“Yesterday’s Liberalism is Today’s Conservatism”:
The Jewish Roots of Neoconservatism,
as Shown by the Rise and Evolution of Commentary

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Introduction

“Let me not hedge my bet. I believe that neoconservatism is the serious and intelligent conservatism America has lacked, and whose absence has been roundly lamented by the American left.”¹ This quote appears in the introduction of Fordham University professor Peter Steinfels’ 1979 book *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America’s Politics*. As both the quote and the title suggest, Professor Steinfels, in the first book to thoroughly consider this emerging political ideology, recognized in neoconservatism a potential to reshape the very foundation of American politics. He himself was clearly opposed to it – as illustrated on the first page of the book, when he said “should it prevail, [neoconservatism] threatens to attenuate or diminish the promise of American democracy”² – but he vigorously argued that the movement, as a political force, was emerging in American politics and conceivably could realign the parties and usher in a decidedly new, conservative era. From the perspective of a writer in the year 2022, aware that only a year after this book was published the Reagan Revolution succeeded, Professor Steinfel appears to have been vindicated in his bet on the prospects of the neoconservative movement.

Academic interest in studying American conservatism increased drastically in the aftermath of the 1980 election, particularly from the early 1990s onward.³ Historians, sociologists, and political scientists alike have been forced to examine how a movement that had seemingly been pushed to the margins of American politics from the 1930s to the 1960s was able to roar back with such ferocity that it has seemingly driven the American political scene for the

past forty years and counting. Neoconservatism, a subset of this wider movement, has similarly received additional academic attention in the decades following the political achievements of the conservative movement. Countless articles have been written on the subject, as well as books such as Steinfels’, in addition to Jewish historian and Temple University professor Murray Friedman’s *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* and journalist Daniel Oppenheimer’s *Exit Right: The People Who Left the Left and Reshaped the American Century*. These works explore the roots of the neoconservative movement, how it developed, and key figures within it, with special attention usually paid to Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, and Daniel P. Moynihan.

As plentiful as literature on neoconservatism may be, there appeared to be two aspects of it that were less than fully developed by those who examined the movement. The first was that of the role of a leading magazine of the movement, *Commentary*, and the editor who made it so, Norman Podhoretz. Steinfel, in *The Neoconservatives*, discussed the magazine *Commentary* in his book’s introduction, writing:

> *Commentary*, the monthly magazine published by the American Jewish Committee, has been one of a handful of leading intellectual forums; until the rise of *The New York Review of Books*, probably no other journal of serious and extended discussion of politics and culture had as wide a readership.4

Given his personal opposition to the neoconservative movement he later lambasted the magazine and its editor, Podhoretz, mocking them for what he called their “formulaic” and at times “ludicrous” attacks. But even while criticizing it, Steinfel conceded that “For all that, *Commentary’s* main battle pieces are often spectacular – frontal assaults, verbal rocketry, a matchless sense of the adversary’s weakest points.”5 Despite these statements that seemingly

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outline the importance of *Commentary* and Norman Podhoretz in the neoconservative movement, in the rest of the book they were mentioned only occasionally and in passing, a feature common in much of the existing writings on neoconservatism. The second, and perhaps more puzzling, hole in neoconservative literature is that the Jewishness of neoconservatism is either ignored or simply acknowledged without elaboration. By “Jewishness” it is not meant that the movement itself was unique to Judaism or American Jews, as it certainly was not, but it is clear that Judaism and American Jews played a central role in its founding. Of the four prominent neoconservatives mentioned before - Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Bell, and Daniel P. Moynihan – three of them were Jews, and the fourth, Daniel P. Moynihan, owed his success in the 1976 New York Democratic senatorial primary, at least in part, to the strong Jewish support he received. As mentioned with the first point, *Commentary* magazine was instrumental in advancing the intellectual notions of the movement, and it had been founded in 1945 as a Jewish magazine, backed by the American Jewish Committee.

The central project of this thesis is to fill those two voids in the academic writing on the neoconservative movement, and in doing so gain greater insight into the role of *Commentary* magazine and Jewish identity in its formation. By examining the Jewish roots of the neoconservative movement, specifically by following the narrow intellectual thread of *Commentary*, it, and as a result the American conservative movement, can be better understood. Such information would be of great benefit to anyone seeking to examine either the general

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6 Daniel P. Moynihan received this strong New York Jewish support, even while facing Jewish congresswoman Bella Abzug in the primary, due to the outspoken stand he took as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in opposing UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, which declared that Zionism was a form of racism (it was later revoked in 1991 with UN General Assembly Resolution 46/86). Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* from 1960-1995, was instrumental in helping Moynihan strongly criticize the resolution, going so far as to write the first draft of the remarks Moynihan delivered on the floor of the UN.
American political scene at present, and the developments that led to it, or the specific American Jewish community, and the contemporary partisan divisions within it.

The subsequent pages will be divided into three chapters, as the nine decades from the influx of Eastern European Jews from the Russian Empire in the wake of massive pogroms after 1881 to the rightward turn of Commentary in 1970, with all its developments at the individual, institutional, and ideological levels, will be methodically contemplated. The chapters will build off one another, mirroring the way that these organizations, magazines, and people did the same, taking inspiration from their forebears, adapting it to the present, and establishing a legacy that would be inherited by their successors. Given the tight focus of this project, it draws from several existing historiographies to reveal an overlooked aspect in the formation of neoconservatism: the role of Jewish identity.

The first chapter will examine the forces that led to the creation of the American Jewish Committee, the organization that would later form and sponsor Commentary, the ideas it and its leaders espoused from its creation in 1906 to 1938. It will also investigate Contemporary Jewish Record, a magazine sponsored by the American Jewish Committee from 1938 to 1945, and the direct precursor to Commentary. While a commercial failure, it nevertheless merits consideration as it laid both the structural and conceptual foundation on which Commentary expanded. There exist no secondary sources solely dedicated to Contemporary Jewish Record, and in the few books that mention it, it garners only a sentence as the American Jewish Committee’s failed venture into the world of magazines before the stunning success of Commentary. While previous writers have overlooked it, a more complete understanding of Commentary will be achieved by analyzing Contemporary Jewish Record’s evolution and the beliefs expressed in its pages.
The second chapter explores *Commentary* under the leadership of its first editor, Elliot Cohen, from 1945 to 1959. It looks at Cohen’s background, highlighting the community to which he, his successor Norman Podhoretz, and many of the thinkers (such as Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Bell) who worked for and/or contributed to *Commentary*, and later neoconservatism, belonged: the so-called New York Intellectuals. The chapter will conclude by scrutinizing articles from the first fifteen years of *Commentary* to understand the key ideas that it, its writers, and its editors accepted and advanced.

The third and final chapter follows the first decade of *Commentary* (1960-1970) under the leadership of its second editor, Norman Podhoretz, and the transformation it underwent in that short period of time, from a decidedly less Jewish and more left-leaning magazine to a proudly Jewish and neoconservative outlet. The life and writings of Podhoretz will be investigated so that the man behind the ideological conversion of *Commentary* can be considered, and the motivations for his transformation can be contemplated. Additionally, *Commentary* articles from this decade will be utilized to observe the way it, led by its editor, gradually transformed into the leading intellectual platform for the neoconservative movement.

Abraham Joshua Herschel famously wrote that “No religion is an island;” the same can be said of ideas and ideologies. They do not stand alone, as they are all, in some way, shape, or form, influenced by one another. The neoconservative movement, undeniably, was aided in its development by a confluence of individuals and ideologies: William F. Buckley, Jr. and the “New Conservatism,” the New Left, Black Nationalism, and the Third World Liberation movement, just to name a few. But too infrequently mentioned or considered by past writers and intellectuals on neoconservatism is the role of Jewish identity in its formation. The role of Jews and Jewishness in this movement can be better understood by following the specific, Jewish path
that created *Commentary*, as well as observing its turn towards neoconservatism, highlighting the key ideologies it championed and how they evolved, and examining the people who wrote and edited the magazine.
Chapter 1: The American Jewish Committee, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, and the Creation of *Commentary*: 1906-1945

On Saturday evening, February 3, 1906, thirty-four of the most prominent members of the American Jewish community assembled in New York City to discuss the urgent matter of how to respond to the plight of their coreligionists in the Russian Empire. The horrors that Russian Jews endured was captured succinctly in a short article that appeared on page one of the previous day’s issue of the *New York Times*, “16 Executed; 15 of Them Jews”:

WARSAW, Feb. 1. – Five persons were executed yesterday in the Citadel, bringing the number shot in the past fortnight up to sixteen. Of these, fifteen were Jews.

