

Introduction

“One cannot even imagine what hardship the Jews in Eastern Europe have suffered,” wrote a youthful Lt. James Becker to his parents in Chicago. “Everywhere they have been plundered, driven out, homes destroyed, businesses ruined, until one is obliged to wonder if it ever will be possible to reconstruct these people. Personally I believe that a large percentage never will be saved or restored to their former position. And after all I am no pessimist. As a matter of fact I am generally quite optimistic. However, after having been given the chance to see the condition of the Jews in Poland, Galicia, Czecho-Slovakia, German-Austria, Roumania, Bessarabia and Bukovina you can believe me when I tell you that the burden of war has fallen on an undue and unbelievable proportion o[f] our coreligionists in all parts of Europe.”¹

James Becker, writing from Czernowitz,² was not a missionary, a businessman, nor a governmental official. This American-born, upper-middle-class Jewish twenty-five-year-old was working as a humanitarian delegate for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Traveling around Central and Eastern Europe in uniform after his US military service, he was having the education of a lifetime after his formal study at Cornell. Shouldering enormous responsibility alongside just a few other American Jews deployed by the JDC, he was supposed to be organizing humanitarian relief to save millions of European Jews from the ravages of war. Back in his home country, American Jews were raising millions of dollars and developing plans that he would have to try to carry out, balancing their instructions with his own inexperienced intuition regarding reality on the ground.

Without a state employing him, Becker’s American looks and demeanor still took him far: He was the closest thing out there to an American Jewish emissary. Nevertheless, well-positioned and optimistic as he was, Becker was sobered by the intensive, overwhelming task of relieving the suffering of Jewish strangers. They were frustrating and quarrelsome at times, unreformed and wholly un-American, and yet, these strangers were his own “coreligionists” whom he understood to be like several million destitute kin. His was serious business.

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Becker's humanitarian sojourn seems a familiar story, but upon closer inspection, it was rather unusual. It is not the story of American Jews arriving as US troops and liberating Nazi death camps, the story that sits at the center of our historical imagination regarding Jewish humanitarianism, especially where Eastern Europe is concerned. Rather, it took place a full generation earlier – his letter was composed in January 1920. Nor is it simply the romantic story of a hearty white American youth, off on a humanitarian adventure to feed the hungry children of Europe under Herbert Hoover's aegis for a short while. That story defined mainstream American humanitarianism of the moment. Becker and his peers occupied an ambiguous middle ground where worlds collided, precipitated by the Great War. This was international Jewish humanitarianism in action.

A Calamity of Stupendous Proportions

“The War was a calamity to the world at large; to the Jews it was a disaster of stupendous proportions.”³ Historian Abraham Duker's assessment of the Great War was published on the eve of the Second World War. And then, in the inconceivable horrors of the Second World War and the genocide of Jews, the Great War was promptly forgotten, never to be fully excavated. By exploring the birth of international Jewish humanitarianism in the age of the Great War, this book recovers a forgotten story. Put simply, the war sent the Jewish world into a tailspin. Jewish civilians and soldiers suffered terribly along the Eastern Front, which also happened to be where the majority of Jews in the world lived. Beyond untold deaths, it displaced more than a million Jewish refugees; created tens of thousands of Jewish war orphans; awakened intense anti-Jewish violence; and brought about the wholesale destruction of Jewish property, and with it, a way of life. In retrospect we can see that the Great War marked a crucial turning point in modern Jewish history, second only to the Holocaust.

In 1914, there were fourteen million Jews in the world, more than six million of whom lived in the Russian Empire. Large Jewish populations spanned Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. There were nearly three million Jews in the United States, which meant that American Jews were poised to become the largest Jewish population in the strongest neutral country, outside a war zone. The Polish Partitions at the end of the eighteenth century had long reverberations in European Jewish history and demography, splitting the heartland of European Jewry into three empires (Prussian, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian) and launching its Jews onto three different yet interrelated trajectories. Jews who were

legally confined in an area called the Pale of Settlement, which spanned the western provinces of the Russian Empire and part of Poland, suffered anti-Jewish violence and economic and legal oppression, particularly since the late nineteenth century. By contrast, Jews in the West, including Germany and Austria-Hungary, had been gradually emancipated since the French Revolution, and were increasingly acculturated and able to act with agency in domestic, imperial, and international politics. In many ways, the century leading up to the Great War was a golden age for Jews, with spreading emancipation, liberal immigration, and internal European peace.⁴ Progress and emancipation for all of Europe's Jews seemed as much on the horizon as the possibility of war and destruction.

