

The First World War

The First World War:

Analysis and Interpretation, Volume 2

Edited by

Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta

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CHAPTER FIVE
NATIONALITIES AND MINORITIES

THE JEWS OF EASTERN EUROPE AND THE GREAT WAR IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE

GIUSEPPE MOTTA

The Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement suffered from the consequences of the Great War from many points of view: the Russian military measures produced a great flow of refugees, the repeated occupations of German and Russian armies impoverished these communities and created big damages to the Jewish populations, especially in Poland and Lithuania. This particular reality became the center of the activities of many organizations, in Russia, Europe, and also in the United States: here the Joint Distribution Committee, created for the relief of the Jews in Palestine, decided to enlarge its action and to include also the relief of Eastern Jewish groups. The help first came through the American Embassy in Holland and only later direct emissaries of the Joint Distribution Committee started to visit the regions of Eastern Europe and to be directly interested in this activity. The documents of the Joint Distribution Committee, therefore, could be very helpful to have a first-hand description of many Eastern European cities and of the reality in which many Jewish communities were living. In particular, this paper is focused on the reports drafted in the first months of 1918 by A. van Raalte, a representative of the JDC who travelled to Poland and Lithuania and underlined the needs and the misery of Jews in many villages and cities.

Introduction

When talking about the conditions of European Jewry at the time of the First World War the most common reference is normally made to the well-known Balfour Declaration, dated November 2, 1917, concerning the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.¹ But

¹ Zionist movements were started by T. Herzl, who was followed by Chaim Weizmann and supported by other activists such as Arkadi Kremer, Chaim Zhitlovsky, Nachman Syrkin, Menachem Ussishkin, and Ber Borochov. *A Jewish*

together with this outstanding document, many other events contributed to the idea of creating a state, or a “national home”: the conflict, as a matter of fact, stressed the necessity to finally intervene and solve the Jewish question, that is to say, to put an end to the historical discriminations and difficulties that had accompanied Jewish life in Europe since the medieval ages. The violence that affected Eastern European Jewry during and after the war strengthened the consciousness of alleviating this emergency and reinforcing the aspirations of those men who were fighting to create a new and fair Europe under the principle of national self-determination, assuring to all the people in the world (or to the great majority of them) the right to freely cultivate their creeds and identities, through a “national state” or through the guarantee of civil and political equality, both in law and in fact.

The conflict and the Jews in Russia

The conditions of Jews in tsarist Russia were strongly conditioned by the existence of the notorious Pale of Settlement, which practically represented a sort of open-air prison for many Jews who were concentrated in some “special” areas, next to the western frontiers. The Pale of Settlement embraced the western part of the Russian Empire: almost the entire Ukraine including Bessarabia, Russian Poland, and the Lithuanian and White Russian provinces (Vilna, Vitebsk, Grodno, Kovno, Minsk, Mogilev). This area hosted more or less 6/7 of all the Jewish population: 2,600,000 inhabitants of Ukraine were Jews, 1,400,000 lived in the six provinces of Lithuania and White Russia.²

The overwhelming majority of these approximately six million Jews lived in cities and small towns (hamlets) and, as a rule, led a miserable or not very comfortable life as an effect of all the restrictions of the Russian law. These legal discriminations were accompanied by a widespread sentiment of anti-Semitism, which brought to many “disgraceful” measures such as the forced “admission” of Jewish children into the

state: an attempt at a modern solution of the Jewish question by T. Herzl gave birth to the contemporary Zionist movement in 1896 (Laqueur 2003; Hertzberg 1959; Vital 1975; Brenner 2003; Yapp 1987; Schneer 2010).

² Memorandum 1. The Pale of Settlement in the Former Russian Empire, folder USSR: Agro-Joint, Publicity, 1925–1927, 1921–1932 New York Collection, item 359421.

Cantonist schools, the expulsion from Kiev and Moscow, and the laws of May 1882, after Alexander II's death (Dubnow 1916, 408).³

Naturally, the oppression converted some Jews into one of the most radical enemies of the tsar. It was showed by their extended participation in the birth and development of the first socialist movements, the Bund and the Social Democratic Party, which proved to be very counterproductive as it strengthened the aversion of the authorities and public opinion towards them. This atmosphere staged the play of an incredible *coup de theatre*, which was directed against the Jews and would have tremendous consequences for their future in Europe: the tsarist secret police commissioned a fraudulent pamphlet, the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, which was published in 1903. This forged text was proposed as proof of a Jewish conspiracy to conquer the power in the world through finance, economy, politics, masonry, disorder, and the destruction of religion. It was published in *Znamya*, a journal that was close to the movement of the Black Hundreds (*Chornaya sotnya, chernosotentsy*), a rightist anti-Semitic movement that was terrorizing Russian Jews, inciting and organizing pogroms such as the one at Kishinev during Passover in 1903.⁴

