proclaimed:

From the infested, typhus-ridden ghetto of Warsaw, from the death-block of Nazi-occupied lands, where myriads of our people are awaiting execution by the slow or the quick method, from a hundred concentration camps which befoul the map of Europe, from the pitiful ranks of our wandering hosts over the entire face of the earth, comes the cry: "Enough; there must be a final end to all this, a sure and certain end!"

To those who believed that the British government and the Arabs would agree to a humanitarian plea for large scale Jewish immigration into Palestine, the rabbi countered that immigration to Palestine was based in the final analysis on the Jewish right to build a state there. Silver believed that Palestine had done its "philanthropic" duty by having taken in "more than one-half of the total Jewish refugees of the world." He linked the creation of the commonwealth with the rescue of European Jewry, saying:

We cannot truly rescue the Jews of Europe unless we have free immigration into Palestine. We cannot have free immigration into Palestine unless our political rights are recognized there. Our political rights cannot be recognized there unless our historic connection with the country is acknowledged and our right to rebuild our national home is reaffirmed. These are inseparable links in the chain. The whole chain breaks if one of the links is missing.

As Silver finished speaking, the audience spontaneously rose and sang "Hatikvah" (The Hope), the Zionist anthem. The highly emotional ovation that followed sealed Silver's victory over those who had attempted to postpone temporarily the commonwealth issue.

The conference's Palestine Committee, chaired by Silver, was charged with the wording of a Palestine resolution to be presented before the entire conference. Non-Zionists on the committee launched a final effort to present their case. Judge Proskauer again appealed to the Zionists to compromise for the sake of unity. He claimed that his sources in Washington had advised him that a demand for a commonwealth would have disadvantageous effects for the Jewish people and Palestine. He threatened to withdraw the American Jewish Committee from the American Jewish Conference if the Zionists persisted in pushing through a resolution supporting the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth.⁵⁸

Robert Goldman, representing the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, like Proskauer, was in favor of a compromise resolution. Unlike Proskauer however, he based his argument on the plight of European Jewry. He pointed out to the Palestine Committee that there were two problems facing American Jewry: the long range problem and the immediate problem. Goldman disagreed with Abba Hillel Silver, who believed that the immediate problem was Jewish homelessness, and said:

The immediate problem, ladies and gentlemen, is rescue; and I don't care what else you say or how you characterize it, or what you say about me for saying it, that is the immediate problem and that is the problem that we should be concerned with.

Goldman warned that the demand for a commonwealth would hinder the rescue effort, and that the British and Arabs would take an even stronger stand against the demand for Jewish immigration to Palestine.⁵⁹

Emanuel Neumann, a long-time friend of Abba Hillel Silver, argued with Goldman, saying that the "immediate problem" facing the conference was not peculiar to the Jews of their day. Jews for centuries had been in a "permanent state of emergency". Neumann charged that Jewish leaders always concerned themselves with the "immediate problems," thereby ignoring the underlying cause of their suffering and persecution. Had Jews dealt with the problem of "homelessness" earlier, Neumann speculated, "either a Hitler would not have arisen in our time, or, if one had, we might have had a country under Jewish control in which Jews of Germany and other lands could have been received - and received in large numbers." Neumann complained: "It has been our misfortune throughout our history that we have not been able to look ahead, to plan ahead, and to provide this radical solution."⁶⁰ Neumann's and Silver's argument won many more supporters than did Goldman's. The American Jewish Conference overwhelmingly endorsed the demand for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.

Conclusion

The Palestine resolution of the American Jewish Conference was a great personal victory for Abba Hillel Silver. The conference delegates had responded enthusiastically to his appeal for revolution against the trend of Jewish history. Their fight was not only against Hitler, but against a world order that had for two thousand years condemned the Jewish people to murder and hatred. The Nazi atrocities proved to Silver that the governments of the world cared little about the fate of the Jews. There was no reason to think that this Holocaust would be the last as long as Jews remained stateless.

Great Britain's increasingly anti-Zionist policy made the immediate creation of a Jewish commonwealth all the more important. If the British

agreed to give independence to the Arabs in Palestine, all hope for a Jewish homeland would be lost. World War II, which was expected to end with a redrawing of national boundaries, seemed to give the Zionists one last chance to win their state.

Unfortunately, the Zionist battle to save future generations of Jews from persecution undermined the struggle to rescue millions of Jews from an immediate death sentence. The commonwealth campaign diverted public attention away from the plight of European Jewry. Extraordinary leaders, such as Abba Hillel Silver, occupied themselves with the campaign for a Jewish state, while their talents and energies were sorely needed in the struggle for rescue. The opening of Palestine, important to any rescue plan, was politicized, and could not be presented to the Allies on solely humanitarian grounds.

Silver and other American Zionist leaders were ideologically incapable of distinguishing between the rescue issue and the statehood issue. Nazi extermination was seen as just another link in the chain of suffering which had been the Jewish destiny for two thousand years. The fulfillment of the Zionist dream would break the chain. Zionist leaders were willing to do anything to rescue European Jewry as long as it did not undermine the future establishment of the state. To do so would condemn future generations to a death sentence.

Zionists correctly perceived the need for a Jewish state, but failed to comprehend the true nature of the Holocaust. Never before had the Jewish people faced an oppressor bent solely on their physical destruction. Never before had they met an enemy who had the technological knowledge to turn murder into an assembly-line process. The Jews of Eastern Europe, who were being murdered by the millions, had for generations been the back-

bone of the Zionist movement. Who needed a state more than they? Had a Jewish state existed before the rise of Hitler, many of them might have been saved. Once the extermination started however, the need for a state should have taken a back-seat to the need for rescue. All resources should have been devoted into forcing the Roosevelt Administration to make rescue a major Allied war aim, just as the extermination of the Jews was a major war aim of the Nazis. American Zionists failed to realize that the war might end with few Jews left in Europe to populate their future Jewish state.



Footnotes

- ¹Walter Laqueur, A History of Zionism (New York, 1972), 564.
- ²Doreen Bierbrier, "The American Zionist Emergency Council: An Analysis of a Pressure Group," American Jewish Historical Quarterly, LX (Sept. 1970), 270-278.
Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 549.
- ³The reaction of the American government and public to the Nazi persecution and extermination of the Jews has been analysed in four major works: David Wyman, Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941 (Amherst, 1968); Henry Feingold, The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust 1938-1945 (New Brunswick, 1970); Arthur Morse, While 6,000,000 Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy (New York, 1968); Saul S. Friedman, No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees 1938-1945 (Detroit, 1973).
- ⁴For biographical material on Abba Hillel Silver, see: Leon I. Feuer, "Abba Hillel Silver: A Personal Memoir", American Jewish Archives, XIX (November, 1967), 107-126; Abraham J. Feldman, "Abba Hillel Silver", American Jewish Historical Quarterly, LIV (June, 1965), 474-480; Harold P. Manson, "Abba Hillel Silver - An Appreciation", in Daniel Jeremy Silver, ed., In the Time of the Harvest: Essays in Honor of Abba Hillel Silver (New York, 1963), 1-27.
- ⁵New York Times, May 13, 1933, 12.
- ⁶Moshe Gottlieb, "The Anti-Nazi Boycott Movement in the United States: An Ideological and Sociological Appreciation", Jewish Social Studies, XXXV, (July-October, 1973), 208.
- ⁷For a thorough analysis of American immigration policy at this time, see: David Wyman, Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1933-1941 (Amherst, 1968).
- ⁸For a discussion of Great Britain's immigration policy, see: A. J. Sherman, Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich 1933-1938 (Los Angeles, 1974).
- ⁹Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 509.
- ¹⁰Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, Chapter 2; Wyman, Paper Walls, 43-51.
- ¹¹Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 528.
- ¹²It should be noted however, that when Theodor Herzl organized the World Zionist Organization, his goal was to establish a Jewish State. With the death of Herzl in 1904, a new generation of Zionist leaders emerged (notably Chaim Weizmann), who put primary emphasis on the settling and development of Palestine.

