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The Forty Years' Crisis: The Jewish Dimension

Mark Levene

In a three-day period at the end of August 1941, near an obscure western Ukrainian town close to the intersection of the pre-war Polish, Soviet, Hungarian and Rumanian borders, some 23,600 Jews were murdered by the Nazis. Noteworthy for this being the first occasion in which the tally reached and vastly surpassed a five figure number as well as one of the first in which men, women and children were systematically exterminated, the massacres at Kamenets-Podolsk have been treated by historians as a major staging post in the shift from an initial 'experimental' phase in the Nazi destruction of European Jewry to a programme of concerted annihilation, which we have come to recognize as the Holocaust.¹

Yet this is only half the story. Though some of the murdered Jews were Soviet citizens local to the town, some 16,000 were either Jews who had recently been made stateless by the Hungarians in the nearby Carpatho-Rus region, were refugees from across Europe evicted by Budapest – as the US ambassador there noted in 'distinct violation of the right of asylum' – or were Rumanian Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina forcibly deported by the Bucharest authorities.² In other words, the majority of those killed at Kamenets-Podolsk, alongside many more who died in nearby massacres at this time, were either Jews who had been denied their citizenship or their recognition as legitimate asylum seekers by states other than Germany but who then used the opportunity of Operation Barbarossa to illegally erupt them across international borders into a Nazi-occupied war zone.

From this perspective Kamenets-Podolsk becomes less a significant moment in the unfolding of a specifically Hitlerian drive against the Jews and more a climactic one in a much wider and deeper European, not to say global, crisis of Jewish displacement and unwantedness. Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to propose that the attempted destruction of European Jewry, while clearly the direct outcome of a self-inflicted Nazi cul-de-sac in their own efforts to be rid of them, was also a consequence of this much more embedded and universal malaise. One might go further and suggest that the international community, through its individual and collective ambiguity, if not downright refusal, to accept the notion of displaced and dispossessed Jews from the Reich, and beyond, as *refugees* – either in principle or practice – paved the way for and, inadvertently or otherwise, became complicit in the radicalized Nazi solution to the problem.

Yet a difficult question is posed by the implications of this assertion. The forty-year refugee crisis, as this book makes abundantly clear, was hardly a Jewish one alone. Indeed, one could argue that in terms of a truly searing moment, when the liberal West was faced with having to do something immediate and consequential to relieve a truly gargantuan emergency prior to the Second World War, it was not Jews who were the community at issue, but rather the Greeks of Asia Minor. Compared with this 1922 catastrophe, the British refugee expert, Sir John Hope Simpson, considered the much smaller number of central European Jews at the centre of the 1938 emergency an entirely more manageable prospect. Yet Hope Simpson also recognized that the immediate pre-war Nazi effort at Jewish expulsion had the capacity to trigger a much wider and entirely more demographically serious displacement of the much larger Ashkenazi communities further to the east.³ Even then, this might simply remind us that these Jews were among *many* peoples who were exposed to the winds of radical change as the imperial empires of the historically multi-ethnic rimlands of eastern Europe and western Eurasia were replaced by successor polities implicitly or explicitly committed to nation-state-building master narratives. Indeed, this intense epoch of 'minority group' vulnerability coincided with the exact post-Great War moment when what Alfred Crosby has dubbed the neo-Europes, most especially North America, blocked off the migratory safety valve, which had provided refuge for any number of diverse peoples prior to 1914.⁴ After all, the estimated 2.4–2.7 million Jews who exited Europe for these new worlds between 1881 and 1914, at a rate of 65,000 per annum to the United States alone in the key 1899–1910 phase, were only a fraction of the total European or near-European migrant exodus from this period.⁵ But if this process was both momentous and traumatic, it only provided the antechamber to the post-1918 crisis because the relatively minimally regulated and largely unstanched prior flow was superseded by an entirely more mobilized, bureaucratic regime of immigration controls and quotas.

From this perspective the specifically Jewish refugee crisis might be seen as yet another symptom of the post-Great War mismatch between the urgent needs of minority group exit from the imperial shatter-zones, as set against the barriers to Western state ingress heralded by the onset of a contemporary era of close state supervision and surveillance of cross-border people movements. This, in the starkest terms, would reduce the Jewish crisis to an entirely functional question, a position sometimes adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and most certainly in some of the 'blue-skies' thinking of Franklin D. Roosevelt's top-secret 1940s M-Project (M for Migration) to shift Europe's surplus peoples, Jews included, to often far-flung and obscure colonial vistas.⁶ Yet we have already proposed that the actual Nazi denouement cannot be viewed as some entirely aberrant or peculiarly contingent twist in an otherwise fraught yet ongoing process, leading towards some ultimately benign resolution of the refugee crisis, Jewish or Gentile. This is why it has to be contextualized within its wider parameters. What nevertheless stands out about the Jewish aspect is not just the extreme cultural hostility evinced towards Jews at national and international levels, but the way this translated into an almost standard political pretext to deny or refute the existence of a specific Jewish refugee issue at all. As the Zionist leader, Chaim Weizmann acidly summarized at the time of the infamous Evian

Conference, the world had become divided 'into two camps, one of countries expelling Jews, and the other of countries which did not admit them'.⁷

To be sure, the reification of all state actions on the one hand, and a more general societal animus on the other into a single indictment of anti-Semitism, fails to grasp the spectrum of tendencies at work, some of which were empathetically, even defiantly, humanitarian. By the same token, any assumption that there was or could only be one single Jewish response, encapsulated in the Zionist insistence that the only answer to the crisis was the creation of a sovereign state of their own in Palestine, wilfully ignores Jewish narratives which sought other routes to communal rescue and survival. It also avoids the impact that the creation of Israel had in terms of its knock-on displacements – both Jewish and non-Jewish – on the manner in which the forty-year crisis had a pronounced if convoluted afterlife.