Crucially, the article stated that Jews were the overwhelming victims of violence and that these executions occurred over the course of two weeks, underscoring the fact that it had been happening and was ongoing. Widespread acts of antisemitic violence and destruction, called “pogroms,” had plagued the Jewish *shtetls* in the “Pale of Settlements,” the Eastern European territories of the Russian Empire where that nation’s Jews predominantly lived, for the previous twenty-five years.

The second and third chapters will focus more explicitly on *Commentary* and the groups and individuals who led and shaped it as it went down the path that culminated in its transformation into a leading magazine of the neoconservative movement. This chapter, however, is different from much of the existing secondary literature of this intellectual journey, as it considers the history of the organization responsible for supporting and sponsoring *Commentary*, the American Jewish Committee, as well as its direct predecessor, *Contemporary Jewish Record*. While *Commentary* was granted editorial independence by the American Jewish

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Committee, the very fact that the organization sponsored it, financially supported it, and even granted a floor of its Midtown Manhattan headquarters to the magazine that served as its office, shows that the history and ideology of the American Jewish Committee is important to gaining greater insight into *Commentary*. As for *Contemporary Jewish Record*, the author of this thesis was unable to locate any secondary sources that discussed it in depth. In books or articles about *Commentary*, at most there were several sentences noting that it had been preceded by *Contemporary Jewish Record*, which was dismissed as an abject failure. In print from 1938 to 1945, the magazine was never a commercial success, having only 4,200 subscribers by its final year in circulation.

Nevertheless, it merits inquiry by virtue of it being the predecessor to *Commentary* and in many ways its incubator. Many of the writers for *Contemporary Jewish Record* wrote for *Commentary*, and the final editor of *Contemporary Jewish Record*, Elliot Cohen, served as the inaugural editor of *Commentary*. Additionally, in the seven years of its existence *Contemporary Jewish Record* underwent a radical reinvention, transforming from something resembling a primary source reader to a magazine publishing articles penned by George Orwell and Hannah Arendt, and its final issues were closely mirrored (if not copied) by the first issues of *Commentary*. For these reasons, while previous writers overlooked the history of the American Jewish Committee and *Contemporary Jewish Record*, the first chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to the consideration of both.

In this first chapter, the events that transpired in the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries will be discussed, to contextualize the founding of the American Jewish Committee in 1906. The creation of this organization, while not unprecedented given the history of similar organizations across Europe, was important for
the United States, as it was the first successful attempt to build a lasting institution that aimed to represent the interests of Jews in the United States; the unique history of American Jewry’s disunity will also be examined. After that, the first three decades of the American Jewish Committee will be considered, with a specific emphasis on the challenges it faced and the ideologies it espoused, particularly on the most pressing issues facing the American Jewish community during that time: immigration, antisemitism, and Zionism. Having thoroughly explored the American Jewish Committee, attention will then be turned to the first magazine it sponsored - *Contemporary Jewish Record* – and the three issues it, its editors, and its writers dedicated the lion’s share of their attention to: attacking antisemitism, portraying American Jews as patriotic, and accepting (albeit not wholeheartedly) Zionism.

**Background**

**The Pogroms of 1881-1884 and 1903-1906**

In 1881 the Russian ruler Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by a revolutionary movement, *Narodnaya Volya*. Of the numerous conspirators who perpetrated the crime, one of them, Hesya Helfman, was Jewish. While there was only one Jew who participated in the assassination of the Tsar, blame for the murder quickly fell upon the Jews as a whole, and 1881 saw massive pogroms break out across the Pale of Settlements. Over the next three years, 169 Jewish communities were attacked, 20,000 Jewish homes were destroyed, and tens of thousands of Jews were economically decimated. Insult was added to injury as the successor to the Russian throne, Tsar Alexander III, passed the May Laws the following year, banning Jews from

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settling in Russia’s economically thriving cities, restricting general Jewish economic activity, and curtailing Jewish access to secondary education and universities. These laws, as repressive and degrading as they were for Russian Jews, were seen by Russian governors controlling regions in the Pale of Settlement as just a beginning, as they expected the laws to be strengthened.

April 19, 1903, would see a resurrection of widespread violence against Jews in the Russian Empire, originating in the city of Kishinev (now in Moldova). In the days leading up to the outbreak of violence, the body of a murdered fifteen-year-old Christian child was discovered in the nearby village of Dubossary. The body was discovered with numerous stab wounds, and the populace began to blame the Jews for the murder, turning to the age-old antisemitic trope of the blood libel. While the authorities, after conducting an autopsy, debunked the claim, discovering that the body was not drained of blood and that the boy was most likely murdered by his grandfather, the antisemitic allegation persisted. A rumor soon arose that a prominent local Jew was overheard saying in Yiddish “we already have the one we shall torment,” and a local man (who was an unemployed drunk) testified to the police that he had been contracted by Jews to help commit the crime. Anti-Jewish riots soon erupted, and they turned into a full-blown pogrom that would reach Kishinev on April 19.

13 The blood libel is an antisemitic trope that accuses Jews of murdering Christian children before the Passover festival to drain their blood so that it could be incorporated into the matzos. It is rooted in the Christian theological accusation of deicide and portrays Jews as desiring to continue their evilness and rejection of Christ by murdering innocent young Christian boys just as they murder Jesus Christ. There is no evidence supporting or truth to this accusation.
That day, Easter Sunday for Orthodox Christians and the final day of Passover for Jews, was fraught with religious tension in the city, which had a Jewish population totaling about 50,000, nearly one-third of the total population.\textsuperscript{15} Motivated by Easter sermons propagating the blood libel and connecting the killing of Christ to the killing of the boy from Dubossary, noontime verbal harassment of Jews in the main square rapidly turned into a pogrom, with a band of nearly 1,000 armed Christians attacking the Jewish quarter of the city by late afternoon.\textsuperscript{16} The acts perpetrated against the Jews of Kishinev were abhorrent:

\begin{quote}
They dragged Jews from their hiding places to kill, torture, and mutilate them with their bare hands. They raped girls and women within sight of their fathers and husbands, cut off breasts, chopped off hands, gouged out eyes, drove nails through people's heads, hacked bodies in half, split open bellies, and filled them with feathers.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Only after three days and external pressure did this pogrom stop, and in its wake forty-five were left dead, 600 were wounded and/or disfigured, thousands were left homeless and destitute, and 1,500 shops and homes were ruined.\textsuperscript{18} While the pogrom had come to an end in Kishinev, it was only beginning for the rest of Russian Jewry, as 1903-1906 would see another wave of antisemitic violence perpetrated against them. These pogroms would devastate hundreds of towns and leave tens of thousands of Jews injured or dead.\textsuperscript{19}

It was in response to this latest wave of Russian pogroms that those thirty-four prominent American Jews convened in New York City to discuss meeting the moment with a response remarkable in the American context. They sought to succeed where others had failed in the United States and to replicate what had been successful for Jewish communities in European

\begin{footnotes}
\item Zipperstein, \textit{Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History}, pp. 61-68.
\item Ibid.
\item Sanua, \textit{Let Us Prove Strong}, p. 2.
\end{footnotes}
nations such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. These men met to discuss the creation of a unified organization to speak on behalf of American Jewry.

