

WORLD WAR I AND THE JEWISH MASSES (1914-1917)

By Morris U. Schappes

WHAT kind of war was it that exploded in Europe at the end of July 1914? For the Jews, the war was to be a major influence on their whole future history, both in Europe and in the United States. It was therefore particularly important for them to understand the kind of war it was. When the bleeding and dying were over, President Woodrow Wilson, in a rare flash of candor, told the truth. Master of the seductive liberal phrase, Wilson had been re-elected in 1916 on the slogan, "He kept us out of war," and had in April 1917 taken us into the war on the slogan that we should be fighting "to make the world safe for democracy." But in 1919, touring the country to rouse support for the League of Nations project, Wilson blurted out this "revelation" at the St. Louis Coliseum on September 5th: "This war was a commercial and industrial war. It was not a political war. . . . Under the League plan, the financial leadership will be ours, the industrial supremacy will be ours, the commercial advantage will be ours and the other countries of the world will look to us, and shall I say, are looking to us, for leadership and direction. . . ."¹ For uttering this truth before United States entry into the war in order to help keep us out of it, and during the war as part of the fight for peace, thousands had been arrested and imprisoned as subversive, foreign agents and unpatriotic. Nor did Wilson, even after publishing this truth, hurry to amnesty the political prisoners.

In our country, the Jewish workers were mainly socialist in their aspirations and led by socialists in their union, fraternal and political organizations. Therefore the workers were keenly interested in views of the developing war situation expressed by European socialists.

Since the war had been brewing from the beginning of the century, its character had been analyzed and predicted at several international socialist congresses. There it had been foretold that the big powers would come to blows in order to redivide the colonial areas and reshuffle spheres of economic influence and penetration. As far back

as 1907 it had been resolved at such a congress in Stuttgart that if war did come, "the Socialists shall take measures to bring about its early termination and strive with all their power to use the economic and political crisis created by the war to arouse the masses politically and hasten the overthrow of capitalist class rule." Reaffirmed unanimously in 1912 at a conference in Basle, this policy was supposed to guide all the participating Socialist Parties, including that of the United States.

But when the fighting began, most of the leaderships of the European Socialist Parties in the warring countries ignored these resolutions and yielded conveniently to the pressure of their ruling classes and the propagandistic description of their war aims. Where before the Socialist leaders had seen predatory empires at home, they now recognized only homelands and fatherlands to be defended. The Kaiser's propagandists proclaimed this to be a war against the barbarism and tyranny of tsarism with the aim of liberating the oppressed masses thereof. The Allied propagandists, British, French and Russian, proclaimed theirs to be a war to liberate small nations like Belgium and Serbia from Prussian barbarism and all democracy from the threat of Kaiserism. Pliantly the majorities of the Socialist leaderships invented their own "socialist" versions of these slogans and ended by supporting their own ruling class in the war. The vaunted Social Democratic Party in Germany, the largest, the most influential and regarded generally as the most "advanced" in Europe, capitulated most supinely: of 110 Socialist members in the Reichstag, only Karl Liebknecht voted against the war and the war budget. In each belligerent country only minorities of the Socialist leaderships adhered to the socialist position, the largest and ultimately the most influential of these being the Bolsheviks in Russia.

Relief for European Jews

In our country, at what was then a safe transatlantic distance, there was time to observe all these European

¹ Woodrow Wilson, *The Hope of the World*, New York and London, 1920, p. 101, 102-103.

developments and try to learn from them. Our ruling circles, caught in an economic depression, recovered by busily selling materials of war to both camps until they could determine in favor of which side they would be "neutral," with the Allies speedily winning out. For the three million Jews in the United States, however, the broad Atlantic was not so meaningful. Since almost two million Jews had recently crossed it in the East European immigration tide from 1880 on, there were innumerable close ties with families, relatives and friends remaining in the old countries—and the Eastern war front was exactly in the areas of heavy Jewish population. Thus while the attention and interest of most Americans were fixed on the Western Front and the German rape of Belgium, the Jews here were more concerned with the tsarist armies' threat to conquer Galicia and its large Jewish population on the Austro-Polish frontier.² Attitudes to the war and the contending camps were among the Jews shaped under stress of personal anxiety and, almost immediately, of providing active financial aid to hundreds of thousands of distressed Jews in the war-ravaged areas.

