Introduction

HASIA R. DINUER AND GENNADY ESTRAIKH

Conventional thinking about Jewish history has pivoted around a number of key dates, going from 70 CE with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans to 1492 and the expulsion from Spain. Most commentators would agree that 1881 with the outbreak of the pogroms in the Czarist empire, 1933 and the rise of Adolf Hitler to power, and finally 1948 and the declaration of the State of Israel as a sovereign Jewish state constitute the key years from which to imagine the flow of Jewish historical time. Many also regard 1967 as a dividing line, as the June War changed tangibly the international image and situation of Israel, stimulated new interpretations of history, and triggered the Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union.

But since Jewish history cannot, and ought not, be divorced from the larger history of the world, other dates also suggest themselves as possible moments which can provide a framework for understanding the Jewish past. 1096 and the launch of the First Crusade, 1516 when Martin Luther ripped apart the unity of Christendom, and the French Revolution of 1789, which offered citizenship to all men, divorcing the benefits offered by the state from religious affiliation, offer a few other dates drawn from world history which could be considered as transformative of Jewish life and worthy of exploration.

1929, the subject of this volume, proved to be a watershed in modern Jewish history. The reaction of Jewish communities, organizations, and individuals to the dramatic events of that year was determined by, particularly, although not limited to, the great crisis of the world economy ushered in by the crash of the stock market. The developments of 1929 as they played out in the Jewish world reflected the reality that changes,
for better or worse, in the larger society impacted upon the Jews. Jews in the modern world, or the premodern world for that matter, never lived in splendid isolation from others. Their internal communal practices, their relationships with each other, and the bonds they forged with non-Jews took their shape as much from the issues and events of the larger society as they reflected Jewish concerns and consciousness. Additionally, 1929 offers a clear example of the transnational connections which linked Jews to each other, regardless of where they lived.

While Jews functioned as American Jews, Russian—or, better, Soviet—Jews, German Jews, Palestinian Jews, Polish Jews, and the like, they behaved politically in a global context. They understood their fates to be tied up with each other despite the fact that each Jewish community had a particular bundle of political, social, and economic rights, based on place of residence. Each had to react to and interact with the particularities of their specific societies. Yet each Jewry took the worldwide condition of the Jewish people to be a matter of grave concern. 1929 proved to a year when Jews, regardless of where they lived, saw themselves as affected by developments that took place far away. No matter how far away, the crises endured by other Jews became part of a transnational Jewish consciousness.

As the historians and literary scholars whose essays make up this book engage with so many other watershed dates, they have taken 1929 as more that just a singular year. But they contemplate it as a key moment in time from which to assess the trends set in motion in the decade that preceded it and in the immediate period of time which followed. As such, they have not limited themselves to the events of only that one year. Rather, 1929 provides this book with a vantage point from which to survey and analyze the revolutions in Jewish life, set in place by developments in the post–World War I world, as they shaped Jewish intellectual, political, and communal conditions. 1929 likewise provides a lens from which to contemplate the changes which that year brought about, some of which left indelible marks on the history of the Jewish people.

In 1929, the world Jewish population hovered at just a bit over 17 million, a striking figure retrospectively, given that in less than ten years, political forces would be unleashed in Germany which would annihilate one-third of them, and in fewer than twenty years, the image of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust would dominate Jewish
thinking and political action. That, however, lay in the future. In 1929, over 7 million of the Jewish people lived in central and eastern Europe, including Poland, Russia, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania, where they constituted about 6 percent of the total population. 300,000, on the other hand, made their home in the Jews’ ancestral homeland, Palestine. Almost 5 million Jews lived in the Americas, north and south, with the lion’s share of over 4 million in the United States. While eastern Europe, across national boundaries, represented the single largest concentration of Jews anywhere, the United States had the largest single Jewish community in any one country.

To a considerable degree, this book takes a decidedly American focus, reflecting not only the flowering of scholarship in the field of American Jewish history and literature but also the size of the Jewish community and the fact that the United States experienced World War I so differently than did the nations of Europe, which had fought so much longer and lost so many more men and on whose soil the battles had raged. Reflecting that postbellum reality as well as the migration trends which had brought nearly one-third of European Jewry across the Atlantic to the United States, in the 1920s, the Jews of the United States had become the dominant constituent of world Jewry. Fundraising campaigns all over the United States helped continue Zionist projects in Palestine. In Europe, many individuals, organizations, or even whole communities depended on American Jewish charities such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which played a central role in assisting Jews in World War I–torn Europe and after the war, helping secure their economic position by providing direct relief and by establishing hundreds of cooperative credit unions to assist Jewish-owned businesses in eastern Europe, among other projects.

