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“Un-American” Antisemitism?: The American Jewish Committee’s Response to Global Antisemitism in the Interwar Period

Nina Valbousquet¹

The first pages of Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* depict an idyllic picture of Jewish-American symbiosis characterized by security, opportunity, acculturation, and a strong feeling of at-homeness in America. Only one disruptive element cracks the façade: the election in 1940 of a fascist and antisemitic president, Charles Lindbergh. For the Jewish narrator, this shock “assaulted, as nothing ever had before, that huge endowment of personal security that I had taken for granted as an American child of American parents in an American school in an American city in an America at peace with the world.”² In reimagining the course of Jewish history in America, Roth’s 2004 novel highlights a complex relationship between antisemitism, American Jewish exceptionalism, and American democracy, which still deserves further scholarly attention.

Although a counterfactual history, Roth’s novel nevertheless draws upon some facts: For one thing, between the two world wars, Jews in America turned out to be one of the chief targets of global anti-Jewish discourse. When Charles Lindbergh, the famous aviator-turned-isolationist-leader made his infamous Des Moines speech of September 11, 1941, he accused Jews of pushing the United States into war against Nazi Germany.³ Calling out American Jewish leaders, Lindbergh capitalized on antisemitic myths about Jewish power and internationalism that had been taking deep roots during the interwar years. More and more during that period, American Jews crystallized antisemitic resent-

1. This research was made possible thanks to three fellowships and I am indebted to the archivists and other fellows of these institutions: Center for Jewish History, American Jewish Archives, and Fordham-NYPL. I wish to sincerely thank scholars whose comments on this ongoing research helped me to refine my arguments, in particular Natalia Aleksion, Doris Bergen, Lila Corwin Berman, Hasia Diner, Sol Goldberg, Eli Lederhendler, James Loeffler, Shaul Magid, Richard Steigmann-Gall, Daniel Soyer, Frances Tanzer, and Magda Teter.

2. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Random US Vintage, 2005), 7.

3. See *Press Reaction to the Lindbergh Speech at Des Moines* (New York: Library of Jewish Information, The American Jewish Committee, 1941).

ment toward modernity and liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic. As Cornelia Wilhelm explains, “For anti-Semites, America was symbolic for empowering the Jew and allowing him to be a driving force and supposed sole ‘winner’ in the modernization of society, economics, and politics.”⁴

This article investigates the historical shapes of the triangular relationship between the American exceptionalism, democracy, and antisemitism recalled by Roth. It does so by looking specifically at the mutual influences between global antisemitic myths and the defense strategies of the American Jewish Committee during the interwar years. Hence, this article examines the ways in which some of those involved in Jewish defense work saw the interplay between Americanness and antisemitism at that time.

Some historians have focused on Jewish legal defense, but a deeper inspection of the impact of antisemitic myths upon Jewish strategies and self-perception, leads to questions concerning the extent to which antisemitism informed Jews’ public discourse while they wrestled with dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the United States.⁵ How did American Jews define themselves politically and culturally via their efforts to tamp down antisemitism at home and abroad? Part of the answer is that the American Jewish Committee’s efforts against antisemitism served also as a tool to assert both Jews’ Americanness and America’s exceptional model. In an ironic twist, fighting antisemitism became a way to reinforce an exceptionalist claim about the presumed weakness of American antisemitism.

Reintegrating Jewish responses into the study of antisemitism promises to complicate the narrative of the American Jewish exceptionalism. The paradigm of exceptionalism sees the American Jewish experience as unique and superior to the fate of other Jewish communities, especially when compared to persecutions of Jews in Europe. Because of its assumptions and distortions, this narrative—which is part of a broader ideology of American exceptionalism—calls for more nuanced scrutiny, as historian Tony Michels argues. The exceptionalist claim of American

4. Cornelia Wilhelm, “From Community and Place to Network and Space: The Transnational Dimension of Immigration in American Jewish History,” *American Jewish History* 101, no. 4 (2017): 545–51.

5. See, Victoria Saker Woeste, *Henry Ford’s War on Jews and the Legal Battle against Hate Speech* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). My approach is influenced by Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), in particular chapter 7. On American Jewish public discourse, see, Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Jewish uniqueness relies on a set of core themes taken as given: absence of a "Jewish question," and immediate legal equality and individual rights in a liberal political system (making American Jews a singular case of "post-emancipation Jewry"); separation of church and state, and religious pluralism; lack of traditions of clericalism and feudalism; upward social and economic mobility; identification between Jewish values and American liberalism.⁶

The presumed absence or insignificance of antisemitism in the United States underpins the exceptionalist narrative. But this view includes a set of reductive assumptions about antisemitism, namely that to be noteworthy antisemitic manifestations must be necessarily lethal, violent, or political in a narrow institutional sense of the term. Conversely, the common wisdom remains that antisemitism in the United States was essentially social, attitudinal, and non-lethal. Especially when dealing with political and ideological expressions of antisemitism, both historical sources and scholarly literature tend to interpret it as a foreign contaminant, implying a national-comparative framework with antisemitism in an essentialized "Europe."⁷ The comparative-exceptionalist frame stresses differences and uniqueness, thus hindering a close examination of transnational dynamics and the possibility of an "integrated Euro-American Jewish history."⁸

Situating the question of American antisemitism in a transnational perspective highlights instead the transatlantic similarities that the exceptionalist claim discards.⁹ During the interwar period, antisemitism in

6. Tony Michels, "Is America 'Different?' A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *American Jewish History* 96, no. 3 (2010): 201–24. "Post-Emancipation Jewry" was the term used by Ben Halpern in his famous essay, "America Is Different," *Midstream*, Autumn 1955, 39–52. The literature on exceptionalism is vast. See, Michael N. Dobkowski, "American Antisemitism: The Myth and Reality of American Exceptionalism," in *Why Is America Different? American Jewry on Its 350th Anniversary*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010), 28–53; and Jonathan Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, nos. 1/2 (1998/1999): 52–79. On American Jewish politics, liberalism, and nationalism, see, James Loeffler, "Nationalism without a Nation? On the Invisibility of American Jewish Politics," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 3 (2015): 367–98; Arthur Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

7. On the comparative frame, see, David Sorkin, "Is American Jewry Exceptional? Comparing Jewish Emancipation in Europe and America," *American Jewish History* 96, no. 3 (2010): 175–200.

8. Eli Lederhendler, "Modern Historians and Jewish Transnational Perspectives," *American Jewish History* 101, no. 3 (2017): 557–61.

9. For a distinction between comparative and transnational approaches I drew on Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney, eds., *Transnational Moments of Change, Europe, 1945, 1968, 1989* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

the United States was transnational and global: not only did antisemitic individuals and networks on both sides of the Atlantic exchange literature which circulated transnationally, they also relied on the same antisemitic myths (such as the Jewish world conspiracy) that simultaneously formed a shared global repertoire of anti-Jewish sentiments. How did AJC leaders address the entanglement between the global dimension of antisemitism and its American manifestations, while being themselves in a delicate balancing act as defenders of Jews both at home and abroad?¹⁰

Antisemitic mythmaking drew upon and shared some assumptions of the ideology of American exceptionalism, especially legal equality, the American Jewish elite's identification with liberalism, and Jewish achievements in modern mass culture and economy. This may be why the narrative of American Jewish exceptionalism remained mostly unchallenged in spite of growing antisemitic attacks against Jews in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.

