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“Between the straits”: Jewish immigration to the United States and Palestine, 1915–1925

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ABSTRACT
From 1919 to 1925, some 400,000 Jews from Eastern Europe emigrated to the United States and Palestine. The central thesis of this article is that the profile of the Jewish exodus before World War I differed from the postwar flow. Above all, Jews who had escaped the carnage of the Ukrainian Civil War (1918–1920) were more akin to refugees than immigrants. The first of this article’s three parts revolves around Jewish emigration during World War I via Siberia to Vladivostok or to the Chinese town of Harbin, whereupon they continued to the port of Yokohama and sailed to the US Pacific coast. The second part focuses on new immigration policies that were rolled out by the authorities in the United States and Palestine between 1921 and 1924. Lastly, the third part delves into comparative and demographic aspects of Jewish migration during the 1920s.

KEYWORDS
Eastern European Jewry; Jewish migration; migration policy; Mandatory Palestine

Introduction
Between 1875 and 1914, roughly 3 million Eastern European Jews picked up and left the region, thereby changing the face of world Jewry beyond recognition. New Jewish centers were established where none had existed, while others went into decline. The United States was the main destination, but Jews also relocated to Argentina, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Palestine. Following the outbreak of World War I, the flow of migration from Eastern Europe to the West was cut off. More specifically, the sea routes were no longer operative, the trains took soldiers to the front instead of emigrants to their ports of departure, ships were requisitioned by governments, and the borders were closed.

Despite the conflagration in Europe and the difficulty of maritime and land travel throughout this period, attempts were made to emigrate to the United States in roundabout ways. Additionally, the war severed communications between the Jews who had emigrated before the war and the families that remained behind. The concern of these expatriates for the fate of relatives back in “the old country” exerted pressure on Jewish aid organizations to find a way to bring Eastern European Jews to North America. These groups did indeed manage to open up a new route. Upon crossing Siberia into China and Japan, emigrants boarded ships to the western seaboard of the United States, from where trains conveyed them across the American continent. In contrast, the gates of
Palestine were sealed off to immigration during the war. At any rate, this was hardly a safe haven during these years, as many of the land’s inhabitants succumbed to hunger and disease. Moreover, Jews vacated the region for the sake of avoiding military conscription or expulsion at the hands of the Ottomans. By the time of the armistice, the yishuv’s (Jewish residents in Palestine prior the establishment of the State of Israel) prewar population of 85,000 had dwindled to 50,000.

After the war, emigration to Palestine resumed and the Jewish community’s population swiftly rebounded to its prewar level. The present study compares Jewish emigration to the United States and Palestine during a period that encompasses World War I, the Ukrainian Civil War, and the United States’ policy that closed borders to immigration in 1924. As I argue, the profile of the Jewish exodus to the United States and Palestine before World War I markedly differs from its postwar counterpart. The Jews who escaped bloodshed in the Ukraine and reached one of the two countries of destination better fit the classification of refugees than immigrants. Until 1914, the primary catalyst for emigration was economic. In other words, Eastern European Jews had the option of either staying put or emigrating to a new country with better economic prospects. After World War I, and following the destruction of Jewish life in Ukraine, many Jews fled their homes and sought, above all, a safe haven. Put differently, emigration was imposed on them by a new reality – the murder and wounding of tens of thousands of Jews. However, as we will see, formidable obstacles to immigration were thrown in their path.

In some respects, the outflow of the 1920s can be seen as a continuation of the exodus before World War I. All things considered, however, this period constitutes a separate, unique, and exceptional chapter in the history of Jewish immigration. The geopolitical situation had changed beyond recognition. More specifically, the Russian empire had dissolved, the Emergency Quota Act was passed in the United States, the Ukrainian Civil War (1918–1920) had exacted 100,000 Jewish casualties, and Palestine gradually became the favored country of destination. As we shall see, these developments influenced the scope and composition of the Jewish departure from Eastern Europe.

The first of this article’s three parts deals with Jewish emigration during World War I to the US Pacific coast, via Siberia, Vladivostok (a Russian town on the Sea of Japan), or Harbin in China, and the Japanese port of Yokohama. In the second part, we take stock of Washington and Mandatory Palestine’s new immigration policies between 1921 and 1924. Lastly, the third part focuses on comparative and demographic aspects of Jewish immigration throughout this decade.

**Jewish emigration during World War I**

Troubled by the news trickling in from blood-soaked Europe, Jewish immigrants already in the United States exerted pressure on Jewish aid organizations to find ways to track down relatives who had disappeared back in “the old country” and to bring them to America.

The archives of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) contain hundreds of letters written by American Jews trying to locate those relatives who found themselves in the path of advancing and retreating armies. These documents shed light on the everyday concerns and anxieties of ordinary Jews who made every effort to find their lost kin. Below, two of these letters merit special attention.
On September 13, 1915, Celis Levitt turned to the HIAS for help in “establishing communication with my father from whom I haven’t heard for nearly a year.” As stated in the letter, her father’s name was Lieb Rubinstein and he resided in the Suwałki province of Poland. She wrote that, “Early this year I sent him money, but it never reached him according to tracers sent out by the bank here who forwarded it to Russia. The last I heard from him in November 1914, he was in very dire straits and lacked the basic necessities of life.” Moreover, Celis noted that she had also lost contact with her sister-in-law, Rosa Sereisko, and her eight children who had been living along the battle-scarred Polish–German border. The last communication that she had received from Rosa was sent from Bialystok.