Other cities were affected by this wave of pogroms (Odessa, Bialystok, Melitopol, Feodosiya), which were repeated during the following years, for example in 1906, and had the primary effect of increasing emigration from Russia, especially to the United States, where an important group of Jewish communities had established active organizations for charity and assistance: Board of Delegates in Civil and Religious Rights of the Hebrew, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society.

This atmosphere caused the emigration of many Jews—emigration to the USA increased during the period 1881–1910 and about 90 percent of this flow came from Eastern Europe—and the feeling of anti-Semitism reached its most intense stage after 1912 when in Russian Poland there was a split between the Polish National Democratic Party, which nominated an anti-Semite to represent Warsaw in the Russian Duma, and the Socialist Jews (Joseph 1914, 172; Weinryb 1955, 519).

Only a part of Jewish emigrants adhered to Zionism and to the idea of creating their own state in Palestine. Following the old attempts of Joseph Nasi and Sabbatai Zebi, and the recent ones of Moses Montefiore, Theodor Herzl infused Zionism with a new ideology and practical urgency,

³ See also Semenov (1907); Wolf (1912); *The Persecution of the Jews in Russia*, London, Wertheimer (1920); Mendelsohn (1970); Vago and Mosse (1974); Frankel (1981).

⁴ The movement was loyal to tsarism and opposed every form of national self-determination, for example the Ukrainian one (Laqueur 1993; Rawson 1995).

leading to the first Zionist congress at Basel in 1897, which created the World Zionist Organization (WZO). Even if Herzl's attempts to reach a political agreement with the Ottoman rulers of Palestine were unsuccessful, the WZO supported small-scale settlement and focused on strengthening the Jewish feeling and consciousness and on building a worldwide federation.

Despite the start of this flow towards the "promised land," the number of Jews living in Russia at the beginning of the war was estimated at six million, and 95 percent of this amount resided in the Pale of Settlement. The conditions of Jews further deteriorated after the outbreak of the Great War, and not only as a consequence of battles and conflicts along the western frontier, where Russian troops fought against German and Habsburg ones. The first information coming from this war zone reported hundreds of Jews from Poland rushing to Lithuania in order to escape from the frontier, which was expected to be the center of the conflict.

The conditions of war troubled oversea emigration and caused a great mass of refugees in search of help and shelter in European regions or through Siberia and Japan. At the same time, the Great War represented an occasion for those Jews who hoped to reform and cancel tsarist misrule and improve Jewish conditions, "to make Russia a modern state builded upon righteousness and justice, may at least have a voice in the framing of the laws of that medieval country." In many synagogues, prayers were offered up for the success of the German army and it was not surprising, therefore, that a Jewish journal in the United States, in August 1914, openly criticized Russia:

The two evils that support the Russian throne and sustain the haughty and arrogant aristocracy are the ignorance of the Russian peasants and its puissance through their soldiers. To dispel the one and break the other is the only and sole salvation of the oppressed of Russia. ... The nature of the persecution of the Jews by the Russian government is actually designed along the lines of suppressing and expelling them. In the first place, they fear that the Jews will influence the peasants and spread some enlightenment among them. They therefore seek to separate the Jews from the Russians and have crowded the former into what has been styled the Pale of Settlement. They have compelled over four million persons to live within these quarters, refusing to allow any, with some exceptions, to leave or to settle in the interior of Russia ... From this cesspool of ignorance and superstition, there emanate the epidemic of nation-wide persecution and popular anti-Jewish hatred.⁵

⁵ I. I., "Russia and the Jew." *The Sentinel*, August 14, 1914, p. 2; "War Items of Special Jewish Interests." *The Sentinel*, August 14, 1914, p. 4.

The enemies of Russia, and Germany in particular, were fully aware of this state of things and tried to exploit the situation and address the hostility of Jewish people against Russian troops. In 1914, the German command inaugurated its strategy for conquering the sympathies of these Jews and received the help of the Zionist leaders Max Isidor Bodenheimer and Nahum Sokolow, and of associations such as the Komitee für den Osten and the Mannesmann-Comité (Szajkowski 1969, 311–320).