The American Jewish Committee (AJC) was a national and non-denominational organization founded in New York in 1906 mostly by men of an acculturated Jewish elite of German origin.¹¹ During the interwar period, AJC was one of the three main American Jewish groups fighting antisemitism, together with the Anti-Defamation League, created in 1913, and the American Jewish Congress formed in 1918. Domestically, these organizations' agenda aimed at ending social and civil discrimination against Jews (especially in housing, employment, and education). Representing one sector of the American Jewish elite, and considering itself above the concerns of grassroots militancy, AJC cannot be taken as representative of the entire sociological complexity of American Jewry. However, it offers an important perspective on an organization committed to the idea of exceptionalism, particularly active internationally, and involved in mobilizing non-Jews against antisemitism. As Stuart Svonkin shows, during the interwar period, the "small clique of German Jewish notables" constituting the leadership of AJC

10. On the relationship between transnationalism and Americanization, see, Daniel Soyer, "Transnationalism and Mutual Influence: American and East European Jewries in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Rethinking European Jewish History*, eds. Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman (Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009), 201–22; Hasia Diner, "Living Locally, Organizing Nationally, and Thinking Globally: The View from the United States," in 1929: *Mapping the Jewish World*, eds. Hasia Diner and Gennady Estraiikh (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 11–26.

11. Naomi Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906–1966* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972); Jerold S. Auerbach, *Rabbis and Lawyers: The Journey from Torah to Constitution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Marianne R. Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong: The American Jewish Committee, 1945–2006* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007).

"had become in many people's eyes the preeminent representatives of American Jewry, especially in matters pertaining to politics, foreign affairs, and relations with the broader society."¹² Often studied in binary terms of success or failure, the AJC's efforts to fight antisemitism have been criticized for their "ineffectiveness."¹³ The point should rather be to understand the complex motives and dilemmas of AJC leaders, how they addressed antisemitism, and what their efforts say about the deeper impact of antisemitism in American history.

To be sure, the scope and rhetoric of global antisemitism did not go unnoticed by AJC leaders between the two world wars. Their reactions to antisemitic myths tended however to stress the congenital un-Americanness of antisemitism and to reify the positive exceptionality of Jews' position in the United States. Tropes about the "international Jew" and "Jewish power" shaped AJC strategies in four ways. First, despite playing a central role in post-WWI antisemitic myths, American Jewish leaders responded to these attacks in terms of exceptionalism. Second, they internalized some of these antisemitic tropes—especially about their own power—in a way that significantly shaped their defense strategies. Third, they increasingly interpreted interwar global antisemitism as a Nazi imitation, thus glossing over its American roots. Fourth, speaking against antisemitism with the language of Americanness, AJC leaders overlooked the reasons why antisemitism was able to take root in a democratic and liberal context.

AMERICAN JEWS UNDER ATTACK: THE "INTERNATIONAL JEW"

Although they became one of the main targets of global antisemitism after WWI, American Jewish leaders interpreted the propagation of hate-speech in a way that did little to erode the narrative of American Jewish exceptionalism. An AJC memorandum on the "Overseas activities of the AJC" between 1906 and 1943 pointed out two different phases of Jewish defense. The pre-WWI phase was described as mostly philanthropic: "The approach was at first almost entirely altruistic, being prompted largely by a sense of duty—the obligation of Jews in a favorable position to exert such influence as they possessed for the

12. Stuart Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3, 11. See also Matthew Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America: A Biography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013).

13. Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 101.

amelioration of the lot of less fortunate brethren.” The introduction of global antisemitic myths such as the *Protocols* after the Great War differentiated the second stage:

This approach underwent a change after the first World War with the change in the anti-Semitic “line”...After the Bolshevik revolution the bogey of a Jewish world conspiracy became the theme of anti-Semites and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* their bible. This charge embraced Jews all over the world and gained wide currency especially in the lands of the former Allies.¹⁴

The memorandum suggested that the diffusion of antisemitism in the aftermath of the war forced American Jews to adopt new forms of Jewish interventionism: the goal was not merely to bring relief to other Jewish communities who were victims of anti-Jewish policies abroad, but also to curb the transnational dissemination of antisemitism at home.

American Jewish leaders were well aware of the post-World War I revival of antisemitic propaganda based on the myth of Jewish world power. During the interwar period, they became directly concerned with the spread of antisemitism, for an unprecedented role in these myths had been attributed to them. The period witnessed an Americanization of global antisemitic tropes in the sense that figures of both stereotyped and real American Jews came to play a central part in the antisemitic imaginary of interwar Europe and America. Empowered by the *Protocols*, accusations against American Jews flourished in European antisemitism after the war, a time of affirmation of both the American power on the international scene and American Jews in Jewish internationalism. In France, Italy, and Germany, nationalists and revisionists who opposed a liberal international order and resented American power blamed it on the Jews.¹⁵ Roger Lambelin, a militant in the monarchist and Catholic league *Action française*, for instance, published his own translation of the *Protocols* alongside three other volumes on the “Jewish Peril,” which specifically denounced the “Jewish invasion” of the United States as the most striking evidence of the “imperialism of the international race.”¹⁶

14. Memorandum, “Overseas activities of the AJC, 1906-1943,” AJC Morris Waldman Files, RG 347.1.29, folder 221, box 10, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, NY (henceforth Waldman Files, YIVO).

15. Charles Maurras, “La conquête juive et le monde,” *L’Action française*, September 17, 1920.

16. Roger Lambelin, *“Protocols” des Sages de Sion* (Paris: Grasset, 1921) and *Le péril juif: Les victoires d’Israël* (Paris: Grasset, 1928). Excerpts of the latter volume appeared in English as *The Victories of Israel*. On Lambelin, see Nina Valbousquet, “Transnational Antisemitic Networks and Political Christianity: The Catholic Participation in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,” in *Christianity, Antisemitism, and Ethnonationalism in the Era of the Two World Wars*, eds. Rebecca Carter-Chand and Kevin Spicer (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022).

The French antisemite dwelt extensively on the alleged Jewish influence in American politics and slandered prominent Jews like Otto Kahn and Jacob Schiff as well as the "Zionist entourage of President Wilson." According to Lambelin, the "Jewish conquest" of the United States had been favored by "philosophical and religious affinities for puritanism" that had "resulted in large measure from Jewish mentality."¹⁷ Significantly, antisemites like him who targeted American Jews capitalized on a gross identification between Americanness and Jewishness, not very far from some of the core assumptions and founding myths of the ideology of American exceptionalism which saw America as a messianic land.¹⁸

Developed on both sides of the Atlantic, the myth of a Jewish world conspiracy involving American Jews peaked with the global diffusion of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.¹⁹ Forged by tsarist agents in Russia in 1905, the *Protocols* purported to be the minutes of a plot orchestrated by world Jewry to take over Christian societies by the means of both capitalism and socialist revolutions. The conspiracy theory of the *Protocols* provided antisemites with an easy explanatory framework for all the dramatic changes of the post-World War I period. The forgery urged on the zealous uncovering of one common enemy, the international Jew, seen to be responsible not only for the Bolshevik revolution but also for the drawbacks of capitalism and liberalism. The first translations from Russian into German, English, French, and Italian appeared in the years 1920-1921 as White Russian émigrés fleeing the Russian civil war brought the antisemitic forgery with them to Western Europe and North America.²⁰

The *Protocols* first spread in the United States under the initiative of both American and foreign antisemites.²¹ The shadowy Boris Brasol played a key role in the publication of the first two American editions. Sent to Washington in 1916 as Tsarist emissary to the Inter-Allied Conference, Brasol remained in America after the 1917 revolutions

17. Roger Lambelin, *Le Pêril Juif: Le règne d'Israel chez les Anglo-saxons* (Paris: Grasset, 1921), 8. Translations from French into English are mine.

18. Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, 191-3.

19. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Serif 1996, 1st ed. 1967); Cesare de Michelis, *The Non-Existent Manuscript: A Study of the Protocols of the Sages of Zion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Steven J. Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (London: Liveright, 2018). The most up-to-date work on the transnational diffusion of the *Protocols* remains Michael Hagemeister, *Die "Protokolle der Weisen von Zion" vor Gericht. Der Berner Prozess 1933-1937 und die "antisemitische Internationale"* (Zürich: Chronos, 2017).

20. Michael Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism: White Emigrés and the Making of National Socialism, 1917-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

21. Robert Singerman, "The American Career of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion," *American Jewish History* 71, no. 1 (1981): 48-78.

and participated in White Russian propaganda as vice-president of the Russian Officers' Union in America and writer for the Brooklyn-based journal, *The Anti-Bolshevist*. After the armistice Brasol worked at the War Trade Board and used his connections within military and intelligence circles to disseminate a 1917 manuscript of the *Protocols*. This version directly inspired Harris Ayres Houghton, a military physician and nativist militant, to publish the first American edition of the *Protocols* in New York in June 1920: *Praemonitus Praemunitus. The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion*. Shortly after, Brasol published his own English edition in Boston in summer 1920.²² Already in November 1918, he had circulated a summary of the *Protocols* in a report entitled *Bolshevism and Judaism*, in which he explicitly accused American Jewish leaders, and especially one of AJC co-founders, Jacob Schiff, of having financed Trotsky. Like many other antisemites of that period, Brasol drew upon the timely and pervasive myth of Judeo-Bolshevism according to which Jews were to be blamed for the Bolshevik revolution and by extension for the wave of communist and socialist upheavals in the aftermath of the war.²³

Brasol recurrently railed against American Jewish defense agencies, not only in his publications but also in his private correspondence, for instance in a letter of June 1921 to a notorious Catholic antisemite in Paris, Msgr Jouin: "Here in America, in spite of all Hebrew endeavors to stop the circulation of *the Protocols*, to silence the press on this subject, to throw powder in the public eye on this important matter, the *Protocols* are being read with the greatest interest and are being debated in serious quarters and among serious-minded Americans."²⁴ By that time, Brasol had already collaborated on the antisemitic campaign of the Detroit weekly *The Dearborn Independent* and met its owner, Henry Ford.

If it were not for the influence of Ford's antisemitic campaign, the *Protocols* probably would not have gained visibility in the United States so quickly and massively. Between June and September 1920, *The Dearborn Independent* published the *Protocols* in their entirety, along with several other antisemitic articles. Under the auspices of the Detroit industrialist,

22. *The Protocols and World Revolution : Including a Translation and Analysis of the Protocols of the Meetings of the Zionist Men of Wisdom* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1920).

23. Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 26, 32. See Boris Brasol, *The World at the Cross Roads* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1921) and *Socialism vs. Civilization* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1920).

24. Brasol (New York) to Jouin (Paris), June 15, 1921, Fonds maçonnique, RISS, box 2, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF).

these articles were reprinted in a four-volume publication infamously entitled *The International Jew*. Published in November 1920 (with an initial run of 500,000 copies), the first volume carried the subtitle *The World's Foremost Problem*, while the other three volumes all targeted American Jews explicitly: *Jewish Activities in the United States* (April 1921), *Jewish Influences in American Life* (November 1921), and *Aspects of Jewish Power in the United States* (May 1922).²⁵ Mixing global and domestic themes, *The International Jew* recycled the claim that Jewish financiers, and especially American Jews like Jacob Schiff, had made the Bolshevik revolution possible in order to take control of the world: "The Japanese war with Russia enabled Mr. Schiff to advance his plan to undermine the Russian Empire, as it has now been accomplished by Jewish Bolshevism."²⁶

According to *The International Jew*, the global Jewish plot was especially visible in the nefarious influence of the Jews in America. Several chapters denounced the "Gigantic Jewish liquor trust," "Jewish supremacy in Motion Picture World," "Jewish degradation of American baseball," "Jewish Power and America's Money Famine," how "Jewish Jazz becomes our national music," and how "Jewish Rights clash with American Rights." Barely any single field of American life seemed to escape Jewish influence and thirst for power. Claiming since the onset that "the American Jew does not assimilate," Ford's publication adopted overtly political tones in denouncing a "Jewish dictatorship in the US" through the influence of Jewish politicians and organizations, among which the American Jewish Committee.²⁷

In spite of its vehement and ad hominem accusations, *The International Jew* pretended that its disclosure of a Jewish "plan to control the world" was "not anti-Semitism, it may even be found to be a world service to the Jew": "It is not anti-Semitism to say that, nor to present the evidence which supports that...Those who could best disprove it if it were not true are the international Jews themselves, but they have not disproved it."²⁸ In Ford's mindset, it was American Jews' own responsibility to prove their innocence. Unless they you could do so, they would be inevitably eyed with suspicion.

25. Leo Ribuffo, "Henry Ford and *The International Jew*," *American Jewish History* 69, no. 4 (1979-80): 437-77.

26. *The International Jew*: 3. *Jewish Influences in American Life* (Dearborn: Dearborn Independent, 1921), chapter 60, "How Jewish International Finance Functions."

27. *The International Jew*: 1. *The World's Foremost Problem* (Dearborn: Dearborn Independent, 1920), chapter 3, "Jewish History in the United States."

28. *The International Jew*, chapter 5, "Anti-Semitism – Will it Appear in the US?"

How did American Jewish leadership react to these direct and unprecedented attacks, which were national and global at the same time? As shown by Victoria Saker Woeste, there was no unified stance on how to counter-attack Ford's mass hatred.²⁹ But despite these divisions, the publication of *The International Jew* did not for the most part challenge Jewish leaders' faith in American-Jewish symbiosis. To reply to the domestic dissemination of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, AJC issued a statement on December 1, 1920, also signed by the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Zionist Organization of America, and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis. The statement presented postwar antisemitism as a set of "assaults upon the honor of the Jewish people" consisting essentially in a revival of archaic bigotry that would not even deserve a proper answer by distinguished American Jews:

When the Jews of the United States first learned of these malevolent prints, they deemed it beneath their dignity to take notice of them because they regarded them as a mere recrudescence of mediaeval bigotry and stupidity showing upon their face their utter worthlessness.

The insistence of the statement on the essentially "medieval" nature of this antisemitic campaign and the omission of the potential modern appeal of antisemitism are not coincidental. The absence in the United States of a legacy of anti-Jewish persecutions usually associated with European Middle Ages was a key element in the construction of a paradigm of American Jewish exceptionalism. Yet, as shameful as it seemed for the American Jewish elite to grapple with "mediaeval bigotry," a firm reaction proved to be necessary precisely because of the mass diffusion of antisemitic materials:

These publications have, however, been put in circulation to such an extent that it is believed that the time has come, humiliating though it be to them, for the Jews to make answer to these libels and to the unworthy insinuations and innuendoes that have been whispered against them.³⁰

AJC's initiatives against antisemitism at the beginning of the 1920s bore witness to the confidence of an organization of acculturated Jews who tended to play down the extent of homegrown antisemitism. Jewish organizations labeled the postwar resurgence of antisemitism an "un-American" and "un-Christian" form of "bigotry." Viewed as an imported product and an imitation of European hatemongers, the diffusion of antisemitism threatened not only the values of American

29. Woeste, *Henry Ford's War on Jews*, 87–93.

30. *The Protocols, Bolshevism and the Jews: An Address to their Fellow-Citizens by American Jewish Organizations* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1921).

democracy but also the Christian tenets of the majority of American Jews' fellow citizens.³¹

Far from being isolated, this type of discourse mirrored similar trends in non-Jewish responses to antisemitism. On January 16, 1921, a statement signed by 119 "citizens of Gentile birth and Christian faith," including Woodrow Wilson, William Howard Taft, and Cardinal William O'Connell, was released to the press to denounce antisemitism as an "un-American and un-Christian agitation."³² The protest pointed out the global dimension of the postwar wave of antisemitic propaganda, and especially its European dimension, in decrying "the appearance in this country of what is apparently an organized campaign of anti-Semitism, conducted in close conformity to, and co-operation with similar campaigns in Europe."

