Introduction

This book analyses Anglo-Jewish responses to the Holocaust. This community was unique in that it was the only Jewry in a democratic country which, while actively engaged in and physically close to the war, was never occupied by the Germans. It is important to explore the nature of this community’s response against this distinctive background. The emphasis here will not be on the influence, or lack of it, that Anglo-Jewry had on events. Rather the book examines what the community’s response to this historical experience reveals about its own organisational structure and socio-political philosophy. The book is, in other words, a contribution to the understanding of Anglo-Jewry, not the Holocaust.

Much of the existing historical work on diasporic Jewish reactions to the Holocaust is narrative. This book takes a different approach, one which focusses on the attitudes and philosophies which informed actions. Whilst I shall not overlook the deviation of segments of the community or individuals, it is normative responses that will be the subject of this study, responses that were on the surface frequently inconsistent or contradictory.

Despite the considerable growth in interest in the field of ‘bystander’ or ‘onlooker’ response to the Holocaust this is the first book which concerns itself with the British Jewish response. American Jewish response has been the subject of numerous books, articles and reports and has consequently been the focus of considerable debate and discussion. The British Jewish response has, in contrast, been sadly neglected.1

I have surveyed most of the relevant sources, including memoirs, biographies, archives of Jewish organisations and Government archives. Newspapers are a major source for this book, and in particular the Jewish Chronicle. It reported almost all public matters of Jewish concern and its reportage, notwithstanding the Revisionist
outlook of its editor Ivan Greenberg, was on the whole impartial and comprehensive. So much so indeed that even dissident and provincial Jewish journals paid deference to it (see the Glasgow Jewish Echo editorials on 19 June 1942 and 21 August 1942 and the Agudist Di Vochenzitung on July 1943, p. 4). As its pages are not dominated by partisan or parochial concerns its coverage gives a good assessment of the community’s moods and priorities. It is undoubtedly the most widely read Jewish publication of the time.  

The book hardly touches on the historical East End/West End divide in the London Jewish community. Despite the militancy of East End groups such as the Jewish Friendly Societies and Trade Unions, the Workers’ Circle (Arbeiter Ring) and Jews in the Communist Party who forced the pace on anti-Nazi protest rallies and the anti-German boycott between 1933 and 1939, these groups had faded from view by 1942.  

The outbreak of war had proved a watershed in the history of the East End as a focus of Anglo-Jewish life. The move to leafier suburbs, promoted by economic forces, had already begun in the 1920s and 1930s and was well under way. The battering taken by the East End in the Blitz and the evacuation which followed exacerbated the trend, so much so that one contemporary could write that by 1945 ‘the Whitechapel district which had already begun before the war to give place to other neighbourhoods as Jewish centres, may now be regarded as on the very verge of disappearance as a place of Jewish residence’.  

The Friendly Societies, Trade Unions and Workers’ Circles saw their membership decline considerably during the war. The movements’ constituent groups were largely disbanded. Many of the young who had been prominent in the campaigns of the 1930s were now on active service. The same was true of activist Jewish youth groups. The Communist Party remained strong but its concern was mainly with the general struggle against Fascism, and, after 1941, it laid particular emphasis on support for the Soviet war effort. For the Party the Jews of Europe were only an indirect issue. Consequently for the duration of the war the East End did not play a particularly independent or distinctive part in the response of Anglo-Jewry to the Holocaust.  

Refugee Jews similarly had little impact. As I will show, the indigenous community had placed them under severe constraints, and moreover many had at first been interned and later conscripted. This rendered them a marginal factor.
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I have not dealt with Anglo-Jewish views of Nazism before the War because both the outbreak of hostilities in 1939 and the systematic policy of extermination of the Jews of Europe pursued by the Nazis after 1941 mark two very significant discontinuities in the response of Anglo-Jewry. The wartime response can legitimately and, in my view, should properly be examined separately.