The rabbi of a congregation in Fall River, Massachusetts, Abraham Halevi Lifchitz, appealed to the HIAS for help in locating his “poor sons” back in Russia:

They lived in the little town of Slavada, also known as Mirasla, in the province of Suwałki and later travelled to Aratz in the province of Vilna, where they stayed with my brother-in-law Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Finkelstein…. I had sent them money and received a reply, but for months there has been complete silence. Perhaps they were sent away… or remained under the protection of the Germans. At any rate, according to what I have heard from many people, they are connected with many charitable organizations and institutions in Europe, and therefore I would be obliged if you would kindly give me your advice on how to achieve my objective of finding out where they are.

Rabbi Lifchitz had turned to the HIAS after failing to obtain information through people in contact with Jewish aid organizations in Europe. We do not know if the HIAS managed to locate the petitioner’s children. In any event, this letter expresses the rabbi’s grave concern for their fate.

World War I spawned chaos, violence, and economic distress among the population – Jewish and otherwise – of Eastern Europe. Celis Levitt and Rabbi Lifchitz’s relatives were part of a wave of refugees who had fled or were expelled from the war zones, and subsequently lost touch with their family members across the Atlantic. Following the Russian invasion of Galicia, hundreds of thousands of Jews headed west, many of whom ended up in Vienna and its environs. Those who remained under the czarist occupation were subsequently expelled to the interior of Russia.

These transfers were both an economic catastrophe and personal trauma for hundreds of thousands of Jews. Overnight, they had become penniless refugees, dependent on the mercy of Jewish aid organizations in Europe and the United States. There are no precise figures concerning the number of Jews displaced by the vicissitudes of the Great War. Mordechai Altshuler claims that there were about half a million, whereas Jonathan Frankel estimates that there were 1 million by the end of 1915.

In his annual survey of the HIAS’s activities, Leon Sanders, the group’s president, described in stark terms the impact of the hostilities on the Jewish population:

Fate, ever cruel to the Jews, has picked out with unerring hand the Jews of Russia, of Poland, and Galicia for a special unmerited place in this world-tragedy. Their homes have become the battleground of Eastern Europe…Six hundred thousand Jews were suddenly, without warning, expelled from their homes in the war zone, and compelled to leave, often at dead of night, without conveyance, or inhumanly boxed in freight cars – the young, the aged, the crippled, the sick, the mother in labor, even the soldiers in their country’s cause – and to wander into the interior of Russia.
As outlined in Table 1, Jews continued to find their way to the United States over the course of the war, albeit in small numbers and as a small percentage of the total number of immigrants.

Roughly 62,000 Jews entered the United States over the course of World War I. This figure constitutes a mere 6% of the total number of immigrants who entered the country during these years. Some of the immigrants reached the west coast from the Japanese port of Yokohama. These Jews were part of a larger group of 20,000 refugees who had fled the Bolsheviks and/or the battle zones of Europe. Upon reaching the Ural Mountains, some of them boarded the Trans-Siberian Railway, crossed the steppes of Siberia, and reached the towns of Vladivostok or Harbin, before proceeding to Yokohama. As discussed below, the concentration of Jewish asylum seekers in these three Far Eastern and, from their standpoint, utterly alien towns prompted the HIAS to roll up its sleeves in an effort to tend to their needs and secure safe passage to the United States.

Vladivostok, a city on the Pacific coast of Asia, was founded in 1860. Within two decades, this fledgling settlement became Russia’s most important maritime outlet. Given Vladivostok’s economic potential, the government recognized the need for a serviceable transport system connecting its far-flung empire. In 1891, Sergei Witte, the Minister of Finance, launched construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. A quarter of a century later, the St. Petersburg–Vladivostok line was completed. Covering 9,288 kilometers and eight time zones, it was the longest railroad in the world.

Approximately two thousand destitute Jewish refugees crossed Siberia by rail and arrived in Vladivostok and Harbin, where they were exceedingly unfamiliar with the local norms. As part of his regular reports to headquarters in New York, Samuel Mason, the HIAS envoy to the Far East, described their miserable conditions. He stressed the importance of providing food, shelter, and medical care and of contacting their relatives in the United States. According to Mason, the refugees in Vladivostok – Jews and non-Jews alike – were “picking up crumbs wherever they can find them, and they sleep in any shed they can find along the railroad tracks. Their number is very large.” In Harbin, “Thousands of refugees [are] sleeping in courtyards, sheds, and even … among the Chinese.” What is more, “Jews are always to be found, among others, sleeping at railroad stations.”8 The envoy also offered the following portrait of the average Jewish refugee in these towns:

It is very important that I dwell upon the character of the refugees. They are not Bolsheviks nor in any way sympathetic to the Bolsheviks and their regime. They are peace-loving, law-abiding people who under the old regime went about their business. … They fled from intolerable conditions and gave evidence of every eagerness to resume their former normal life as speedily as possible. In a word, the refugees belong to the “Bale-batishe” element or as we would say the “Middle-Class”.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-Jews</th>
<th>Jews</th>
<th>Percentage of Jews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>327,000</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>299,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>295,000</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>111,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10,32,000</td>
<td>62,000</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mason worked indefatigably to improve the conditions of these displaced Jews. To this end, he urged his superiors to set up facilities in Harbin and Vladivostok to process the refugees and tend to their problems. Shortly after his arrival, the HIAS indeed rented an old hotel in Yokohama that became the center of its activities throughout the region. From this hub, the organizers looked after the emigrants, shuttled them to the port, and sent them to the United States. During Mason’s six months in Yokohama, 1,706 Jewish refugees passed through the HIAS’s office – 1,551 were taken to the United States, 103 to Canada, 11 to South Africa, 11 to Hawaii (then a US territory), 10 to Argentina, 4 to China, and 1 to India. Eleven were sent back to Russia upon being denied entry into the United States. What is more, the aid society lent a hand to a small yet diverse array of non-Jewish refugees: Poles, Slavs, Armenians, Syrians, and Persians.10