- ¹³Laqueur, A History of Zionism, 514-521.
- ¹⁴New York Times, January 26, 1941, 25.
- ¹⁵Ibid., January 26, 1941, 25; January 27, 1941, 5; September 21, 1941, 35.
- ¹⁶Ibid., January 26, 1941, 25.
- ¹⁷Ibid., March 8, 1942, 12.
- ¹⁸Extraordinary Zionist Conference, New York, 1942, Stenographic Protocol (hereafter, Stenographic Protocol), Zionist Archives, New York, 14.
- ¹⁹Stenographic Protocol, 8.
- ²⁰Chaim Weizmann's address can be found in Stenographic Protocol, 20-40.
- ²¹Chaim Weizmann, "Palestine's Role in the Solution of the Jewish Problem", Foreign Affairs, XXII (January, 1942), 338.
- ²²Nahum Goldmann's address can be found in Stenographic Protocol, 231-257.
- ²³David Ben Gurion's address can be found in Stenographic Protocol, 50-82. Abba Hillel Silver's address can be found in Stenographic Protocol, 456-478.
- ²⁴Samuel Halperin, The Political World of American Zionism (Detroit, 1961), 223.
- ²⁵Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 167-171; Morse, While 6,000,000 Died, Chaps. I, II; Friedman, No Haven for the Oppressed, chap. 6.
- ²⁶New York Times, November 25, 1942, 10.
- ²⁷Ibid., November 26, 1942, 16.
- ²⁸Ibid., December 28, 1942, 15.
- ²⁹Abba Hillel Silver, "The Undefeated Optimism of Our Faith", Sunday sermon delivered March 7, 1943, Silver Archive, Cleveland.
- ³⁰New York Times, March 2, 1943, 1, 4.
- ³¹Ibid., March 2, 1943, 4; Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 176-177; "Program: Action on the Rescue of Jews in Nazi Occupied Territories, Adopted by the Joint Committee on the European Emergency Jewish Situation", n.d., Manson Files 1-81, Silver Archive, Cleveland.

³²For background on the Bermuda Conference, see: Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, Chapter 7; Morse, While 6,000,000 Died, chapter III; Friedman, No Haven for the Oppressed, chapter 7.

³³Abba Hillel Silver to Herman Shulman, April 9, 1943, Manson files #1-81, Silver Archive, Cleveland.

³⁴Meyer Weisgal, Meyer Weisgal...So Far: An Autobiography (New York, 1971), 173.

³⁵Alexander S. Kohanski ed., The American Jewish Conference: Its Organization and Proceedings of the First Session, August 29 to September 2, 1943 (New York, 1944), 15.

³⁶Kohanski, The American Jewish Conference, 33.

³⁷Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 174.

³⁸Minutes of a Meeting of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, May 3, 1943, Zionist Archives, New York.

³⁹Minutes of a Meeting of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, May 3, 1943, Zionist Archives, New York.

⁴⁰Minutes of American Zionist Emergency Council, Executive Committee Meeting, November 29, 1943, Silver Archive, Cleveland.

⁴¹Abba Hillel Silver's address can be found in: Abba Hillel Silver, address to the National Conference for Palestine, May 2, 1943 in Vision and Victory: A Collection of Addresses by Dr. Abba Hillel Silver 1942-1948 (New York, 1949), 1-12.

⁴²For information on Bergson, Merlin and the Palestinian emissaries, see: Aaron Berman, "The Hebrew Committee of National Liberation and the Rescue of the European Jews," unpublished Division III Project, Hampshire College, Amherst, Mass.; Isaac Zaar, Rescue and Liberation: America's Part in the Birth of Israel (New York, 1954).

^{42A}Ben Hecht later wrote a polemic entitled Perfidy (NY, 1961) in which he accuses Zionist leaders of collaboration in the destruction of European Jewry. This is both an absurd and untenable proposition.

⁴³Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 223.

⁴⁴Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 238; New York Times, December 2, 1943, 4; Minutes of American Zionist Emergency Council, Executive Committee Meeting, November 29, 1943, Silver Archive, Cleveland.

⁴⁵Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 211-212.

⁴⁶Bergson to Halifax, June 10, 1944, reprinted in "A Statement of Policy Pertaining to the Entry of Hebrews into Palestine"; published by the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation, January, 1945, HCNL file #50, Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv; Answer Magazine, July 15, 1944, 22; Telegram, Bergson to Churchill, July 15, 1944, reprinted in, "A Statement of Policy..." HCNL file #50, Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv; Answer Magazine, August 29, 1944, 28.

⁴⁷John Peble to Edward Stettins, March 20, 1944, Bergson documents Yale University, microfilm roll #12.

⁴⁸For more details on the plight of Hungarian Jewry, see: Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (Chicago, 1961, 1967), 509-554; Randolph L. Braham, Eichman and the Destruction of Hungarian Jewry (New York, 1961); Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, Chapter 9; Morse, While 6,000,000 Died, chapter IX; Friedman, No Haven for the Oppressed, chapter 9.

⁴⁹Arthur Lourie, Draft Statement on Emergency Rescue Shelter Resolution Before Congress, September 6, 1944, File # 4-2-24, Silver Archive, Cleveland; Minutes of American Zionist Emergency Council, Executive Committee Meeting, August 31, 1944, Zionist Archives, New York; Trend of Events, "Who Wants 'Oswegos' in the Jewish National Home?", September 1, 1944, HCNL file # 40, Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv.

⁵⁰Kohanski, The American Jewish Conference, 46.

⁵¹Halperin, The Political World of American Zionism, 233.

⁵²Joseph Halbert, quoted in Minutes of the Palestine Committee, American Jewish Conference Sessions held August 31 through September 1, 1943, 210, Zionist Archives, New York.

⁵³Kohanski, The American Jewish Conference, 241-243; Report of the Interim Committee and the Commission on Rescue, Commission on Palestine, Commission on Post-War to the Delegates of the American Jewish Conference, New York, 1944, 13-60.

⁵⁴Halperin, The Political World of American Zionism, 230-233.

⁵⁵Kohanski, The American Jewish Conference (for summary of Proskauer's speech), 73-76.

⁵⁶Halperin, The Political World of American Zionism, 233-234.

⁵⁷Silver's address can be found in either: Arthur Hertzberg, ed., The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader (New York, 1959), 592-600; Abba Hillel Silver, Vision and Victory: A Collection of Addresses by Dr. Abba Hillel Silver 1942-1948 (New York, 1949), 13-21.

⁵⁸Joseph Proskauer, quoted in Minutes of the Palestine Committee, American Jewish Conference Sessions held August 31 through September 1, 1943, 108-115, Zionist Archives, New York.

⁵⁹Robert Goldman quoted in Minutes of the Palestine Committee, American Jewish Conference Sessions held August 31 through September 1, 1943, 73-77, Zionist Archives, New York.

⁶⁰Emanuel Neumann, quoted in Minutes of the Palestine Committee, American Jewish Conference Sessions Held August 31 through September 1, 1943, 218-236, Zionist Archives, New York; Neumann's speech is extracted in Kohanski, The American Jewish Conference, 172-175. For further information on Newman's role see his autobiography, In the Arena (New York, 1976).



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ANTI-SEMITISM,

1919-1921

Allan Kagedan Kage

I...met the then Monsignor Kelley, now Bishop of Oklahoma, and the then Cardinal Under-Secretary of State Pacelli of the Vatican, now Pope. I found them both men of great knowledge and experience. We were all striving for the same things--religious, cultural and civil rights for minorities.

--Cyrus Adler, I Have Considered the Days
(New York, 1969), p. 319.