That said, the fundamental historical challenge is to understand the causative factors which lead to primary, dominant trends with significant or lasting outcomes, as opposed to those which become recessive, submerged or completely obliterated by the course of events. And one cannot but note that what stands out as dominant in Gentile terms, namely a desire to be shot of Jewish 'refugees' through some far away, extra-European territorialized 'solution,' had its corollary in mainstream Zionism's absolute rejection of humanitarian asylum notions in favour of a politically led, if firmly Palestine-centric, 'emergence from powerlessness'.⁸ The searing tragedy of the actual Jewish crisis is that set against these grand political agendas, vast swathes of human beings caught in the middle were denied their most urgent need: a place of genuine refuge. Or put another way, the road from Kamenets-Podolsk towards Auschwitz may have been in some very definite sense unilaterally taken, yet it is very difficult to conceive of it in isolation from the broadening gulf between the asylum imperative and the absence of effective international response.

The onset of mass Ashkenazi migration from eastern Europe is usually dated to 1881 as galvanized by the wave of pogroms across the Russian Pale of Settlement, following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. For our purposes, however, a stronger clue to the crisis as it would begin to crystallize forty years later is offered by the great power deliberations on the 'Jewish question' three years earlier at the Congress of Berlin. The point at issue was the sovereignty of recently self-appointed post-Ottoman Balkan polities, and more exactly, whether the persistent refusal by Rumania to grant citizenship to the majority of its Jews would debar Bucharest from international recognition. The issue of political and civil rights aside, what Rumanian stonewalling at the Congress posited was the possibility that a modern nation-state might determine that a portion of its population were on ethnic or religious grounds *apatrides*, yet in spite of that could still be accepted as a fully recognized member of the community of nations. But then, from a Rumanian perspective, most of the Jews in question were not 'native' but in the words of one notable supporter at Berlin, the Russian foreign minister Alexander Gorchakov, 'a veritable scourge to the indigenous population'. Gorchakov drew out his point to his fellow plenipotentiaries by making a distinction between 'the *israélites* of Berlin, Paris, London or Vienna, to whom one would assuredly not withhold these rights, with the *juiifs* of Serbia, Rumania and several Russian provinces' who were inferred to be alien invaders disruptive of any 'natural' societal evolution.⁹

A few years later the influential Polish journal *Głos* would reinforce the insinuation thus: 'Every society, in relation to the Jews, must work to destroy them – whether we will call this extermination, expulsion, or assimilation, does not change the essence of things. Both judeophiles and anti-Semites want to destroy the Jews as Jews, that is, as representatives of a separate society.'¹⁰

Through to the outset of the Great War, such a gloomy forecast appeared to be only partially proven. In 1878 the immediate diplomatic *scandale* of Rumanian intransigence on Jewish rights had been averted, while the deteriorating condition for Jews in the east did not lead to the raising of the emigration drawbridge. However, what is interesting about this immediate pre-crisis period is the degree to which elite Jewish opinion was so thoroughly exercised by the scale of the migration flow. Largely plutocratic Western Jewish leaderships, operating on the assumption that large numbers of incoming *Ostjuden* spelt the rise of domestic anti-Semitism, strove to develop strategies aimed at moving them on, dispersing them away from major metropolises, or even, as in the case of Anglo-Jewish Board of Guardians, paying for their repatriation.¹¹ Yet Theodor Herzl, the *fin de siècle* arch-prophet of Zionism, sought to mobilize the international community behind his notion of a Jewish sovereign state on the not dissimilar premise that as a matter of self-interest the great powers would want to help found such a 'colonial' entity – even in Africa – in order to siphon off a mass Ashkenazi influx to their own shores.¹² Other non-Zionist schemes such as that of the Jewish Colonization Association to settle Jews on the Argentine Pampas, or that of the Jewish Territorial Organization – which was less particular about the exact geographical locale – seem to have been motivated by similar imperatives.¹³ If some of the thinking behind such projects was certainly utopian as opposed to the more precisely dystopian Gentile fantasies from the late 1930s and early 1940s for removing European Jews en bloc to some faraway hell, not only do these tendencies suggest an elite Jewish perception of migrant co-religionists as a problem to be resolved en masse but they also indicate an underlying cultural sensitivity on the matter, reflecting an almost Gorchakov-like duality.

The pre-1914 Jewish world thus provides a rather fractured insight into the early intimations of how Jews would respond, in the event of the real crisis later on. There were Zionists longing for an imagined Jewish national community in Palestine, very often impelled by a horror of the *shmutzige shtetl* (filthy village) of east European life. There were acculturated western Jews supposedly at daggers drawn with Zionism, who often wanted to be kind and generous to needy immigrants but in their heart of hearts also wanted them to go anywhere but where they lived. And then there was the vast majority of the immigrants themselves whose ideological moorings may have been flaky, shifting or non-existent but who responded to their increasingly dire situation at home with a firm determination that however they were going to get there and whatever bureaucratic obstacles were thrown in their path it was not towards Palestine, or some other distant agricultural colony, but the true *goldene medina* (promised land): New York.