Divided along religious and class lines, overseas Jewish relief agencies began to appear within ten weeks after the war began. The first to emerge, on October 4, 1914, was the Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering through the War, under the auspices of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, with Leon Kamaiky, editor of the Orthodox daily, *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, as chairman; by July 1917, it had raised \$1,500,000. On October 25, 1914, the Reform Jewish element founded the American Jewish Relief Committee with Louis Marshall, head of the American Jewish Committee, as chairman; by July 1917, the 39 participating national organizations of more affluent Jews had raised \$6,000,000. For coordination of distribution of funds these two groups on November 27, 1914 established the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee with the banker Felix M. Warburg as chairman. The working class and socialist Jews first conducted their relief activities through the Workmen's Circle but in August 1915, they formed the Jewish People's Relief Committee with the Socialist Congressman Meyer London, of New York's East Side, as chairman; by July 1917, it had collected \$800,000. It too affiliated with the J. D. C.³

Anti-tsarist, "Pro-German" Sentiment

In describing the views and positions of the bulk of the American Jewish population with reference to the war and the relationship of the United States to it, it is necessary to make a division between the period before United States entry into the war on April 6, 1917 and the period after that entry. The pre-war period also needs to be subdivided into the part up to the Russian revolutionary overthrow of the tsarist government on March 12, 1917,

and the few weeks between that great change and April 6, 1917, during which the position of large numbers of Jews was swiftly transformed.

Like the American people as a whole, the Jews wanted our country to stay out of the war and to maintain neutrality. Within that framework, however, while maintaining a position of neutrality in deed, the Jewish population developed partisanship in thought, opinion and sympathy. The guiding principle that determined the sympathies of the great bulk of middle class and lower middle Jews, and even of sections of Jewish workers, was their deep hatred of Russian tsarism. Those whose attitude to the war was based simply and only on anti-tsarism became "pro-German." In a similar way large numbers of Irish-Americans expressed their hatred of British oppression of Ireland by being "pro-German."⁴ To be against tsarism (and British oppression) and not pro-German required a consistent socialist understanding, a conscious anti-imperialist neutrality that was to be found only among the firm socialists in the Jewish working class.

Less consistent socialists, such as the *Jewish Daily Forward* and its editor, Abraham Cahan, were pro-German not only because they were anti-tsarist but because they had been brought up on veneration of the German Social-Democratic Party as the leading force in the Socialist International and could hardly believe its pro-war position was a betrayal of the German as well as the international working class. Thus even in October 1916, when disillusionment among the Jewish socialist workers with the opportunism of the German as well as other Socialist parties was widespread, Cahan still assured the convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union that "Germany has the greatest socialist movement in the world. They have outstripped England in trade unionism and have a greater movement and this all has been achieved in 25 years simply because they have learned the lesson of patience and practical result." In the same vein, bowing before German power and German culture, Cahan had on December 10, 1914 written in the *Forward* that he was "convinced that in the interests of general progress and for Jews specifically a Russian defeat would be fortunate . . . that it would be fortunate for all of Europe and for the whole Jewish population if Germany would take all of Poland and also Lithuania from Russia."⁵

This anti-tsarist "pro-German" sentiment was universal in the Yiddish press and almost as widespread in the Anglo-Jewish press. The other Allied powers, England and France, were, it would seem, indelibly stained with the pitch of the tsarist alliance. The Orthodox *Morgen Journal* on August 3, 1914 predicted that France would "get what she deserves" for this alliance and on September 9 it regretted that England might be defeated, but if it were "it will only be a sign that there is historical justice." And such sentiments were echoed in the *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, the *California Yiddische Shimme* in San Francisco and the

² Joseph Rappaport, *Jewish Immigrants and World War I, A Study of American Yiddish Press Reactions*, unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1951, p. 73.

³ Rappaport, work cited, p. 238.

⁴ George M. Stephenson, *A History of American Immigration, 1820-1924*, Boston, 1926, p. 207.

⁵ Rappaport, work cited, p. 192, 92.

Tog and *American Hebrew* in New York. So extensive was this anti-tsarist "pro-German" feeling that, when Louis Miller tried to make his newspaper, the *Vahrheit*, a pro-Ally journal, he lost circulation so rapidly that he was ousted from his paper in January 1915.⁶