But war was what arrived in the summer of 1914 in the German Empire, Russian Empire, Habsburg Empire, and Ottoman Empire, borderlands sometimes called the “bloodlands” or the “shatterzone of empires.”⁵ Destruction and revolution followed. The Eastern Front overlaid the most densely Jewish places on earth, from Vilna and Poland, to Galicia in eastern Austria-Hungary, to Ukraine and Romania. Jews living within the shatterzone were exposed to the rampages of successive armies passing through their small urban dwellings as the front pushed west and east. *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone*, produced in 1916 by the American Jewish Committee, and based on careful research in several languages, noted that seven million Jews bore the brunt of the war, one million more than Belgium's population, which received much greater Western attention.⁶ Jews fled in advance of armies, joining streams of refugees headed toward Siberia, Warsaw, Vienna, Budapest, and Constantinople, and estimates are that well over a million Jews became refugees. Although general civilian suffering from scorched-earth tactics, chaos, famine, cold, and disease was widespread along the Eastern Front, the wide acceptance of the antisemitic idea that Jews were or could become a danger to the conduct of the war proved particularly dangerous.⁷ Jewish residents were deported from the front lines or targeted for violence by troops or other locals. Families were broken up, dispersed in different directions, and searched for one another, unable to reconnect.⁸ From warring sides, Jews were charged with all manner of flimsy, antisemitic accusations, from well poisoning to hiding enemy soldiers, spying, speaking the occupiers' language (Yiddish, a Germanic language), to being Bolsheviks.⁹ Even where people survived, schools, synagogues, and homes were closed or destroyed. Occupying armies gunned and tore down for firewood buildings from which Jewish inhabitants had been driven.¹⁰

In Russia, military operations ordered the mass expulsion, region by region, of Jews from war zones in their westward drive across the Pale of

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Settlement. Military authorities scarcely considered the logistical conditions or results of these deportation orders.¹¹ The one to two *million* Jews displaced from the front formed a mass humanitarian crisis. As they headed into Russia's interior, sent packing or forced into freight trains, they quickly overwhelmed Jewish social services in nearby cities. Romania's entry into the war in 1916 opened a bloody chapter of Romanian Jewish history that barely made headlines: targeted surveillance and abuse of Jewish soldiers, outlawing Yiddish, mass expulsions, pogroms "more or less organized by the authorities," and mass arrests and executions.¹² When the Russian Revolution overthrew the tsar in March 1917, Russian Jews were officially emancipated, which produced fleeting euphoria, until the Bolshevik Revolution in October of that year.¹³ The Russian Revolution also sparked antisemitic backlash across the border in Romania, as Romanian Jews stood accused of treason and sympathizing with the revolution.¹⁴

The Central Powers meanwhile occupied Poland and Lithuania and marched across Galicia in the eastern reaches of Austria-Hungary. Jews escaping their small, vulnerable market towns crowded into Warsaw, Vienna, Prague, and Budapest, effecting an extraordinary acceleration of urbanization: Traditional Jews were suddenly visible in all of Central Europe's major cities. Estimates suggested that nearly a half million Jewish refugees moved within the Habsburg monarchy alone. Jews were granted freedoms under German occupation in Poland and Lithuania, but some were forcibly deported to work inside Germany proper.¹⁵ As Catholic Poles sought to regain Polish independence as an outcome of war, they not infrequently turned against Jewish neighbors.¹⁶

The worst was yet to come. As militaries were defeated, empires crumbled and revolutions overthrew the political order. Civil and interstate wars were underway, making government protection utterly unreliable. The hardships of war – including severe food shortages, sometimes blamed on Jewish "middlemen," rather than on warring states – created a breeding ground for antisemitism. Pogroms took place across East Central Europe and Russia in 1918, reaching their height, but not ending, in 1919, killing or injuring hundreds of thousands of Jews and stripping survivors of their property. Alongside traditional interethnic hatreds, non-Jews were increasingly motivated by a concocted association between all Jews and the Bolsheviks.¹⁷ These striking death tolls and the performativity of violence against Jews were unprecedented in modern times. In hindsight, these years look like some of the earliest examples of the mass interethnic violence that would characterize the twentieth century, and the bridge connecting the Russian pogrom to the Holocaust.¹⁸