This presents a certain paradox about the pre-1914 migration sequence. Should we call this in itself a refugee crisis? With various caveats the answer is not quite. So long as they could, even when as a consequence of direct flight-specific pogrom events

perhaps excluded, most departing Jews were able to do so in relatively good order. And working through their own increasingly transnational family networks for subsistence and support, they did not generally need interfering communal organizations to show them how to do it, however grateful the migrants may have been for temporary Jewish charity-supported shelter and succour in transit or on destination arrival. To be sure, there is another darker side to this pre-1914 assessment. Set against Western liberal expressions of sympathy for their persecution, there was a growing, insistent and most often media-led, demotic trend within receiving countries, which mimicked not so much the Gorchakov as the *Glos* line. The very term 'alien' as given concrete political expression in the British statute of 1905 gives the lie to the notion that this virulently anti-Semitic trend was a purely 'continental' phenomenon. It is true that the Aliens Act proved to be much worse in its threatened bark than its actual bite. Nor in itself did it radically stem the Jewish immigrant flow to London's East End and other major cities. Yet the very fact that this was the first time that Britain had introduced immigration controls and registration paved the way for an entirely new regime. The British Aliens Restriction Act rushed through Parliament within twenty-four hours of Britain declaring war on Germany on 5 August 1914, marks a precise cut-off date.¹⁴ The era of open, laissez-faire migration from East to West was over.

The point at which one might thus set the emergence of a genuine Jewish refugee crisis narrative would appear to be the moment when wartime legislation was reaffirmed for the peace, in the British case with the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act extending the terms of its 1914 predecessor but now also consciously omitting any reference to refugees or asylum.¹⁵ With the US quota system coming into force two years later, the safety valve enabling east European Jewish exit to the west was almost completely shut off. Yet this needs to be set against why it was exactly this moment when the potentiality of mass Jewish flight from Russia and eastern Europe became so acute. The Great War's most long-term and searing consequence was the destruction of the old, multi-ethnic European empires and their replacement by post-imperial regimes which, whether national or Soviet, had little or no wish to accommodate the ongoing existence of Jews as Jews in their midst. In fact, the possibility of some huge, even total, Jewish evacuation from the empire had already passed a threshold during the war when the Tsarist military had of their own initiative sought to eruct some three quarters of a million Russian Jews in the line of their 1915 'Great Retreat'. The event has largely gone down a memory hole, utterly eclipsed as it was by the Hitlerian exterminations in this same rimlands' arena a world war later. The closest synchronous Great War parallel is with the Ottoman Armenian deportations. To be sure, whereas the latter were either cover for or prelude to mass extermination, total Jewish disaster at the hands of the Russian *Stavka* was averted in critical part because political pressures from the Western Allies – rehearsing the stock-in-trade line that a total assault on Russian Jewry would undermine Wall Street credit, not to say the sympathies of a still neutral America – prevailed.¹⁶

The Great War emergence of an international Jewish power motif cannot but be factored into our overall crisis narrative here. Later on, Hitler, the motif's most fervent believer, ultimately believing himself stymied by Jewry's supposed manipulation of Washington and London, accelerated the crisis towards a point of no return. By

contrast, the 1915 emergency was diffused through Russia's temporary lifting of the Pale: the rimland provinces beyond which to the east Jews were historically disallowed from inhabiting. Nevertheless, what was latent in 1915 became manifest in 1919 when in the post-tsarist civil war struggles for control of the region, most particularly this time in the Ukraine, Petliurist troops, quasi-independent warlords and finally Denikin's White Army revenged themselves on Jews for their military defeats at the hands of the Bolsheviks in a manner and on a scale entirely dwarfing the grass-roots pogroms of pre-war years.¹⁷ If eastern Jewish exodus to the West had been possible, this is the most likely moment, pre-1939 when it might have occurred. Instead, those who attempted to make the journey were more than likely to end up for months if not years in the shipping-line-run, Jewish charity-supported transmigrant camps such as that at Atlantic Park, near Southampton, stranded between a United States which refused them entry and a Soviet Russia to which they dared not return.¹⁸

To be sure, there was meant to be an international post-war system aimed at preventing this sort of *staatenlos* (statelessness) void, though it was hardly applicable to Soviet territories where Western Allied diktat – despite want of trying – had failed to penetrate. The Minorities Treaties – an adjunct to the Western-imposed Versailles and related peace settlements – were at face value an attempt to secure not only the political but also cultural rights of ethno-religious communities within the now post-imperial, purportedly nationally self-determined states of the 'New Europe'. Indeed, as Zara Steiner also notes in her chapter, the treaties were very specifically formulated with Jews in mind as an atypical ubiquitous 'minority' grouping who did not obviously fit within or were deemed absorbable into this national societal reordering.¹⁹ However, we might equally view the treaties as a weak Western Allied attempt to shore up their own domestic frontiers from a wave of Jewish migrants by anchoring them instead in the 'New Europe' countries where they resided. The fact that the elites of these states themselves looked upon the treaties as an unwarranted interference in their sovereign rights, rather like Rumania had done in 1878, and that many of their Jewish inhabitants themselves had no obvious loyalty to the national ethos to which they were now supposedly wedded rather underscores the provisionality of the arrangement.

One might argue that there was an important new safety valve: Palestine. But we need to approach this idea with caution. At the end of the Great War there was no Western master plan, which conceived of the Minorities Treaties on the one hand, a League of Nations-authorized British Mandate to create a Jewish National Home in post-Ottoman Palestine on the other, as two synergistic sides of a liberal commitment to Jewish refuge from anti-Semitism. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 had been a wartime contingency founded on Whitehall's own vastly confabulated assumptions about the role – and behaviour – of Russian Jewry in the Bolshevik equation.²⁰ And while reaffirming the post-war commitment to the Zionist endeavour, successive British administrations had no intention of allowing a Jewish migration into an already populated Arab region to destabilize the UK's own best interests. Necessarily these seemed to be served by maintaining some modicum of demographic balance. That said, the irreconcilable aspects of the undertaking ensured a convoluted trajectory leading in 1937 to the Peel plan to partition Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, only for Whitehall to then execute a rapid about-turn – the May