Promoted by AJC, the statement was praised as evidence of American Jewish integration by Herman Bernstein who sent it, among others, to Pope Benedict XV.³³ One month later, Bernstein published a book against the *Protocols*, which he had prepared with the help of Louis Marshall, lawyer and president of AJC from 1912 to his death in 1929.³⁴ Founder of the Yiddish newspaper, *The Day*, and writer for the *Forverts*, Bernstein toured post-World War I Europe on behalf of AJC to collect evidence of antisemitic forgery. He was aware of the entanglement of American and European antisemitism and pointed to the role of Boris Brasol, among other transnational antisemites. Yet, both Bernstein and Marshall contributed to forging a discourse of American exceptionalism. In a letter sent to Bernstein in October 1921, Marshall expressed the confidence that "one thing is certain—that the *Protocols* have been absolutely destroyed."³⁵ The following decades would prove him wrong.

Although Ford's antisemitism turned soft-spoken after the lost libel suit filed by attorney Aaron Sapiro, the myth of the international Jew

31. On the emergence of a concept of "Judeo-Christian" values, see, K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

32. "President Wilson Heads Protest against Anti-Semitism," clipping, Anti-Semitic Literature Collection, folder 310, box 29, American Jewish Historical Society, NY. See also, "Issue a Protest on Anti-Semitism," *New York Times*, January 17, 1921.

33. Bernstein to Secretary of State Cardinal Gasparri, January 28, 1921, Vatican Archives, Secretariat of State, "Francia" pos. 1337.

34. Herman Bernstein, *The History of a Lie: The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion* (New York: Ogilvie Pub. Co, 1921). The 1935 reissue is dedicated to the "Christian" signatories of the 1921 statement: *The Truth about "The Protocols of Zion": A Complete Exposure by Herman Bernstein* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1935).

35. Marshall to Bernstein, October 1, 1921, folder 337, box 11, Papers of Herman Bernstein, RG 713, YIVO (henceforth Bernstein Papers, YIVO).

persisted throughout the interwar period.³⁶ Despite his public apology in 1927, the auto-magnate later accepted the Grand Cross of the German Eagle in July 1938. In the meantime, translations of his *International Jew* had become a global Nazi best-seller. Not limited to the immediate post-World War I period, the tropes of world Jewish conspiracy and of American Jewish power spread even more after the 1929 economic crisis and through the 1930s. The 1920's stigmatization of President Wilson as "puppet of the Jews" found its equivalent in attacks against Jews working for the Roosevelt administration. Even though there were noticeable differences between antisemitic episodes of the 1920s and the 1930s—namely, increasingly politicized and organized forms of antisemitism—attacks against "international Jews" remained a common leitmotiv throughout two decades of antisemitic prose.

The most well-known example of the antisemitic revival of the late 1930s drawing on similar themes is probably Father Charles Coughlin. A Catholic priest from Ontario, Coughlin preached from the Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, Michigan. Thanks to his radio broadcasts, he reached millions of listeners. On behalf of American and Christian values, the "Radio Priest" recycled global conspiracy theories, stirred up fear of refugees, stoked xenophobic sentiments, and drew upon homegrown nativism and illiberal American populism.³⁷ From July to November 1938, Coughlin reprinted and commented on the *Protocols* almost every week in his own Detroit-based weekly, *Social Justice*. The August 8TH issue quoted Brasol's 1918 report, and listed Jewish banks accused of having financed the Bolshevik revolution.³⁸

The transnational and national sources of Coughlin's antisemitism were closely entangled. For instance, *Social Justice* praised Mussolini's regime for implementing antisemitic racial laws in fascist Italy in 1938 while at the exact same time reiterating its attacks on prominent American Jews.³⁹ Coughlin's weekly stigmatized Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau for leading the "money changers of the government" on behalf of world Jewry's interests, in terms similar to those employed by fascist propaganda in Italy. In fact, Coughlin's antisemitic publications circulated within

36. On the lawsuit, see, Woeste, *Henry Ford's War on Jews*.

37. Mary Christine Athans, *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection: Father Charles E. Coughlin, Father Denis Fahey, C.S.Sp., and Religious Anti-Semitism in the United States, 1938-1954* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

38. "Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion," *Social Justice*, August 8, 1938, 5. See, AJC's response: Memorandum on AJC actions taken to counter Father Coughlin's revival of the *Protocols*, August 22, 1938, American Jewish Committee Archives, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/THR-38.PDF.

39. J.S. Barnes, "Italy's Race Campaign," *Social Justice*, September 26, 1938, 3-4.

high circles of the fascist regime.⁴⁰ The official antisemitic magazine of Italian fascism, *La Difesa della Razza*, frequently featured pictures of prominent American Jews such as Samuel Untermyer, Stephen Wise, Bernard Baruch, Felix Frankfurter, and Albert Einstein to signify their involvement in a global plot to take over the world.⁴¹ In August and September 1941, the fascist magazine claimed that Frankfurter, Morgenthau, and Brandeis were the natural heirs of the 1897 Elders of Zion, and that the American Hebrew Medal given to Roosevelt two years earlier was without a doubt "well-earned!"⁴² American antisemitism was thus often a mix of imported and homegrown elements, and could even be exported to Europe. In sum, antisemitism in the United States was neither mild nor exceptional; yet American Jewish leaders struggled to fully comprehend its nature and scope.

INTERNALIZED ANTISEMITISM IN AMERICAN JEWISH DEFENSE

The persistent use of the myth of the "international Jew" in the 1930s was most often a subterfuge to challenge American Jews on political grounds. Capitalizing on global issues, these allegations fueled national political antisemitism. While Jewish defense agencies had been used to fighting social discrimination and infringements on civil rights in the United States, they were now attacked on a different front. Political antisemitism—understood here not only as antisemitism supported by public demonstrations and political organizations, but also as the political ramifications of antisemitic tropes, as well as prejudices grounded in political and ideological views such as perceptions of Jewish political influence or alleged communism—grew in the second half of the 1930s. The Great Depression, the political backlash against the New Deal, the worsening of the international situation, and the refugee crisis all fostered increasing hostility toward minorities and immigrants in America. Against that backdrop, the propagation of antisemitic myths about American Jewish power and Judeo-communism reached a new level of mass diffusion, while organized groups advocated for antisemitic policies. Capitalizing on a recrudescence of anti-communism, American

40. See, fascist hierarch Roberto Farinacci's praise of Coughlin's attacks against "Jewish democracy" (October 11, 1940), box 807, Fondo Ministero Cultura Popolare, Italian Foreign Ministry: Archivio Storico Diplomatico (Rome).

41. "La soluzione della questione giudaica. Il Madagascar," *La Difesa della razza*, June 20, 1940.