The years immediately following World War I witnessed an outburst of anti-Jewish activity in America. Anti-Jewish agitation developed against a background of rising xenophobia, alarm over the bombings carried out by radicals in America, and fear of growing unionism. In 1919, a coalition of self-styled patriots and anti-subversives inaugurated the Great Red Scare. Under orders from Attorney-General Mitchell Palmer, presumed radicals were apprehended, and then either incarcerated or deported.¹

One of the targets of the anti-subversives was the Eastern European Jewish immigrant to America. Anti-subversives propagated the Jew-Bolshevik image, which consisted in the notion that New York Jews were responsible for the Russian Revolution and that, furthermore, they were the instigators of revolutionary activity in America. The Jew-Bolshevik image won adherents among Senators, clergymen, and, of course, among the general public.²

Anti-Jewish writers gained a vehicle for their ideas from Henry Ford, whose Dearborn Independent began to publish a series of articles attacking Jews in May, 1920. Equally troubling to American Jews was the announcement by President Lowell of Harvard that his university planned to restrict admission of Jews. The finale to this era of inter-group tension came in 1924 with the passage by Congress of immigration legislation, which reduced drastically the number of Eastern European Jews admitted to the United States. Politicians argued in favor of immigration restriction on the grounds that America did not need to import greater numbers of Jewish subversives.³

The American Jewish Committee was perhaps the leading American Jewish organization in the years following World War I. Founded in 1906 in response to an external problem--the persecution of Eastern European Jews--in the post-War era the Committee was forced to become introspective and consider the position of Jews in America. Seen in this light, the anti-Jewish campaign after World War I offers the historian an excellent opportunity to assess the AJC's initial reaction to American anti-semitism; and, indeed, to investigate the broader historical question of how the AJC viewed the position of Jews in America.

Too often scholars, and other commentators who have treated the American Jewish Committee (AJC), have remained content to rehearse traditional analyses of the Committee based on arguments framed, originally, for polemical purposes. The Committee leaders were, it is argued, American facsimiles of the European Shtadlanim. Like their European precursors, the Committee leadership resorted to quiet diplomacy, and sought to assimilate rapidly into the mainstream of the host society, all out of fear of the Gentiles.⁵

It is quite accurate to say that the Committee was slow to rise to the anti-Jewish challenge of the post-War years. The organization all but ignored the propagation of the Jew-Bolshevik image. And once the AJC did respond, it reacted in a markedly restrained fashion. The Committee failed to bring suit against Ford or other anti-semites; nor did it use its considerable political influence to have anti-semitic journals censored. The leaders of the Committee were satisfied to issue dignified refutation of anti-Jewish canards, and to request Church bodies to disassociate themselves from the anti-semitic propagandists. Yet none of this activity--or lack of activity--is susceptible to the simple explanation that the Committee feared the Gentiles

To understand the Committee's behavior the historian must analyze the world view of its leadership insofar as it touches upon the position of Jews in America. Naomi Cohen has suggested that in the AJC's early years, Committee leaders shared "a basic affinity in values and perspectives..."⁶ This essay will attempt to discuss some of the values and perspectives of Committee leaders and interpret how these views affected the AJC's reaction to American anti-semitism in the years 1919-1921.

The persons to be treated here include the core leadership group of the AJC--Louis Marshall, Cyrus Adler and Jacob Schiff--who were most active in contesting anti-Jewish canards. Also mentioned are Oscar Strauss and Joseph Proskauer, the latter a man who rose to prominence in the organization in the 1940s. Among the sources tapped are autobiographies and personal letters of these men, as well as the Annual Reports of the AJC and publically issued statements of the Committee.

The attitudes of Committee leaders will be sketched in chronological fashion. First, the environment in which the men were raised will be surveyed. Then, the perspectives that the leaders adopted on the position of Jews in America will be discussed. And finally, the paper will assess what impact these views had on the political behavior of the AJC in the case of the flowering of the Jew-Bolshevik image as well as the Henry Ford episode.

The Shared Background of the Committee Leadership

Louis Marshall, Cyrus Adler and Oscar Straus were second generation Americans, the sons of German-Jewish immigrants.⁷ They were born within thirteen years of each other--Straus in 1850, Marshall in 1856, and Adler in 1863.⁸

Economic opportunities had drawn the Straus, Marshall and Adler families away from the large cities and into the American heartland. Although Straus was born in Germany, he spent most of his childhood in the small town of Talbotton, Georgia.⁹ Adler was born in the hamlet of Van Buren, Arkansas; at the age of six, he moved to Philadelphia to live with his uncle.¹⁰ Louis Marshall resided in Syracuse, New York, until he was graduated from college. He then went to New York City for legal studies and, after a return stay in Syracuse, rooted himself in the metropolis.¹¹

As inhabitants of small Jewish communities in equally miniature towns, the future leaders of the American Jewish Committee were in close contact with non-Jews from their earliest years. The Jewish children with whom they associated were simply too few in number to constitute a complete

friendship group, let alone an impermeable peer group. Both inside and outside of school Straus, Marshall and Adler came into contact with children who belonged to Protestant sects. Their peer group, indeed, was, almost exclusively, white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. It may be assumed that this remained true in college: Straus, Marshall and Adler attended Ivy League Universities in the 1880s. Straus and Marshall graduated from Columbia Law School, while Adler received his Ph.D. in Semitics from Johns Hopkins. The Committee leaders were educated with the elite of Anglo-Protestant America.¹²

With the exception of Cyrus Adler, the leadership's Jewish education was minimal. Marshall attended a synagogue Sunday school as a child. And not only did Oscar Straus fail to be educated in Judaica: he studied at a Baptist Sunday school in Talbotton, Georgia, for two years. On the other hand, Adler learned Hebrew and Talmud at an early version of a Hebrew day school--the Hebrew Education Society--in Philadelphia.¹³

Of course the social milieu in which the Committee leaders spent their formative--or in Adler's case, college--years, affected their understanding of America. The fact that Marshall, Adler and Straus dealt so intensely with Christian Americans from so young an age led them to feel secure in the larger American society. With no boundaries of group membership or language to limit them, moreover, the Committee leaders fit easily into the dominant mentality of late nineteenth century America, where social divisions were drawn along denominational lines. What marked the AJC leadership off from their fellows was their Jewish faith.

The facility with which Adler, Marshall and Straus moved into Anglo-Protestant circles is exemplified by an episode taken from Adler's undergraduate days at the University of Pennsylvania. At Pennsylvania, Adler relates in his autobiography,¹⁴

Chapel was compulsory. As a Jew I did not feel that I ought to go to a Christian Chapel...I marched myself to the Provost's office and asked to be excused from Chapel. When he inquired my reason, I gave it, and he said I was excused. Being satisfied that I was not compelled to go, I used to attend Chapel about three times a week.

Remarkable here is not merely Adler's boldness, nor even the Provost's leniency: it is Adler's willingness to attend Chapel and hear the preacher's sermons, purely out of interest. Attendance at Chapel did not cause Adler any psychological discomfort.

The portrait drawn thus far of the Committee leaders' relations with the larger society borders on the idyllic. It might seem reasonable to suppose that they did suffer from some anti-Jewish feeling; but it is difficult to find a hint of this in their writings. Adler denies having heard an anti-semitic remark uttered in his presence until he was in his late thirties.¹⁵ No mention of anti-semitism suffered personally occurs in Straus' autobiography, although he does mention that he and a few friends decided to organize a Young Men's Hebrew Association because the Young Men's Christian Association, situated not far from Columbia, was "an institution for Christians." Straus obviously felt uncomfortable in the Christian "Y", but he fails to explain whether this was due to anti-semitism or some other characteristic of the institution.¹⁶

Marshall's biographer cites a letter in which Marshall describes how he was mistreated by his Christian classmates after the weekly lesson in religion, in which the word Jews was used as a term of opprobrium. Whether this sort of name-calling affected Marshall is questionable. It may be noted that if this antagonism did influence Marshall, it would have led him primarily to oppose religious lessons in the schools, and

not to a notion that anti-semitism pervaded all aspects of life.¹⁷

More revealing is a searing episode of anti-Jewish activity endured by Joseph Proskauer who was Marshall's junior by two decades. As a child in Mobile, Alabama, Proskauer had his nose bloodied "on the astounding theory that I was a Christ-killer."¹⁸ He continues:

It was the earliest in a long series of bloodied noses both physical and metaphorical, that have marked the life of myself and every other American Jew.

The Committee leadership of the 1910s and 1920s would have dissented from Proskauer's judgement about the prevalence of anti-semitism in America.