The book deals exclusively with the internal dynamics of the Anglo-Jewish community. The reader will not find much discussion of the nature of the actions of the external Gentile world including those of the government or of anti-semitic groups. I am interested here solely in Anglo-Jewry’s perceptions of these groups, not in the groups themselves.

I have tried to examine any public statement or publication of a British Jew which might have a bearing on response to the Holocaust. Many, though not all, of those individuals turned out to be involved somehow in Anglo-Jewish institutions. Within these circles there was some diversity, however, and these individuals can be said to have articulated all those socio-political philosophies present within the community at large.

The public nature of the statements and actions I have studied is crucially important. Meetings behind closed doors, conversations and letters do not have the same wide impact on attitudes and opinions. Public statements, however, can be amplified, retracted or openly challenged. It is only by a study of what British Jews were prepared to say and do in public that we can determine the contours on the map of Anglo-Jewish attitudes regarding the outside, non-Jewish world.

This book shares the assumption held by most Jewish historians that the Jews constituted a people who, even after emancipation, remained united by strong cultural bonds. These bonds, based on common heritage and religion, produced strong feelings of solidarity and unity which extended beyond national boundaries. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, of course, there has been clear evidence of such solidarity in strong diasporic support for Israel. But in the first half of this century, many examples of transnational Jewish solidarity are also to be found, as are institutions that expressed it. These included political unions (the Zionist movement and the World Jewish Congress), religious organisations (the World Agudist Organisation), representative bodies (the foreign committees of the Board of Deputies and the Anglo-Jewish Association),
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newspapers such as the *Jewish Chronicle* and a host of philanthropic bodies. This book assumes the existence of a strong and abiding sense of communal loyalty among the Jews of Europe. What I will investigate is how it was manifested and in what ways it was affected by competing Anglo-Jewish interests and ideologies in the period 1942–5.
PART I

Knowing and believing
Knowing and believing

When did the news of the mass murder of European Jewry reach Britain? What facts were known, how did they come to be known and who knew them? Detailed research on these questions has already been undertaken in other works, but it is important that this book too should detail the information on the European atrocities that was available to Britain’s Jewish community from the day war was declared on 3 September 1939.

The first part of this book, therefore, outlines the context of British Jewry’s response to the Holocaust. It examines the information that was available to the Anglo-Jewish community about events behind Nazi lines and summarises the main conclusions of the existing body of scholarly literature on diasporic response to the Holocaust.

In order to assess the response of Britain’s Jewish community, we need to ask what actual facts were known to the community at the time. In the years since the Holocaust mountains of documentary and photographic historical evidence have emerged. But we must make the huge mental leap to ask what was known to those who could have only second-hand information at the time.

The main conduit of information was, of course, the press. Andrew Sharf, in his work The British Press and Jews under Nazi Rule, states categorically that ‘on the whole question of atrocity and extermination, the Press knew well and printed accurately exactly what was happening . . . few facts of Nazi anti-semitism were left unstated by the British press’. Indeed one could go further and suggest that in Britain’s newspapers one finds as firm a grasp of the motivations behind Nazi policy as was available anywhere. The newspapers
indicated trends in German actions earlier than others and reported them accurately and swiftly.

As early as 16 December 1939 the *Times* published an article indicating the murderous intent of the Nazis, headlined ‘A Slow Road to Extermination’. The aim of the Nazi scheme was to set up a place for gradual extermination, and not what the Germans would describe as a Lebensraum or living space’. The first reports on the mass killings by the Einsatzgruppen on Soviet territory were printed in December 1941, the most famous of which, the Babi-Yar massacre, was marked by a report of the Joint Foreign Committee of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Anglo-Jewish Association released to the press on 17 December, and stating that 52,000 people, Jews and non-Jews, had been murdered by the Nazis after the German occupation of Kiev.