42. "Storia massonica dei protocolli dei Savi di Sion," *La Difesa della razza*, August 5, 1941, and September 5, 1941.

antisemites demonized “international Jews” for taking part in communist and anti-clerical policies in Spain, Mexico, the Soviet Union, and France. Fueled by anti-liberal populism and nativism, this discourse also targeted Jews in America and accused them of favoring an infiltration of anti-American elements by supporting liberal immigration policies.

Once more, Coughlin is a striking example of this explosive mix of prejudices. A fierce opponent of Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Radio Priest founded a proto-political movement, the National Union for Social Justice, in 1934. Coughlin’s antisemitism surfaced as early as 1931 when he attributed the economic crisis to American Jewish financiers, but it definitely peaked in 1938. Antisemites like Coughlin pressed American Jewish leaders to denounce their coreligionists and tried to hold them accountable for the wickedness of “International Jewry.” In his *Protocols* issue of August 8, 1938, Coughlin reached the following conclusion about Stalinism and the responsibilities of Jews in America:

All this goes to prove that...Israel will always be the controlling power and driving force behind [Stalin’s government]. As a matter of fact, the conspiracy against civilization in the world emanates from Russia, or from those who are responsible for organizing the Russian revolution under the leadership of Trotsky, and other bad Jews who have not been castigated in the Jewish pulpits of America.⁴³

A later issue of *Social Justice*, on December 5, 1938, called into question American Jews’ loyalty by linking them to Soviet commissar of foreign affairs Maxim Litvinov, who was of Jewish origin: “American Jews have a call to action. They cannot afford to remain silent when World Jewry is thus honoring Red Litvinov.”⁴⁴ Thus, Coughlin pointed his finger at the alleged silence of American Jewish leaders in the face of communism.

In spite of his populist vehemence, or maybe because of it, Coughlin had numerous followers and imitators who recycled the same type of rhetoric. Some of them gathered to form the Christian Front, a proto-fascist movement involved in various incidents of street violence in New York and Boston in 1938-1939.⁴⁵ On April 2, 1939, Father Gregory Feige, a Catholic priest from Little Flower Monastery in New Jersey

43. “Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion”; Memorandum on AJC actions taken to counter Father Coughlin’s revival of the *Protocols*.

44. George Edward Sullivan, “America’s Insidious Foes: Surveying Some Subversive Snares and Propaganda,” *Social justice*, December 5, 1938, 10-11.

45. Stephen Norwood, “Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York during World War II,” *American Jewish History* 91 (June 2003): 233-67.

and an AJC collaborator, gave a talk against antisemitism at a Knight of Columbus branch in Brooklyn. He was violently interrupted by a group of noisy men waving aloft copies of *Social justice* and shouting offensive questions:

Were you ever a Jew?

Why are Jews hated if they are not red and immoral? – answer that one!

Jews teach hate, that is in their religion.

Why talk so much about Jewish persecution when the Christians are more so?

The hungry Jewish Reds that escaped Germany came here to take our jobs!

Father Coughlin is the only priest who tells the truth!"⁴⁶

Such rhetorical questions encompassed various features of global and domestic, old and new, antisemitism. They singled out both American Jews and those who were suspected of being Jewish (Feige was a convert of Jewish origins) and blamed them for larger international problems.

Other antisemitic activists wrote directly to the top American Jewish leadership with similar admonitions and threats. Leslie Fry, for example, wrote a vitriolic letter to Cyrus Adler and Stephen Wise in 1938. A White Russian émigré and one of the first champions of the *Protocols* in America, Fry collaborated occasionally with Ford at the beginning of the 1920s and was fully integrated into transatlantic networks of antisemitic and anti-communist activists.⁴⁷ In the 1930s she moved from Pennsylvania to California and joined the Militant Christian Patriots in Glendale. In her capacity as editor of the *Christian Free Press*, Fry wrote to Adler and Wise, respectively presidents of AJC and of the Zionist Organization of America. On one hand, some of her populist claims are specific to the American political context: "The New Deal is your deal, and President Roosevelt only your puppet. You have tried to abolish the American Supreme Court, with your Brandeises, Rosenmans, Cohens, and Frankfurters...Your Jewish oppression of American farmers and growers has been exposed." On the other hand, the letter is also emblematic of the entanglement of global and local antisemitism: "But now you are uncovered and exposed...The example of France is before us. She became Communist almost overnight, with a Jew, Leon Blum, at the head of her government." Both dimensions, international

46. Memorandum, April 20, 1939, box 10, Waldman Files, YIVO.

47. Michael Hagemeister, "The American Connection: Leslie Fry and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion," in *Scritti in onore di Cesare G. De Michelis*, eds. Marina Ciccarini et al. (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2014), 217-28.

and domestic, of antisemitism converged into an inflaming hate speech against immigrants and refugees:

We therefore give you fair warning:

All further mass importation of Jews, communists, and European fugitives from justice into this country must be stopped.

Your American Jewish Committee, together with the Zionist Organization of America, must cease:

1. Sponsoring, facilitating, and financing such mass importations from Europe, through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and other Jewish immigration societies.
2. Exerting pressure upon the President, the Secretary of State and the whole administration, to give preference in Government jobs to Jewish aliens and Communists.

You and your co-leaders of the Jewish Communities must take the full consequences for your participation in this diabolic plan.⁴⁸

Fry's reference to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society highlights an inflammatory coalescence of antisemitism and nativism.⁴⁹ Both Fry and Coughlin held American Jewish leaders accountable for the alleged wrongdoings of "international Jewry" and urged them to police their "own" Jews. Such injunction was a rhetorical stratagem to demonize all American Jews and a slippery slope argument to accuse them of flawed loyalty. As antisemites directly called American Jewish leaders on both domestic and global issues, how did the latter answer?

The optimistic view expressed by Bernstein and Marshall at the beginning of the 1920s was increasingly challenged as the sound refutation of antisemitism based on rational evidence of Jewish integration and achievements in America did not suffice to curb the dissemination of hate speech. The AJC had to face the growing impact of global antisemitism on Jewish defense and the entanglement of both. Already in 1927, Herman Bernstein had realized that the *Protocols* were far from being "totally destroyed," and called for a stronger Jewish response. Commenting on the outcomes of a Zurich conference initiated by the American Jewish Congress, Bernstein lamented the lack of unity among Jewish organizations. He saw this division as a result of antisemitic allegations:

48. Fry to Adler and Wise, March 28, 1938, folder 511, box 29, Waldman Files, YIVO.

49. See Britt Tevis, "'The Hebrews Are Appearing in Court in Great Numbers': Toward a Reassessment of Early Twentieth-Century American Jewish Immigration History," *American Jewish History* 100, no. 3 (2016): 319–47.

We need not fear the charges of the anti-Semites that we are united for world dominion. We all know how untrue that is. We should also realize that if there is a world organization dealing with the Jews, it is the anti-Semitic International. The Jews should fight this unitedly, openly and fearlessly.⁵⁰

Yet, the fear of lending credence to antisemitic myths continued to shape Jewish defense strategies in the 1930s. Of course, such fear was based upon the perverse logic of the *Protocols*, according to which Jewish refutation only confirmed the existence of the conspiracy. At the beginning of 1935, Anglo-Jewish leader Neville Laski reported to AJC executive secretary Morris Waldman after meeting with Justice Louis Brandeis in Washington. Brandeis was skeptical about the World Jewish Congress precisely because it would give credit to the *Protocols*:

With regard to the World Jewish Congress, he [Brandeis] entirely disapproved....He thought it would lend color to arguments based on the *Protocols*. He thought Americans were too far removed from the European scene, and as for visits of short duration, they did not serve to remedy that comparative ignorance. Arguing for a World Jewish Congress in America was a far different proposition to a consideration of it in Europe. One could say and do things in America, separated by three thousand miles of ocean, which one could not possibly do in England or on the Continent.⁵¹

In Brandeis's view, the creation of a transatlantic Jewish defense umbrella organization was thus not necessary precisely because of the exceptional situation of Jews in America. Cyrus Adler conveyed a similar idea when writing to Laski two months later regarding the transnational coordination of Jewish responses to antisemitic attacks: "Of course, our situation in America is not comparable in this matter to yours in England. We are supposed to have the potential strength of a community of over four millions."⁵² Thus, the fight against antisemitism mirrored a certain self-perception of American Jewish power sculpted in the interactions with Jewish communities abroad.