The Zionist organizations were officially neutral, the Poale Zionists adopting that stand in December 1914 at a convention in Rochester, N. Y., and the Federation of American Zionists in June 1915 at a Boston convention. Nevertheless the Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs, formed in August 1914 under the chairmanship of Louis D. Brandeis, was pro-Ally in orientation. Yet the majority were pro-German in their sympathies, counting on a victory by Germany and Turkey to advance Zionist ends: a German conquest of Poland and Rumania would liberate the Jews and a victorious Turkey would then agree to having Palestine become a Jewish province. Eager to hold on to Zionist support, the German government in November 1916 promised the Jews they would set up a Jewish democratic central council to govern the Jewish communities in conquered areas and the Zionists rejoiced. Aware of this pro-German orientation of American Zionists, the British took steps to woo the Zionists that finally led to the Balfour Declaration in November 1917. British motives in this respect were neatly stated in a Foreign Office memorandum sent to the Russian Foreign Minister on March 13, 1916: "It is clear that by utilizing the Zionist idea, important political results could be realized. One of the results would be the conversion of the Jewish elements in the East, the U.S.A., and other places, to the use of the Allies; elements whose attitude is at present rather antagonistic to the Allies."⁷

Anti-war Sentiment

Whatever their views on the war, the organized Jewish workers, usually led by Socialists, took the path of anti-war activity as soon as the European fighting began. On August 8, 1914, Jewish trade unions in Chicago and New York staged meetings to protest "capitalist blood-letting." On August 13, the United Hebrew Trades of New York sent a peace memorial to Wilson, and on August 22 it organized a rally at Union Square under the slogan "Starve the war and feed America," demanding a halt to shipments of food abroad which were causing steep price rises at home. On August 29, New York Jewish working women marched in a peace parade down Fifth Avenue to a meeting in Union Square. On September 10, the Jewish Socialist Federation took part in a socialist conference "to keep our country from being dragged into war." The Jewish labor press vigorously condemned the preparedness propaganda and armament production program. A Cooper Union rally on April 15, 1915, organized by the A. F. of L. Central Federated Union of New York representing 300,000 workers for the purpose of protesting

arms production, was heavily supported by the United Hebrew Trades, the I. L. G. W. U. and particularly the Ladies' Waistmakers Union. At its convention in October 1915, the I. L. G. W. U. resolved to oppose shipping "life necessities" to Europe.

Outside the ranks of labor, resolutions for peace were passed at this time by such groups as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform) in January 1915, the New York Kehilla (organized community) in May 1915, the Independent Order of Brith Abraham in June 1915, and the Federation of Galician and Bukowinian Jews and the General Conference of American Rabbis in the spring, 1916.

In the fall of 1915, Jewish socialist and labor peace forces were encouraged by a development that took place in the European socialist movement. On September 5 to 8, in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, a conference was held of 38 anti-war socialists from 11 countries; the Jewish Bund was among those represented. Condemning the pro-war socialists, the Conference raised the slogans of "no annexations" and "self-determination of peoples." Its most important effect was to stiffen opposition to the war among socialists in both camps. Thus on December 15, 1915 Karl Liebknecht led the Sparacus group, already grown to 20 Socialist Reichstag members, in voting against the fourth war budget and in calling for action to stop the war. In the United States, this conference gave added strength to those socialists who adhered to a position of anti-imperialist neutrality and the ending of the war. When on November 4, 1915, Wilson reversed himself and came out for "preparedness," he took with him on the road that led inexorably to war the conservative Yiddish press, rabbinical organizations and the Jewish fraternal orders (except for the Workmen's Circle); but the socialist and labor forces put increased energy into their fight against the trend to war. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers' convention in May 1916 resolved to oppose the preparedness and militarization program. In June the convention of the Workmen's Circle warned that "constant preparations for war must sooner or later lead to conflict." Yet, the *Jewish Daily Forward* despite all its clamorous denunciation of the war as caused by "capitalists" and "imperialists," still defended the pro-war socialists in Germany and sharply criticized the Zimmerwald Conference. Opposing the *Forward*, however, were groups like the Jewish Socialist Federation, elements in the trade unions and the Workmen's Circle, and the *Idische Arbeter Velt* in Chicago, edited by Kalman Marmor. This bolder anti-war tendency grew stronger during 1916 and 1917.⁸

Two Meetings

As the danger of United States entry into the war increased, the socialist and labor forces among the Jews stepped up their anti-war campaign. When the German gov-

⁶ Rappaport, work cited, p. 82, 80, 99
⁷ Rappaport, work cited, p. 122, 127, 133, 233.