United States Jewry and Its Previous Rejection of Coordination

In February 1906, Jews in Germany were represented by Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden. Jews in France were represented by Alliance Israélite Universelle. Jews in the United Kingdom were represented by the Anglo-Jewish Association and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Jews in the United States, roughly 1.8 million in number, had no representative body.20

There had previously been attempts to create an organization for American Jewry, however, they had all ended in failure. In 1841 Isaac Leeser, a prominent figure within the Jewish community who founded the Jewish Publication Society, presented a “plan for establishing a religious union among the Israelites of America,” which would have set up a Central Religious Council, established “schools for general and religious education under Jewish Superintendence” nationwide, and assembled an organization of delegates “to promote harmony and undertake concerted communal action when necessary.”21 The call for a coordinated American Jewish leadership came only one year after the failure of American Jews to successfully intercede on behalf of their brethren in Damascus. Jews there had been accused of blood libel in 1840, and while Jewish organizations in European nations strongly advocated intervention, American Jews had mounted a haphazard response. The Jews of New York City petitioned President Martin Van Buren for help and coordinated demonstrations in six other

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20 Sanua, Let Us Prove Strong, p. 5.
21 Sarna, American Judaism, p. 104.
The effort proved too little, too late, and this failure is regarded as a motivating factor in Leeser’s call for communal coordination. However, after five years of attempting to bring his vision to reality, the plan failed. Several years later, in 1859, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites was founded, largely in response to the Mortara case in Italy,\(^23\) in another attempt to create an American Jewish institution that could speak on behalf of the entire community. This organization did last, and it was later incorporated into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the congregational arm of Reform Judaism, so it succeeded in standing the test of time but failed to become a unifying entity for American Jews.\(^24\)

In the wake of the inability of American Jewry to form a coordinated organization to speak on its behalf, prominent Jewish leaders came together to address crises as they arose. Wealthy Jewish leaders worked with the *New York Times* to finance journalist Harold Frederic's trip to Russia in 1891 so that he could report on the atrocities committed against Russian Jews by the tsarist regime.\(^25\) When pogroms again broke out in Russia in 1903, Jacob H. Schiff, a wealthy businessman of German Jewish heritage, agreed to serve as the treasurer of the *ad hoc* National Committee for the Relief of Sufferers of Russian Massacres, which he helped bankroll and which distributed over $1.25 million by the end of 1905.\(^26\) But after this experience, Schiff came to believe that issues would arise again that would call for an American Jewish response, and that they would be too great for him or any other prominent Jew to handle alone. After consulting with his confidants, who agreed with his conclusion, five of them sent out a letter on

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\(^{23}\) This case, which grabbed the attention of European and American Jewry, involved a six-year-old Jewish boy in Bologna named Edgar Mortara who, having been secretly baptized by a former servant as an infant, was seized by the Papal State authorities because a Jewish family could not raise a Catholic child. The parents lost custody of Edgar, and while the authorities involved were prosecuted for kidnapping, they were ultimately acquitted.

\(^{24}\) Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, p. 5.


\(^{26}\) Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, p. 5.
January 8, 1906, to fifty-seven prominent American Jews. The letter invited them to meet in New York City in February, to discuss the "advisability of the formation of a General Committee to deal with serious problems thus presented." Of the fifty-seven men invited thirty-four accepted, and after decades of being unable to form a single Jewish institution in America that could speak on behalf of American Jewry, leading Jewish men finally came together to found the first American Jewish organization that would go the distance and try to speak on behalf of the entire community: the American Jewish Committee (AJC).

**The American Jewish Committee: 1906-1938**

At the February 3, 1906, conference Jacob Schiff organized, the first question discussed was an existential one: should there be a new national Jewish organization? The matter was contentious, and some of the leaders present, such as Adolf Kraus, a lawyer and prominent executive of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, opposed creating anything except a small committee that would only meet in the event of an urgent crisis. While the measure to found an organization was not universally supported, “the general consensus… favored the establishment of an American committee whose primary function would be safeguarding Jewish rights abroad.” Agreement largely secured, after the initial meeting several more were held, and the conversation about how the organization should be structured and what its mission ought to be continued for the next several months. On November 11, 1906, the American Jewish Committee was the first successful organization aiming to represent the interests of the American Jewish community, it was not the only one. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was founded in 1881 with the narrow mission to provide relief and support for Jewish refugees. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was founded in 1913 to combat antisemitism specifically and bigotry more broadly. And the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) was founded in 1918 to be a populist, Zionist alternative to the American Jewish Committee.

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27 Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, p. 5.
28 It is important to note that while the American Jewish Committee was the first successful organization aiming to represent the interests of the American Jewish community, it was not the only one. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was founded in 1881 with the narrow mission to provide relief and support for Jewish refugees. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was founded in 1913 to combat antisemitism specifically and bigotry more broadly. And the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) was founded in 1918 to be a populist, Zionist alternative to the American Jewish Committee.
30 Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, p. 11.
Committee held its first meeting in the Hotel Savoy in New York City, where the leaders assembled the organizational structure, adopted a constitution, and set forth its principles:

To prevent the infraction of the civil and religious rights of Jews, in any part of the world; to render all lawful assistance and to take appropriate remedial action in the event of threatened or actual invasion or restriction of such rights, or of unfavorable discrimination with respect thereto; to secure for Jews equality of economic, social and educational opportunity; alleviate the consequences of persecution and to afford relief from calamities affecting Jews, where they may occur, and to compass these ends to administer any relief fund which shall come into its possession or which may be received by it, in trust or otherwise, for any of the aforesaid objects or for the purposes comprehended therein.31

Antisemitism had been the animating force behind the formation of the American Jewish Committee, so it makes sense that it would see its primary mission as protecting Jews, both at home and abroad. The American Jewish Committee would spend the next thirty-two years attempting to find its footing, working to do what no other organization had successfully done in the United States, and in the pursuit of longevity it would adopt policy positions and a mindset that would be maintained by future prominent members of the American Jewish community.

One of the most crucial and long-lasting positions that the American Jewish Committee took was its neutrality in domestic politics. While the European political landscape was one in which major parties espoused or otherwise supported explicit antisemitism, the United States, while not free of antisemitism, did not see antisemitism play an outsized role on the political stage.32 The Committee did not want to position itself as Republican, Democratic, progressive, or conservative, because what it aimed to do was to present itself (and by extension, the wider American Jewish community) as American, first and foremost. By remaining neutral, it was hoped, the American Jewish Committee could prevent either major party from wielding

antisemitism, and as a bonus, neutrality would allow the organization to lobby Congress and the president, regardless of which political party was in power.

An additional position taken by the American Jewish Committee, one that was maintained until after the Second World War, was to focus exclusively on Jewish issues, and issues of importance to the entire community, not specific segments of it or individuals within it. While the AJC would support the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s onward, in the 1910s it chose not to fight the Wilson Administration’s decision to segregate the federal government, and it maintained silence on racial matters until the end of the Second World War.\(^{33}\) The plight of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory supervisor in Georgia who was falsely convicted of murdering a thirteen-year-old girl, and who had his death sentence commuted to a life sentence before being lynched, would be the inciting incident for the formation of another prominent American Jewish organization in 1913, the Anti-Defamation League, but the American Jewish Committee “refused to act officially… insisting upon treating the case as a travesty of justice, of concern to all Americans irrespective of religion.”\(^{34}\)

These two positions taken by the AJC were pragmatic in nature and underpin something crucial to understanding the organization in the first few decades of its existence: it believed that it and the wider American Jewish community were in a precarious situation. There was an understanding that Jews in the United States were uncertain about their future and on a shaky foundation. There had been Jews in the United States since the nation was founded, but it was only since the 1880s that Jews existed in noteworthy numbers. 8.8 million immigrants arrived in the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century, and they were overwhelmingly

\(^{33}\) Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, p. 29.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as predominantly Catholic or Jewish. This changing demographic reality was combined with the introduction of pseudo-intellectual racism into the American zeitgeist, led by men such as leading anthropologist and advocate of pseudo-scientific racism Madison Grant. In his best-selling book, The Passing of the Great Race, Grant bemoaned the introduction of what he believed were alien elements into American society, arguing that “these immigrants adopt the language of the native American; they wear his clothes; they steal his name, and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals.” This sentiment, and the xenophobia and antisemitism at its core, led the American Jewish Committee to spend the vast majority of its first three decades opposing antisemitism and combating immigration restrictions, because it wanted to ensure that the United States could remain a safe harbor for persecuted Jews and a place where existing Jews could live free from fear of antisemitism.