Yokohama gradually became the staging grounds for HIAS’s operations in the Far East during World War I. After registering at the society’s building, Jewish emigrants received assistance until reaching their final destination. They also felt a sense of security under HIAS’s protection; the hotel, for instance, was outfitted with a synagogue that also hosted cultural events. In time, the building became the center of Jewish life throughout Japan. “The knowledge of the existence of the synagogue,” Mason reported, spread throughout the country and Jewish settlers from different parts of Japan came to Yokohama to attend services. Particularly was this so during the Holy Days when memorial services were conducted. … Our home in Japan is the Jewish community in Japan.11

Moreover, the envoy mentioned that “a wedding ceremony was performed on March 25 in our synagogue. The bride came from New York where her parents reside and the bridegroom was a resident of Japan.” There was also a circumcision:

We have great pleasure in announcing that his grandson, born here in Yokohama, Japan, was circumcised today: he was eight days old, according to religious law, and was named Feibush B. R. Zalman. The circumciser was our shochet, Mr. Menahem Baransky … . After the ceremony, all those present went to a festive meal in our home, and we blessed the forbears of the new arrival and his grandfather with the hope that he will be reared and educated without trouble and there will be sons and grandsons devoted to the Torah. And may there be peace upon Israel.12

The HIAS’s enterprise in Japan depended on the cooperation of the Japanese government, which was less than eager to permit humanitarian activities on its territory, especially when the beneficiaries were Russian nationals. On January 24, Tokyo issued an edict that basically prevented the refugees from entering Japanese territory. According to the decree, every migrant, regardless of age, who stepped foot in Japan would have to pay a levy of 250 yen. The HIAS sent a petition to Baron Goto, the Japanese Minister of State for Home Affairs, asking him to exempt Jews from this tax. In turn, the missive’s authors guaranteed that the wayfarers would not be a burden on Japanese society. Due in part to the Japanese government’s close relations with Jacob Schiff, an influential Jewish banker in New York, Goto made an exception for the Jewish refugees.

As the old Western European sea routes were reopened to civilian travel following World War I, Jewish immigration to the United States via the Far East came to a halt. By 1920, the HIAS had wound down its operations in Harbin, Vladivostok, and Yokohama.13
New times – new melodies: immigration policies in the 1920s

In the early twentieth century, strict policies and laws threw obstacles in the way of potential immigrants to Western countries. The red tape involved in obtaining the necessary documents and the authorities’ greater insistence on, say, transit visas made immigration a long and arduous bureaucratic process, which heavily restricted such movement both within and outside of Europe.

Immigration reform was introduced during a fateful period for Eastern European Jewry, not least the community of the Ukraine. Between 1918 and 1920, 100,000 Jews were murdered or wounded in the bloody Ukrainian Civil War. In consequence, wives lost their husbands, children were orphaned, and tens of thousands of Jews became refugees after their homes were plundered and set ablaze.14 Overall, the state of Eastern European Jewry took a dramatic turn for the worse after World War I. Quite a few Jews sought to escape to any country that was willing to accept them, but Western governments erected formidable barriers. The persecution in the “homeland” and the immigration policies of the countries of destination combined to reduce the choices available to the typical Jewish emigrant, who, in the 1920s, was more than likely to fall under the heading of “refugee.”

Both the United States and Palestine – the two primary havens for Jews – started to limit the number of immigrants they accepted. With respect to the latter, the Zionist leaders based the granting of entry visas on the physical capacity of the immigrant to contribute to the nation-building enterprise and the yishuv.

Policy on emigration to Palestine

In the aftermath of the British army’s conquest of Palestine in October, 1918, the authorities began to devise a policy governing both the scale of Jewish immigration and the profile of the immigrants. There were abrupt swings in this policy from the mandate’s inception to the close of the 1920s. All told, this period can be divided into three stages. The first phase, which lasted until the end of September 1920, was characterized by unlimited immigration – the only such interval throughout the years of British rule.

Between 1919 and 1920, refugees began to arrive in Palestine from the killing fields of Ukraine. This turn of events triggered a public debate over what assistance the yishuv and the Zionist movement should provide to the asylum seekers. Ha-po’el ha-tza’ir, the labor party in the yishuv, held its annual executive committee meeting at the end of 1919. Following a report on “the terrible situation of the Jews in Russia and Ukraine,” the participants expressed their regret that “apart from demonstrations and public statements,” world Jewry has been largely indifferent “to this terrible tragedy unparalleled in our time and to the fate of thousands of our suffering brothers and sisters.” Moreover, the committee passed a number of resolutions concerning Eastern European Jewry, especially the Ukrainian community. Above all, the local body called on the heads of the Zionist Organization (ZO) to “initiate” post haste “broad settlement activity so that it will be possible to divert part of the stream of emigration of Russian Jewry to Palestine.” A resolution was also passed to urge the ZO to do “everything in its power to enable the young pioneering elements in Russia to be brought to Palestine as soon as possible,” so that they may “work the land and prepare it for wide-scale immigration.” What is more, they decided to set up a special task force that would assemble “all the material concerning the disturbances in Russia … and publish it in a suitable manner.”15
A month later the provisional committee of the Jewish National Council convened in Jaffa. With the objective of rescuing Ukrainian Jews from annihilation, the participants called upon the Zionist leadership to open the gates of the Land of Israel to immigration. Alert to the precarious circumstances of their co-religionists, the delegates felt that Zionism’s most pressing concern was the rescue of Eastern European Jewry:

The recent disturbances in southern Russia, which have exterminated thousands of Jews and jeopardize the entire Jewish exile in those countries, require from the entire Jewish people not only an effort to help this branch of Jewry with the means to possibly defend itself (notwithstanding the doubts as to whether this will succeed), but an effort to evacuate ... endangered Jews ... [from these areas]. The only and final hope is for them to be rescued to the Land of Israel, for which the Jews of southern Russia have [a warm place] in their hearts. The cries of despair and calls for help that reach us ... compel the entire Jewish people, first and foremost the Zionist Organization, and us, the inhabitants of the Land of Israel, in particular, to extend our brotherly assistance. The one action that is truly required is to remove the Jews in southern Russia from the hostile environment and bring them to the Land of Israel. We view aliyah from the lands of southern Russia as a means for saving hundreds of thousands of Jews from extermination.16

The yishuv’s vehement admonitions to open the borders of Palestine and rescue Ukrainian Jewry fell on deaf ears.17 The Zionist leadership was indeed opposed to mass immigration. For example, Arthur Ruppin (Head of the Palestine Office), worried that such an influx would encompass inferior refugees that would pose a danger to the yishuv. “At most,” he averred, the Zionist Organization should “bring to the country the quantity of elements required to build the Yishuv,” namely, candidates with the right “profession, state of health, and character.” On the other hand, “the portion of undesirable elements” should be kept “to a minimum.”18 Ruppin even went so far as to advocate withholding absorption benefits to those immigrants, such as “reduced prices for their voyage, temporary accommodation, the provision of jobs by employment bureaus, credit, free medical assistance during their first year, insurance against work accidents, and other rights.”19

The first postwar Zionist Congress was held in London between February and March, 1919. ZO delegates from various countries managed to attend. In order to handle requests for emigration to Palestine, particularly from Eastern Europe, the congress decided to set up an aliyah department within the framework of the Zionist bureau in London and a network of offices in Palestine.20 Shortly after the congress, Zionist leaders Nahum Sokolov and Chaim Weizmann warned against a mass aliyah and demanded that the number of immigrants be kept to an absolute minimum:

The time for [extensive] aliyah to the Land of Israel has not yet arrived. Such an aliyah is impossible until we have systematic plans for settlement with a financial and economic basis, and so on: plans that are bound up with a solution to the political questions in our country. Under the present circumstances, not a single immigrant should come to Israel. We feel it necessary to warn all communities and individuals in no uncertain terms against any hasty steps to promote an expedited aliyah to the Land of Israel.21

The main consideration behind this position was not fear of a mass aliyah per se. Rather, the Zionist top brass trembled at the prospect of an influx of Jewish newcomers, not least the survivors of the recent pogroms in the Ukraine, deemed to be ill-suited to the task of upbuilding the country. For example, Weizmann repeatedly stated that it was not Palestine’s capacity for absorbing immigrants that troubled him, but the character of those
who arrived. In fact, he welcomed *olim* (immigrants) who were of sound mind and body. On December 17, 1919, the eve of his departure from Palestine for the Zionist Congress in London, Weizmann delivered a speech at the Lemel School in Jerusalem before local dignitaries, communal workers, teachers, doctors, and writers. He made sure to note that, while Palestine could take in thousands of immigrants per year, those who were presently interested in coming were unsuited for “the great Zionist project” of building a national home in the Land of Israel:

For *aliyah*, we have to have a plan. We have asked for this and we cannot forgo it. I don’t believe in a disorderly *aliyah*. It pains me that we always have to point out that Zionism is incapable of responding to a catastrophe. I admit to you that when we spoke at the [Paris] Peace Conference about the *aliyah* of thousands of people each year, I had my qualms, not because the goal is impossible. The country *can* absorb that number every year, but I don’t see in the aftermath of the great disaster that has transpired [in Ukraine], the tremendous capacity for building [on the part of the survivors] necessary for this great project.

At the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, Weizmann indeed declared that he expected thousands of immigrants per year. However, his speech at Lemel nearly a year later hints at his misgivings regarding this goal. The Zionist leader thought that Palestine was capable of absorbing a mass influx of Jews, but the great disaster in Eastern Europe that prompted the emigration of those he considered unsuited for “the great project” seriously affected this option.

In consequence, Weizmann requested patience and forbearance lest the Jewish people repeat the mistakes of the past:

Perhaps ten years from now, we will be able to act on a larger scale. We must accept this in order not to despair. There is no reason to despair. We mustn’t stray from the path: we are advancing bit by bit. Our exaggerated notions have given rise to a pessimistic frame of mind. That’s a fact. Just remember all the wild rumors that spread among the people after Herzl’s meeting with Wilhelm, just remember all the imaginings of the Jews in the Diasporas of an imminent redemption, and you will understand how the Jewish imagination can be enthusiastic about something and grow despondent when it hears the story to the end. One can understand the enthusiasm and one can understand the despondency when after all the rumors of a Jewish republic in the Land of Israel, one had a [British] military administration.

At a general meeting of the Zionist executive in London on January 23, 1920, Weizmann said that the founding of a Jewish state not only entailed securing Whitehall’s permission for emigration to the Land of Israel, but was first and foremost a matter of attracting the right kind of manpower – the quality of the immigrants. As such, he compared the movement’s efforts to buttress the *yishuv* to General Herbert Kitchener’s re-construction of the British army from a legion of volunteers during the initial stages of World War I:

In my opinion, the question of a Jewish state – not just one with the consent of the British, but a real Jewish state – depends entirely on the first four hundred thousand Jews in the Land of Israel. What we want now is exactly what Lord Kitchener wanted when he built up the British army. “From the first hundred thousand [volunteers],” the British army grew to one of millions.