The German Committee for the Freeing of Russian Jews (Deutsches Komitee zur Befreiung der russischen Juden) was created in August 1914, while many leaflets were distributed by the German and Austro-Hungarian armies in the occupied zones of Poland and also a propaganda bulletin in Yiddish and Hebrew entitled *Der Emes*, reminding the Jews (*An die Juden in Polen!*) of the constant anti-Jewish persecution in Russia.

Naturally, the tsar tried to annul this potential menace and during the first months of the war issued a proclamation to his “dear Jews” and even decorated some of them, such as M. Kurlandsky of Dubroya (Grodno) for his educational activities, and M. Bruk, Rabbi of Kovel (Volhynia), in August 1914.

The Jewish deputy of the Duma from the province of Kovno, N. Friedman, anyway, in the historic “war session” of the Russian Duma, on August 8, 1914, promised that:

In the great spiritual uplift which has come to the nation the Jews fully participate, and they will go to the field of battle shoulder to shoulder with the other nationalities of the Empire. Although we Jews have long suffered, and are still suffering, from grievous civil disabilities, we feel, nevertheless, that we are Russian citizens and faithful sons of our Fatherland. Nothing will ever alienate us from our country, nor separate us from the land to which for so many centuries we have been attached.⁶

But Friedman’s assurances proved to be quite useless: as a matter of fact, the first military measures of the tsarist army confirmed the secular “tradition” of diffidence and suspicions regarding the Jews as potential spies and had some tragic consequences for the Jewish people of the Pale.

Many historiographical works have underlined the precarious situation of Russian Jews during the war (Altshuler, Ansky, Bianchi, Gatrell, Goldin, Levene, Lohr, Prusin) and Eric Lohr, in particular, has reviewed the different dispositions that the Russian army adopted during the war and has underlined how the latter were inspired by the vision of Jews as an

⁶ G. Kennan, “The War and the Russian Jews.” *The Outlook*, January 20, 1915, p. 132.

unreliable element: spies or deserters who were to be removed from the zones of major strategic importance. As a consequence, military commands used the War Statute of 1914 and the unlimited powers that this act bestowed on them to clean certain areas from Jews, Germans, and foreigners (who were all considered as potential spies) and to consequently adopt a gamut of different measures targeted at these particular groups. Lohr has distinguished four different phases of this policy beginning with the deportations or forced expulsions in July 1914–January 1915. During the second phase, this system was better organized with a circular (January 25, 1915) in which the Commander-in-Chief of the Army Headquarters, Nikolaj Januskevic, instructed all the commanders to expel all Jews and suspected individuals from the entire area of military activity where troops were present. In April–May 1915, the third phase commenced with larger scale mass deportations: in this case the deportees were assigned destinations in advance and the travels were better organized with the use of trains and the help of civilian officials. These measures, anyway, were not fully implemented owing to technical problems and to the lack of space where to deport the Jews: as a matter of fact, a large part of the Pale of Settlement was under military control and only a few zones remained available to concentrate the Jewish deportees. Some criticisms were expressed by the civilian and political authorities, for example by some governors who complained that this policy was impoverishing local economy, as removing the Jews in many cases meant a paralysis of certain economic sectors.

In this context, another practice was also used, the hostage-taking, which marked the passage to a new phase. As transferring whole populations generated many inconveniences, the commands ordered that deportation was to be replaced with hostage-taking, allowing the communities of deportees to return back home under the condition that hostages were to be taken from each group.

Deportations and hostage-taking declined in scale by the end of 1915, but army commanders still retained the power of deciding about forced expulsions and taking hostages and many kept on using this prerogative also in the following years. But this whole of discriminatory measures created a legitimized framework for anti-Jewish violence, which punctually broke out during the conflict. A real and large wave of pogroms began only in 1915 and was “caused” by the Russian retreat and by some Cossack units, who often instigated violence encouraging popular participation in looting and violence.