American Jews experienced steady and solid economic mobility in the 1920s, making it comfortable for them to provide assistance to their coreligionists abroad. And despite the rising levels of anti-Semitism, both in rhetoric and in action, which characterized the 1920s, they by and large evinced a positive outlook on their place in American life, an optimistic view toward the future, and an eagerness to fulfill their self-imposed obligations to Jews around the world in distress. In 1929, however, the stock-market crash brought profound economic, social, and ideological changes to the American Jewish community and limited its
ability to support humanitarian and Jewish nationalist projects in other countries.

The particularities of the United States shaped the relationships between its Jews and those elsewhere. This played itself out most importantly in terms of the ways in which American Jews connected to those in the Soviet Union, a political entity forged in the crucible of World War I. Given the absence of official relations between the United States and Soviet Russia until 1933, Jewish channels of economic assistance sometimes served diplomatic ends. Charitable activities directed at foreign causes by the JDC, *landsmanshaftn* (hometown societies), and various other organizations helped reinforce their members’ and sponsors’ positions on the Jewish and general political landscape. It also strengthened and particularized the American Jewish identity.

The post–World War I remapping created, inter alia, new Jewish identities, for instance, that of the “Finnish Jewish” and the “Latvian Jewish.” At the same time, the “Ukrainian Jewish” self-identification began to replace previous regional identifications, such as “Volhynian” and “Podolyan.” One of the most significant identity changes took place in the Soviet Union. Lazar Fagelman, a heavyweight among the New York Jewish journalists, wrote on 12 July 1943, in the *Forverts* (which he would edit in the 1960s) about the abyss that had divided the Soviet Jewish and the western Jewish worlds. An American Jew and a Soviet Jew, especially of the younger generations, began to speak essentially different languages, even if both remained fluent Yiddish speakers. According to Fagelman, Soviet Jews developed different habits, values, and manners; their vision of life differed; they had a different attitude to people, to the world, and to all political, economic, and moral problems.

While many Jewish intellectuals mourned the decline of the relatively homogeneous Jewish cultural terrain in eastern Europe, they anticipated the emergence of distinctive centers of strong cultural gravitation, most notably in New York, Warsaw, and Moscow, with Berlin as the main crossroads. Latin America, South Africa, and Australia each supported a lively Jewish cultural and communal life. At the same time, international Jewish organizations countered these centrifugal tendencies.

In August 1929, a constituent assembly met in Zurich, establishing the Jewish Agency for Palestine, or *sokhnut*, responsible for emigration, *aliyah*, to the future Jewish state. The Fourth Aliyah (1924–1926)
brought to Palestine about 70,000 Jews, most notably middle-class migrants from Poland. This bourgeois population included many fewer supporters of the socialist ideals than earlier waves of immigration had, and more advocates of the Revisionist Zionism of Vladimir Jabotinsky. The newcomers reinforced the urban population of Palestine, especially Tel Aviv, which increased in size from 16,000 in 1924 to 46,000 in 1929. This period saw the opening of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Technion in Haifa.

The Jewish organizations for vocational training, ORT, and for health protection, OZE, which initially appeared in imperial Russia, morphed into international bodies with fundraising and relief operations in scores of countries. The establishment of the Yiddish section at the PEN Club and the international popularity of its honorary chairman, the novelist and playwright Sholem Asch, underscored the Diasporic character of Jewish cultural life. The Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO), a 1925 brainchild of a few Berlin-based intellectuals, by 1929 had sunk strong roots in Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, and established affiliates in Warsaw and Berlin. It also enlisted to its ranks a worldwide constituency of scholars and supporters.