The type of anti-Jewish sentiment directed against Proskauer and Marshall was clothed in Christian religious doctrine. This underscores the fact that the leadership was raised in an essentially religious society. It also indicates why, as adults, Committee leaders would turn for aid in their battle against anti-semitism to the Church; for this was the institution which seemed to them in large part responsible for anti-Jewish sentiment and, therefore, the most capable of combatting its spread.

The Jewish identity imparted to AJC members by their parents was in harmony with prevailing religious norms. Jewish identity here was based on the Jewish religion, and it found expression in the selective observance of traditional religious practices. In Marshall's home, for instance,¹⁹

The household routine was regularly and pleasantly interrupted by ritual observances. Never, so long as his mother and father lived, was Louis to miss the annual Passover seder...Often later he would think back to the times when his mother had read the Bible with him.

Joseph Proskauer, who elaborated on his religious feelings more expressively than the others, offered a similar description. "Our family," he wrote,²⁰

was not piously orthodox, but it was observant...
On Friday nights we broke the Sabbath bread while my
father invoked the traditional blessing.

Quite impressive is Proskauer's account of what his rabbi meant to him.

It demonstrates the man's commitment to Judaism, as he understood it:²¹

He [the rabbi] gave me a sense of the immanence of a
divine spirit, firing me with a glow that made me Jew
through and through, loving my religion and its tradi-
tions. He greatly influenced my secular education, but
his priceless gift was to my soul.

Cyrus Adler attended a Jewish school in Philadelphia, as noted above,
where he was instructed in "the elements of Jewish religion" in a
structured setting.²² Oscar Straus, on the other hand, was tutored
in a pot-pourri of religious doctrines as a child:²³

My main religious instruction came from conver-
sations with my father and from the discussions
the visiting ministers of various denominations
had with him...

It was one of these men of the cloth who convinced the elder Straus
to send his son Oscar to Baptist Sunday school.²⁴

To be sure, Committee leaders adhered to religious belief, and
executed religious practices, to varying degrees. Adler was distinguished
by his punctilious adherence to Jewish custom. Admittedly, too, the extent of
religious observance dictated by Jewish tradition was minimal in the
homes of the men under discussion.²⁵ Nevertheless, insofar as a Jewish
identity was imparted to the leadership, it was a self-image that was
religious in its barest elements.

Discussion of Jacob Schiff's background has been held for last,
because it differs materially from the up-bringsings of the other leaders.

Schiff was born not in America, but rather in Germany in 1847, from which he immigrated to the United States in 1865.²⁶ Because Schiff was not raised in America, he did not feel as comfortable among Americans as Straus, Marshall and Adler. As we shall see, this difference in background would set Schiff at odds with Marshall over how to respond to anti-Jewish propaganda. Nevertheless, in the years before anti-Jewish agitation gripped America, Schiff probably imbibed the views of his fellow Committee leaders on anti-semitism in America, and on the role of the American Jewish Committee in American life.

The Leadership's Perspective

Louis Marshall and Cyrus Adler adopted a perspective on America that reflected their favourable encounter, as youths and as adults, with American society. They came to see American anti-semitism as a contradiction in terms; anti-Jewish feeling was for them an aberration in the stream of American history. Marshall²⁷

never believed that anti-semitism was a major social problem in the United States...he refused to admit the possibility that a Jewish problem on the continental model might arise in America.

Adler told a goodwill dinner in 1926 that²⁸

As an individual I have a simple task in speaking at a dinner called by a Committee to promote good will between Jews and Christians, for so far as I can recall, I have never been the object of anything but good will.

Adler went on to remind his audience that America had always been regarded as a haven for the oppressed--especially oppressed Jews--and that this perception would not change.²⁹ In 1933, perhaps in response to the passage of the Nuremberg laws, Adler repeated these thoughts:³⁰

We are here in America on the soil of a country in which no such distinction as Aryan and non-Aryan is possible... Here Judaism can be maintained without hindrance.

It would be misleading to characterize AJC leaders as men unaware of or unconcerned with the problems of economic and social discrimination with which American Jews were faced in the 1920's and 1930's. Rather, these early leaders were careful to distinguish between their own situation and the tragic predicament of European Jewry. Because of their upbringing, men like Adler and Marshall were confident that American anti-semitism was an epiphenomenon, a detour on the road to inter-group co-operation.

Louis Marshall and Cyrus Adler appreciated America not merely for what it lacked -- political anti-semitism -- but also for what it represented before the world. For the leadership, America was a champion of liberty, a light to the nations. Thus, Marshall, personally, was a sincere patriot. Every Fourth of July he carried out an elaborate ritual in which "he led his family in a little parade, each carrying a flag and singing patriotic songs." The AJC President, moreover, revered the Constitution; for him it was "a holy of holies." 32 If one may attempt to carry Marshall's metaphor one step further, the fact that he was a constitutional lawyer must have conferred upon him, in his own eyes, the status of a high priest.

Adler, the more intellectual of the pair, allowed himself to criticize America, but fundamentally he shared Marshall's love for the Republic. In a letter to a Reform rabbi that is marked "confidential," Adler interrupts a recitation of his misgivings about Zionism to write: 33

I love America but I can see its faults...am a subscriber to that extraordinary sentence which Woodrow Wilson spoke on the Fourth of July in Independence Hall... "Not, my Country, right or wrong, my Country; but, my Country, may she always be right."

It is not surprising that Adler chose to cite Wilson, because he counted the President among his long-time acquaintances, and he likely shared Wilson's dedication to the construction of a moral world under the architectural supervision of America.³⁴ In this light, moreover, it is understandable why Adler was stung by a letter from the Immigration Department which asked his advice on whether to appoint an officer to educate Jews in American principles. Adler stated that Jews had resided in America since 1665. He then admonished the inquirer: ³⁵

It seems therefore that to address a communication of this kind with the apparent assumption that all the "Americans of Jewish origin" require to have the ideals of America interpreted to them is not only beyond the fact, but liable to be irritating.

The Committee's leadership's faith in America formed part of its larger faith in the progress of mankind. Describing the score of years before World War I, Adler wrote in his autobiography wistfully: ³⁶

Maybe the world was then in its best state, and surely no one foresaw the great upheavals and anxieties that were to come. We all believed that the world was getting better and better. We were satisfied that science and learning were making steady progress...

The leaders of the American Jewish Committee, then, cherished an abiding faith in America. This country would at least serve as a permanent home for the beleaguered Jew. Another notion to which the leaders adhered had to do with the Committee's self-image. They saw the Committee as the representative of an American religious group.

The Jewish identity imparted to the leadership was, as has been shown, religious in nature. That religion was the core of Jewishness became the conviction of Marshall and Adler. Religion for Marshall, "had ever been the 'vital force' in the Jews' life."³⁷ Marshall was interested in Jewish scholarship-- he even tried his own hand at it-- and he was active in synagogue life in Syracuse, and later, in New York.³⁸ Cyrus Adler, writing to the organizer of a Bnai Brith "Jewish consciousness" group, revealed his intellectual commitment to religion:

Jewish consciousness can, of course, be deepened by things Jewish... We have a great history... But... a Christian... could also read Jewish history... I would almost be inclined to suggest that in order that there should be a deeper religious consciousness there would have to be a good deal of Jewish unconsciousness... the larger part of our lives is determined by the unconscious, by things we are taught when we were children... ³⁹

The quality that distinguished the Jews was, in Adler's estimation, a religious consciousness grounded in an emotional bond established in childhood. Jewish history, and Jewish studies in general, was an open book which any educated person could read. The seed of Jewish commitment was sown in the home, not in the library.

Adler's suggestion that Jewish identity was founded on a deep psychological attachment comes close to the Zionist view that Jews are a people united by national sentiment. Notably, it was Adler, the only leader with Hebrew day school education, who arrived at this conclusion. What is most important here, however, is that Adler never admitted to Zionist beliefs. This points up the fact that the self-definitions to which Jews adhered as adults owed much to external, social factors, and less to an internal attachment to Judaism. Zionism was born in Europe; and it was not a national but rather a religious self-definition of the Jew which American society felt most comfortable. Christian Americans viewed with favor the Jew's adherence to his faith. Indeed, some Gentiles advocated the encouragement of

religious education among Jews as an antidote to the group's apparent fascination with radical ideas.⁴⁰ Astute men, the Committee leaders saw no cause to trade this religious self-definition for an identity less prestigious, or less acceptable.