The use of gas as a weapon of mass extermination was first mentioned in a 9 January 1942 *Jewish Chronicle* report that poison gas experiments had been conducted at Mauthausen concentration camp. As details of the massacres flowed into London, those with an intimate knowledge of events occurring within Nazi-occupied territory became convinced of the radical nature of Hitler’s solution to the ‘Jewish Problem’. On 9 June 1942 General Sikorski, the Polish Prime Minister, broadcast from London on the BBC European Services: ‘The Jewish population in Poland is doomed to annihilation in accordance with the maxim “Slaughter all the Jews regardless of how the war will end.”’ The *Daily Telegraph* began a despatch on 25 June as follows: ‘More than 700,000 Polish Jews have been slaughtered by the Germans in the greatest massacre in the world’s history.’ The report reviewed the mass exterminations in East Galicia and Lithuania and revealed for the first time the use of ‘travelling gas chambers’ in Chelmno concentration camp. The newspaper declared that the Germans had ‘embarked on the physical extermination of the Jewish population’. The article continued to state that these facts were ‘wholly in keeping with Hitler’s many times avowed policy’. Five days later, on 30 June 1942, the same newspaper included a report under the headline ‘More Than 1,000,000 Jews Killed in Europe’. This story made one further point of great importance which had not been clearly spelled out previously – that it was the aim of the Nazis ‘to wipe the race from the European continent’.

The fact of a systematic extermination of Jews was now widely
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accepted in newspaper columns. On the same day as this second Daily Telegraph report appeared, most British newspapers carried stories with headlines such as ‘Massacre of Jews: Over 1,000,000 Jews Dead Since War Began’ (Times), ‘1,000,000 Jews Die’ (Evening Standard), ‘Million Jews Die’ (News Chronicle), ‘Bondage in Eastern Europe – A Vast Slaughterhouse of Jews’ (Scotsman), ‘Great Pogrom – 1 Million Jews Die’ (Daily Mail) and ‘Jewish War Victims – More Than 1 Million Dead’ (Manchester Guardian).9

Details of gas killings were now commonplace. The weekly magazine News Review told in July 1942 of the ‘large gas stations’ which had been set up in Poland ‘to kill off Jews . . . No sleeping-drugs were wasted on them. They were just trussed up and finished off.’10

In tandem with these press reports, the British Foreign Office received a telegram on 10 August 1942 which many historians consider a turning-point in British response. What it said was not in fact new but its impact, particularly on British government and Jewish organisational circles, was great. The telegram, sent by the Geneva representative of the World Jewish Congress, Dr Gerhart Riegner, contained a message for Sidney Silverman MP: ‘Received alarming report stating that, in the Fuehrer’s Headquarters, a plan has been discussed and is under consideration, according to which all Jews in countries occupied or controlled by Germany numbering 3½–4 millions should, after deportation and concentration in the East, be at one blow exterminated, in order to resolve, once and for all, the Jewish question in Europe.’11 At the end of the same month, another Jewish official in Geneva, Richard Lichtheim of the Jewish Agency, wrote to London in more concrete as well as resigned fashion: ‘This process of annihilation is going on relentlessly and there is no hope left to save any considerable number . . . Therefore it is no exaggeration to say that Hitler has killed or is killing 4 million Jews in Continental Europe and that no more than 2 million have a chance of surviving.’12

As information from Europe built up, the response of British institutions, both Jewish and non-Jewish, became more organised. The first major rally held in Britain to protest against the German extermination programme was held in the Caxton Hall under the auspices of the British Labour Party on 2 September 1942. The Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, told the meeting that ‘the mounting tale of atrocity and horror was no surprise to the people of this country’.13 On 8 September the Prime Minister, Winston
Churchill, made the first government statement in the House of Commons specifically referring to the Jews. In a speech on German atrocities he described those committed against the Jews as ‘the most bestial, the most squalid and most senseless of all their offences’.  

Reports from Europe became increasingly desperate. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency carried a despatch on 20 September from ‘a point at the border of Axis-held territory’. The report ended with a terse invocation: ‘Pogroms on unprecedented scale in Poland. The Nazis have begun the extermination of Polish Jews. Save Us.’