Cosmopolitans populated the headquarters of international and national Jewish organizations. Born and educated between East and West, these Jews devoted themselves not to a homeland but to ideas, be they Zionism, Bundism (the socialist Jewish workers’ movement), Communism, Jewish nation-building in the Diaspora, Westernization and other forms of acculturation. These globally focused Jewish activists built their worlds on Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish, English, and German, as the spoken and written mediums of their polyglot institutions. Some among these activists not only spoke all of these—and other—languages fluently but also used them in their creative work. Linguistic, cultural, and ideological affinity of activists living in various countries contributed to the success of Jewish international projects.

Some uprooted disillusioned intellectuals became recruits of the international Communist movement. In the Soviet Union, the consolidation of power in the hands of Josef Stalin created by 1929 a much more dogmatic policy and reality intolerant of dissent, whether in the USSR itself or around the world in the international network of the Communist movement. This included the Jewish branches. In the 1920s
and 1930s, legal and illegal outlets of the Communist International, or Comintern, had more than a fair share of Jewish activists. The international character of the Communist movement appealed to some literati, turning them into fellow travelers. Jewish, notably Yiddish-speaking, Communist substructures mushroomed in the United States and other countries with a significant Jewish population. 1929 proved pivotal in the history of American Communists. In March 1929, the Workers Party of America, during its sixth convention, stopped hiding its real identity and became the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA), merging into one organization. The new ideological and organizational path of the Communist movement sparked vast and volatile conflicts in Jewish trade unions in the United States and elsewhere. It split Jewish fraternal organizations such as the Arbeiter Ring (the Workmen’s Circle) and inspired disputes that would persist for decades, well into the period following World War II.

The new departure of the international Communist movement played itself out in other very specific Jewish settings and forced some Jewish Communists to have to decide if their Jewish loyalties trumped their Communist ones, or the other way around. In the fall of 1929, a group of Jewish believers in the Soviet experiment abandoned the movement following the Kremlin’s siding with the Arabs and hailing the Jewish bloodshed in Palestine as an anticolonial uprising.

The outbreak of violence in Palestine ought not be thought of as a localized event of limited geographic reach. On 11 October 1929, the highbrow Warsaw Yiddish weekly Literarishe Bleter (Literary Pages), which favored promoting unity in the ranks of Yiddish literati, indicated that the events in Palestine had created a schism in the Jewish world and had driven virtually everyone to participate in a bitter debate. The riots in Hebron and other towns of Palestine underscored the vulnerability of the Zionist enterprise and ignited hot discussions among various Jewish political groupings about the matters of establishing a Jewish state on its historical site. Jacob Lestschinsky, one of the foremost Jewish social scientists, published an article in the Warsaw-based Bundist daily Naye Folkstsaytung (New People’s Newspaper, 11 and 18 April 1930), arguing that after the riots, Palestine became simply another dangerous place in the Jewish world. He compared Zionists with followers of the seventeenth-century “false messiah” Shabbatai...
Zvi. Being ready to accept the Zionists’ commitment to building Jewish life in Israel, Lestschinsky condemned those radicals who undermined Jewish life by “ruining the Jewish soul” and depriving “the Jewish masses of their feelings of citizenship, of having birthrights to the country of their residence, and of equality with the surrounding population. . . . Instead, it [Zionism] exhilarates them with illusions and promises, which can intoxicate but cannot produce results.” Meanwhile, American and other Western donors provided funds for such projects as the building a Jewish republic in the Crimea and, later, in Birobidzhan. While both projects never achieved their goals, the enthusiastic support of non-Soviet sponsors, representing a range of ideologies, revealed widespread skepticism toward Zionism and assimilation and demonstrated global Jewish connections.

Wherever Jews lived, wherever they maintained organized communities which both participated in global Jewish philanthropy—as either receivers or donors—and wherever they maintained a Jewish press and supported Jewish movements, they followed these and other developments. They understood that their fate and their status, while surely determined by the policies of their home countries and national governments, could not be extricated from the fate and status of Jews elsewhere. Their definition of the “Jewish community” or the “Jewish world” did not stop at the lines of their cities, states, or countries. Rather, looking outward, they defined themselves as bound together with other Jews, no matter how far away they lived.

Because of the global interconnection of Jews and Jewish politics, an international team of leading experts have contributed to 1929: Mapping the Jewish World. This book takes as its conceptual framework the idea of the various “(tree-)rings” of this year in Jewish history. The local may have very well served as the lived center, but each ring represented meaningful places in the world Jewish imagination and in the political reality which shaped Jewish community life.

NOTES