The AJC clung tenaciously to the assessment of Jews as, exclusively, a religious group. When the forms for the census were drawn up in 1909, Judge Julian Mack, an AJC representative, argued against the inclusion of classifications on the basis of race.⁴¹ And when in the 1920's the term minority group entered the language, Cyrus Adler fought bitterly against applying the term to American Jews:⁴²

I am one of the American people, and I belong to a Synagogue, but I do not feel myself a member of a "group" nor of a "minority group." Except in the matter of my form of religious worship I do not feel myself marked off in any way from my fellow Americans, and indeed I feel a greater kinship with those who have some form of religion other than my own than with anyone who has no religion at all.

Adler, it seems, objected to the label minority group not out of fear, but rather because it offended him. To Adler, as to other cultured Americans, devotion to God seemed a vocation infinitely superior to the pursuit of minority group interests.

A corollary to the AJC's self-image as the representative of a religious group was its scorn for political appeals to Jews. The idea of a Jewish vote was anathema to Committee leaders.⁴³ For if Jews were a religious group, then as a group they could only be concerned with the infringements on the practice of their faith, and these arose rarely. Bible readings in the schools could be counted as a religious issue, and so, with a little imaginative thinking,

could advertisements for "Only Christian" job offers. The Committee took action on these cases. But it rejected the use of Jewish votes on domestic or foreign matters, including the question of American anti-semitism.⁴⁴

An air of contradiction encircles the AJC leadership's religious self-definition. In the first place, the Committee deviated from the normal behavior of a religious body. Unlike Christian religious bodies, the Committee was intensely involved in political causes, such as the battle for liberal immigration laws. Episcopalians and Methodists were not, as was the AJC, engaged actively in negotiations on Minorities Treaties held at Versailles in 1919. The Jewish organization's political activities suggested that it represented a national group, or barring that, at least an interest group akin to Business or Labour. To the objective observer, the Committee seemed something of an anomaly.

Yet to live amid these apparent contradictions was a burden foisted not only on the AJC leadership but on all modern Jewish communities. Once emancipation had undermined traditional Jewish society, the idea of a Jewish identity was cast afloat in a sea of competing intellectual currents. Self-definition came to depend on social setting. The Jewish identity of German-American Jews, such as Marshall and Adler, conformed to the dominant denominational model. Eastern European Jewish intellectuals such as Simon Dubnov saw Jews as a national group who dwelled in a region that was composed of diverse national minorities. Modernity had left Jews with a shelf full of options from which to select an identity. The task of Jewish leaders was to choose a self-image that

would satisfy Jewish dignity, but also win acceptability for Jewish group persistence in the larger society.

On a subconscious level, the leadership of the Committee may have found a solution to their personal difficulties with American Jewish identity through their political work. Perhaps they believed that these activities would compensate in some manner for their attenuated religious commitment. But such psychological speculation must not bury the fact that Committee leaders would have regarded a title such as ethnic group leaders, which we might want to pin on them, as nothing more than an unsavoury epithet.

The Committee's response to the Jew-Bolshevik Image.

Two governing convictions thus guided the reactions of the Committee to anti-semitism in America. First, the leaders believed that America was not inherently anti-semitic. Second, as the representatives of a religious group, they strove to combat anti-Jewish sentiment accordingly.

The first anti-Jewish episode to be considered is the propagation of the Jew-Bolshevik image in 1919. The Jew-Bolshevik image consisted in the identification of New York Jews with the forces of world revolution. Its adherents alleged that New York Jews had fomented the Russian Revolution and that they now aimed to subvert America's democratic institutions. The Jew-Bolshevik image won wide acceptance. It appeared frequently in the press, and it found supporters among the clergy and in the Senate. The image was taken seriously even by President Wilson and his advisors, which gave Cyrus Adler quite a shock. ⁴⁵

The Committee showed little interest in this national campaign to defame American Jewry. Conceptually, the AJC's reaction to the propagation of the Jew-Bolshevik image, (and for that matter, to the Henry Ford episode,) may be divided into two parts: a period of initial inaction followed by a stage of reaction.

For a number of reasons the Committee was hesitant initially to respond to the Jew-Bolshevik campaign. First, the Committee continued to place faith in America. The anti-Jewish agitation in America was a transitory phenomenon which merited little attention. During the War, Committee leaders confessed, anti-Jewish incidents had occurred. But this was natural, for war-time is an abnormal period, and it could be expected to beget abnormal social phenomena such as anti-semitism. "The termination of hostilities," the AJC Annual Report for 1920-21 concluded,⁴⁶

brought to an end some of the abnormal conditions which had during the previous year and a half resulted in a number of instances of anti-Jewish discrimination... Happily your Committee has but few matters of this character to bring to your attention at this meeting.

Another reason that the Committee did not react quickly to the Jew-Bolshevik image was that it seemed an inappropriate subject for their attention. As the representatives of a religious group, the committee tried to ease tensions spawned by religious differences. The scope of the Committee's activities in the 1910s, which demonstrate the denominational orientation of the Committee, may be gauged by the listings of "General Events of Interest to Jews in the United States," which were a regular feature of the American Jewish Year

Book. The lists reveal what the Committee supposed American Jews to be interested in, and betray what the Committee was interested in. Most heavily represented among the events were cases of religion in the schools, that is violations of agreements of Church-State separation. Found also in the lists are incidents where advertisements request that only Christians need apply for a given position. Some sporadic mention is made of questions relating to the proper regulation of Kashrut. All these issues are arguably religious matters, and the Committee, as a religious organization, could treat them.⁴⁷

Because the campaign to identify Jews with Bolshevism did not lend itself to interpretation as a religious issue, it caused the Committee some confusion. Committee leaders were unsure whether, and if so how, to combat the Jew-Bolshevik image. The wisest course to take, it was suggested, was to ignore the issue. The Committee did precisely this from the summer of 1918, when it was alerted to the possibility of a problem, until February, 1919, when the Committee was finally inspired to respond.⁴⁸

What provoked the Committee to act was the appearance before the Senate Overman Committee on subversion of one Reverend Simons who said that he had no doubt in his mind that "the predominant element in this Bolsheviki movement in America is, as you may call it, the Yiddish of the East Side."⁴⁹ Committee leaders decided to respond; they would counteract the Jew-Bolshevik image by informing non-Jews that Judaism and Bolshevism were antithetical. In a statement published in the New York Times, Louis Marshall explained:⁵⁰

Everything that real Bolshevism stands for is to the Jew detestable. His traditions wed him to law and order, make of him a legalist. The Bolsheviks are enemies of law and order. The Jew makes the very center of his life and of his existence the home and the family. The Bolsheviks decry marriage and condemn morality. The Jew is justly noted for being thrifty and economical, and with recognizing as necessary the institution of property. The great masses of the Jews are faithful to their ancient religion, and are ever ready to help their brethren in distress. The club of the Bolshevik knows no brother and despises religion.

Marshall's response was ineffective because it did not address the facts. The non-Jewish world was aware of the political proclivities of the East Side. It knew that Jews were prominent in left-wing circles; the Forward, the leading Yiddish daily, was staunchly socialist; and that Jews voted for socialist candidates who ran for municipal, state, and federal office. These Jewish political tendencies had lent plausibility to the Jew-Bolshevik image; but Marshall did not attempt to address them.⁵¹ And Marshall's concentration on the Jew's religiosity was not reserved for public consumption. In a personal letter to Richard V. Lindabury, Marshall repeats the theme, this time not even bothering to use the word Bolshevik:⁵²

The Jew is not, however, by disposition a radical. He is essentially conservative...The Ten Commandments are still his anchor, and the teachings of the prophets of Israel, with their ideals of Justice and righteousness and the love of humanity, still command his veneration.