No newspaper doubted the Nazis’ intent to destroy physically Europe’s Jews, nor the centrality of this aim in Nazi policy. The Rieger telegram, originally sent on 8 August, was published (without attribution) in the *Jewish Chronicle* on 2 October 1942 under the headline ‘Nazis’ Master Plan for Jews’. On 27 October the *Manchester Guardian* commented on a speech by Hitler (presumably that delivered on 30 September 1942 at the Berlin Sports Palace) which had threatened the annihilation of the Jews of Europe. The *Guardian* warned its readers not to take Hitler’s claim ‘as just another wild and whirling threat’; Hitler ‘aims literally at the extermination of the Jews in Europe so far as his hand can reach them’. Between one and two million Jews ‘are believed to have already been destroyed’, it stated, and perhaps four and a half million remained to be killed ‘if Hitler had his way’.

This murder of Europe’s Jews was seen as a distinct and unique phenomenon. In a three-page bulletin of 1 December 1942 the World Jewish Congress British Section reported on the ‘annihilation of European Jewry’. Hitler’s policy was ‘total destruction’. Two million Jews at least had already been ‘murdered, tortured and deliberately starved to death in Eastern Europe’. The number was probably ‘much greater’. Using for the first time the word that has since come to refer to the systematic murder of European Jewry, the bulletin stressed that in March 1942 ‘the holocaust took on a formal design under an explicit policy’. The *Times* in an article of 4 December under the title ‘Deliberate Policy for Extermination’ referred to a total of 1,700,000 Jews ‘liquidated’. The newspaper commented that ‘all other war crimes of Nazism will fail in the end – and the defeat of German Fascism is inevitable – but this particular aim, a complete extermination of Jews, is already being enforced’.  

December 1942 marked another important watershed in the flow of information to Anglo-Jewry. The *Jewish Chronicle*, collating
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earlier reports from Europe, appeared with a black border on its front page and a headline ‘Two Million Jews Slaughtered; Most Terrible Massacre of All Time: Appalling Horrors of Nazi Mass Murders’.20 Another attempt to raise people’s consciousness took place on 15 December 1942, when the Chief Rabbi, J. H. Hertz, declared a day of fasting and mourning for the victims of the Nazis, and a service was held at the Bevis Marks synagogue in London. The effect was maintained and emphasised when four days later, on 17 December, Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, made a detailed declaration on the extermination of European Jewry to the House of Commons issued in the name of eleven Allied Governments and of the French National Committee. The House rose and stood in silence for two minutes following the declaration.21

The beginning of 1943 saw important articles on the subject of European Jewry published prominently. The New Statesman and Nation printed on 9 January a major article entitled ‘Our Part in Massacre’. Hitler ‘is engaged in exterminating the Jews of Europe, not metaphorically, not more or less, but with a literal totalitarian completeness, as farmers try to exterminate Californian beetles’.22

Allied Government reaction to the news from Europe was now also the subject of comment. The Manchester Guardian on 22 April saw the Bermuda Refugee Conference as a ‘side-stepping of the Jewish problem. The facts remain, the extermination goes on.’23 On the same day The Times reported on a UP despatch from Sweden on ‘secret Polish radio’ containing the first news of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.24 The story of the Warsaw ghetto continued to unfold and on 23 May the Manchester Sunday Chronicle published a detailed account under the headline ‘Warsaw Jews Defy Nazis’ Might in Last Stand Against Mass Murder. Pitched Battle Rages in Ghetto.’25 As the toll of destruction mounted the People published a statement of the Institute of Jewish Affairs in New York on 17 October which declared that ‘Hitler has Murdered Three Million Jews in Europe’.26

The pattern of the Nazi extermination was clearly set by the time the Germans occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944. The Board of Deputies held an emergency meeting two days later to discuss the situation. The fate of Hungarian Jewry was in no doubt as the Jewish Chronicle headlined its story on 14 June 1944: ‘Hungarian Jews Doomed. Planned Extermination’.27 As reports of the deportations of Hungarian Jews to the death camps reached London Sidney