Despite the best efforts of the American Jewish Committee to snuff out American antisemitism, the United States saw a surge of antisemitism in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. One of the first accusations to come out against Jews was that they were subversive to the United States and advancing global communism. In the aftermath of the October Revolution and the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Jews-as-Bolsheviks image was ingrained in parts of the American public. The charge of conspiracy was furthered by two related occurrences: the introduction of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion to the United States in 1919, and Henry Ford’s promotion of the Protocols in his newspaper, the Dearborn

35 Cohen, Not Free to Desist, p. 39.
37 Schachner, The Price of Liberty, p. 75.
38 The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, first published in Russia in 1903, is a forged antisemitic document that purports to outline the Jewish (sometimes changed to Zionist) plan for world domination.
39 Cohen, Not Free to Desist, p. 124.
Independent, under the title The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem. The American Jewish Committee’s approach to combating this rising tide of antisemitism “was to inform and galvanize enlightened, liberal, and as yet uninfected public opinion against the antisemitic onslaught.”\(^{40}\) In the eyes of the American Jewish Committee, those living in rural communities and those inclined to be antisemitic were beyond their reach, and it would be folly to attempt to engage with them. Instead, time would be better spent engaging with the more liberal-minded, educated members of society, because with them the American Jewish Committee could present the facts as they were and rest easy knowing that the truth alone would convince them to oppose Ford and disregard the Protocols. However, it is important to note that while this is where they placed their faith, oftentimes educated members of society, such as Madison Grant, were among the most virulent antisemites.

Despite its best efforts, the 1920s were a time when antisemitism became so prevalent that there was little the American Jewish Committee could do to stop it. In 1924, Congress passed and President Calvin Coolidge signed the Immigration Act of 1924, which severely limited all immigration to the United States, but particularly impacted Jewish immigrants. Nativism and antisemitism were advanced by the resurgent Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and antisemitism prevailed even in those educated echelons of society that the AJC had hoped to influence. Universities such as Harvard, Columbia, NYU, and Georgetown instituted quotas reducing the number of Jews able to access higher education at their campuses, and few Jews could make it through the institutionalized discrimination they faced on campus.\(^ {41}\)

The scene for both American and global Jewry would only further deteriorate in the 1930s, as the Great Depression decimated the global economy and invigorated populist, anti-

\(^{40}\) Cohen, Not Free to Desist, p. 133.
\(^{41}\) Dinnerstein, Antisemitism in America, pp. 87-88.
capitalist antisemitism, and the rise of Hitler and Nazism cast a long shadow over the Jewish world. The American Jewish Committee continued to try to exert itself, working with the Roosevelt Administration to apply pressure on Nazi Germany and protect German Jews. President Roosevelt was willing to partner with the American Jewish Committee and the wider American Jewish community, readily condemning Kristallnacht\(^{42}\) and other incidents of Nazi antisemitism.\(^{43}\) As much as President Roosevelt’s condemnations of Nazi antisemitism inspired Jewish confidence and support for him, nativism and isolationism were still dominant ideologies in the United States that went against the American Jewish Committee’s agenda and prevented any concrete actions from being taken against Nazi Germany. Labor unions, empowered by the New Deal and a crucial part of the Democratic coalition, opposed increasing the number of Jewish refugees allowed into the United States, with William Green, the president of the American Federation of Labor, telling President Roosevelt in 1938 to not increase the cap “in the name of the 11,000,000 unemployed.”\(^{44}\) The American Jewish Committee was successful in urging the president to push for the 1938 Evian Conference, an international meeting to discuss the plight of Jewish refugees and attempt to find places for them to be relocated to, but that was as much as they were able to achieve, and the conference concluded with only one nation volunteering to accept European Jews;\(^{45}\) ultimately no concrete steps were taken.

\(^{42}\) Kristallnacht, literally translated to “Night of Crystal,” refers to the Nazi state-sanctioned pogroms that occurred on November 9-10, 1938. Herschel Grynszpan, a seventeen-year-old Polish Jew, had assassinated Ernst vom Rath, a German Diplomat at their embassy in Paris, due to the recent German policy announcement that it was expelling Polish Jews living in Germany, including Grynszpan’s parents. In response to this assassination, Nazi Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels called for violence against the German Jewish community, and in those two days rioters destroyed hundreds of synagogues and other Jewish institutions, and it is believed that hundreds of Jews were killed or injured.

\(^{43}\) Cohen, Not Free to Desist, pp. 185-188.

\(^{44}\) Cohen, Not Free to Desist, p. 186.

\(^{45}\) Of all the nations that attended the Evian Conference, only the Dominican Republic offered to accept Jewish refugees. It stated that it would absorb up to 100,000 European Jews. However, difficulties arose and only 800 Jewish refugees were able to flee to the Dominican Republic before the outbreak of the Second World War and the onset of the Holocaust.
In the face of increasing antisemitism and the ascent of Hitler’s Germany, the American Jewish Committee in the 1930s began to rethink its long-standing ambivalence on a Jewish political movement that claimed to offer a solution to the Jewish Question: Zionism.

The American Jewish Committee and Zionism (1906-1938): Anti-Zionist to Non-Zionist to Tacit Support

The question that consumed the Jews of Europe, and to a lesser but still significant extent the Jews of America, was the Jewish Question: whether Jews could become equal members of the modern, nation-state-orientated system. While the nineteenth century saw Jewish emancipation occur across Europe, as the old system of empires began to give way to the new system of nation-states, and as racial and ethnic identities began to dominate the collective consciousness of the continent, antisemitism drastically increased. It was not the antisemitism of years past, antisemitism based on disagreements of theology and accusations of deicide (although this did not go away, as the Kishinev pogrom shows), but a new variant of antisemitism, a racial antisemitism decrying the Jews as an inherently inferior, parasitic, and evil strand of humanity. It was from this way of thought that the very term "antisemitism" came into existence.46

There were numerous responses to this modern manifestation of antisemitism. Some Jews chose the path of universalism, believing that Jewish liberation would be best achieved through advancing an ideology such as liberalism or socialism. Other Jews supported a hybrid model, taking a universal ideology and giving it a uniquely Jewish spin, and those Jews advocated for

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ideologies such as Bundism. But there was another option, one which would be a constant source of contention within the Jewish world from the end of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth (and even the twenty-first) century: Zionism.

Zionism can be understood simply as an ideology supporting the (re)establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel, the historical and spiritual homeland of the Jewish people. There were numerous advocates for Zionism, which first formed into a coherent idea after the perceived failure of Jewish emancipation in Eastern Europe following the 1881-1884 Russian pogroms and in Western Europe following the Dreyfus Affair, but the man who transformed the idea into a movement was Theodor Herzl. Herzl witnessed firsthand what he believed was the failure of Jewish emancipation as an Austro-Hungarian reporter covering the Dreyfus Affair. He responded by dedicating his life to the cause of Political Zionism, pleading the case of global Jewry and the need to establish a Jewish state to world leaders and the global Jewish community. He led the First Zionist Congress, which met in Basel, Switzerland in 1897 and formed the basis for the Zionist movement, which would continue after Herzl died in 1904.

From the inception of the American Jewish Committee, the organization’s reception of Zionism was cold, to say the least. While there were members of the Committee who supported the Zionist cause, the consensus was an anti-Zionist one, concluding that “America is our

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47 Bundism, which was most prominent in Eastern Europe, was an ideology that supported a socialist revolution while calling for the Pale of Settlements to serve as an autonomous Jewish region where Yiddish culture could flourish. It opposed Zionism, decrying it as bourgeois due to its support of nationalism. Bundism largely became obsolete following the Holocaust and the near destruction of European Jewry, as well as the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.

48 The Dreyfus Affair was a scandal that occurred in France from 1894 to 1906. Capitan Alfred Dreyfus, who was a Jew, was accused of providing Germany with French military secrets, and was convicted of treason in 1894. However, it later emerged that Capitan Dreyfus was innocent and had been framed, which the French military covered up, and he was ultimately exonerated in 1906. Capitan Dreyfus’ Jewish identity played a crucial role in this affair, as his opponents used it to propagate the antisemitic trope that Jews are disloyal, and there were several instances of antisemitic riots occurring in France as a direct result of the Dreyfus Affair.

Palestine, Washington our Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{50} Given the advantages Jews found in the United States, especially when compared with the Europe they or their forefathers had left, this conclusion can hardly be surprising. There was an understanding, however, that Palestine played a unique role in the history of the Jewish people, acknowledging the validity of this key tenet of Zionism, yet the Committee felt that “to affirm a separate Jewish nationalism would endanger the rights secured by Jews throughout the emancipated world.”\textsuperscript{51} Furthermore, the American Jewish Committee viewed Zionist organizations that had developed in the United States, such as the Federation of American Zionists, with great disdain, and they concluded that Herzl’s program for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine was unrealistic.\textsuperscript{52}

The initial position of the American Jewish Committee regarding Zionism was one of anti-Zionism, rejecting it as a threat to the American Jewish community as well as unviable. However, this position was soon challenged by a development that brought the Zionist dream closer to reality: the Balfour Declaration. Amidst the First World War and the British campaign in the Middle East to conquer Ottoman territory, on November 2, 1917, the British government issued a public statement, the Balfour Declaration. In this document, which was a letter from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a prominent member of the British Jewish community, the British government declared its sympathy towards the "Jewish Zionist aspirations" and that "His Majesty's Government view[s] with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object."\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} Cohen, \textit{Not Free to Desist}, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{51} Cohen, \textit{Not Free to Desist}, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{52} Cohen, \textit{Not Free to Desist}, pp. 104-105.