This apologetic effort may be understood as an elaboration for the public of the American Jewish Committee's perspective on Jewishness, which for it consisted in an adherence to morality and religion, tinged with conservatism.

Another apologetic approach used by Marshall harped on the Jew's love

of America. Here again one finds a projection of the Committee's leadership's perspective--its faith in America--on its fellow Jews. In a letter to Senator Lee Overman, head of a Senate Committee on subversion, who saw merit in the Jew-Bolshevik image, Marshall describes the residents of the East Side of New York as a whole as ⁵³

reputable, honorable, and patriotic a body of people as are to be found in any other part of the country. They are industrious, law-abiding and intellectual; they perform the duties of citizenship; they pay their taxes; they have ideals; they educate their children... there are but few illiterates among them, no paupers and no intemperance.

Once more, Marshall fails to address the issue: the question of Jewish involvement in the Bolshevik movement. His statement, moreover, suffers from overstatement. Was it accurate to assert that the East Side had neither poverty nor intemperance? The point here is that the Committee leadership felt compelled, in order to save the good name of Jews in America, to describe East Side Jews--who were ill at ease in America and many of whom scorned religion-- as a body of unwavering patriots and religious devotees. In so doing, the leadership lost the ear of those who professed any familiarity with the East Side.

The Committee's response to the Dearborn Independent articles.

When the Red Scare drew to a close in 1920, the anti-Jewish image it had evoked assumed a new incarnation. The Jew-Bolshevik image became the image of the International Jew who, like the Jew-Bolshevik, schemed against civil society. The central channel through which the image of the International Jew was transmitted was the Dearborn Independent, a magazine financed by Henry Ford.

The Dearborn Independent's crusade against the Jews created great uneasiness among the Jews. The magazine, in the first place, enjoyed wide circulation as it was sent to Ford's car dealerships. Secondly, the attacks on Jews contained in the Dearborn Independent were sophisticated, and drawing upon the Protocols of the Elders of Zion for inspiration. Finally, Ford himself enjoyed immense popularity in the 1920s; so much so that he was considered a potential candidate for the Presidency. This did not comfort American Jewry.⁵⁴

The Committee's response to the Dearborn Independent problem came in two parts. At first the Committee was rendered inactive because of internal dissention. The Committee then began to meditate over the nature of this anti-Jewish activity, and finally it attempted to take the wind out of the sails of American anti-semitism.

Internal conflict marked the opening phase of the Committee's response to the Dearborn Independent. The Jew -Bolshevik scare had alerted the Committee to the possibility of anti-Jewish agitation in America, thus in this case it was not a wish to forget the issue that led to initial inaction. Indeed, after only two issues of the Independent had included anti-Jewish stories, Louis Marshall, in his office as President of the Committee, wired Ford in the beginning of June, 1920. The statement which the articles contain, Marshall wrote Ford,⁵⁵

are palpable fabrications and the insinuations with which they abound are the emanations of hatred and prejudice. They constitute a libel on an entire people who had hoped that at least in America they might be spared the insult the humiliation and the obloquy which these articles are scattering throughout the land and which echoes from the dark middle ages...

Marshall received the following response to his plea for good will from the editors of the Dearborn Independent:⁵⁶

Your rhetoric is that of a Bolshevik orator...
Incidentally you cruelly overwork your most
usefull term which is "antizemitism" [sic].
These articles shall continue and we hope
you will continue to read them and when you have
attained a more tolerable state of mind we shall
be glad to discuss them with you.

Recaption of the Dearborn Independent's response created internal discord within the Committee. Marshall alone pressed for action. "I do not propose," he wrote to Julius Rosenwald on June 5, 1920,⁵⁷

to remain quiet in view of the disgraceful attitude that these people [at the Dearborn Independent] have taken... I think we should have a meeting of the American Jewish Committee at an early date... It is better that this whole matter be brought out in the open than to allow this poison to circulate under the surface as it now does.

But Marshall's plans were squelched by his fellow Committee members.

"More timid counsels," he admitted to Henry Butzel in September, 1920,⁵⁸

prevailed among my associates, it being their opinion that such an attack would only give publicity to these articles...

What was wrong with publicity? Jacob Schiff feared that publicity would provoke an escalation of anti-Jewish feeling, the consequences of which were serious indeed. "If we get into a controversy," he warned Marshall and the others,⁵⁹

we shall light a fire, which no one can foretell how it will become extinguished, and I would strongly advise therefore that no notice be taken of these articles...

Fire is a striking simile; perhaps it was meant to suggest physical assault on the Jews. In any event, Schiff here, in a moment of crisis,

betrays his lack of faith in America. As an immigrant he had no contact with ordinary Americans during his childhood, and likely his contact with the American public in his business life was limited. This left him without the confidence in America that characterized other committee leaders. And Schiff's sense of insecurity in America led him to order Marshall not to act against the anti-semites, because their ideas would find many adherents in the public at large.

Schiff's objections to action against American anti-semitism were among the last suggestions he made to the Committee as he died soon after. Without Schiff's presence, the Committee could proceed as it saw fit. The problem that the leadership now faced was how to reconcile the surge of anti-Jewish feeling in America with its faith in America.

The solution struck upon by the Committee was to blame American anti-Jewish feeling on a coterie of European emigrés who, it was alleged, had imported it. The leadership grew convinced that there was a conspiracy afoot to defame Jews around the world, and that members of the conspiracy had been dispatched to the United States to vilify American Jewry. There was, therefore, no reason to question one's faith in America; for Europeans, not Americans, were responsible for ill feeling towards Jews.

The Report of the American Jewish Committee contained in the American Jewish Year Book for 1921 expressed the Committee's understanding of the sources of anti-semitism in America. The Report addressed both the Jew-Bolshevik image (a bit belatedly) and also the articles in the Dearborn Independent. "The widespread anti-Jewish propaganda now being artificially stimulated," the Report asserted, ⁶⁰

...is a concerted movement conducted in Great Britain Germany, Austria, Hungary, France, and even in our own country, to fasten upon the Jews, as a people, the odium of having brought about the world war and with being the mainspring of all the evils that accompanied and followed it...in this country [the anti-Jewish campaign is furthered] by a group of Russians who were among the leaders of the Black Hundreds... Increased impetus and currency has been given to this propaganda through the medium of a series of anonymous articles which have been appearing weekly, since May 22, in the Dearborn Independent...

Herman Bernstein picked up the thread of the Committee's analysis, and continued to elaborate it at a dinner in honour of Chaim Weizmann who was visiting New York: ⁶¹

...the spirit of fairness characteristic of the American people cannot be influenced by these old, outworn, long-exploited anti-semitic myths and falsehoods. For broad-minded Americans know that American Jewry has contributed substantially... to this great Republic.

The Committee statements on American anti-semitism beg the question of how those Americans who did believe the anti-Jewish canards--and there were many of these--could act so oddly. The answer given was that these people were "uninformed and unintelligent..."⁶²

Conspiracy theories, which seek to explain complex social phenomena as the work of a few individuals, almost by definition contain a grain of truth. For certain individuals are involved, prominently, in any war, riot, or revolution. The problem with a conspiracy theory is that it reduces the adherent's field of vision to the actions of a few individuals, and blinds them to the influence of deeper causal factors.

There were, to be sure, European emigrés in America who propagated anti-Jewish beliefs.⁶³ But the fact that these notions gained acceptance had to do with the American public, not with the Europeans. Hostile or favorable beliefs about a group circulate constantly; they win

popularity when the perceptions of that group by the larger society turn extremely negative or overwhelmingly positive. It was precisely this issue-- the fact that America was irritated with the Jews in the years after World War I-- that the conspiracy theory permitted the Committee to ignore.

Cyrus Adler tried to think beyond the conspiracy theory, at least in private. He toyed with the notion that Jewish political activities were in part responsible for anti-Jewish sentiment in America. "We Jews", he remarked,⁶⁴

have made a noise in the world of recent years... far out of proportion to our numbers. We have demonstrated and shouted and paraded and congressed and waved flags to an extent which was bound to focus upon the Jew the attention of the world and having got this attention, we could hardly expect that it would all be favorable.