⁸ Rappaport, work cited, p. 85-86, 145, 177, 148, 150, 186, 189-190, 181-182, 192, 194-196.

ernment on January 31, 1917 announced the resumption of submarine warfare, the Executive Committee of the Workmen's Circle called on its 60,000 members to organize anti-war protests. On February 3, Wilson announced the severing of diplomatic relations with Germany. Protests mounted. The Jewish Socialist Federation and the Poale Zion published anti-war manifestoes calling on the workers to resist. On February 8, the Current Events Committee of the Ladies' Waistmakers Local 25 of the I. L. G. W. U., issued a leaflet with a resolution opposing entry into "this horrible war, begun and conducted only for imperialistic purposes and in the interest of big capital," and calling on the I. L. G. W. U. to urge its members not to join the army and to ask the A. F. of L. to call a general strike. On February 11, the convention of the National Workmen's Committee for Jewish Rights, representing 190 organizations with a half million members, passed an anti-war resolution and delegated Morris Winchevsky to represent it on a mass delegation to Washington.

Significant is the contrast between two labor conferences held within 24 hours of each other, one sponsored by the Jewish Socialist Federation on March 11, 1917, the other by the A. F. of L. on March 12. At the first there were representatives also from the Workmen's Circle, the United Hebrew Trades, the I. L. G. W. U., the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and other unions. A declaration was adopted calling on the workers to fight the impending war and our own ruling class. "If our efforts should not have the desired success and war does break out, we shall do everything possible to bring about an immediate peace, to oppose the war and the war policy of our government, to reduce and lighten the difficulties that a war brings down upon the worker, to maintain the labor movement, to fight against censorship of speech and press, against the chains that will be imposed on unions, meetings and strikes."⁹

The second conference, called by the A. F. of L., brought together 148 officers of 78 international unions, A. F. of L. departments and the railroad unions. Out of it came a pledge of unconditional support of the government's policy, coupled with pious "demands" that labor's gains be protected, that capital be asked to make equal sacrifices with labor, and that labor be represented on all national defense agencies. When Gompers reported on this conference to the Council of National Defense, on which he represented labor, he did not even bother to report these futile "demands." Refusing to attend this pro-war conference were the United Mine Workers, the Typographical Union, the Western Federation of Miners, the Journeymen Barbers and the I. L. G. W. U.

On the same day that this conference was held in Washington, there occurred the event that removed the last big obstacle to United States entry into the war and that

caused a tremendous change in the "pro-German" sentiments among the Jewish population. The American war propaganda machine, no matter how much it beat the hollow drum of a "war for democracy," could not be convincing so long as that dubious democrat, the tsar of all the Russias, was one of the Allies. Now on March 12, 1917, the world-shaking Russian Revolution began, and three days later the tsar abdicated. Diversely motivated rejoicing swept our country, some of it undoubtedly due to the fact that the road to war was no longer obstructed by a possible alliance with hated tsarism. But the jubilation of the Jews, particularly those from Eastern Europe, was unbridled and unprecedented. Amid the dancing in the streets, the overflow meetings and the gay parades, all "pro-German" sentiment vanished, to be replaced overnight by a pro-Ally tide that engulfed the Jewish middle class, lower middle class and parts of the working class. This new pro-Ally zeal was easy prey for the pro-war steam-roller, now unbraked.

On the Eve of War

Even before Wilson's war-message of April 2, 1917, there were Jewish circles that announced that American Jews were now ready to go to war. The *Tog*, the *Varheit*, the *Morgen Jurnal* and the *Tageblatt* in New York and the *Yiddisher Record* in Chicago were conspicuous in this respect. On March 25, 1917, the pro-war Jewish newspaper editors and publishers formed the Jewish League of American Patriots, with Samuel Untermeyer as president, to "undertake the systematic mobilization of the forces of the Jewish race with the view of placing them at the disposal of our country." Immediately after the declaration of war by Congress, the League launched a campaign to arouse Jews to enlist in the army and navy.¹⁰

Breasting the pro-Ally, pro-war tide, the anti-imperialist peace forces fought back. "We are pro-proletarian," declared a resolution of the Jewish branches of the Socialist Party of New York adopted towards the end of March, and they pledged themselves to work for an immediate negotiated peace if the United States were dragged into the war. Thus did the rank and file Jewish socialists answer in effect the statement made by Morris Hillquit, one of the main national leaders of the Socialist Party, in an interview in the *New York Times Magazine Section*, February 11, 1917. There he had declared that the S. P., in the event of war, would not hinder the government through strikes or by a fight against conscription. Following his leader, Congressman Meyer London had on March 10, 1917 stated in an interview in the *New York Tribune* that if the United States entered the war, American socialists would follow the lead of the European socialists and support their government. The breach between this leadership and the socialist membership was beginning to unfold.

⁹ *Noise Velt*, New York, organ of the Jewish Socialist Federation, March 16, 1917; Rappaport, work cited, p. 260-262.

¹⁰ Circular letter, Barondess Papers, New York Public Library, Carton 6; Rappaport, work cited, p. 270-272.