In May 1915, the Russian-Jewish Relief Committee that had been established in Petrograd as the central institution to coordinate local ones

issued a report according to which in Poland there were at least 200 towns and about 9,000 townlets and villages that had suffered from the war, producing a big damage in terms of agricultural and industrial production. This document estimated that about two million Jews were directly affected by the war: many of them had been forcibly expelled from their residence, while others decided to flee but also to come back. Notwithstanding the difficult collection of data, this report calculated that more than 100,000 refugees had left the Polish provinces:

Hundreds of factories have been destroyed ... while branches of trade have been shattered, burying the welfare of the artisans under their ruins ... Commercial life also has been laid waste. The merchants – great and small – are ruined... (American Jewish Committee 1916, 101–102)

In 1915, the Jewish Deputy of the Duma, Friedman, complained that about half a million persons had been doomed to a state of beggary and vagabondage: in the province of Kovno wealthy persons became beggars in a few days, while all the cities and the villages within and outside the Pale began to be crowded with an increasing number of refugees.⁷ The city of Smolensk, for example, in 1916 witnessed the arrival or passage of great masses: 1,500 persons in June 1916, 6,500 in July, and 8,600 in August (Hickey 1998, 826).⁸

A special conference for the Organization of War Refugees was created by Jewish organizations in cooperation with the government and also this institution recorded the rapid increase of refugees. The account of March 1, 1916, for example, registered a total number of 185,596 refugees (on November 1, 1915, there were only 160,000) and in some places the situation was undoubtedly more serious. In a few months, Vilnius passed from 1,135 to 3,166, Poltava from 5,366 to 10,842 refugees. The provinces of the northwestern front line (Vilnius, Vitebsk, Livonia, Minsk, Mogilev) hosted 53,534 refugees; those of the southwestern front line were even more numerous (41,146 refugees in Ekaterinoslav, Poltava, Taurida, Kharkoff; 16,836 refugees in Bessarabia, Volhynia, Kieff, Podolia, and

⁷ “Among the refugees I met Jewish women and girls, who had worked together with Russian women, had sewed garments with them and collected contributions with them, and who were now forced to encamp on the railway embankment.” The speech of Deputy Friedman in the Duma, on August 2, published in the *New York Times* on September 23, 1915. See also “Victory cheers Germany. Big Capture of Russians looked from Following Vilna’s Fall.” *NYT* September 22, 1915.

⁸ Jews in Smolensk organized a Society for the Aid of Jewish War Victims and a refugee labor bureau.

Tehernigoff); the provinces of the interior or of the rear had 74,078 refugees.⁹

In April 1916, the report of EKOPO, the Russian-Jewish Relief Committee, took into consideration the number of 400,000 refugees.

Naturally, these flows were directed not only eastwards but also to the other side of the front, that is to say to those Austrian and German territories where the fugitives hoped to find better conditions of living. According to a report of the Israelitische Allianz zu Wienn (November 17, 1916): Bohemia hosted 75,135 refugees; Mahrend 31,344; East Silesia 7,000; Steiermark 4,000; Northern Austria 10,000; Vienna and Southern Austria 50,000; and Western Austria 200,000. But these numbers were not destined to decrease, even if the policy of forced expulsions was partially abandoned, at least at the level of government policies. In fact, the conflict exacerbated the hostility between Poles and Jews and the attacks of Austrian and German troops were interpreted as the result of Jewish connivance: this suspicion consequently produced many problems where the Russian troops succeeded in driving their opponents back. Severe punishments were inflicted upon the Jews of the war zone who were charged for high treason according to the Polish accusations but were many times proved innocent by the witnesses. The Russian military authorities preferred to seek a scapegoat for their failures and to give Polish accusations wide circulation such as in the case reported by a military paper, *Nash Viestnik*, on May 5 (18), 1915, regarding Kuzhi. This village was attacked by Germans on the night of April 28, 1915, and the local Jews were accused of helping the German invaders, but the investigation of some deputies of the Duma discovered that in the entire village of Kuzhi there were only six Jewish families and that their houses were not so huge to host German soldiers as the previous accusations had underlined. Furthermore, these Jews had escaped before the arrival of the Germans and were residing in a nearby village during the attack.

Paradoxically, the discriminations during the war also produced the first virtual abolition of the Pale of Settlement, as in 1915; as a natural consequence of the war decrees, the Council of Ministers for the first time permitted the Jews to move to the interior of Russia. This abolition, anyway, was considered by the Jews just as a “temporary expedient, dictated mainly by military necessity and partly by the need of a foreign loan.” The American Jewish Committee’s book tried to prove this assertion stating that this measure did not remove any of the disabilities to

⁹ Report of the special conference for the Organization of War (December 30, 1916). JDC Archives, Russia general 1916, New York collection 1914–1918, item 10081.

which Jews were legally subjected. In this case, the book quoted the minutes of the Council of Ministers (August 4–17, 1915), which clearly stressed that the necessity for such a measure was due to the growing flow of Jewish refugees and the unrest provoked by the latter.¹⁰

A certain “sympathy” towards the Jewish situation increased only with the rise of liberals inside the Duma, especially in 1917, but never produced any radical changes in the legal conditions of Jews or in the material need of Jewish refugees who were destined to live between “the devil and the deep blue sea,” in a territory constantly subjected to the menace of an invading army and to the destruction caused by war.