These statements indicate that Weizmann was wary of an unselective *aliyah*. While these opinions served the purposes of the Zionist movement and the *yishuv*, they certainly ran counter to the desperate needs of Eastern European Jewry owing to the carnage in the Ukraine.
Succinctly put, Weizmann preferred ideologically-motivated, productive immigrants to panic-stricken refugees. At the time, Jews seeking to enter Palestine were knocking on the doors of the *aliyah* offices in Eastern Europe. However, the plight of Ukrainian Jews notwithstanding, those candidates who failed to meet “Weizmann’s criteria” were sent away with the explanation that the time was not ripe. As stated in one of the movement’s circulars, “The Zionist organization is aware of the terrible situation that masses of our people throughout nearly all East Europe now find themselves in, and it also knows how great the longing is to immigrate [sic] to the Land of Israel.” That said, only through an organized and orderly *aliyah* “can we succeed in implementing our national ideal – erecting our national home, the Land of Israel.”

The fear of a massive and unbridled influx was stoked by the droves of refugees and immigrants who visited the *aliyah* offices in Europe. “It’s a very serious situation here,” wrote Zeev Tiomkin, head of the Aliyah Board in Istanbul, to the Committee of Delegates in Jerusalem. Refugees are arriving from countries “where economic life has by and large been destroyed, and most of them are indigent from the day of their arrival here and need urgent assistance.” Cautioned between a rock and a hard place, officials at the immigration bureaus had to maneuver between the pressure of the masses seeking entry into Palestine, the Zionist leadership’s selective immigration policy, and their own preferences. Nevertheless, the instructions that they received from above were abundantly clear: undesirable elements (mostly refugees from the crisis in Ukraine) who lack the ability to contribute to the nation-building enterprise were not welcome in the Land of Israel:

> On the matter of *aliyah*, you must draw the attention of all the Zionist bureaus with which you are in contact to the fact that every single immigrant must undergo an exhaustive examination. One must take note of the state of the immigrant’s health, both physically and mentally. We hope that you will succeed in influencing these bureaus to proceed in a spirit of patience and moderation and not to spoil things through rashness and “jumping the gun.”

In a similar vein, Menachem Ussishkin, head of the Zionist Commission in Palestine, insisted that

> When you [that is, *aliyah* representatives] send immigrants here [to Palestine], examine them seven times over, so that the element that comes here will be healthy in mind and body. For among the healthy ones, there have recently been some that are extremely deficient and quite incapable of settling in the Land. A bit of subpar material is liable to immensely spoil things.

During the second Zionist Congress in London (July 1920), the military administration of Palestine was replaced by a civilian government headed by Herbert Samuel. The first directions concerning immigration were released in August 1920. According to these liberal guidelines, any candidate of sound body and mind, with a guaranteed source of livelihood, posing no criminal or political threat to society was welcome. In addition, the mandatory government set a very high annual immigration quota of 16,500 households, or roughly 80,000 people, per year. Although these rules came into force at the beginning of September, it took several more months before all the necessary bureaucratic arrangements were made. In the interim, there was free and unlimited access to Palestine. About seven thousand immigrants, many of whom were Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, took advantage of this six-month window. Needless to say, this influx contravened the policy drawn
up by Weizmann and Sokolow. In response, the Zionist movement undertook to limit immigration to all but a thousand candidates _per annum_.

This precipitous reduction of immigration in the midst of such a harrowing period for Eastern European Jewry is one of the most controversial decisions in the history of the Zionist movement. Hence, it is surprising that this topic rarely comes up in the historiographical literature. Scholars of the _yishuv_ only refer to the great tragedy that befell Ukrainian Jewry in passing and egregiously understate its magnitude. The point of departure of Zionist historiographers has generally been the movement’s policy in light of its interactions with the British government, Palestine’s economic capacity for absorbing immigrants, the type of person needed to bolster the Land of Israel, the contribution of the Aliyah to the _yishuv’s_ development, and the like. In fact, no real effort has been made to examine these questions through the prism of the critical events in the Ukraine. Historians have treated the country’s 100,000 Jewish casualties as merely another surge in the long line of Eastern European pogroms, rather than a formative event in the absence of which we would be hard-pressed to understand the _yishuv_ in the 1920s, not least the Zionist movement’s immigration policy.

With the institution of civilian rule in Palestine, the authorities began to formulate an immigration policy in accordance with the land’s economic capacity. While Herbert Samuel, the first high commissioner of Palestine, opened the country’s gates to 16,500 households, Aviva Halamish argues that this was on the condition that immigrants had a guaranteed means of livelihood and employment for no less than a year after their arrival. However, it was only on June 3, 1921 – about a month after the outbreak of Arab riots – that Samuel publicly unveiled a policy according to which immigration would henceforth be tied to Palestine’s economic ability to absorb new residents. For its part, the Zionist movement found itself in a quandary, as it was forced to decide between a visa policy aimed at saving lives or a selective immigration policy. On the one hand, it feared that Palestine was incapable of sustaining the thousands of refugees and emigrants who wished to come; on the other hand, they wanted to lend a hand to the victims of the national disaster that was afflicting the Jewish people. In the end, Weizmann and Sokolow, among other Zionist leaders, reached the conclusion that the movement lacked the ability to contend with both the tragedy in the Ukraine and the rigors of nation-building. Ultimately, the Zionist top brass decided to concentrate on laying down a solid foundation for the emergent homeland by carefully vetting candidates for _aliyah_.