The question of Zionism was forced to the forefront of the Jewish conversation in the aftermath of the publication of the Balfour Declaration. Internally, the American Jewish Committee’s reaction was mixed, as there was a fear that antisemites in America would capitalize on the notion of Jews as a people with a national home to argue that Jews did not belong in the United States because they were an alien element with loyalties elsewhere. But leaders of the organization, especially Louis Marshall, recognized the necessity to acknowledge and respond to the declaration, and they did so in April 1918 in a statement that was almost unanimously approved. The statement sought to walk a fine line, making it clear that American Jews were Americans first and foremost, saying “The Committee regards it as axiomatic that the Jews of the United States… recognize their unqualified allegiance to this country, which they love and cherish and of whose people they constitute an integral part.”

On the other hand, they declared their support for establishing "in Palestine a center for Judaism, for the stimulation of our faith, for the pursuit and development of literature, science, and art in a Jewish environment, and for the rehabilitation of the land."

The primary concern of the American Jewish Committee in its response to the Balfour Declaration was that antisemites would seize the moment to advance their cause, so it portrayed American Jews as the most patriotic citizens the United States could count on. At the same time, it acknowledged their Jewishness and the importance of Palestine as a land for the Jewish people, and given the fact that what had previously been seen as Herzl’s fantasy was coming closer to a Jewish reality, the American Jewish Committee swiftly and succinctly switched its position from being anti-Zionist to being non-Zionist. It was neither for nor against the founding of a Jewish state, because what mattered most was accepting the situation as it was and working within those parameters to advance the Jewish interest, both

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54 Cohen, Not Free to Desist, p. 109.
55 Cohen, Not Free to Desist, p. 110.
within the United States and globally. This willingness to shift on the matter of Zionism, a key issue within the Jewish community, would come into play twenty years later, when the question of where the Jews of Germany could go as the antisemitism of the Nazi regime intensified led the American Jewish Committee to reluctantly see Mandatory Palestine\(^\text{56}\) as a place for Jews to relocate, in lieu of the United States.

At the heart of the non-Zionism upheld by the American Jewish Committee were two clashing beliefs: one, motivated by emancipationist philosophy that resented the charges of dual allegiance and disloyalty that stemmed from support for Zionism, and the other, supporting development projects in Palestine and believing that the land there, while not close to becoming an independent Jewish state, served as a place where Jewish refugees could go while the United States, along with most of the nations of the world, was unwilling to accept them.\(^\text{57}\) The Committee maintained its ambivalent stance on Zionism in the aftermath of the Balfour Declaration from 1917 to 1938. From 1936 to 1938, numerous events occurred both in Mandatory Palestine and the United Kingdom which influenced the organization's official opinion on Zionism. The American Jewish Committee viewed with displeasure the 1936 Arab riots which brought chaos and destruction to the region, and it also opposed the British proposal at the time to partition the region into separate Jewish and Arab states. It did so not out of opposition to the existence of a Jewish state, but because "with the Nazi threat paramount, all of Palestine had to be kept open to the European refugees."\(^\text{58}\) The immediacy of the Nazi threat and the fear for the lives of European Jews motivated the American Jewish Committee’s move from non-Zionism to tacit support for Zionism. The situation was so dire that in 1936, a prominent

\(^{56}\)Mandatory Palestine is the term for the territory that the British Empire received from the League of Nations in the form of a mandate in June 1922, and includes modern-day Israel, Palestinian territories, and Jordan.

\(^{57}\)Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, pp. 188-189.

\(^{58}\)Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, p. 189.
member of the Jewish community and a leader of the organization, Cyrus Adler, said that “This present crisis… has turned some of the most ardent non-Zionists and possibly anti-Zionists around just the other way.”

With the crises in Nazi Germany and Mandatory Palestine mounting, and with antisemitism increasing in the United States, the American Jewish Committee was facing a daunting situation as it entered 1938. It was then, amidst this era of trial and tribulation, that it sponsored and published, for the first time, a magazine, *Contemporary Jewish Record*. Although the magazine would never be commercially successful, and would only last for seven years, it did succeed in channeling the ideologies and strategies of the American Jewish Committee and laying the groundwork for its successor, *Commentary*.

**Contemporary Jewish Record (1938-1945): Not a Mouthpiece, But an Embodiment of Values**

In September 1938, the American Jewish Committee published the first issue of its new magazine, *Contemporary Jewish Record*. Deciding to establish an independent magazine that examined Jewish issues at a time when the specter of Nazi Germany haunted all European Jewry and instilled in American Jewry great pessimism appears at first to have been a questionable choice. Why, when antisemitism was so prevalent in the United States and Europe, when the Jewish position seemed so vulnerable, did the organization decide it was a good time to support a magazine that spoke directly to Jewish issues and concerns? The internal discussions may be unknown, but through the foreword published in the inaugural issue, the answer becomes clear: it

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wanted to advance the American Jewish Committee’s ideologies and assert the Jewish position, as it understood it.

In the foreword of the first issue of *Contemporary Jewish Record*, the editors of the nascent bimonthly magazine laid out their vision. They cited, as inspiring the creation of the magazine, “the great increase in the number and significance of events of Jewish interest throughout the world since the close of the [First] World War, especially since 1933.”60 However, while there had been this explosion in Jewish intellectual responses to the post-First World War landscape, particularly in the wake of the rise of Adolf Hitler, and despite "the American Jewish Committee['s] sustained effort… to assemble as many… publications as possible,"61 the editors noted that “there is no periodical publication available in our country in English… presenting an objective systematic record of events… [while also] aiding [in] their interpretation and understanding.”62 The editors hoped that *Contemporary Jewish Record* could fill that void. In doing so they aimed to ensure that the American public had access to contemporary Jewish history and that it would inform their understanding "of current events in general," which was a not-so-subtle acknowledgment of the current predicament American and European Jews found themselves in. As they concluded their founding statement, they added that they wanted the magazine to fill this need, not just for Jews but also for “an ever-widening circle of Christians… sincerely desirous of knowledge and understanding of events affecting Jews in the world of today.”63 Ambitious as this may have been, what is clear is that *Contemporary Jewish Record*, with the financial backing and credibility of the American Jewish Committee behind it, saw itself as taking on a generational challenge. It hoped that the magazine could be an

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
organ for American Jewry to respond to their situation and the situation of their European brethren, and that Jews and Christians alike could be stirred into supporting the plight of oppressed Jews.

Motivated by this mission, *Contemporary Jewish Record* spent the next seven years responding to the relentless crises of its era: the continuation of the Great Depression, the commencement of the Second World War, domestic antisemitism fueled by questions of Jewish patriotism and loyalty, Nazi and Soviet antisemitism, the situation of Zionist Jews in Mandatory Palestine, and the Holocaust. In addressing these issues, the magazine went through growing pains, altering its format so that it could best inform and persuade its audience.

*Contemporary Jewish Record*, as it existed at the time of its founding and throughout its first two years, did little more than regurgitate the news of the past month, with the occasional effort to offer an opinion on what occurred. The second issue, released in November 1938, predominantly featured public statements made by prominent American diplomats and politicians, as well as statements from leading Jewish organizations and the editorial board. The only thing in it that could be considered an article was by journalist Abraham Revunsky, “Political Developments in Palestine Since the 1936 Riots.”64 The issues that followed this one were much in the same mold. They almost exclusively reprinted important documents concerning Jewish issues, with the occasional article diving beneath the surface to provide greater context to what was happening and offering an opinion on recent events. However, by the March-April 1940 issue, the magazine began to find its footing, publishing articles that explored facets of Jewish life and providing opinions on the news, and not simply reprinting documents.

Contemporary Jewish Record continued on this trajectory, strengthening the quality of its articles until it eventually ceased publication in 1945.