Jews in the Ottoman Empire did not fare better. The economy of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, depended on the receipt of *chalukah*, or charitable donations for scholars from the Jewish community abroad. This entire network fell apart immediately at the war's outbreak.¹⁹ A volatile political situation already existed within the empire that opened the door to the mass murder of Armenians, another minority people, combined with high death rates from starvation and military service across the empire. In this context, Jews felt especially precarious without their usual means of outside support. The 1917 Balfour Declaration was a sign of great promise for Jews but also resulted in the suffering of Jews in lands still under the control of Djemal Pasha and the evacuation of the 9,000 remaining members of the Jewish population of Jaffa.²⁰

Jews were not entirely passive victims in the war, but their participation did not go as planned. They signed up in record numbers for their countries' militaries, especially in Germany and Austria-Hungary, well above their proportions to the general population, displaying their loyalty and bravery to their homelands in the hopes that emancipation or further integration would follow on the heels of war. Jewish units were created within the framework of the British army.²¹ Organizations sprung up to support Jewish soldiers and veterans, such as the Jewish Welfare Board in the United States.²² Jewish women jumped into philanthropic activities to support the war, and men and women participated in civil and labor services.²³ Still others set about chronicling their experiences in the war, spurring a new genre of writing about anti-Jewish violence and producing a generation of Jewish ethnographers.²⁴ While war made coordination among Western European Jewish communities impossible, Western European Jews could take action on behalf of Jews within their own empires and across allied states.

At first, the war seemed to hold all kinds of possibilities for Jews. Even Tsarist Russia promised that Jews would gain full equality after the conflict. Few of these hoped-for gains on the battlefield came to fruition, except for the Zionist breakthrough of Jewish units in Palestine. Instead, Jewish soldiers suffered in social isolation in the trenches, died in the fighting, or were taken as prisoners of war, leaving behind women, children, and elderly Jews, who had to fend for themselves on the front lines of war. Jews in Galicia captured by the invading Russian army, for example, were women, children, and the elderly, who were raped and treated as enemies of state while their able-bodied men fought Austria-Hungary's battles elsewhere. The very destruction of total war then made it extremely difficult to publicize and keep records of it.²⁵

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The Great War rendered Jews a whole diaspora walking;²⁶ it was the most extensive and swiftest geopolitical displacement in Jewish history since late antiquity. Jews were not trapped and systematically murdered en masse as they would be just one generation later, at least not outside Ukraine. Still, Jewish refugees did not have a safe place to go or any government or military to protect them. The war upended “the search for physical security” that was a principal problem of modern Jewish life.²⁷ Contemporary documents show similarities with Holocaust-era writing: “Hundreds of thousands were forced from their homes ... the more fortunate being packed and shipped as freight— ... the less fortunate driven into the woods and swamps to die of starvation.” “Orgies of lust and torture took place in public in the light of day.” “Jews were burned alive in synagogues where they had fled for shelter.”²⁸ The mass dislocation and disruption of Jewish life in the Great War must therefore be seen both as a distinct, meaningful event in Jewish history and also within the context of state-sanctioned or state-organized violence in the long twentieth century, especially in the shatterzone, often directed at long-marginalized civilian “others” and rarely ending in restorative justice of any kind. If the Balkan wars and the Armenian genocide opened a violent century, the Jewish disaster of the First World War continued it and presaged its tragic intensification.

The armistice in 1918 allowed the Great Powers of the West to come to a peace agreement, though on the Eastern Front violence intensified rather than receded.²⁹ Nationalism surged over the course of the war, and the borderlands of former empires were parceled out in Paris into a buffer zone of independent states. This had the effect of splintering a dispersed Jewish population into discrete ethno-religious minorities within their many new states. In 1922, more than 70 percent of the world’s Jews lived under regimes that had not governed their place of residence before the war.³⁰ The “Jewish Question” hung over the peacemakers, dogging efforts to redraw the map of Europe according to US President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points and promises made during wartime. The Jewish Question in European diplomacy had begun at the Congress of Vienna a century earlier and remained part of Great Power summits as Jewish notables in their midst sought to gain or assure the maintenance of rights on behalf of oppressed Jews.³¹

Eventually, a series of Minorities Treaties were appended to the peace treaty, largely based on the initiative of Jewish leaders who coalesced in Paris to lobby peacemakers.³² The Minorities Treaties were designed to protect Jews and other national minorities (today one would say “ethnic minorities”) under the guarantee of the new League of Nations. This political achievement, as well as the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which

boosted the Zionist movement, were significant and offered reason for optimism. Both seemed to recognize the Jewish people as a coherent entity: The Minorities Treaty conceived of Jews as one national minority existing across and within many nation-states simultaneously and the Balfour Declaration envisaged Jews as forming a protonation.