Antisemitic myths informed the tools of Jewish defense itself. Especially when dealing with cases of homegrown antisemitism, AJC preferred to work behind the scenes rather than publicly. This was also based on the conviction that non-Jewish voices rather than Jewish voices could more efficiently curb antisemitism. Similar considerations shaped AJC strategy to coordinate Jewish defense at an international level, especially as the Jewish condition worsened by the mid-1930s. For Jacob Landau,

50. Bernstein, "The Zurich Conference – A Demonstration of Our Weakness," 1927, folder 761, box 32, Bernstein Papers, YIVO.

51. Laski to Waldman, January 3, 1935, folder 10, box 24, Waldman Files, YIVO

52. Adler to Laski, March 29, 1935, folder 10, box 24, Waldman Files, YIVO.

assistant director of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, this work required an active sense of leadership but also diplomatic flair, as he wrote to Morris Waldman. On one side, his praise of AJC initiatives contrasted with a veiled critique of European Jewish leaders' apathy: "It is needless for me to say that, if the European organizations are at last aroused from their lethargy and are going to put up money and go into the matter actively, it is due to your efforts here." On the other side, Landau frequently lamented European Jewish organizations' lack of caution when dealing with delicate matters. Concerned about the consequences of these indiscretions, he wrote again to Waldman: "I am wondering whether you are tearing up the letters I am writing you on all these subjects in order to prevent any leakage."⁵³ Competition within Jewish politics fueled the fear that some delicate information might "leak." But internalized antisemitic myths about Jewish power and internationalism also played a key role in AJC leaders' wariness about a possible disclosure of their diaspora connections and transnational plan to curb antisemitism.

The anxiety about leakages and the fear of giving ammunition to the antisemites was based on actual attacks against Jewish defense efforts that circulated widely and increasingly in the United States. For instance, the mainstream Catholic magazine *America* adopted the same rhetoric used by Coughlin.⁵⁴ A major weekly published in New York, *America* explicitly blamed "International Jewry" in a June 1939 article that casted suspicion on American Jewish defense:

One phase of the Palestine problem that is impressive is the force and the vehemence of the attack of international Jewry. The union of sentiment, the similarity of method, the use of propaganda, the moral pressure of Jews in every nation, particularly in the British Commonwealth and the United States, all manifest that Jewry is an international power, that it is aggressive and may be ruthless, and that it is determined to champion its interests against all and any who would question its aims. The problem of Palestine may provoke a new orientation of ideas in regard to the place of the Jewish race in world affairs.

In the United States, likewise, there is in process a new Jewish consciousness, characterized by militancy and acumen. This, also, requires a new American evaluation and orientation.⁵⁵

53. Landau to Waldman, May 27 and June 19, 1937, folder 6, box 24. Waldman Files, YIVO.

54. Rev. Francis X. Talbot, *America's* main editor between 1936 and 1944 supported most of Coughlin's causes. See Charles Gallagher, "'Correct and Christian': American Jesuit Support of Father Charles E. Coughlin's Anti-Semitism, 1935-38" in *"Tragic Couple": Encounters between Jews and Jesuits*, eds. James Bernauer and Robert Maryks (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), 297-315. On the broader context of Jewish-Catholic relations, see Egal Feldman, *Catholics and Jews in Twentieth Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

55. "Palestine Homeland," *America*, June 3, 1939, 180.

America's article signaled clearly the entanglement of global and domestic contexts in the shaping of American antisemitism. In the minds of antisemites, "international Jewry" was inseparable from its American equivalent. American Jewish leaders were held accountable for the alleged wrongdoings of their foreign coreligionists everywhere. Such prejudices weighed heavily on AJC strategies. Yet, AJC officials tended to seek external factors that could explain the development of such conflation in the United States, without properly investigating its American roots.

EXTERNAL CONTAMINATION: THE MYTH OF JUDEO-COMMUNISM AND NAZI ANTISEMITISM

Another key feature of global antisemitism increasingly informed AJC defense strategy in the 1930s: the myth of Judeo-Communism (a continuation of the post-WWI myth of Judeo-Bolshevism). Given the strength of anti-communism in the United States, it became especially important for well-established Jewish leaders of AJC, in their condemnation of Nazism, antisemitism and fascism, to dissociate themselves from any possible conflation with communism. According to Cyrus Adler, the risk of close association between anti-fascism and communism legitimized AJC guardedness toward the boycott against Nazi Germany in 1935, as he wrote to Neville Laski: "The charge of Jewish Bolshevism has gained currency in responsible quarters to a very disturbing degree and we all felt that the time had come for us to issue a formal declaration about it."⁵⁶ Antisemites called on American Jewish organizations to publicly speak out against communism the same way they condemned Nazism. For instance, Coughlin in one of his *Social Justice* commentaries on the *Protocols* concluded: "We regard every organization against War and Fascism as a menace until the officials of such organizations incorporate the war against Communism in their program."⁵⁷

AJC's public dissociation from communism to deflect the charge of Judeo-Communism turned out to be vain. It did not prevent some American conservative and Christian sectors from adopting outspoken forms of political antisemitism that labelled Jews as internationalists, communists, radicals, and atheists. AJC officials were aware of these biases; for instance, a memorandum of March 1939 explained how antisemitism spread among American Catholics:

There is developing a subtle form of antisemitism in the Catholic press, when certain Communists are spoken of as Jewish Communists or as Jewish radicals, or when Einstein is labeled a typical Jewish radical refugee who does not belong here. There has been a tendency to over-emphasize a seeming

56. Adler to Laski, October 21, 1935, folder 10, box 24, Waldman Files, YIVO.

57. "Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion," *Social Justice*, August 8, 1938, 5.

preponderance of Jewish-appearing faces at radical and Communist meetings; and to some degree, all liberals who oppose some particular Catholic project have been branded as Communists.⁵⁸

It is not by chance that such an informed and perceptive assessment of the vectors of antisemitism in the United States came after Coughlin's infamous Sunday broadcast of November 20, 1938, in which the Radio Priest minimized Nazi persecutions while blaming antisemitism on Jews themselves. Downplaying the gravity of Kristallnacht, Coughlin openly accused Jewish immigrants of introducing communism and atheism in America, while at the same time pressing American Jews to publicly repudiate their "radical" coreligionists.⁵⁹

Because the myth of Judeo-Communism was a key component of Nazi ideology, it was not too difficult for Jewish defense agencies to jump to the conclusion that American hatemongers who capitalized on such a bogey were merely mimicking their Nazi role-models. Even when they accurately explained that antisemitism was disseminated in the United States disguised as anti-communism, AJC leaders did not extensively tackle its American roots. According to most of their reports from the 1930s and 1940s, Nazism remained the main cause of the propagation of antisemitism, both at a global and domestic levels.