Here Adler reveals himself as a sufferer from selective perception. He focusses his criticism on the activities of Eastern European immigrants-- on their parades in support of the Russian Revolution, on their calls for an American Jewish Congress. But Adler never considers the proposition that the activities of the Committee-- their active role at Versailles, for instance-- might have lent credence to the idea of an international Jewish conspiracy.

Adler's unorthodox ruminations never insinuated themselves into the Committee's official statements, of course; in these the European anti-semites were highlighted. Not only did the conspiracy theory hold the advantage of rescuing the honor of Americans. The doctrine also fixed a target for attack, and suggested a plan for action. The Committee would launch an assault on the Europeans, expose them, and refute their

anti-Jewish claims. Then the Committee would appeal to non-Jews for aid in the debunking effort.

Committee strategy aimed, then, to inform the uninformed. At the outset of the plan, the Committee had to find a vehicle to combat ignorance. Adler suggested that Marshall have

a look at the chapter [in a book by Israel Zangwill] entitled "The Legend of the Conquering Jew" which if it was slightly altered and put in book form would, I think, furnish very important reading for a Campaign.

Instead, however, the leadership elected to commission Herman Bernstein, who for a time edited Der Tog, to write a book that detailed how anti-Jewish notions reached America. Bernstein's work, History of A Lie, appeared in 1921. It was sent to hundreds of libraries and prominent individuals.⁶⁶ Further along these lines Marshall, fearing a recrudescence of the canard that the Talmud was virulently anti-Christian, ordered hundreds of copies of Joseph Block's refutation of this charge, Israel und die Volker, and shipped them to all major university libraries.⁶⁷ The Committee, moreover, distributed in the thousands copies of John Spargo's The Jew and American Ideals and Joseph Jacob's Jewish Contributions to Civilization.⁶⁸

The American Jewish Committee's efforts to refute anti-Jewish accusations made by the European emigrés and their dupes⁶⁹ were complemented by the Committee's appeal to the Church to disassociate itself from the anti-semites. The Committee's turn to this institution was predictable. The leadership was raised among Bible-reading Christians whose preachers sometimes chided the Jews. Now, as representatives themselves of a religious group, the leadership could imagine no more appropriate ally

in the battle against anti-semitism than the Church.

To attract the attention of Church leaders, the Committee, in concert with other Jewish organizations, composed a statement that decried anti-Jewish agitation in America. The statement concluded with a plea to non-Jews to condemn the propagators of anti-Jewish ideas.⁷⁰ The appeal was issued four days prior to the convening of the Quadrennial Convention of the Churches of Christ in America. The conference, no doubt in response to the Committee's request, adopted the following resolution:⁷¹

...be it resolved that the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, impressed by the need at this period of our national existence for unity and brotherhood, deplores all such cruel and unwarranted attacks upon our Jewish brethren and in a spirit of good will extends to them an expression of confidence in their patriotism and their good citizenship and earnestly admonishes our people to express disapproval on all actions which are conducive to intolerance...

The Church Council's resolution warmed the hearts of the Committee leadership. Writing to Marshall five days after the resolution was passed, Adler allowed a measure of emotion to temper his normally restrained prose:⁷²

I agree with you that our Statement met with a splendid reception. I saw the resolution adopted by the Churches of Christ in America and consider it admirable.

The Committee, the leadership believed, had been vindicated. The non-Jewish body whose respect it most prized had come to American Jewry's aid in a time of need. Little further action, they thought, was necessary. Marshall disapproved of efforts to have the Dearborn Independent censored, and he counseled inquirers not to bring suit against the automobile magnate.⁷³

Pointing to a long-term strategy to undermine anti-Jewish beliefs, Marshall, and the Committee which he led, sounded a moral note. "You need not be concerned," Marshall said at the opening of an endowment campaign for the Jewish Theological Seminary,⁷⁴

about nameless individuals who in their ignorance attack us... There is always one full and complete answer to all falsehood and calumny--that is, right conduct. Right conduct is taught in our Seminary...

and, therefore, the argument ran, wealthy Jews should support the institution. In the view of the AJC leadership, correct conduct by American Jews rested on a profound faith in the goodness of the land, and adherence to a religious group identity.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the sources for the American Jewish Committee's response to American anti-semitism in the early 1920s. Here, the assets and liabilities of the leadership's view will be considered from a political standpoint.

The AJC failed to inveigh against the Jew-Bolshevik image because of its leaders' trust in America. With hindsight it may be suggested that the leadership's faith in the United States was somewhat misplaced. Far from being an isolated instance of anti-Jewish stereotyping, the Jew-Bolshevik myth was one manifestation of an attitude that would bedevil American Jewry through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, when occupational and social discrimination against Jews was widespread.⁷⁷

Was the AJC mistaken to practice restraint in its challenge to

the image of the Jew as Bolshevik? Historical experience teaches that it is difficult, if not impossible, to alter a hostile stereotype in a short space of time. It is unlikely, indeed, that louder protests from the Committee would have arrested the trend towards anti-Jewish restriction: there are limits as to what minority group politicians can accomplish. To score the AJC for not protesting against the Jew-Bolshevik image would, then, be inappropriate.

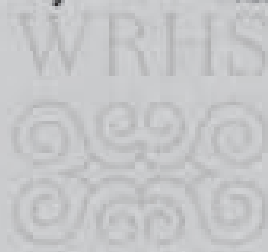
The Committee's reaction to Henry Ford's charges of world Jewish conspiracy was more vocal. Acting as the self-appointed representative of an American religious group, the AJC appealed to other religious bodies to disassociate their organizations from Ford's polemics. The leadership refused to bring suit against the automobile magnate with the idea that such action would inflame, rather than assuage, the problem.

In the Dearborn Independent episode, the Jewish leaders seem to have acted in a politically sagacious manner. Criticism from leading Christian clergymen robbed Ford of any claim to moral authority or political respectability. The magnate can be considered, no doubt, an extremist who harbored un-American opinions. On the other hand, an attempt on the part of the Committee to censor Ford might have proven counter-productive. Had the AJC provoked such action, it would have come into conflict with a national value--freedom of speech. And it is never wise for minority group leaders to define their community's interests, publicly, in a manner antagonistic to national ideals.

Criticism of American Jewish defence organizations such as the American Jewish Committee has traditionally turned on the question

of the extent to which the body should react to anti-Jewish provocation. Some fault the defence agencies for being over-sensitive to anti-Jewish bias, while others complain of the restraint that these organizations show. But both types of critics rely on the premise that it is fear of breeding further anti-semitism that guides the course of action taken by a body such as the American Jewish Committee.

The present analysis has attempted to demonstrate that such an assumption is too simple. It was the world view of the Committee leadership, in all its elements, that dictated the AJC's response to American anti-semitism in the early 1920s. The political decisions reached by the AJC leadership in the turbulent twenties owed their origins to an earlier, more tranquil, era, when anti-semitism was a foreign affair.