Many protests were issued inside the Duma or in the press by artists and writers, but these appeals were practically unproductive, especially during the troublesome experience of war. The conflict obviously aggravated the situation, and the chaos that was increasingly affecting Russia did not help Jewish interests. The only “positive” consequence of the war was represented by the legal abolition of the Pale of Settlement and the recognition of Jews’ equal rights by the Provisional Government following the February Revolution (legislation passed on March 21, 1917), but this formal achievement did not meet a significant improvement of material conditions. On the contrary, the atmosphere even worsened and the liberal proclamations of the Provisional Government in 1917 were rarely followed by concrete changes. The anarchy that pervaded Russian troops had terrible consequences for the Jews who were seen by the military units as Bolsheviks who were threatening the existence of Russia, helping the Germans outside and the Bolsheviks in the interior. The gravest phase of violence, as a matter of fact, commenced during the second part of the war, when legal forced expulsions theoretically ceased but were replaced by attacks and violence.

The work of relief: Russian and international societies

The situation of Russian Jews created a tragic “humanitarian emergency” that was dealt with by national and international societies. First of all, Russian Jewish communities prompted a set of measures in order to help their co-religionaries who were affected by the conflict. At Petrograd (the new Slavic name was used to strengthen patriotic feelings and stress the distance from the old German Petersburg), Jewish communities organized the Jewish Committee for the Relief of War

¹⁰ A deputy of the Duma Rostovtzev even denounced that the Pale had been abolished by Russia but by Kaiser Wilhelm (American Jewish Committee 1916, 23).

Victims (*Evreiskii Komitet Pomoshchi Zhertvam Voiny*, EKOPO), which was formed by the Petrograd central committee and by a whole of coordinated local committees and branches all over Russia. EKOPO coordinated its activities and involved also other existing societies such as the Society for the Advancement of Education among the Jews (*Obshchestva dlia Rasprostraneniia Prosveshcheniia Mezhdru Evreiami v Rossii*; OPE, created in 1863), the Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population (*Obschestvo zdravookhraneniia evreev*; OZE, founded in 1912), and other funds such as the Princess Tatiana Relief Fund and the sums that the government provided only since 1915.

But this intricate whole of societies, committees, and organizations had to deal with many difficulties; first of all with a general lack of funds, which was partially covered by the generous aid coming from America. The American help had already become a sort of “myth” in these Eastern European communities—see for example the reference to Jacob Schiff in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *The Family Moskat*—and during the war this connection proved to be essential to meet the material needs of many needy people, starting with the refugees who were crowding the towns of Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine.

The conditions of Russia were alarming and the widespread information regarding this catastrophe caused a quick race for charity and solidarity also abroad, for example, in the United States, where a large community of Jewish immigrants from Russia had settled, in Great Britain and in other states such as France and Germany.

American organizations immediately reacted against the tragedy of WWI and during the meetings of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in 1914 the structure of the funds and their destination were organized, focusing on Palestine and, at the same time, explaining that:

our duty is not, however, confined to come to the assistance of the unfortunate Jews of Turkey, but the great body of Jews of Russia, Belgium, Austria-Hungary, and of other affected lands where for weeks past has occurred the most destructive warfare known to history, stand in grievous need, and must of necessity look to us for assistance.¹¹

Many appeals to this regard arrived from Antwerp and from many European societies such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Israelitische Allianz of Vienna, and to meet these

¹¹ “Eighth Annual Report of the American Jewish Committee in November 1914.” In *American Jewish Yearbook* vol.17, p. 367.

needs the committee reserved a sum of the emergency fund and to issue a call for the establishment of a general relief fund.