1939 MacDonald White Paper – in which it came as close as it conceivably could to relinquishing the entire Zionist commitment and with it almost all further Jewish immigration into the Mandate.²¹

Peel thus represents a high watermark in what might have been, had Britain grasped the nettle. The other side of the coin is that the Jewish Agency, the Zionist body constituted to facilitate development in Mandate Palestine, was itself hardly geared up for either rapid, let alone massive, immigration or settlement. Some extravagant early forecasts aside on the number of Jews Palestine could absorb, the Agency's main aim was to foster a slow but steady year-on-year Jewish ingress until such time as having not only created a 'majority' but demonstrated to the British that the experiment was sound, the latter would have no choice but to relinquish the country to Zionist control. To be sure, a decade into the experiment, unintended contingencies started shifting this long-term game plan in entirely unforeseen directions. One of these was the Ha'avara Agreement (August 1933). An ingenuous Zionist scheme to link Jewish migration with a Depression-hit German economic recovery, a Nazi renegotiation of the package secured the flight of mostly but not exclusively wealthier German Jews in such a way that they were able to recover a modicum of their assets in Palestine. The controversy about dealing with the Nazis aside, the Ha'avara Agreement helped enable a mid-1930s migration spurt, which brought the Jewish element to some 400,000 or one-third of the population total.²² This proved a precipitating factor in the 1936 Arab revolt and so paved the way for Peel and his radical solution. However, the Jewish Agency was not yet ready for statehood, or at least not for the *much* smaller territory the British were now offering.²³

The partition proposal highlighted the nub of the Jewish nationalist dilemma. Political Zionism was nothing if not about sovereign self-possession. Back in 1903 the movement reluctantly conceded to the ephemeral British offer of a colony in Uganda as a *nacht-asyl* – in other words, a temporary way station en route to Palestine. The Yishuv, the pre-state entity, by contrast was never conceived of as an emergency refuge, the Nazi threat notwithstanding. To be sure, by the early 1930s a more urgent mood prevailed. The assault on another minority community – the so-called Assyrian affair – in nearby newly independent Iraq had galvanized some Zionist thinking towards the need for a general European Jewish evacuation plan. Initially, it was so-called Revisionists, acolytes of Vladimir Jabotinsky such as Abba Achimeir, who were its open, sometimes shrill, proponents.²⁴ But leading Yishuv figures such as David Ben-Gurion were by 1937 also weighing up the options not least through setting up a secret committee, which was to consider how a mass transfer of Palestinians to surrounding Arab states might facilitate the object. Ironically, the then plight of German Jewry remained essentially marginal to either explicit or implicit Jewish Agency agendas except insofar as it helped put greater pressure on the British to accelerate a pro-Zionist solution. German Jews were generally not considered ideal immigrants to Palestine because very few of them were committed Zionists. But then the Yishuv leadership repeatedly evinced a notable lack of enthusiasm for its main east European constituency, most of whom were deemed to lack the sort of pioneering ethos or credentials considered essential for Jewish nation-state building.²⁵

Zionist ambivalence on its supposed mass following aside, Palestine could only have assisted the actual refugee crisis as it came to a head in 1938–9 if the British had

been prepared to follow through on the Peel recommendations, indigenous population ‘transfer’ from the Jewish to neighbouring Arab states included, or there again offered a ‘territorial’ solution to European Jewish unwantedness, somewhere else in its far-flung empire. In fact, as the crisis intensified, all manner of settlement projects were, to varying degrees, explored by the British Colonial Office. The roster included British Guiana, Borneo, Nyasaland and northern Rhodesia. And where the British were not involved directly, they were party to a range of other schemes and enquiries, which included Portuguese Angola, French Guiana, New Caledonia and above all Madagascar, a three-man Polish-sponsored commission to which in the summer of 1939 reported entirely negatively on its settlement prospects.²⁶ What we remember today is the Nazi scheme, one year later, to turn the island into a tropical death camp. Yet how big was the gulf between Nazi thinking and that of Poles, Rumanians, French, British or even Americans when it came to ‘spiriting away’ the Jews to some distant vista?²⁷

What many European leaders in truth would have liked for the *Ostjuden* was that they were eructed en masse to somewhere closer to the moon. As late as 1946, the British Foreign Office were in all seriousness inquiring of Moscow as to whether the far-eastern Soviet territory of Birobidzhan might be available for Jewish post-war ‘displaced persons.’²⁸ Yet what is extraordinary about this fairyland ‘territorial’ motif is the way it kept on being regurgitated even during and *after* the Holocaust: all the more so when set against its essential unreality. At the very time, for instance, in late 1942 when news of the ‘Final Solution’ was being widely reported in the Western media, the British home secretary, Herbert Morrison, was seeking to veto schemes which would allow refugees into Britain in favour of ‘a biggish territory where large numbers can go e.g. Madagascar’. Morrison was not some notably hard line or obviously anti-Semitic minister. And his views were reflected a few months later in an April 1943 cabinet committee minute ‘to investigate the possibility of allocating some suitable area of large size as a place of settlement for Jewish refugees after the war.’²⁹ Yet it was at this very juncture that the British and Americans convened a conference in Bermuda ostensibly to demonstrate their public commitment to Jewish rescue from Nazi Europe but actually with entirely the opposite aim of reaffirming to themselves that they would *not* be entering into any wartime arrangements involving admittance of Jewish refugees into Palestine or any other Allied colonial or occupied territory.³⁰