For Morris Waldman, the demonizing conflation of Jews and communism was essentially a product of Nazi propaganda. AJC's executive secretary viewed the success of antisemitism among American Catholics, for example, as a form of external contamination, fueled by German Nazis and by their imitators in the United States. Regarding the American context, he recommended that Jewish defense agencies "point out how Nazi propaganda has diabolically attempted to distort the facts in order to generate hostility on the part of some religious groups against others, for example, trying to identify Communism against which the Catholic church is arrayed, as a Jewish movement."⁶⁰ This misleading interpretation (both because the Jewish-Communist conflation had taken roots earlier, after WWI, and because it persisted in broader milieus than just pro-Nazi groups) nourished the hope that by removing the Nazi contaminant domestic antisemitism would naturally disappear.

Similar views persisted after the war, for instance in a report on *The American Jewish Committee's Fight against anti-Semitism, 1938-1950*,

58. Memorandum, "The Catholic press and possible cooperation with it," March 1939, folder 4, box 21, Waldman Files, YIVO.

59. The sensationalistic radio sermon was printed in 1939 in a volume entitled *Am I an Anti-Semite?* (Detroit: Condon Printing Co., 1939).

60. Waldman to Proskauer, June 16, 1937, folder 12, box 20, Waldman Papers.

by Richard Rothschild, director of the AJC's Survey Committee. In retrospect, Rothschild identified "three levels of Anti-Semitism": "basic anti-Semitism" (theological), "economic anti-Semitism," and a specific category, "the anti-Semitism of the late 1930's." The latter:

was of a third kind, originating in the flood of propaganda, direct and indirect, coming out of Hitler Germany. Economic depressions, world wars, and a thousand and one things never before associated with the Jews, were being interpreted by the Nazis as having this or that Jewish angle. Day after day, the Hitlerites and their anti-Semitic allies were pouring this poison into the blood stream of the democracies. In short, anti-Semitism had been given a new dimension, a political dimension, in that it had been made the emotional spearhead of a world-wide program of conquest.⁶¹

To be sure, antisemitism in America stemmed, in no small part, from global influences, including Nazi-inspired movements. AJC however tended to downplay the local roots of these manifestations which were too quickly labeled "imitations." One way to present antisemitism as exceptional by American standards was to consider it imported by non-Jewish immigrant groups under the influence of Nazi propagandists. In March 1943, an AJC memorandum stated that "besides the traditional anti-Semitic attitudes which immigrants brought from Europe, particularly the Slavs (Catholic, Greek-Catholic and Greek Orthodox), strong new impetus was given to anti-Semitism through German and satellite propaganda (Hungary, pro Tiso Slovakia) during the last decade."⁶²

Conversely, antisemitism abroad appeared also as a result of Nazi propaganda and ultimately as un- and anti-American in the context of WWII, even when it was originally exported from the United States. In January 1942, Jacob Landau wrote to Henry Ford: "Your name is widely exploited all over South America in the dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda." Spanish translations of Ford's *International Jew* played into anti-American hands, according to JTA's secretary: "I do not overstate in saying that in each of the Latin American countries anti-Semitism is not only an index of Nazi influence but indicates the degree of anti-United States sentiment." Such statements were not necessarily inaccurate. But they relied on assumptions that helped situate antisemitism as a problem foreign to American democracy.⁶³

61. *The American Jewish Committee's Fight against Anti-Semitism, 1938 - 1950, as Recounted by Richard C. Rothschild* (New York, 1953), 6.

62. Memo, "How to Reach Immigrant Groups," Horace M. Marston to David Roseblum, March 16, 1943, folder 221, box 10, Waldman Papers.

63. Landau to Ford, January 28, 1942, folder 219, box 10, Waldman Files, YIVO.

FINDING SHELTER BEHIND AMERICANNESS

As the fate of European Jews worsened in the second half of the 1930s, the comparative approach of Jewish defense agencies made American antisemitism seem milder. Yet, however understandable it was that AJC leaders focused their attention on Nazi antisemitism in the years 1935-1945, their emphasis on Nazi contamination obscured the possibility that antisemitic forces originated and grew in a democratic context. AJC reports almost systematically associated contemporary antisemitism with the totalitarian, racist, and annihilationist goals of the Nazi regime. The reverse side of the same narrative was the equation of the fight against antisemitism and the defense of American democracy. Claiming that antisemitism had no roots in American politics, AJC took shelter behind an apologetic discourse of democracy in America.

Since the aftermath of World War I, the language of Americanness (as constructed through the lens of liberalism) had helped AJC leaders counterattack against antisemitism, while at the same time evading difficult questions about American modernization. Already in December 1920, the exceptionalist claim projected flattering values onto American Jewish defense: antisemitism was essentially un-American, therefore the fight against it was a good marker of Americanness. The statement of January 16, 1921, by “citizens of Gentile birth” echoed the same idea from the viewpoint of the non-Jewish American leadership. Defending American Jews’ national faithfulness, it aimed at delegitimizing antisemitism with rational arguments: “The loyalty and patriotism of our fellow citizens of the Jewish faith is equal to that of any part of our people...There is not the slightest justification, therefore, for a campaign of antisemitism in this country.” Stirring up “the division of our citizens along racial and religious lines,” anti-Jewish bigotry posed a direct threat to American democratic values: “American citizenship and American democracy are thus challenged and menaced.”⁶⁴ The logic conclusion was that antisemitism had to be countered on broad democratic grounds, not simply on the basis of Jewish interests. The subtext—shared by AJC—implied that democracy was a shield against antisemitism and not a fertile ground on which anti-Jewish hatred could possibly grow.

In their work against antisemitism, AJC leaders often put forward a set of chosen American democratic values that they identified as being perfectly convergent with Jewish defense. In Spring 1933, for example, AJC invited Catholic leaders to speak out against the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. In response, the Archbishop of Baltimore and

64. Anti-Semitic Literature Collection, folder 310, box 29, AJHS.

several other Catholic bishops "asked why they should be called upon to demonstrate their interest in Jews when under the persecution of Roman Catholics in Mexico the Jews of America voiced no protest."⁶⁵ AJC assistant secretary Harry Schneiderman replied to Catholic officials that the difference between anti-Jewish persecutions in Nazi Germany and anti-Catholic persecutions in Mexico had to do with opposite configurations of church-state relations:

American citizens could not very well protest against the separation of church and state in Mexico, when our own Government is based on such separation. Jews certainly could not protest, because they are in danger in any country in which there is an alliance between the state and any particular church.⁶⁶

Thus, Schneiderman argued, as both American citizens and as Jews, American Jews could not denounce the separation of church and state. In countries and regimes that did not stand by democratic, liberal, and secular principles similar to those of the American democracy, Jews were inevitably more vulnerable and emancipation a never-ending process. Once more, in AJC's view, Americanness was a shield against anti-Jewish bigotry, and democracy an anathema to antisemitism.

As political antisemitism grew in the mid-1930s, however, AJC bolstered its research apparatus to counterattack American Jew-haters. In 1936, Waldman prompted the creation of the Survey Committee to report on antisemitic episodes and groups in America, as well as to produce refutation literature.⁶⁷ The Committee's reports focused on the psychological dimension of antisemitism and promoted education as an antidote to pathological hatred. Because of their psychological lens, such initiatives did not expose comprehensively the deeper historical structures of antisemitism in America. On one hand, they offered the false hope that antisemitism in the United States could end when faced with rational, scientific arguments; education and social science could render hate speech powerless. On the other hand, by focusing on foreign causes, AJC interpretations did not confront how antisemitic language gave voice to a domestic anti-liberal backlash and channeled anxieties about American modernization and capitalism.