In November 1914, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was established for “joining” the different committees that had been created for Palestine and for providing aid to the Jewish victims of World War I. The Joint Distribution Committee first looked at the Palestinian reality, where Jews were starting a process of colonization and experienced a radical impoverishment after the outbreak of World War I. In 1914, US Ambassador Morgenthau to Istanbul travelled to Palestine and, alarmed by the misery he found in the region, solicited an economic help from the United States.¹² In a telegram he talked about a “terrible crisis” and the menace of a “serious destruction,” which derived from the fact that the Turkish authorities compelled many Jews to join the army and many families remained without any “breadwinner,” many of them moving to Constantinople. In August 1914, Morgenthau’s solicitations reached the leaders of the AJC, through the Secretary of State, W. J. Bryan, and Jacob H. Schiff and Louis Marshall immediately reacted in order to respond to such an alarm. In a letter dated September 4, 1914, Morgenthau reminded L. Marshall about the conditions of Jews in Palestine:

Most of them have always depended for their support on charitable institutions and benevolent men in other countries, and now that the inflow of money has absolutely ceased, most of the societies will have to be abandoned, and it is almost too horrible to think of what will become of the poor men that will be stranded high and dry.¹³

After Ambassador Morgenthau’s initial telegram, the American Jewish Committee called for a general meeting in New York, on October 25, and established the first committees to coordinate the work of relief and collection of funds. On November 24, 1914, the Joint Distribution Committee of American Funds for the Relief of Jewish War Sufferers was finally formed joining the American Jewish Relief Committee (expression of the New York elites), the Central Relief Committee (appealing to the Orthodox element), and the People’s Relief Committee, which was organized later in August 1915 mainly for the laborers. Fundraising for Jewish refugees was catalyzed thanks to the support of American institutions and to President Wilson’s designation of January 27, 1916, as

¹² Jacob Schiff, AJC Executive Committee, to AJC President Louis Marshall. Attached is telegram correspondence between Jacob Schiff and U.S. Secretary of State W.J. Byran. (Aug. 28, 1914) AJC Archives online.

¹³ Telegram of August 31 to Jacob Schiff, New York; Letter of US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau to AJC president Loui Marshall (September 4, 1914).

Jewish Relief Day. The Transmission Department of the JDC was established in 1915 to deliver personal remittances to those areas in Europe and Palestine where normal transmission agencies were unable to function under war conditions. In this way, the relatives from the West were put in the conditions of depositing small amounts of money (typically \$5 or \$10, up to \$100) for the JDC to remit to their relatives overseas.

In March 1915, the JDC dispatched some \$1.5 million in relief, along with 900 tons of food and medicine, to Palestine on the *U.S.S. Vulcan*. At the same time, the JDC received permission from the US State Department to establish a committee of Dutch representatives to administer relief funds to European Jews in enemy-occupied countries during World War I. The JDC's intervention in Europe was carried out thanks to US institutions such as the Departments of State and of War, which channeled the funds and organized a central committee—Max Senior and Doris Bogen were involved in this complex work—in order to distribute and administer this money in Europe establishing the headquarters in the US diplomatic office in Amsterdam. As a matter of fact, the JDC did not have the staff or the structures to get directly involved in this work of relief and had to rely on the existing societies and on the different committees that had already started their activities in the war zone.

To receive this relief, different local organizations had to fill in a “Landsmanschaften questionnaire,” indicating the name and the data concerning the organization, legal representatives, and other details. These documents were collected by the JDC's agents yet in the second part of 1915 and distributed among the applicants.

As a consequence, the first actions of the JDC consisted primarily in arranging a general organizational structure, in establishing solid contacts with different associations and in financing them thanks to the funds of American institutions and some special banks such as Kuhn, Loeb & Co. The financial support of the JDC continued in the following years and at the end of 1917, the JDC had transferred \$2,532,000 to Russia, \$3,000,000 to German-occupied Poland and Lithuania, \$1,532,300 to Galicia, and \$76,000 to Romania. These endeavors proved that the first aid was soon implemented and represented just the beginning of a complex work of relief consisting not only in providing for immediate material aid but also in creating the basis for the future reconstruction. Under this perspective, the purpose of the JDC was briefly described by one of its agents, Mr. Zuckerman, “not merely to give bread, but to give the hope of a better

life—to help our brothers over there to live again, to give them the means wherewith to live, and to enable them to live as Jews.”¹⁴

As a consequence the tasks of the JDC were particularly directed at helping the development and renewal of Jewish spirit and morale, the building up of cultural, benevolent, and technical institutions, and integrating the various divergent groups and societies into a common purpose. In this context, the reconstruction could not be simply intended as the restoration of devastated areas but had the aim to enable the victims of war to resume their life anew and to apply their own efforts in their rehabilitation.

At the same time, the relief should also strengthen the Jewish political field and “encourage” those communal activities that would tend to correct the old evils and abuses that had weighted down the Jews, for example helping the Jewish welfare work in interlocking with non-Jewish welfare work. It was thought that only in this way the moral and economic support of American Jews in the long run might prove to be even more valuable than their material support.