If this exemplified the searing contradiction between public spin and official practice, the specifically British blockade on flight from Nazi Europe into Palestine necessarily in itself began to unravel the Mandate’s fragile relationship with Zionism. The wartime loss or internment of refugee boats bound legally or illegally for Palestine waters would ultimately present Ben-Gurion post-war with a propaganda gift with which to shift international and more specifically American opinion firmly against the British and in favour of the Zionist cause. Cynically put, all he needed was enough Zionist-organized, Palestine-directed refugee ships crammed full of Holocaust survivors to be interdicted by the British, preferably using brute force and in the full glare of the world’s media. The fact that the summer 1947 *Exodus* affair achieved this symbolic object to a T at a time when the UN Special Committee on Palestine was trying to assess the Mandate’s post-British future proved almost the final nail in the Mandatory coffin, paving the way in turn for the US-led UN vote in favour of a two-state solution.³¹

Yet looked at through the prism of the refugee crisis *tout ensemble* a celebratory Zionist version of these events is in key respects wanting. Ben-Gurion may have both succeeded in using the boat-refugees as a stick with which to beat the British, and hence, as a purposeful tool towards the creation of Israel. However, the fact is that the Yishuv leadership paid scant attention to the issue of humanitarian wartime rescue, nor was it probably in a position to do so. In this sense Zionism failed to provide the answer for Europe's most vulnerable Jewish masses, the majority of whom were now dead. By the same token, Zionism's later political success proved a convenient alibi for those countries who had been trying to get rid of Jews in the first place or, alternatively, did not want to receive them in significant numbers. The latter group included the United States. This may be to do the United States – and Britain – a certain injustice. Humanitarian impulses did play a role in the political trajectory of these and other Western liberal societies. Yet this does not change the fundamentals of the case, namely that there was no concerted unilateral or international action either before or after 1939 to offer refuge to Europe's most threatened Jews.

The paradox is that some of the evidence would seem to suggest otherwise. At critical moments, official immigration policies could be relaxed, most particularly when elements of Western public opinion were mobilized towards practical action. In Britain, the 166 local committees who formed the Refugee Children's Movement provided the often Quaker-led grass-roots framework through which some 10,000 Central European Jewish children were brought to homes in Britain in the wake of *Kristallnacht*.³² Yet the whole process whereby refugees were able to get temporary visas to stay in Britain or elsewhere was highly dependent on independent rather than state financial guarantees – the unsung heroes of the whole interwar saga, the mostly Jewish-aid committees and umbrella organizations who stumped up the necessary cash to both meet state visa requirements and succour the asylum seekers. If governments themselves were usually obdurate and bureaucratic on such matters, there were, however, many cases of individuals within administrative departments, consular officials included, who were prepared to bend the rules or to even quite consciously and proactively create their own in order to save lives.

Pressure too from hastily organized national campaigns could produce significant results. Largely thanks to such grass-roots activists, there were in September 1939 an estimated 70,000 refugees in Britain.³³ Similar easing of visa requirements in France, and Belgium in particular, especially in the months immediately prior to war enabled last minute if albeit provisional escape for many German, Austrian and Czech Jews – the provisionality (and hence difference from Britain) clearly being that once these states were overrun by the Nazis, Jewish refugees were as vulnerable as they would have been had they stayed at home. Wartime efforts from within governments also made some difference. For instance, the creation of the US War Refugee Board (WRB) in January 1944 represented what amounted to an internal coup by elements within the Treasury Department against those in the State Department who had remained – like their British counterparts at Bermuda – resolutely opposed to any action which might lead to any domestic Jewish influx.³⁴ Yet in a sense the very belated and quite limited nature of WRB success simply underscores the dominance and persistence of the opposing tendency. Certainly, the sensitivity of liberal states about being *seen* to

be less than principled on questions of asylum was reflected in the early Nazi years in the manner in which immigration restrictions, specifically from Germany, could be temporarily eased, usually nearly always under demotic pressure. But equally they could be entirely closed down with the sophistry – as offered in a Dutch ministerial statement in April 1934 – that the Jews were not ‘in any mortal danger’ – or, as one British Foreign Office official iterated at the time of the Czech crisis, they were not refugees ‘in the proper sense of the word’.³⁵ Jews then were different from other ‘genuine’ asylum seekers, a special category to be held at arm’s length and even when they were offered assistance at all, it was on the strict understanding that their transit could be expedited elsewhere. This almost universal state view was pithily summarized by Henry Berenger, the French delegate to the League High Commission on Refugees: ‘La France, c’est un passage, pas un garage.’³⁶

What that meant in practice was that Jews who thought they had found a safe haven instead could be rounded up, criminalized as *clandestines*, incarcerated in camps and expelled or deported across borders, even back into Nazi clutches. We remember the vicious Vichy Vél. d’Hiv *raffes* of July 1942, we forget the pre-war French round-ups; we remember Westerbork and Mechelen as Dutch and Belgian preludes to the ‘Final Solution’, we forget the pre-war creation of the Westerbork and Merksplas internment camps by a sovereign Hague and Brussels.³⁷ To be sure, further east it was entirely worse, though again we tend to recall Zbaszyn where the Nazis dumped potentially stateless Jews in October 1938 on the Polish border, not the thousands more now equally stateless Jews from Slovakia and the Sudetenland who post-Munich were marooned in a no man’s land at Michsdorf or on a Danube riverboat unwanted by either Czechs or Hungarians.³⁸ By this juncture it was not just the Jews of an expanding Nazi Reich who were at risk of ejection into ‘nowhere’: whole swathes of Hungarian and Rumanian Jews were being earmarked for denationalization, the Hungarian authorities in Carpatho-Rus particularly energetic protagonists of cross-border expulsion.³⁹ But it was at this very point as mass Jewish displacement began to present overtly transnational characteristics that liberal Western states responded with not just ever-tighter border controls but a way of denying entry, which the Swiss authorities had effectively gifted to them through their own bit of Nazi collusion. Indeed, the ‘J’ stamp on German passports introduced by Berlin at Swiss request in late September 1938 to differentiate Jews from other travellers proved as powerful a way as any of turning the very essence of refugee status on its head.⁴⁰