This interpretative pattern persisted into the 1940s, following a broader trend that Lila Corwin Berman identifies as the "social-scientific

65. B. Hargotensis to Schneiderman, April 15, 1933, folder 12, box 20, Waldman Files, YIVO.

66. Schneiderman to Hartogensis, April 21, 1933, folder 12, box 20, Waldman Files, YIVO.

67. Memo, Waldman to staff, May 19, 1941, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/RS20A.CV01.pdf, American Jewish Committee Archives.

turn” in the public discourse about Jewishness.⁶⁸ AJC proponents of the “social-scientific turn” attempted to reconcile this new understanding of antisemitism with the enduring claim of American exceptionalism. Professor of philosophy at City College of New York and founder of the Conference on Jewish Relations in 1933, Morris Raphael Cohen championed social science as a tool in the fight against prejudice and for Jewish security. As chairman of the AJC Committee on Peace Studies (appointed in spring 1940), Cohen wrote a lengthy report entitled “Jewish Studies of Peace and Post-War Problems.” Printed in the *Contemporary Jewish Record* in April 1941, Cohen’s report once again tied the fight against antisemitism to a broader defense of American democratic values and religious pluralism in the face of foreign totalitarian threats.

Cohen’s report addressed antisemitism as a global issue that signaled the connectedness of Jews’ fate inside and outside the United States, in Europe as well as Latin America: “The problems of the Jews in other parts of the Western Hemisphere are bound to affect us so intimately that very close attention to them is urgent... While as citizens of the United States we wish to avoid all kinds of foreign entanglements, we must remember the precarious condition in which the Jews now find themselves in many of the Latin American countries.”⁶⁹ Cohen’s cautious words demonstrate that antisemitic accusations of double loyalty lingered in the minds of American Jewish leaders. They also show a certain uneasiness toward American Jewish involvement in global interventionism and sense of superiority in diaspora relations.

Looking back at the 1930s, Cohen interpreted the development of antisemitism in the United States as a foreign contamination, “the rise of sinister un-American efforts to arouse hatred against us and even—in its extremist form—to threaten us with Tsarist or Nazi pogroms.” Nonetheless, the report pointed out some potential domestic sources of antisemitism alongside international causes: “Yet it would be inexcusable folly to believe that anti-Semitism is entirely dead in this country never to revive again. Much obviously depends on future developments of our political and economic conditions, on the possible growth of militarism and efforts at appeasement with Germany.”

In his practical conclusions, Cohen recommended that the fight against antisemitism be linked to patriotism and the defense of American democracy: “To fight anti-Semitism effectively, we must not be satisfied with answering false charges against us. We must join our truly patriotic

68. Berman, *Speaking of Jews.*, especially 43–50 on Cohen.

69. Records relating to the intergovernmental committee on refugees 1938–41, folder “American Jewish Committee, Morris Waldman,” RG 59, Department of State Central Files, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Cohen wrote the report to support the creation of a special department sponsored by AJC, the Research Institute on Peace and Post-War Problems.

fellow-citizens in repelling the forces that would overthrow the traditional American democratic spirit of equal opportunity for all." Once more, for both strategical and ideological motives, the language of Americanness and exceptionalism provided a framework through which AJC could advocate the defense of Jewish rights on behalf of a broader cause identified with democratic and liberal values. Since fighting antisemitism was thus not a parochial cause, but rather a defense of the equal rights of all Americans, AJC leaders had by the early 1940s configured themselves in agents of American exceptionalism broadly understood.

Key moments of antisemitism in the United States, such as Ford's and Coughlin's campaigns, demonstrated that the transnational and national dimensions of antisemitism were closely intertwined. Given the impact of antisemitic myths upon Jewish defense itself, this complex picture reinforced the tendency among AJC leaders to speak of American antisemitism in exceptionalist terms, overlooking its domestic roots. The pervasiveness of global antisemitism during the interwar period blurred the lines between local and imported anti-Jewish discourses and made it more difficult for American Jews to consider the role that antisemitism played in shaping the American Jewish experience. To be sure, these flawed interpretations were conditioned by an ideology of American exceptionalism that Jewish leaders absorbed from the wider culture. But they forged a narrative which depicted antisemitism mostly as an imported product from Europe and argued that American Jews seldom experienced homegrown, political hatred.

Yet, despite their confidence in the American exception, Jewish leaders were often called on by local hatemongers to prove their patriotism as respectable Americans. Antisemites' provocations ironically pushed AJC to demonstrate that there was no antisemitism within the frame of the American democracy, or at least that there were no valid reasons that could explain its existence. AJC leaders were forced into a sort of post-emancipation test, to prove that there was no Jewish question in America and that they deserved equal rights. These examples illustrate David Sorkin's concept that even in the "exceptional" America, Jewish emancipation was a global, long-term, and ongoing process in which American Jews had to keep defending principles of equality and rights perpetually challenged even in a context of democracy.⁷⁰

Furthermore, as Paul Hanebrink has demonstrated in case of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, interwar antisemitic prejudices drew on some small kernel of truth in their elaborations of ubiquitous myths. The

70. David Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 346–53.

AJC therefore had to deal with the facts of Jewish diaspora diplomacy and internationalism, as well as cases of individual Jewish success. That antisemitic myths about American Jews and the discourse of American Jewish exceptionalism shared some similar assumptions and distortions may explain in part the discomfort of American Jewish leaders in fully examining the shape of antisemitism at home. It could also illuminate why Jewish responses to hate speech did not fully address how antisemitism—in the case of Coughlin for instance—had given voice to populist discontents against the inadequacies of liberalism.

The increasing attention that American Jewish defense efforts devoted to Nazi antisemitism toward the end of the interwar period stressed a paradigm of racial, state-sponsored, and totalitarian antisemitism.⁷¹ But this paradigm prevented a deeper examination of antisemitism in the American democracy viewed as immune to political and ideological forms of anti-Jewish sentiment. This omission in part resulted from AJC leaders' reluctance to face the shortcomings of modernization and the social and racial fragmentations of the American liberal model. During that period, Jewish responses were mostly articulated through the language of citizenship and religion, and did not grapple yet with problematic notions of race, ethnicity, and identity politics.⁷² Before the civil rights movement era, the vision of American liberalism as a shield against bigotry also obscured systemic racism and discrimination in the United States, especially against Black Americans.

These considerations are still worth pondering today in a context where many wonder why antisemitism persists in liberal democracies, including in the United States, the mythical land of exceptionalism. Much remains to be understood about the entanglement of global and local factors in the shaping of American antisemitism and its intersectionality with nativism, racism, and populism.⁷³

71. Doris Bergen shows how the conflation between antisemitism and Nazism is an enduring legacy of Nazi antisemitism. See, Bergen, "Nazism," in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*, eds. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser (New York: Palgrave, 2021), 173–186.

72. The literature is vast. For a recent discussion, see, David Schraub, "White Jews: An Intersectional Approach," *AJS Review* 43, no. 2 (2019): 379–407. On American Jews' changing relation to the language of race, see, Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Noam Pianko, "Jewish Peoplehood and the Nationalist Paradigm in American Jewish Culture," in *Thinking Jewish Culture in America*, ed. Ken Koltun-Fromm (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 15–29.

73. See, Jaclyn Granick and Britt Tevis, "Why the Pittsburgh Shooter Raged about Immigration before Attacking a Synagogue," *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2018. On the origins and limitations of intersectionality, see, James Loeffler, "Antisemitism, Adorno, and the Theory of Hate," *Marginalia*, March 1, 2019, <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/antisemitism-adorno-theory-hate/>.