Footnotes

- ¹ By claiming that the years after the First World War mark a watershed in the history of anti-semitism in America, we are in agreement with John Higham, Strangers in the Land (New York, 1963), pp. 278-79. According to Higham, the leading scholar of anti-semitism in America, the post-war years saw anti-Jewish feeling become tenacious and widespread, and witnessed the rise of anti-Jewish agitation in the press. For a comprehensive account of the Red Scare see Robert K. Murray, Red Scare (New York, 1955).
- ² For an account of the spread of the Jew-Bolshevik image see Morton Rosenstock, Louis Marshall (Detroit, 1965), pp. 110-118.
- ³ An account of the Ford episode is contained in Norman Cohn, Warrant For Genocide (London, 1967), pp. 156-64. Cohn, as might be expected, pays more attention to the entry of the Protocols into the United States than to the social conditions under which they flourished. The effects of the Jew-Bolshevik image on American immigration policy are discussed in Henry Feingold, Zion in America (New York, 1974), p. 265. On the Harvard affair see Rosenstock, Louis Marshall, pp. 245-253.
- ⁴ Naomi Cohen, Not Free To Desist (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 4. This work is invaluable for any student of the American Jewish Committee.
- ⁵ Johan D. Smertenko, "The Passing of the Shtadlan," Menorah Journal, June, 1920, pp. 14-55, is an intelligent polemic against the Committee and its supposed Shtadlan-like behavior. Smertenko was a young supporter of the newly-formed American Jewish Congress. Early in her book, Naomi Cohen repeats the Shtadlan image, Not Free To Desist, p. 25; her discussion of the post-War period contains some criticism of the Committee, but little further analysis of its actions, and no revised judgement on its character, ibid., p. 33.
- ⁶ Cohen, Not Free, p. 25.
- ⁷ Straus was, in fact, born in Germany; but because he came to the United States as a small child, he was a de facto if not de jure second-generation American.
- ⁸ On Straus see Naomi Cohen, A Dual Heritage (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 4; on Marshall see Charles Reznikoff, Louis Marshall (Philadelphia, 1967), vol 1, p. xi; on Adler see Cyrus Adler, I Have Considered the Days (New York, 1969), p. 4.
- ⁹ Oscar Straus, Under Four Administrations (Boston, 1922), pp. 6-7.
- ¹⁰ Adler, I Have Considered, pp. 3-21.
- ¹¹ Reznikoff, Louis Marshall, pp. xi-xiv.

- ¹²At times Adler's list of college friends reads like an American Who's Who. At Johns Hopkins he counted Woodrow Wilson and John Dewey among his friends. Adler, I Have Considered, pp. 49-50.
- ¹³Ibid., pp. 11-15 for Adler. On Straus see Under Four Administrations, p. 11.
- ¹⁴Adler, ibid., p. 25.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 296.
- ¹⁶Straus, Under Four Administrations, p. 32.
- ¹⁷Cited in Rosenstock, Louis Marshall, p. 37.
- ¹⁸Joseph Proskauer, A Segment of My Times (New York, 1950), p. 15.
- ¹⁹Reznikoff, Louis Marshall, p. xiii.
- ²⁰Proskauer, A Segment, p. 15.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 16.
- ²²Adler, I Have Considered, pp. 11-15.
- ²³Straus, Under Four Administrations, pp. 10-11
- ²⁴Ibid.
- ²⁵Economic necessity or the pressures of social conformity led German-Jewish immigrants to America to compromise on Jewish religious practice. The trend towards reform was steady but not particularly rapid, however. See Leon Jick, The Americanization of the Synagogue (Hanover, 1976), pp. 79-96 and passim.
- ²⁶Cyrus Adler, Jacob Schiff (Philadelphia, 1927), p. 2ff.
- ²⁷Rosenstock, Louis Marshall, p. 33.
- ²⁸Cyrus Adler, Lectures, Selected Papers, Addresses (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 350
- ²⁹Ibid.
- ³⁰Adler, Lectures, p. 275.
- ³¹Jacob Schiff, "The Jewish Problem Today," Menorah Journal, vol. 1, no. 2 (1916), p. 77.
- ³²Rosenstock, Louis Marshall, p. 28.

- ³³Jewish Theological Seminary(henceforth, JTS). Adler Papers. Arch. 3-1, Box 7, Correspondence, S-Z, File Sa-S1(1909-1933). Adler to Dr. Schulman, p. 3, Jan, 13, 1931.
- ³⁴Adler, I Have Considered, pp. 49-50.
- ³⁵JTS. Adler Papers. Arch 3-1, Box 5, Correspondence, Hadad-Marshall. Adler to Secretary of the Interior, Jan. 16, 1919, p. 2.
- ³⁶Adler, I Have Considered, p. 184.
- ³⁷Reznikoff, Louis Marshall, xvii.
- ³⁸On Marshall and synagogues see ibid., pxiii; on Marshall and Jewish scholarship see ibid., p. xix.
- ³⁹JTS. Adler Papers. Box 3, Correspondence, E-Finkelstein, File F, 1912-1937. Adler to I Adriel Fried.
- ⁴⁰For a taste of the goodwill accorded the Jewish religion, per se, even if not the Jewish people, see the Literary Digest, Nov. 4, 1919, p. 35; ibid., Apr. 1921, p. 291; and ibid., May 10, 1922, p. 35.
- ⁴¹Cohen, Not Free, p. 47.
- ⁴²Adler, Lectures, p. 356.
- ⁴³For a statement of the Committee's objection to the call for use of the Jewish vote from Israel Zangwill, see Harry Schneiderman(ed.), The American Jewish Year Book(henceforth AJ)(Philadelphia, 1924), pp. 637-639.
- ⁴⁴Ibid.
- ⁴⁵Adler, I Have Considered, p. 330.
- ⁴⁶AJYB, 1921, p. 409.
- ⁴⁷See, for instance, the AJYB, 1919, p. 175-181; and ibid., 1920, pp. 133-139.
- ⁴⁸The Committee knew of the Jew- Bolshevik accusation in the summer of 1918, but it did not respond to it until February, 1919, Cohen, Not Free, pp. 125-127. By December 14, 1918, the image was featured in the Literary Digest, a magazine sparing in its sensationalism. See Literary Digest, Dec. 14, 1918, p. 32.
- ⁴⁹Cited in Cohen, Not Free, p. 125
- ⁵⁰Ibid., p. 126

- ⁵¹There is a large contemporary literature, contained in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and books, which describe the Jewish association with radicalism. A good compendium of these observations, which is comparatively restrained in its judgements is Burton J. Hendrick, "Radicalism among Polish Jews," The World's Work, 1922-23, pp. 591-601.
- ⁵²Marshall to Richard V. Lindabury in Reznikoff, Louis Marshall, p. 327. The letter is dated Oct. 24, 1919.
- ⁵³Cohen, Not Free, p. 125.
- ⁵⁴On Ford see Norman Cohn, Warrant For Genocide, pp. 156-164.
- ⁵⁵Cohen, Not Free, p. 131.
- ⁵⁶Ibid.
- ⁵⁷Reznikoff, Louis Marshall, p. 330.
- ⁵⁸Ibid., p. 335.
- ⁵⁹Cohen, Not Free, p. 131.
- ⁶⁰AJYB, 1921, pp. 313-315.
- ⁶¹YIVO. Herman Bernstein Papers. no. 357, File Chaim Weizmann. Address by Herman Bernstein, Presiding at Luncheon of Editors and Publicists in honor of Dr. Chaim Weizmann, Tues. March 13, at the Commodore Hotel, p. 2.
- ⁶²YIVO. Bernstein Papers. no. 761.
- ⁶³See Cohn, Warrant For Genocide, pp. 156-64.
- ⁶⁴Cited in Cohen, Not Free, p. 132.
- ⁶⁵JTS. Adler Papers. Arch 3-1, Box 5, Correspondence, Hadad-Marshall. Adler to Marshall, Dec. 10, 1920, p. 2.
- ⁶⁶This may be inferred from the hundreds of thank-you notes received by Bernstein from recipients of his book. See YIVO. Bernstein Papers, no. 408, "History of a Lie."
- ⁶⁷Rosenstock, Louis Marshall, p. 175.
- ⁶⁸Cohen, Not Free, p. 134.
- ⁶⁹The characterization of believers in the Jew-Bolshevik myth as dupes comes from Herman Bernstein. See infra. fn. 61.
- ⁷⁰AJYB, 1921, p. 377.

⁷¹AJYB, 1922, p. 332.

⁷²JTS. Adler Papers. Arch 3-1, Box 5, Correspondence, Hadad-Marshall.
Adler to Marshall, Dec 10, 1920, p. 2.

⁷³Cohen, Not Free, p. 134.

⁷⁴JTS. Adler Papers. Arch 3-1, Box 5, Correspondence, Hadad-Marshall.
Marshall, Clippings.

⁷⁵Discrimination penetrated all spheres of life. Immigration was restricted, university quotas were established, and residential and job discrimination were practiced against Jews in America in the inter-war period and beyond.