The American aid was particularly important in two sectors: the medico-sanitary organization, which lacked skilled Jewish physicians and surgeons as many of them had been sent to the front during the war, killed or incapacitated; and the possible introduction of American industrial methods and machines among artisans and industrial workers. These steps were considered essential in creating the premises for a future peaceful and rapid development and marked the passage from a policy of assistance to one of the first examples of what today we call “development aid.”

Van Raalte’s journey in Eastern Europe (February–April 1918)

One of the first and most complete documents of the JDC regarding the situation of Jews in Poland and other territories of the former Pale of Settlement was drafted in 1918 by Albert Van Raalte, after spending some months visiting different localities and contacting different Jewish communities. This journey was essential in order to start a new phase in the work of the JDC and to pass from an indirect help to local communities to a direct engagement in helping them.

¹⁴ Internal Report of the Committee on Conference to the Joint Distribution Committee (August 10, 1919) for the sole use of members of J.D.C. Not for Publication. Collection 1919-1921 New York Collection, Folder JDC Administration, Committees, Standing and Subcommittees, 1919-1921. item 201103.

Starting from the JDC's European headquarters at The Hague, in February 1918, Van Raalte went to Berlin and left the German city for a journey that led him to Warsaw, Kaunas, Vienna, and Vilnius, spending seventy-five days in the occupied territories.¹⁵

During this trip, Van Raalte observed the situation, got in touch with different local representatives, collected data and information and tried to draft a complete scheme in order to give to the JDC a clear description of the Eastern European reality and of the concrete needs of the local population. The general remarks naturally underlined the precarious conditions of Jewish communities in the different towns and the need for financial help, as the efforts of the local wealthy people and of the ordinary citizens were not sufficient. In a chassidic town in Warsaw, for example, it occurred that a person asked for the service to be stopped, until it was ascertained that all the people present and their families had enough to eat the next week.

Van Raalte made a tragic description of the poverty in Vilnius: the hygienic conditions were in a bad state and the general poverty especially affected the Jews of the city, as proved by the account of Dr. Schabad, who stated that in his ambulatorium, open to people of all religions, between 50 percent and 80 percent of the patients were Jews.

Some families of refugees obtained a house where to live, some others were not so lucky. There were also families who had been well-off, but in the present situation were demoralized to such an extent that they became ordinary beggars. In one of the Lithuanian towns, Van Raalte had breakfast in a confectioner's shop, where he saw a young woman whose appearance showed that she came from a civilized family. After some information he heard that this girl had been studying to be a pianist before the war and all her brothers had been studying at the university. Left behind with her mother, they had been absolutely reduced to poverty.

Van Raalte visited a great number of shelters, public kitchens, schools, charity institutions and described the great efforts that the local committees, with the help of American funds, were making in order to alleviate the conditions of the poor and needy people. These institutions, such as the Lodzer Israelische Wohltätigkeitsverein, were providing the poor with meals and other support and in some cases were also lending small amounts of money to impoverished merchants. In Lodz the needs

¹⁵ Van Raalte's final report was sent to Holland and New York on June 12, 1918. In the previous months, Van Raalte had already transmitted some partial accounts of his trip, on March 1, 14, 27. JDC Archives, folder Overseas Administration, JDC Committees, Holland Bureau, June-December 1918, item 1052.

were getting higher and higher and in March 1918, out of 140,000 Jews, about 30,000 were getting their meals in public soup kitchens.

But together with his descriptions of this tragic reality, Van Raalte adopted a more scientific approach and collected budgets, information, and all kinds of data, for example regarding mortality and diseases. Only with this information, the JDC could seriously start to think about the future development and the “normalization” of Jewish conditions, preparing the ground for the work that JDC agents had to carry out after the end of the conflict. Under this perspective, it is possible to recall some of the figures that Van Raalte inserted in his reports in order to get a general and detailed account of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.

First of all, Van Raalte underlined the great number of people who needed economic support through meals, clothes, loans, etc.

City	Total Jewish population	People needing support
Kowno (Kaunas)	7000	3000
Wilna (Vilnius)	57500	29430
Grodno	15350	5100
Białystok	38000	27600

The most complete and exhaustive data reported by Van Raalte are those concerning the city of Vilnius, where he could count on the cooperation of Dr. Schabad, who provided him with the information regarding the passage from the prewar situation to the reality after 1914. These statistics are particularly meaningful because they were collected by the persons who directly witnessed the worsening of material, sanitary, and psychosocial conditions and represented a unique source of information in those troublesome years. The rate of mortality in Vilnius was very high and the figure below gives a precise account of how the death rate of the civil population passed from an average estimate in 1911–13, rapidly increased after the outbreak of the war, recorded a “relaxation” in 1916, and reached its maximum in 1917, when the casualties doubled those of the previous year.