As the magazine found its style, it similarly found its message over the seven years of its existence. Although it was given editorial independence from the American Jewish Committee, the writings were clearly influenced by the organization’s ideas. The leadership of Contemporary Jewish Record came largely from prominent members of the American Jewish Committee, and those who were not of the group subscribed to the group’s general ideology. The imprint of ideology can be seen in the three major themes advanced by the magazine: repudiating antisemitism anywhere it occurred, portraying Jews as patriotic Americans, and maintaining a pragmatic attitude on Zionism that gradually became one of acceptance.

Vociferously Against Antisemitism: At-Home and Abroad

Coming into existence when it did, Contemporary Jewish Record dedicated an extraordinary amount of its pages to condemning and combating antisemitism. Criticism of antisemitism appeared in the very first issue of the magazine, as it singled out Mussolini’s Fascist Italy and the antisemitic policies it adopted, condemning them as racist, and it further decried the world’s indifference to the suffering of German Jews with the failure of the Evian Conference in 1938. Disappointment over the Evian Conference continued in that issue, as the editors wrote an article to “express dissatisfaction with the results of the refugee conference,” casting blame on the fascist regimes but also noting that the “Democracies [are] not entirely blameless.”65 In the second issue, statements by prominent politicians Al Smith,66 Thomas Dewey,67 and Alf

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66 “Statement by Alfred E. Smith,” Contemporary Jewish Record, November 1938, p. 56.
Landon\textsuperscript{68} condemning Nazi Germany's atrocities against the Jews were published. By reporting what the 1928 Democratic presidential nominee and former governor of New York, the District Attorney for Manhattan and failed 1938 Republican New York gubernatorial nominee, and 1936 Republican presidential nominee and former governor of Kansas all said, \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record} sought to add credence to its condemnation of Nazi antisemitism. It not only did that but ensured that the cause was made bipartisan, thereby emulating the existing policy of the American Jewish Committee to be bipartisan.

As the magazine evolved, it published fewer speeches and announcements and more of its own articles, many of which continued to criticize antisemitism. Nobel Prize winning writer Thomas Mann, a refugee from Nazi Germany, in the March-April 1940 issue, wrote an article titled "Culture Against Barbarism," which condemned antisemitism as the most prevalent manifestation of barbarism, both historically and especially at the time.\textsuperscript{69} The December 1941 issue dedicated an entire section, constituting eleven pages of the magazine, to discussing and attacking the remarks Charles Lindbergh gave at Des Moines, Iowa, in which “he accused… the Jews as a group, of driving the country into war.”\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record} recorded how widely and loudly the comments had been condemned by the entire American press, including the Isolationist press, and that it viewed the remarks as sympathetic to Nazism, un-American, and as a threat to national unity and the American spirit.\textsuperscript{71} Once again, the condemnations of leading politicians, such as 1940 Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, were published, emphasizing the complete repudiation of Lindbergh’s sentiment by the American

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\textsuperscript{68} “Statement by Alfred M. Landon,” \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record}, November 1938, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{69} Thomas Mann, “Culture Against Barbarism,” \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record}, March-April 1940, pp. 115-119.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
media and political class.\textsuperscript{72} Despite the support they reported, the fact that they felt it necessary to dedicate as much space in their magazine as they did to decrying Lindbergh’s remarks shows that the editors of the magazine feared the sentiment he expressed and saw it as a real threat to American Jewry.

\textbf{Judaism as Americanism, and Jews as Patriotic Americans}

In line with the seriousness with which the editors of \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record} took American antisemitism, the magazine went out of its way to propagate an idea central to the American Jewish Committee: that Jews were as patriotic as possible, and that Judaism itself was central to Americanism and the American way of life. Feeling as vulnerable as the American Jewish community did amidst the rise of antisemitism in the United States and Nazi Germany, the editors chose to follow the path laid before them by the American Jewish Committee and go out of their way to portray Jews as not only patriotically American but quintessentially American.

The September-October 1939 issue of \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record} included an article attempting to foster the notion that Jews and America were as interconnected as could be. The article by Jewish historian Isidore S. Meyer, titled "America’s First Thanksgiving," drew attention to the history of the Puritans in the United States. In doing so, Meyer highlighted the special attention Puritans placed on the Old Testament, the scripture shared by Jews and Christians, and how the Puritans who arrived at Plymouth in 1620 saw in this New World their own promised land, their own Zion.\textsuperscript{73} Driving the message home more directly, less bogged


down in the abstract notions of a homeland promised by God and the belief that America was an exemplar, the article made the direct connection between Thanksgiving as a fall festival and the Jewish fall festival of Sukkot.\textsuperscript{74} In doing so, at a time when Nazi tanks were advancing through Poland and the future of Jewry looked bleak, the author of the article and the magazine at-large sought to show that Jews were the embodiment of American values, and as such, they were worth accepting, worth protecting, and worth caring about.

The following year, in the November-December 1940 issue, Nathaniel Goodrich\textsuperscript{75} wrote an article titled “Politics and Prejudices,” which considered the recent presidential election. While the author acknowledged that “appeals to different groups and sections of the United States during national election campaigns are as old as the political history of the Republic,” he explained that all attempts, across party lines, to advance antisemitism in the 1940 election were rejected by the American voters.\textsuperscript{76} The reason for this, according to Goodrich, was that the United States was a nation better than those of Europe, and the optimal outcome would be if Americans refused to be divided along ethnic lines in political battles, to “avoid being stampeded by demagogic appeals to these loyalties.”\textsuperscript{77} However, the article concluded by arguing that “history proves the prevalence of prejudice, and particularly antisemitism, has always been a barometer of national health,” and that for the United States to keep its “democratic vitality, the appeals of the unthinking to racial and religious blocs must be scrupulously shunned and resisted.”\textsuperscript{78} In the aftermath of the 1940 presidential election, \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record} aimed to underscore the notion that American Jews had proven themselves, beyond any shadow

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{74} Meyer, “America’s First Thanksgiving,” \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record}, September-October 1939, pp. 9-15. 
\textsuperscript{75} I was unable to discover who Nathaniel Goodrich was, what he did, or what his qualifications for writing this article were. 
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.}
of a doubt, to be loyal Americans. Additionally, it claimed that the United States could only stave off the threats of communism and fascism if the nation remained tolerant of its Jews.

Later issues of *Contemporary Jewish Record* stressed the importance of Jews for the United States and the Jewish role in founding Western Civilization. In the June 1941 edition, Louis Finkelstein, a Talmudic scholar and professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, wrote “American Ideals and the Survival of Western Civilization,” which argued that the ongoing conflict of the Second World War was a great clash of civilizations, and at stake was Western Civilization and the ideals that underpinned the United States.79 The inhumanity of the Nazi treatment of Jews stood in stark contrast with the United States’ general acceptance of Jews, so for America and its values to prevail it needed to reject the fascist treatment of Jews and instead ensure that Jews continue to exist as a tolerated, respected people. This was echoed months later by Jacob Marcus, a Reform rabbi and scholar of Jewish history at Hebrew Union College, in his article “Judaism and Western Civilization,” which went a step further than Finkelstein’s article by suggesting that the very concept of Western Civilization on which the values and ideas of United States were founded upon were quintessentially Jewish, owing their origins to the Jewish people and Judaism.80

At a time when European Jewry was falling under the control of Nazi Germany, when the instruments of the Holocaust were forming and the destruction of the European Jewish community was underway, *Contemporary Jewish Record* appealed to patriotism to increase American support for Jews. If Jews could not be accepted based on their humanity alone, the next best thing was to make sure that they could at least be accepted as Americans, terms and

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conditions apply. For the editors and writers, a way to ensure that the future of the Jewish people was of concern to the average American was to portray Jews as loyal to the United States and instrumental in the country’s success, historically in the creation of the nation’s guiding principles and in the present day.

**On Zionism: From Pragmatism to Conditional Acceptance**

The third and final message that permeated the seven-year run of *Contemporary Jewish Record* concerned Zionism. While clearly the editors themselves were not enthusiastic Zionists, they echoed the position of the American Jewish Committee in supporting Mandatory Palestine as a place of safe harbor for European Jews fleeing persecution and condemned instances of Arab atrocities committed against Jews. As time passed, the situation appeared more dire, and the lack of cooperation from the British government became evident, so subsequently the magazine came to accept the view that a Jewish state was necessary in Eretz Israel. However, even as it did, it continued to publish articles questioning and contesting what any potential Jewish state should look like.