At the international level the same basic contours of avoidance, deflection and buck-passing are well known. Having failed to create a mechanism for stateless Jews as Nansen had been able to initiate for comparable Armenians and Russians after the Great War, and with no safeguards for such contingencies written into the Minorities Treaties, the eventual League agreement in late 1933 to the creation of a quasi-official High Commission to deal with the German refugee situation – providing it had no official League standing for fear of upsetting the Nazis (not to say with almost complete dependency on Jewish funding) – demonstrated to the world just how little leverage it had. True, some accolades have been offered for its first head, the American, James G. McDonald, though mostly for his resignation letter two years later in which he castigated League states for their failure to create a strong, collective

approach to Nazi Jewish persecution.⁴¹ But if this was an indictment of the obvious, McDonald's own avoidance of the key issue of how to create an international rescue plan which would distribute refugees equitably among potentially receiving states is surely telling not so much for what it says about him but an international climate in which the very premise was a taboo. Presented three years later with the entirely more glaring emergency arising from the Nazi campaign to eject Austrian Jewry in the wake of the *Anschluss*, President Roosevelt's initiative to bypass the League altogether and set up the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) seems in retrospect the nearest pre-war thing on offer to a radically new international approach under a once again proactive American leadership. In fact, the occasion of the IGCR's formation, the July 1938 Evian Conference, proved nothing of the sort, demonstrating instead how international solidarity – the United States included – existed only in the degree to which each state confirmed the others' aim of not to be a refugee recipient. Worse, Evian is particularly remembered for some of the more overtly racist comments enunciated there by the Australian and Canadian delegates, though in truth what they said was simply a more blunt version of what more or less everybody else was thinking.⁴² The Swiss had their own powerfully toxic word for it: *Überfremdung*, the notion that to let the Jews in was not just a matter of physical inundation but also of alien takeover.⁴³ It speaks volumes about the underlying prewar paranoia, fear and loathing of Jews in states and societies whether supposedly liberal or illiberal.

But is stating this to deflect from the real villains of piece? The Nazis, after all, had set the specific emergency in motion. Presented with an effectively Roosevelt-proffered subterfuge to secretly facilitate a deal for an orderly removal of Reich Jews, the Nazi riposte was to continue illegally shifting Jews across frontiers completely removed of any assets which might have given them the wherewithal with which to relocate elsewhere. As for the Nazi negotiating position itself in these so-called Rublee-Schacht talks, it boiled down to the major US Jewish relief organizations being asked to pick up an astronomical 1.5 billion Reichsmarks financial tag for a recalibrated *Ha'avara*-type trust fund, the immediate and arguably sole Nazi aim of which was to save them from their immediate post-*Kristallnacht* foreign currency crisis. With war looming, the Jewish groups unsurprisingly interpreted the Nazi stance as blackmail, not least because acceptance of the package would have reinforced the canard that they put their international Jewish (hence allegedly conspiratorial) loyalties before those to home country.⁴⁴ It was Nazi perversity, not Jewish obduracy, which ploughed the talks into oblivion, though one might add that the Nazi notion that they could render their Jews homeless, penniless and stateless and then ransom them to the Western Allies for the latter's acquiescence to the regime's wider goals was no more or less than what Bulgarians, Rumanians and Hungarians each in variously convoluted ways attempted to do towards the end of the war.⁴⁵ British and American refusal to contemplate such 'sales' however was not just about refusing to break their own wartime economic blockade of the Axis. Fundamental to their unwillingness to contemplate such negotiations was the old yet persistent fear, true in 1944 as it had been in 1939, of opening up the floodgates to mass Jewish flight: even though the majority of European Jews by then were dead.

But could the floodgates somehow have been prised open by force? It was not the Nazis but the colonels in the twilight Poland of 1939 who came nearest to trying to realize that goal when they dreamt up a truly hare-brained scheme to secretly arm and train Revisionist Zionist activists to invade British Palestine.⁴⁶ While the project was killed stone dead by Hitler's invasion of Poland, it left him with the exquisite dilemma of what to do with an added nearly two and half million more Jews, over and above the ones his minions had already been trying to eject from their expanding pre-September 1939 Reich. Is it at this point that we arrive at the limits of the possible and the onset of the genocidal? The Nazi plan the following year to ship the entirety of European Jewry to Madagascar fell down on the inability to defeat the British in the early autumn of 1940, thereby denying the Germans the secure seaways for their 'phantom' project.⁴⁷ A further example of Axis states being blocked off from their 'Jewish' exit strategies is offered by way of the squalid Rumanian holding camps set up on Soviet-relinquished territory across the Dniester (Transnistria) from late 1941. Here many tens of thousands of Jews cleansed from Rumania's Soviet-liberated western provinces perished through to 1944.⁴⁸ But they did so here because they could not be pushed or deported further to the east; something which would have happened had Bucharest's big German ally roundly defeated the Red Army in the summer or autumn of 1941.