**Policy on emigration to the United States**

World War I was the golden hour of American Jewry. The humanitarian assistance that the community provided to the Jews of Eastern Europe (and to a large extent the _yishuv_ as well) was emblematic of its solidarity with and sense of mutual responsibility for world Jewry. The American community quickly mobilized to help the survivors of the pogroms both in the diplomatic sphere and in all that concerns the provision of material and spiritual relief. Many American Jews had family members back in “the old country” with whom they had lost touch during World War I and then the Ukrainian Civil War. The Joint Distribution Committee was founded in 1914 with the objective of supporting the Jewish casualties of the Great War. In 1920, a special department was created to extend help
to refugees. That same year, the Joint Distribution Committee dispatched a mission to Ukraine for the purpose of gauging the extent of the damage to the local Jewish community. On the basis of this fact-finding mission, delegation members set up orphanages, looked after widows, tended to the wounded, and even took steps to reunite families.

American Jewry also sought to pave the way for Eastern European Jews interested in relocating to the United States, but encountered a brick wall of new immigration laws restricting their entry. Just as Weizmann was wary of Ukrainian refugees flooding Palestine, a US congressman, among others, voiced similar fears. Albert Johnson, the chairman of the American House of Representatives Committee on Immigration, proposed a two-year moratorium on entrance visas as an emergency measure until a new, comprehensive policy could be formulated that suited the challenges of the hour. At the beginning of 1921, Johnson reported to the House of Representatives that many Jews from Eastern Europe had passed through Ellis Island. Citing the words of Wilbur Carr, the head of the United States consular service, he opined that these newcomers were dirty and un-American. If this were not enough, many of these Jews had dangerous habits and lacked any sense of patriotism.32

Within a few months, Congress had passed a provisional, emergency law to restrict immigration that set a precedent for the principle of “quotas.” The law, the Johnson Quota Act, limited immigration from every country in the world to 3% of the number of its citizens that were already residents of the United States in 1910 (the base year). Another, permanent law, the Johnson–Reed Act, took effect in 1924. This Act further reduced the immigration quota, to only 2%, and changed the base year to 1890. In all likelihood, this modification was intended to significantly reduce immigration from Italy and Eastern Europe, for, according to the census results, there were far fewer people from these areas in 1890 than in 1910. Moreover, this law authorized the consul of the United States in foreign countries to strictly regulate the number of immigration permits issued to local applicants.

Like the Zionist leaders, Johnson and other American politicians feared that the immigrant population endangered the American public and undermined its stability. Their primary contention was that the immigrants (especially from Southern and Eastern Europe) who had arrived since the 1880s had not integrated into the host society. Instead, the newcomers had created ethnic enclaves that threatened the American public.33 According to Senator Arthur Capper, “the experience of the last quarter century warns us that the capacity of the ‘melting pot’ is sadly over taxed, and that the fusing has all but ceased.” Likewise, Samuel McReynolds, a congressman from Tennessee, declared that “this country can no longer be the melting pot for foreign nations.”

The similarities between the two sides did not end with their depiction of the newcomers. While Zionists wanted to teach the immigrants and refugees already in Palestine the Hebrew language, the anti-immigration camp in the United States sought to expedite the Americanization process of the “newcomers.” To this end, American opponents of immigration endeavored to stop both the inflow of and focus on this element of society, which in their estimation had set itself apart from the majority. The centerpiece of their plan was educational. Besides teaching English, curricula were designed to strengthen the newcomers’ American identity and distance them from their “native culture.” In some respects, this enterprise is reminiscent of the Zionist idea of “negating the exile,” namely, erasing the oleh’s previous identity and forging a “new Jew” in the Land of Israel.34
In opposition to the Zionist leadership and supporters of the US quota law, the Jewish-American establishment toiled to thwart the government’s efforts to restrict immigration. In June 1924, well over 100 delegates from 55 Jewish organizations gathered in New York City’s Astor Hotel to formulate a plan to counter the Johnson–Reed Act. The meeting was attended by representatives of labor unions, women’s organizations, and human rights groups. In particular, they tried to find a solution for the Eastern European Jews who were in transit to the United States when the legislation barring their entry was passed.35

Due to these restrictions, Jews tried to enter the country illegally. For instance, some slipped in through the Mexico–Texas frontier – occasionally with the help of a smuggler – and others entered with forged passports via Cuba. The American-Jewish leadership was faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, they sympathized with the Jewish refugees’ attempts to extricate themselves from the quagmire in Europe; on the other, as law-abiding citizens, they could not sanction illicit attempts to enter the country. Libby Garland demonstrates that the heads of the American-Jewish community focused on slightly moderating the bill. Once the legislation was passed, they searched for means of allowing certain individuals and groups to enter the United States.36 For instance, they lobbied congressmen to broaden the category of immigrants who were exempt from the official quota. In addition, jurists hunted for precedents that would challenge the legality of the quota system – albeit without success. In 1924, the gates of the United States were, for all intents and purposes, closed off to Jewish immigration. From that point forward, Palestine became the primary destination.

Scale of emigration and demographic profile of immigrants between 1919 and 1925

Emigration to the United States and Palestine was renewed after World War I. Within a few years, the scale of this flow returned to prewar levels. Until closing its gates in 1924, the United States remained the country of choice for Jewish immigrants. In parallel, the number of olim steadily grew. From 1919 to 1925, more Jews settled in Palestine than during the entire 30-year period before the war. As Table 2 illustrates, 1925 was a turning-point in the history of Jewish migration. For the first time, more Jews relocated to Palestine than to the United States. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it was the only place open to Jewish emigration.