“The Jewish Question” is a problematic slogan that has a long history of its own. The Jewish Question might be better thought of as “Jewish questions,” a series of interrelated, hard to resolve issues around emancipation, antisemitism, Zionism, citizenship, labor, capitalism, and anti-Jewish violence, all of which fall under the larger question about how Jews fit into modern European society. In European diplomatic history, diplomats considered Jewish questions on multiple occasions, trying to figure out how to categorize Jews within and caught in between other political considerations. Often, Jewish notables brought Jewish suffering abroad to the attention of their own political leaders at international congresses or diplomatic summits in the hopes that their leaders would intervene, especially in far-flung lands where they had imperial influence. Nineteenth-century European politics produced several intractable social “questions,” not the Jewish one alone – a context that can be helpful to remember.³³ The “Jewish Question” has also been used in a pejorative, antisemitic way to fundamentally question the place of Jews within Europe and for which the Nazis designed a “Final Solution.” But Jews themselves also seized upon this label to collectively invoke their intractable political, social, and economic difficulties in modernizing, industrializing, nationalizing, and internationalizing Europe.³⁴

Taken together, the war experience, American ascendancy, the Balfour Declaration, the Russian Revolution, the new states of East Central Europe, and new migration restrictions completely transformed Jewish life across Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. International Jewish political leadership shifted irrevocably across the Atlantic. The disaster of stupendous proportions prompted an unprecedented international aid effort led by American Jews on behalf of their suffering kin. This humanitarian relief, of course, was also an extended act of Jewish agency in a war that caused much Jewish suffering. It was fundamental to the Jewish experience of the Great War, but we have known almost nothing about it. Not only did American Jews go to Paris in 1919 to see to it that Jews would be afforded rights after the war, but they also sent millions of dollars to Europe and the Middle East during the war and continued to in its wake. This would create long-lasting, systematic change across the Jewish world, which is the focus of this book.

The New Jewish Leadership

US Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, first made Jewish leaders in New York aware of Jewish suffering in August 1914, when he sent an urgent telegram to prominent banker Jacob Schiff through the US State Department.³⁵ By early autumn, appeals from Jewish leaders from around Europe and the Mediterranean were pouring in for the American Jewish Committee (AJC). Louis Marshall, head of the AJC, busied himself responding to his colleagues overseas. Writing to the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, appealing on behalf of Russian Jews stranded there, Marshall pledged American Jewish cooperation and action. “We are also confronted with the enormous problem which will undoubtedly be presented by the Jews within the Russian Pale, in Galicia, and in East Prussia,” he wrote in September 1914.

When one thinks, that seven and a half million Jews are directly in the war zone, that there are upwards of 300,000 Jews in the Russian army, and perhaps half that number in the Austrian and German armies, it is evident that the Jews of the entire world will be called upon to co-operate for the relief of the inevitable and unspeakable suffering which these unfortunate cannot possibly escape.

That relief, however, could not include harboring Jewish refugees in the United States; after years of working as an immigration lawyer and leader of the American Jewish Committee, he knew that America’s increasingly restrictionist initiatives would not permit such a plan.³⁶ Thus, relief would have to be sent overseas. Furthermore, the “Jews of the entire world” were soon drawn into conflict themselves. Before the calendar year came to a close, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which was founded in response to these appeals, sent \$185,000 to Morgenthau directly, and to Vienna, Palestine, Russia, and to Americans stranded in Antwerp.³⁷ Tens of millions of dollars would follow.

Just a few months before, Jewish Americans had no idea that a protracted and gruesome war would overtake Europe and involve its alliances and colonies worldwide. No one did. Until this point, American Jews had no humanitarian infrastructure to speak of, nothing like that of their Jewish counterparts in Western and Central Europe. Like other Americans, Jewish Americans had only a practiced habit of running local communal and social institutions and undertaking associated philanthropic work. Foreign need precipitated by the Great War triggered the growth of American humanitarianism generally and of federated national and international American Jewish philanthropy specifically. Indeed, when the time came to turn these institutions outward to face the rest

of the world – to the “old world” in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean – American Jews generated the infrastructure and funds with remarkable speed, and with a resiliency that has lasted over a century.