	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917
January	94	133	98	112	128	173	330
February	111	99	84	98	129	192	360
March	94	83	94	104	130	116	447
April	77	102	98	104	130	116	378
May	101	81	95	79	146	120	424
June	113	103	66	91	154	99	325
July	93	95	79	95	188	95	304
August	111	90	86	130	271	99	274
September	94	105	101	115	330	108	251
October	95	126	106	124	435	121	184
November	88	101	97	105	145	166	182
December	112	93	84	139	163	209	221
TOTAL	1183	1152	1188	1302	2165	1680	3680

Van Raalte underlined the high mortality rates of children under five years of age, which were evident looking at the statistics of 1916 and 1917 and, taking into consideration the lack of proportions between the general death rate and infant mortality, showed that this “abnormal” phenomenon could only be explained by the bad economic conditions under which the Jews were living.

	Boys	Girls
1916 first half of the year	88	63
1916 second half of the year	78	63
1917 January–May	148	120

The following figures, instead, give an insight into causes of death and recorded an evident increase of some diseases, which were clearly the result of poorer material conditions and of the fall of the medical assistance (tuberculosis, kidney diseases, and weakness, which could easily be confused with bad nourishing and hunger).

	1915	1916	1917 (January-May)
Contagious diseases	12.05%	2.8%	3.36%
Tuberculosis	6.05%	12.7%	13%
Diseases of the digestive organs	7.25%	4.55%	4.3%
Diseases of the respiratory organs	19.25%	15.15%	12.2%
Heart and blood-vessel diseases	9.05%	10.05%	9.5%
Diseases of the urinary organs	5.5%	11.9%	14.7%
Nerve and brain diseases	6.6%	5.2%	2.7%
Cancer and such like	4.5%	3.5%	1.5%
Blood diseases	1.1%	1.45%	1.3%
Weakness	17.5%	26.4%	34.4%
Accidents	10.7%	6.3%	3.04%

Further evidence of the constant worsening and impoverishment was obtained from the data regarding the number of newborn children and of casualties:

	Births	Deaths	Difference
	Boys	Men	
1911	904	606	+298
1912	908	641	+267
1913	773	568	+205
1914	748	696	+52
1915	667	1164	-457
1916	394	869	-475
1917 (January–May)	112	1052	-941

Also the proportion of Jewish deaths compared to the general mortality showed that death rates among the Jews were higher—although slightly—than among the non-Jews. If according to the census of 1916 the Jews represented 41.5 percent of the total population of Vilnius, the rates of the first months of 1917 overcame this proportion:

	Persons	Jews	Jewish Percentage
January	659	282	42.8%
February	731	325	44.4%
March	875	442	50.5%
April	871	363	41.6%
May	1030	463	45%
June	752	304	40.4%
July	784	354	45.1%
TOTAL	5702	2533	44.4%

The same situation also affected other cities such as Warsaw (where the death rate doubled from 1916 to 1917 and passed from 7,211 to 14,111 casualties), Lodz or Lublin (here, there were 712 deaths in 1913, 842 in 1916, and 949 in 1917).

These figures should be interpreted taking into account that the Jewish population generally decreased as many moved to smaller towns in the occupied territory, and, at the same time, the rations of food were also improved thanks to the assistance of the American Jews, which was appreciated and viewed as necessary by all the committees that Van Raalte met during his journey. The financial help of the JDC supported the efforts of these numerous local associations and branches that provided food, clothes, and even psychological assistance to the needy people, including the families of reservists and of emigrants who could not count on monthly revenues.¹⁶

Conclusions

As Dubnow pointed out concluding his three volumes about the history of Jews in Russia and Poland, the war “opened up before the Jewish people a black abyss of medievalism in the midst of the blazing light of modern civilization, and finally threw it into the flames of the gigantic struggle of nations” (Dubnow 1920, 169). This phase, anyway, produced a whole of serious consequences that continued to affect Jewish life also in

¹⁶ The committee of Lublin in 1917 assisted 402 families of reservists (totally 1145 persons), 229 families of emigrants (814 persons), 974 families of poor people (3377 persons) for a total account of 1505 families or 5336 persons.