If this Soviet blockage to Nazi fortunes returns us to the blood-soaked terrain where we began, we still need to rewind a couple of years for one final speculative look at those elusive eastern vistas before we can reach the end of our journey's crisis sequence. Implicit in our discussion so far has been a questionable assumption that faced with an explosion of European anti-Semitism the only countries which could offer succour to large masses of displaced Jews, whether territorially by way of colonies – Palestine included – or through a more standard process of domestic immigrant absorption, were those of the progressive West. Yet there was another possibility: the USSR, however dystopian the implications. After the Hitler-Stalin carve-up of Poland – the major consequence of their August 1939 Non-Aggression Pact – this was, after all, the country with the largest Jewish population bar the United States. True, the Soviet Union's own project to create an autonomous Jewish 'homeland' in the far Siberian wastes of Birobidzhan had been abysmally unsuccessful. Yet the very fact that Russia had a vast geographical arena into which people might move, aligned to a major new spurt of urbanization, offered a route for a more traditional immigrant absorption already well testified in the 1920s and 1930s in the steady flow of Jews from the former Pale into the major, especially metropolitan, centres of Russia proper.⁴⁹

There is no *direct* documentary evidence to suggest Hitler at the time of the Non-Aggression Pact was seeking to resolve his Jewish 'crisis' by way of a mass removal into the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it is curious that the rapid population transfer of some million or more ethnic Germans from the newly acquired Soviet rimland territories back in the direction the Reich, which was fundamental to Stalin's negotiating position, did not involve a major exchange of population involving the ethnic element the Nazis most desperately wanted rid of. Circumstantial evidence that the Nazis understood the arrangement to include the Jews includes Heydrich's infamous September 1939 *Schnellbrief* in which Polish Jewry was to be concentrated around major railheads, pending their deportation eastwards. His *Sicherheitsdienst*

(SD) subordinate Adolf Eichmann's shifting of Jews from central Europe around this time towards the far reaches of Nazi control in Eastern Poland suggests a similar intent. The only problem with this proposed trajectory is that when the Nazis began to push Jews literally across the rivers San and Bug dividing line, the Soviets responded by shooting them, while the some 20,000 Jews who attempted to flee across the new international frontier as 'refugees' ended up on the cattle trains heading for Soviet Central Asia alongside all the Poles, Balts and others the Soviets perceived as 'security risks'.⁵⁰ The Nazi intention at this point was certainly no more benign than what might have been the case two years later had they achieved military success in Russia. Heydrich's Wannsee Conference articulation of the 'Final Solution' in which Jews were to be worked to death in the 'east' simply underscores that reality.⁵¹ However, had European Jewry been eructed into the USSR in 1939, or even 1940, the possibility that some of them – removed from Nazi clutches – might have survived the almost inevitable Soviet mass deportation to the east remains a grotesque yet at the same time tantalizing case of the counterfactual.

In retrospect, we can see that any idea of Soviet salvation was a dead end. There was a tentative early 1944 plan to regroup Holocaust survivors in the Crimea as the kernel of a Jewish Soviet Socialist Republic – the idea apparently emanating from within the Soviet secret police (the NKVD) but fed back to the Politburo as if it were the request of the then quasi-independent Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Yet not only was this initiative toxically linked to the NKVD-organized mass Tatar deportation from the Crimea three months later but was also central to the fabricated charge sheet against the committee four years on, when they were accused of seeking to 'invade' the Crimea in a US-cum-Zionist plot. The growing storm clouds over Russian Jewry thereafter culminated in Stalin's pet project to deport them in entirety east to Birobidzhan, a fate only forestalled by the dictator's timely death in February 1953.⁵²

The Jews of Russia were never to recover their poise. The remnants of self-identifying eastern Jewry who had survived the Holocaust equally found it impossible to survive the chill winds of Soviet anti-Semitism, new peaks of which around the Eastern bloc crisis years of 1956 and 1968 ensured their near-complete departure. Post-*glasnost* and the collapse of the USSR, the majority of Soviet Jewry were also rapidly migrating elsewhere.⁵³ Most were absorbed – as were the earlier but smaller waves of post-Holocaust survivors – into Israel under the 'Law of Return'. This seminal piece of 1948 legislation takes us back to the Zionist riposte to the crisis even before it became fully manifest. The notion of a sovereign Jewish state was intended to put an end to Jewish refugee status once and for all, and with it the ignominy and humiliation of border controls and refused visas: in short, a pillar to post-immiseration. Jewry under the threat of extermination. The paradox is that the very assimilated and un-Jewish Russian Jews who made *aliyah* in the 1990s were a far cry from their eastern European ancestors which Zionism had in its mind's eye to save and succour several generations earlier. Yet Zionism's lack of actual muscle on the world stage in the interwar years and its own primary emphasis on gradual state-building proved it unequal to the role of refugee sanctuary. By the 1990s, that was no longer true. Israel was able to absorb vast numbers of immigrants albeit in its increasingly limited urban space, bursting at the seams and over onto the contested West Bank, though as a further paradox

with considerable US aid to enable the absorption of those who might otherwise have preferred to have relocated to none other than the United States. The added poignancy is that the majority of historic east European Jewry would equally have preferred to have gone there too, but in the crucial years of the 1920s and 1930s they were denied that possibility.

To be sure, by the end of the Second World War, any issue of preference had become entirely academic. The Minorities Treaties were dead, Europe was a Jewish graveyard, and the continued tardiness of countries, including Britain and the United States, to offer an open welcome to survivors seemingly made the national option their only viable one. Yet there was a huge price to pay for it. Israel gained its sovereignty in 1948 but at the expense of two groups of people. The first were the Arabs of Palestine, vast numbers of whom now became perpetual refugees in their own backyard or beyond. The second were the equally large numbers of Arab Jews, from all across the Middle East who had hardly figured within European Zionism's original compass. Yet they were effectively evicted or forced to flee in the late 1940s or early 1950s, in significant part in retaliation for the *Nakba*, mostly for Israel.⁵⁴ Two groups of linked people ending up for years in tents, and doubly ironically with little or nothing to do with the forty years' crisis. Might it all have been avoided if Western states had offered that other wing of Jewry – in other words those at its nub – the compassion, the humanity and the asylum they deserved?