In the inaugural 1938 edition of *Contemporary Jewish Record*, in addition to their reporting on the Evian Conference, the editors chose to provide sources speaking to the recent violence between Jews and Arabs that had occurred in Mandatory Palestine. They noted that the British Empire was sending yet another commission to the region to report back to London with a possible solution. While in this issue the magazine took no position on Palestine, it would do so in the second issue. In this issue, the editorial board featured an article of theirs titled “The Palestine Situation.” In this article, they “condemn[ed] any attempt to close Palestine to Jewish immigration,” further demanding that the Roosevelt Administration "Re-assert [the] moral
responsibility of the United States towards [the] maintenance of the Mandate," and that "All sections of the American Jewish community join in defense of Jewish rights in the Holy Land." Moving from their opinion to what they believed to be the wider opinion of American Jewry, they stated that “Jewish opinion, which has been divided on the disposition of Palestine… was united as it never was before on the necessity of maintaining Palestine open to Jewish immigrants." The editors of Contemporary Jewish Record, making clear that neither they nor the vast majority of the American Jewish community had previously held much sympathy or support for the Zionist movement, had come around on the issue because they believed it was the only place for persecuted Jews to flee to, with the West having turned its back on their plight. This Zionism motivated by pragmatism and not idealism was very much founded in the American Jewish Committee's stance on Zionism, dictated not by feverish fervor but by cold, careful calculation.

While the magazine continued to report on Mandatory Palestine, the editors and writers expressed no further opinion on the matter, as this was still a time when Contemporary Jewish Record mostly reprinted primary sources. An example of this occurred in the January 1939 issue, as it published Woodhead Commission’s report and the response of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. However, as the magazine evolved over the course of its existence it began to publish articles supportive of Zionism, while attempting to maintain some semblance of balance and allowing for criticism and questioning of any future Jewish state. Leading Zionist and attorney Maurice Boukstein wrote an article for the November-December 1940 issue called "Palestine at War," which praised the Zionist movement's actions in fighting the Axis powers. He

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82 Ibid.  
said that "the Jewish community has displayed a marked degree of self-discipline and high public spirit in voluntarily assuming heavy burdens during this period of emergency," and concluded by adding that as strong as they were, as helpful as they may have been in the fight against fascism, they still needed the support of the global Jewish community.\textsuperscript{84} It appears that there were elements within the readership of \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record} who opposed this acceptance of Zionism and pushed back against it. This can be assumed, given that the editorial board felt it necessary to publish a statement in the October 1941 issue reemphasizing the founding mission of the magazine and highlighting the magazine’s balanced nature.

In the aftermath of that statement, until the magazine ceased publication, it kept its word and treated the issue of Zionism with even-handedness. Articles were published that were extremely critical of Zionism, taking the left wing approach of opposing nationalism in all its forms, as seen in the October 1941 "Does Nationalism Menace World Peace?" penned by Carlton J. H. Hayes, a historian at Columbia University and the former co-chairman of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.\textsuperscript{85} Attempts at reconsidering the Zionist goal were discussed by writers Erick Kahler and Mordecai Grossman in their respective articles, “Commonwealth or Bi-National State?\textsuperscript{86} and “Palestine and the Future of the Jews – A Pragmatic Approach,”\textsuperscript{87} challenging the notion that Jews needed their own state in Mandatory Palestine. For those writers, Jews needed to be permitted to live in the region, but they did not need their own state, and a client state of the British Empire or an independent binational Arab-Jewish state would suffice. Others took a non-Zionist approach, not sharing their opinions on the

\textsuperscript{84} Maurice Boukstein, “Palestine at War,” \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record}, November-December 1940, pp. 595-604.
\textsuperscript{86} Erick Kahler, “Commonwealth or Bi-National State?,” \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record}, April 1943, pp. 151-155.
future or even considering it, choosing instead to simply discuss the reality on the ground.

Bernard D. Weinryb, a historian of Eastern European Jews who had lived in Palestine from 1934 to 1939 before moving to New York City, wrote an August 1944 article “Socio-Economic Relations of Arabs and Jews in Palestine” that examined the economic situation of the region during the Second World War, and how segmented the region’s economy was based along ethnic and religious lines. Other writers, such as journalist Robert Weltsch and Bernice Kaufman, wrote articles examining Jewish and Arab political organizations in Mandatory Palestine in October 1944 and February 1945, respectively, and how they were preparing for a post-war world. That is not to say that Zionist voices or the Zionist perspective were shut out entirely. Chaim Weizmann, a prominent leader in the Zionist movement who would go on to serve as Israel’s first president, authored an article published in April 1943 titled “The Role of Palestine,” which advanced the idea that a Jewish state in Mandatory Palestine would be crucial for the future of the Jewish people.

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**Contemporary Jewish Record to Commentary Magazine**

As much as *Contemporary Jewish Record* found its footing through the years, maturing from a magazine primarily republishing documents to a magazine publishing articles written by luminaries such as Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, and George Orwell, this was not enough to save it from ceasing publication. Circulation was at a measly 4,200 subscribers by 1945, and the magazine was left rudderless after its associate editor, Adolph Oko, passed away unexpectedly in

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88 I was unable to discover who Bernice Kaufman was, what she did, or what her qualifications for writing this article were.
November 1944. However, the American Jewish Committee recognized all the benefits that had come from having a magazine that could engage in a conversation with the American Jewish community and speak to their issue. They saw *Contemporary Jewish Record* as a failure in part because it was too intellectual and too modest in its goal, so the organization envisioned their next magazine to be “less stuffy… [with] higher ambitions and wider influence.”

In its final edition, June 1945, *Contemporary Jewish Record* notified its readers that it would cease publication under its name, and that it would “become a monthly [magazine], enlarged and strengthened in its contents, and with a new name and format.” This new magazine reshaped the American Jewish intellectual and political landscape, inheriting the ideas of the magazine that preceded it and continuing to advance key notions of the American Jewish Committee, the sponsoring organization. The name of this new magazine: *Commentary*.

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93 Ibid.
Chapter 2: Elliot Cohen, the New York Intellectuals, and the Rise of *Commentary*: 1945-1959

“It is traditional to begin a new magazine with brave declarations. If we do not, we trust we shall be forgiven.”\(^95\) So began the editorial statement, titled “An Act of Affirmation,” of the magazine created to be the successor of *Contemporary Jewish Record, Commentary* magazine.

In this three-page article, published in the inaugural November 1945 issue, the founding editor of *Commentary*, Elliot Cohen, explained his aims for its future. Acknowledging that the magazine “begin[s] at a movement heavy with a sense of human destiny,”\(^96\) he unpacked the events that all Americans, all Jews, and all humanity had collectively experienced: the conclusion of the Second World War, the defeat of fascism, the use of the world’s first atomic bombs, and the near-total destruction of European Jewry. As an explicitly Jewish magazine, it was this final point that Cohen drew out the most, highlighting it as emblematic of the daunting new era humanity had entered, and the soul-searching necessitated by what had transpired. He wrote:

As Jews, we live with this fact: 4,750,000 of 6,000,000 Jews of Europe have been murdered. Not killed in battle, not massacred in hot blood, but slaughtered like cattle, subjected to every physical indignity—processed. Yes, cruel tyrants did this; they have been hurled down; they will be punished, perhaps. Yes, there were men and women in other lands who raised their voices in protest, who lent helping hands. But we must also record this fact: the voices were not many, the hands were not many. There was a strange passivity the world over in the face of this colossal latter-day massacre of innocents, whether Jews or other “minorities.”\(^97\)

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\(^96\) Ibid.
\(^97\) Cohen, “An Act of Affirmation,” *Commentary*, November 1945, pp. 1-2. It is important to note that the number of Jews murdered in the Holocaust was 6 million, and not the 4.75 million stated in this quote. The number given is inaccurate as it was provided only a year after the conclusion of the Second World War, before a full and accurate count had occurred. For a greater breakdown of the number of Jewish and non-Jewish Holocaust victims, visit the following page of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s website: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution.
Amidst a world facing the stark reality of its incredible, industrialized capacity for calamity, Cohen declared “we light our candle, *Commentary.* Surely here is an act of faith.” The editorial statement concluded by outlining what the magazine would have faith in: in reason, in the United States, and in the capacity of humanity to pursue a better future. When the editor of this nascent magazine wrote the “Act of Affirmation,” he made it clear that *Commentary* fully embraced the gravity of the global situation in the post-Second World War era and accepted the tall task of documenting and debating developments as they occurred.