American Jews had many overseas Jewish models to inspire their own organizations. Since the early nineteenth century, acculturated and wealthy Central and West European Jewish notables interceded on behalf of suffering Jews in the East, working with their imperial governments to build Western-style Jewish schools in colonies around the Mediterranean and helping Jews migrate to America. Emancipated European Jews were eager to appear in sync with their governments on questions of domestic as well as foreign and imperial policy, envisioning a mutually beneficial relationship.³⁸ Over the course of the nineteenth century, single intercessors and benefactors such as Moses Montefiore, Baron Maurice de Hirsch, Adolphe Crémieux, and the Rothschild family were replaced by organizations that grew up around them, especially after the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris. These organizations included the Conjoint Foreign Committee of British Jews, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, the Israelitische Allianz zu Wien, and the Jewish Colonisation Association.³⁹

These organizations had already generated three categories of activity to address the Jewish Question: improving the social and political position of Eastern Jews in situ; providing for the emigration of skilled workers to economically advanced regions; and initiating mass agricultural colonization.⁴⁰ Even in areas where Jews had not been granted full rights, like Russia, Romania, and the Ottoman Empire, by the early twentieth century, Jews had developed their own organizations that cooperated with, competed with, or called upon Western partners in times of need. By the turn of the century, these institutions – combined with additional transmigration relief societies and sheltering homes, agrarianization programs, anti-white slavery organizations, Jewish feminist social welfare organizations, B'nai Brith or other fraternal lodges, hometown associations in the New World, Zionist organizations, the chalukah collections for Palestine, and the traditional charitable organizations of local Jewish communities – formed a diffuse transnational network across the Mediterranean and Europe and to the Americas that mixed philanthropic and diplomatic functions.

The transatlantic connections of elite American Jews were rooted in the world of the private merchant bank. This small world of banking dynasties – the Rothschilds their most famous representative – emerged from west German lands. By the early twentieth century, they connected

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a small group of wealthy, intra-married Jews in ongoing transactions requiring a high level of trust across Central and Western Europe and to New York. The bank of Kuhn, Loeb, & Co. was the New York address for Jewish gentlemen banking at the turn of the century, with Jacob Schiff, Paul and Felix Warburg, and Loeb and Kuhn family members leading the way. Kuhn Loeb was the House of JPMorgan's "strongest competitor and an important collaborator," though it did not share the social background of the Morgans, who descended from early, white Protestant American settlers.⁴¹ Other elite American Jewish merchant banks, including Seligman, Goldman Sachs, and Lehman Brothers, shared kinship and social networks with Kuhn Loeb. Kuhn Loeb's partners were German Jewish, and maintained close ties to Jewish banks back in Germany, notably, the Warburg brothers' bank M & M Warburg & Co.

These tight-knit American Jewish merchant bankers lived in mansions along Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. They were acculturated, and yet distinct from the rest of New York's high society. Though excluded from the most elite social clubs, they did not necessarily seek assimilation.⁴² They were not just bankers but sometimes had major "merchant" aspects to their businesses, such as large department stores, manufacturing, and mining.⁴³ These bankers and merchants maintained close connections to politically oriented Jews whose personal and professional lineages connected them to the Habsburg Revolutions of 1848, such as Louis Marshall, Louis Brandeis, Stephen Wise, and Henrietta Szold.⁴⁴ Overlapping networks in civic and political organizations as well as the business world gave these "uptown Jews" access to the American elite, and bound them to many of the same structural and historical realities.⁴⁵ Thus, despite lingering separate Jewish and white Protestant spheres within America's elite, Schiff, Warburg, Rockefeller, and Carnegie shared practices and norms in business and similar commitments to philanthropy and a capitalist social order.

Uptown Jews dominated American Jewish social and political affairs at the turn of the century, funding and arranging for social service provision to Yiddish-speaking Russian Jewish immigrants. They were animated by antisemitism – Jacob Schiff consistently fought discrimination in the United States and confronted it abroad, especially attempting to undermine Tsarist Russia.⁴⁶ The Straus family, owners of R. H. Macy & Co, New York's biggest department store, included a committed Zionist and New York philanthropist (Nathan) who sponsored mass milk pasteurization and distribution programs for the poor; a career federal politician (Oscar) – US Cabinet Secretary, Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and founder of the American Society of International Law in 1906; and a