Figures 1–4 compare the pre- and postwar distribution of emigrants to the United States by gender and age. The demographic shifts in Jewish emigration to the United

Table 2. Number of emigrants to the United States and Palestine, 1919–1925.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Percentage of Jews compared to non-Jewish emigrants to the United States</th>
<th>Palestine</th>
<th>Percentage of olim compared to Jewish emigrants to the United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>3,055</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>14,292</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>119,036</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>53,524</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>7,844</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>49,719</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>7,421</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>49,989</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>12,856</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>10,292</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>33,801</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jacob Lestschinsky, Di yiddishe wanderung far die letzte 25 yor (Berlin: HIAS Emigdirect, 1927).
Figure 1. Distribution of immigrant population by gender before and after World War I (United States). Source: Walter Willcox, *International Migrations*, vol. 1 (Statistics).

Figure 2. Distribution of immigrant population by age before and after World War I (United States). Source: Walter Willcox, *International Migrations*, vol. 1 (Statistics).

Figure 3. Distribution of immigrant population by gender before and after World War I (Palestine). Source: Jacob Metzer, *Jewish Immigration to Palestine in the Long 1920s*; Yediot, *ha-mahlaca le-statistica* (1920).
States indicate that, in the 15 years that preceded World War I, a change occurred in the typical immigrant in comparison to their counterpart between 1919 and 1925. In contrast, the differences in Jewish emigrants to Palestine were minor. This is chiefly on account of the Zionist movement’s selective immigration policies.

**United States**

As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of male and female immigrants was reversed. Before 1914, more men relocated to the United States, but after the war 54% of immigrants were women. A corollary of female-intensive immigration is the arrival of families with children. Differences in immigrants’ ages between the two periods are also evident: those of working age (16–44 years) declined by 11%, while the inflow of children increased by 6%. Finally, the number of immigrants aged over 45 almost doubled (from 6 to 11%) (Figure 2).

**Palestine**

In Palestine, the ratio of male (approximately 60%) and female (approximately 40%) Jewish immigrants remained the same throughout the periods under review (Figure 3).

The age distribution of Jewish emigrants to Palestine and the United States was somewhat similar. Thirty percent of those entering the Land of Israel were children and a similar percentage entered the United States. Fifty-one percent of emigrants to Palestine and 59% of emigrants to the United States were of working age (15–40 years). Seventeen percent of those who emigrated to the United States and 11% of those who emigrated to Palestine were at least 40 years of age (Figure 4).

The actual profile of adults who entered Palestine bore no resemblance whatsoever to the Zionist historiography’s pioneering image of idealistic socialist-Zionists who came in order to “build and be built by” the Land of Israel. In contrast, press accounts are consistent with the statistical findings whereby the olim were refugees, not immigrants. The *Ha-po’el ha-tsa’ir* newspaper described the passengers aboard the

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**Figure 4.** Distribution of immigrant population by age before and after World War I (Palestine). Source: Jacob Metzer, *Jewish Immigration to Palestine in the Long 1920s; Yediot, ha-mahlaca le-statistica* (1920).
ship Russland, which dropped anchor off the coast of Palestine on December 19, 1919, thus:

On a dark ship undulating on the turbid waves, they arrived, after many long peregrinations and tribulations, at the place of their hearts’ desire. They were gloomy and mournful, mere shadows of men, in whose faces were reflected the terrifying images of the catastrophic life in Russia and Ukraine: widows and orphans, families cut in half, directly relating the terrible news of the blazing wrath poured forth upon the wretched masses of our people.37

In the Do’ar ha-yom newspaper, Itamar Ben-Avi expressed doubts regarding the prospects of these newcomers:

We do not know the quality of many of the immigrants who came by ship last week . . . . I have reason to suspect that a few of them – and not a negligible few – will not settle down here in this country, even if work is found to provide for them.38

Do’ar ha-yom also ran a similarly dour account by Esther Slonim:

They are usually called “immigrants.” Others are more precise and beautify their language, flattering them as “olim,” “returnees to Zion.” The truth is that they are refugees, refugees from a battlefield. Six hundred and fifty of them have come, a drop in the ocean, just a speck, which cannot signify the rescue of the Jews of Russia. In our small and narrow world, though, this group of refugees from Russia provides an authentic image of the terrible situation there. … Do you see that thin, consumptive Jew, that feeble weakling over there? He’s actually a thirty-five-year-old Jew, but he’s been dead four times. No kidding! He’s a dead man who has risen from the grave for the fourth time. He’s from a little town near Poltova. When the “business” started in his town, he was struck down and wounded and was thought to be among the dead; only when it came time to burying him did he open his eyes. Straining to overcome many setbacks, he dragged himself to Odessa.39

**Conclusion**

This study’s findings indicate that Jewish emigration from 1915 to 1925 differed from that of the “great migration” between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To begin with, Jewish refugees had fled or were expelled from the battle zones of Eastern Europe and could not reach the shores of America by the safe and familiar routes across the Atlantic. In consequence, they were forced to find alternative routes, which naturally turned out to be longer and more perilous. Crossing Siberia on the Trans-Siberian Railway, they reached China and Japan. From the port of Yokohama, the emigrants sailed to the western seaboard of the United States. The HIAS assumed responsibility for the refugees once they arrived in the Far East. This aid organization provided for the wayfarers’ daily needs and ensured their safety. Moreover, it ensured their basic rights in this alien environment. In so doing, the HIAS exemplified American Jewry’s deep sense of responsibility towards world Jewry, not least the communities of Eastern Europe. Founded to help Jewish immigrants acclimate to the United States, the HIAS extended its purview during World War I to the countries of origin of its wards, providing assistance well before the emigrants made landfall. Once the Great War was over, the stream of refugees along the Far Eastern route dried up. In parallel, the HIAS wound down its operations in China and Japan. Within a generation, however, Jewish refugees would return to north-eastern Asia.
These two migrations also diverge with respect to their cause. Before World War I, the immigrants were spurred on by economic pressures – foremost among them destitution – that pushed hundreds of thousands of Jews into leaving Europe for North America. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War, a spate of pogroms exacted a toll of roughly 100,000 Jewish casualties in Ukraine alone. What is more, these travails were compounded by unflagging economic woes. Against this backdrop, the Jews who moved to Palestine and the United States in the 1920s are perhaps best classified as refugees, not immigrants. It is difficult to assess all the reasons behind this particular exodus. However, given the rise in women, children, and people over the age of forty among the emigrants to Palestine and the United States, it stands to reason that the motivation for emigration differed from earlier waves. On more than one occasion, the press in both the United States and Palestine described Jewish newcomers as refugees rather than immigrants. In my estimation, this movement falls somewhere between immigration and flight, as the main catalyst was the trauma of the Ukrainian Civil War. Bereavement and, above all, loss of trust in their surroundings left the region’s Jews with scarce hope for a quiet and peaceful life.