Notes

- 1 George Eisen and Tamás Stark, 'The 1941 Galician Deportation and the Kamenets-Podolksy Massacre: A Prologue to the Hungarian Holocaust', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 27, 2 (2013), 207–41.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 3 Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 167; Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 86–7.
- 4 Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 5 David Vital, *A People Apart: A Political History of the Jews in Europe, 1789–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 298–9.
- 6 Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 111–3; Susanne Heim, 'International Refugee Policy and Jewish Immigration under the Shadow of National Socialism', in Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore (eds), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 20.
- 7 Quoted in S. Adler-Rudel, 'The Evian Conference and the Refugee Question', *Leo Baeck Year Book*, 13 (1968), 236.
- 8 Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
- 9 Quoted in Carole Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 26.

- 10 Quoted in Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Begins to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177.
- 11 Eugene C. Black, *The Social Politics of Anglo-Jewry, 1880-1920* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 266–7.
- 12 Theodor Herzl, 'The Jewish State (1896)', in Arthur Hertzberg (ed.), *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (New York: Atheneum, 1959), 208–15.
- 13 Stuart Cohen, *English Zionists and British Jews: The Communal Politics of Anglo-Jewry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 85, 105.
- 14 Tony Kushner and Katherine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 44.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 74–5.
- 16 Mark Levene, *The Crisis of Genocide*, Vol. 1: *Devastation: The European Rimlands, 1912-1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 60–5.
- 17 Mark Levene, 'Frontiers of Genocide: Jews in the Eastern War Zones, 1914 to 1920 and 1941', in Panikos Panayi (ed.), *Minorities in Wartime: National and Racial Groupings in Europe, North America and Australia during the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 98–105.
- 18 Kushner and Knox, *Refugees*, 77–100.
- 19 Mark Levene, *War, Jews and the New Europe: The Diplomacy of Lucien Wolf, 1914-1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 309.
- 20 Mark Levene, 'The Balfour Declaration: A Case of Mistaken Identity', *English Historical Review*, 62 (1992), 54–77.
- 21 Christopher Sykes, *Crossroads to Israel: Palestine from Balfour to Bevin* (London: Collins, 1965), 235–7.
- 22 Francis R. Nicosia, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1986), chapter 3.
- 23 Itzhak Galnoor, *The Partition of Palestine: Decision Crossroads in the Zionist Movement* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).
- 24 Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 27–8; Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948* (Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).
- 25 See Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, trans. Haim Watzman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 86–90.
- 26 Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 41; London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, 266.
- 27 For Herzl's fantasy 1902 novel, *Altneuland*, where the Arabs are spirited away across the Jordan, see Bernard Avishai, *The Tragedy of Zionism: How its Revolutionary Past Haunts Israeli Democracy* (New York: Helios Press, 2002), 40.
- 28 Marrus, *Unwanted*, 338.
- 29 Quoted in London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, 281. See also Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007) for an imagined, alternative history of Jewish settlement in Alaska based upon an aborted US proposal to offer European Jews temporary refuge there.
- 30 Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 183–201.
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- 32 Kushner and Knox, *Refugees*, 154–7.

- 33 London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, 12.
- 34 David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), chapter 10.
- 35 Bob Moore, *Refugees from Nazi Germany in Netherlands, 1933-1940* (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1986), 61; London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, 157.
- 36 Quoted in Heim, 'International Refugee Policy', p. 22.
- 37 Vicki Caron, 'Unwilling Refuge: France the Dilemma of Illegal Immigration, 1933-1939', in Caestecker and Moore (eds), *Refugees*, esp. 69.
- 38 Caestecker and Moore, *Refugees*, p. 246; Vital, *A People Apart*, 821.
- 39 Raz Segal, 'Disintegration, Social Breakdown and Political Mass Violence in Subcarpathian Rus', unpublished PhD dissertation, Clark University MA., August 2013, 126–8.
- 40 Regula Ludi, 'Dwindling Options: Seeking Asylum in Switzerland 1933-1939', in Caestecker and Moore (eds), *Refugees*, 94–5.
- 41 Heim, 'International Refugee Policy', 21–3.
- 42 See Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (New York: Random House, 1983).
- 43 Ludi, 'Dwindling Options', 56.
- 44 Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, 5–43; Heim, 'International Refugee Policy', pp. 35–6; Marrus, *Unwanted*, 216–17, for varying interpretations.
- 45 Marrus, *Unwanted*, 290–3.
- 46 Laurence Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience: The New Zionist Organisation and the Polish Government, 1936-1939* (Boulder CO: East European Monographs, 1993), 143–60.
- 47 Leni Yahil, 'Madagascar – Phantom of a Solution for the Jewish Question', in George Mosse and Béla Vago (eds), *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1974), 315–34.
- 48 Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), chapters 5 and 6.
- 49 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 216–26; Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 90–9.
- 50 See Götz Aly, *Final Solution: Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews*, trans. Belinda Cooper and Allison Brown (London: Arnold, 1999). For further exploration of the bigger 'populations' picture, see Mark Levene, *The Crisis of Genocide, Vol. 2: Annihilation: The European Rimlands, 1939-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 69–71.
- 51 Mark Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, the Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution*, (London: Penguin, 2002), 113.
- 52 For the entire story, see Arkady Vaksberg, *Stalin Against the Jews*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).
- 53 Noah Lewin-Epstein, Yaacov Ro'i and Paul Ritterband (eds), *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Emigration and Resettlement* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).
- 54 See Ada Aharoni, 'The Forced Migration of Jews from Arab Countries', *Peace Review*, 15 (2003), 53–60. A comprehensive study of the Middle-Eastern-wide Jewish exodus is awaited.