As this comparative study has revealed, the emigrants to Palestine and the United States during the 1920s were somewhat similar in terms of demographic background and motive. Following World War I, the proportion of children under the age of 16 and of women among the arrivals increased in both Palestine and the United States. Above all, this wave can be defined as an immigration of families that wished to permanently settle down in their host countries. Despite the attempts of Zionist historiographers to emphasize the ideological motivation and pioneering spirit of this era’s olim, in truth the majority of them came to Palestine in order to make a fresh start after a calamitous experience. As such, their objectives were identical to their counterparts in the United States.

These similarities aside, there were major differences in the attitudes of Zionist and American-Jewish leadership toward postwar Jewish immigration. In the first years of the British Mandate, the Zionist leadership had the ability to sway Whitehall’s policy regarding emigration to Palestine. Put differently, the movement could have opened the gates to the Land of Israel and accommodated every request for aliyah. However, Weizmann was afraid that a mass influx of refugees in Palestine would place an onerous burden on Zionist institutions. In his estimation, the land was not ready to absorb such a large number of immigrants. Surprising as it may be, the first postwar “quota” was enacted by the Zionist movement at Weizmann’s behest. The Mandatory administration reduced the scope of immigration and encouraged the arrival of “productive elements” capable of “building and being built by” the Land of Israel. Conversely, the American-Jewish leadership toiled to facilitate the arrival of as many Jews as possible in the United States by attempting to modify its own country’s tightfisted Quota Acts.

* * *

In the Jewish tradition, yemai bein ha-mei’tsarim (days between the straits) is a time of fasting and asceticism in commemoration of the three weeks between the initial breach of Jerusalem’s outer walls and the destruction of the Temple. World War I set in motion a whole decade “between the straits” over the course of which Eastern European Jewry was subjected to discrimination, mass expulsions, and pogroms. To make matters worse, the United States virtually sealed off its borders to emigrants in the early 1920s.
In fact, these hardships were but a general rehearsal for the catastrophe that would befall European Jewry some 20 years later.

Notes


3. Ibid.

4. See the letter of Abraham Halevi Lifchitz dated November 24, 1914, YIVO, RG 245, 3.


8. Ibid.


15. See Hachlatot va’ida ha-shnatit shel ha-po’el ha-tza’ir [Resolutions of the Annual Committee Meeting of Ha-Po’el Ha-Tza’ir], Ha’po’el Ha-Tza’ir, January 1, 1920, vol. 12, 1.


17. The Zionist leadership ignored this call and, for that matter, other resolutions that were passed in Palestine. This incident substantiates the claim that much of the Zionist movement’s top brass, including Weizmann, consistently displayed a lack of understanding of and sympathy...
towards the yishuv and its local heads; Eviatar Feisel, “Ha-Mediniut ha-Tzionit le-ahar hatzharat Balfour” [Zionist Policy after the Balfour Declaration] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press and Hakibutz Ha’mehuad, 1977), 117.


19. Ibid.


21. “Me-et ha-histadrut ha-tzionit” [From the Zionist Organization], Ha-po’el Ha-tza’ir, 23rd iyyar, vol. 13, 16.


23. Ibid.

24. “Asephat ha-va’ad ha-po’el ha-gado” [General Meeting of the Executive], Ha-Olam, March 5, 1920, no. 21, 6.

25. “Me-et ha-histadrut ha-Tzionit”, Ha-po’el Ha-Tza’ir, May 23, 1919, vol. 13, 16. For an in-depth look at Weizmann’s aliyah policy, see Aviva Halamish, Yahaso shel Chaim Weizmann le-Aliyah bein milhamot ha-olam’ [Weizmann and Jewish Immigration between the World Wars], Weizmann Manhig Ha’tziyonut (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar and Tel Aviv University Press, 2016), 261–98.

26. Letter of Ze’ev Tiomkin to the committee of delegates, December 26, 1920, Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S6, file 338/1.

27. See, for example, the report of the aliyah committee in Constantinople, Report on Palestine Emigration Activities in Constantiinople during the Period of the 1st June 1920 to the 1st July 1921, Zionist Archives, S6, file 338/1.

28. General secretary of the committee of delegates to the aliya committee in Constantinople, on August 12, 1920, Zionist Archives, S6, file 338/1.

29. Letter of Menachem Ussishkin to Ze’ev Tiomkin on October 8, 1920, CZA S6, file338/1.


34. Robert Fleeger, Ellis Island Nation, 18.


36. Libby Garland, After They Closed the Gates, 87.

37. Le’yinyanei ha’sha, Ha-po’el Ha-tsa’ir, December 26, 1919, 2.

38. Ben Avi, Ha’hatchala, Do’ar Ha-yom, December 26, 1919, 1.

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