In this second chapter, the early years of *Commentary* will be explored, and the writers, editors, and intellectuals who contributed to it will be examined. While the previous chapter investigated the ideological foundation of *Commentary*, considering the principles held by its sponsoring organization, the American Jewish Committee, as well as those advanced by its precursor, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, this chapter will focus on *Commentary* under the leadership of its first editor, Elliot Cohen. From 1945 to 1959, Cohen served as the magazine’s inaugural editor, building it from the ground up and ingraining in it his own ideological convictions. What these convictions were, what they were built on, and how they shaped contemporary Jewish intellectual thought, will be addressed by reviewing Elliot Cohen’s background, the greater “New York Intellectual” group of which he was a leading member, and the prevailing tenets articulated in articles published by the magazine in its first fourteen years.

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Elliot Cohen: From Cradle to Commentary

Elliot Etttleson Cohen was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1899, and would soon move to Mobile, Alabama, where he would live for the duration of his childhood. He was the son of Henry Cohen, a Russian-born Jew who had been a rabbinical student at the renowned Volozhin yeshiva before fleeing to the United States to escape conscription in the Russian army, where he became a middle-class shop owner. As fortunate as Elliot Cohen was to have a financially stable family, as well as a religiously-trained father (though he was never particularly observant), his family considered him most blessed in his incredible intellect. Able to read newspaper headlines by the age of three, Elliot Cohen so excelled academically that by the age of fourteen he was admitted to Yale University in 1913 – in an era when people with Jewish surnames were exceedingly scarce at Yale and other elite collegiate institutions. By virtue of his admission to Yale, at a time when antisemitism was institutionalized and strict quotas limiting the number of Jews were being implemented, Cohen’s incredible intelligence is highlighted. For the next four years he studied English literature and philosophy at Yale, and although he was the youngest member of his graduating class, he was awarded one of the university’s most prestigious awards, the John Addison Porter Prize for superb writing of general scholarship.

Upon graduation, Elliot Cohen was faced with the daunting question that befalls all college graduates: what to do next. Inclined to continue his education, yet aware of the rampant institutional antisemitism at colleges and universities, he spent the next five years studying English literature at Yale’s graduate school. It was during these years that Cohen first was

100 Balint, Running Commentary, p. 11.
101 Balint, Running Commentary, pp. 11-12.
introduced to the Jewish intellectual world of which he would become a leading figure. The Menorah Society, first formed at Harvard University in 1906 “in response to the ostracism and insecurity experienced by Jewish students” and aiming to advance Jewish humanism, soon branched out to other college, and Cohen served as the Yale chapter’s president.\textsuperscript{103} Despite his exceptional academic career, and the fact that he had been admitted at a time when very few Jews were, Cohen was subjected to discrimination. As he would later recall, a Yale English Department professor told him “Mr. Cohen, you are a very competent young man, but it is hard for me to imagine a Hebrew teaching the Protestant tradition to young men at Yale.”\textsuperscript{104} Ultimately, while it is unknown whether he was dismissed or withdrew, it is known that Cohen’s education ended abruptly (and without the English doctorate he was pursuing) because of the antisemitism he faced.

After leaving Yale, Elliot Cohen turned to the \textit{Menorah Journal}, the magazine established by the Menorah Society in 1915 to promote their values, for employment. He was drawn there for the same reasons he joined and led Yale’s Menorah Society chapter: because he believed in their goal of understanding the Jewish role in the modern world. Explaining his thinking, he later stated that Jewish history was worth studying “for the light it is sure to lend to those pressing problems of adjustment among all self-conscious racial, national, and cultural minorities in the modern state.”\textsuperscript{105} Having left Yale in 1922, Cohen joined \textit{Menorah Journal} as a writer in October 1923, penning an article that reflected on New York summer school programs. However, it quickly became evident to both him and those at the magazine that he was better suited to work as an editor. As a friend of Cohen, Louis Berg, would later say, “For all his wit,
knowledge of literature, and skill as an editor amounting to genius…composition was agony for him.”

Soon after he joined the journal, Cohen was promoted to the position of managing editor. For the remainder of the 1920s, while working as an editor, Cohen began to recruit a generation of Jewish intellectuals slightly younger than him as writers for Menorah Journal, sculpting them in his and the magazine’s ideological inclinations. These thinkers, who had predominantly been educated at Columbia University, included Lionel Trilling, Herbert Solow, Clifton Fadiman, Henry Rosenthal, Tess Slesinger, Anita Brenner, and Felix Morrow.

This group of New York intellectual Jews, guided by Elliot Cohen, became increasingly politically radicalized as the 1920s became the 1930s. From 1929 to 1932 (coinciding with the onset of the Great Depression) the group led by Cohen aligned itself with the Communist Party and its various organizations, specifically the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (NCDPP). Despite their increased interest in politics and their turn towards the far left, Cohen and the others largely operated independently of the existing communist organizations, rejecting ideological and communal rigidity in favor of maintaining their existing intellectual circle. Seemingly as suddenly as this group had embraced the Communist Party, they abandoned it, as from 1932 to 1934 most members either turned toward the Trotskyists or disassociated themselves with any specific left wing organization in favor of constructing their own leftist ideology. Cohen, taking it further than the others, withdrew from the Jewish political and intellectual scene altogether, leaving Menorah Journal in 1932.

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106 Balint, Running Commentary, p. 18.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
For the next thirteen years, Elliot Cohen worked as the public relations director of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.\(^ {111}\) During this time, having withdrawn from the realm in which he had primarily existed for the previous decade and foregoing the scholarly pursuits he had embraced for the past fifteen years, he began to suffer from manic depression.\(^ {112}\) The child prodigy who had overcome antisemitism at Yale to become an editor of *Menorah Journal*, where he cultivated both a phenomenal reputation and a circle of fellow Jewish intellectuals, had come to feel that his talent was being wasted. Yet, eventually an opportunity would present itself. In early 1945, the American Jewish Committee asked Cohen to join its fledgling magazine, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, as an editor, filling the void left by the passing of the previous editor in 1944. Despite this staffing shake-up the magazine’s failure was assured, so the American Jewish Committee began to internally consider a replacement for it, to be called *Commentary*. Needing an editor to guide this new magazine, the leadership of the organization soon unanimously coalesced behind a single man for this position: Elliot Cohen.

As Cohen prepared for the task at hand and wholeheartedly embraced this chance as the culmination of his deepest aspirations, his manic depression lessened in severity. Starting anew, he could foster younger Jewish intellectuals as he had at *Menorah Journal*. Cohen, describing what he thought his role as editor of *Commentary* would be, turned to baseball for an analogy, saying that “an editor belongs back in the shadow of the dugout… He’s a talent scout. He finds new writers. He’s a coach who has the sense to leave ‘em alone when they’re good and tell ‘em what’s wrong when they’re bad.”\(^ {113}\) He did not have to look far for talent to join him at *Commentary*, as New York City in 1945 was teeming with young Jewish intellectuals. These

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111 Balint, *Running Commentary*, p. 16.
112 The term used here, “manic depression,” refers to the medical diagnosis Elliot Cohen received at the time. That medical condition is known now as Bipolar Disorder.
thinkers, including Cohen, would later be known as the “New York Intellectuals.” It was from this group that the first writers and editors of *Commentary* emerged, so to understand the early years of the magazine, the New York Intellectuals, as a group, must be introduced.

**New York Intellectuals: Their Roots and Ideology**

The American Jewish Committee, the sponsoring organization of *Commentary*, was formed in 1906 by Jews predominantly of German origin. Their ancestors had largely immigrated to the United States around the middle of the nineteenth century, so by the turn of the century they and their offspring were well established, both socially and economically. Additionally, as German states were modernizing and at the heart of the European Reform movement in Judaism, these Jews, the kind who founded and ran the American Jewish Committee for its first few decades, were generally adherents to the Reform movement or secular Jews, and they also were fairly well-adapted to modern western society. On the other hand, the Eastern European Jews who constituted the largest influx of Jews into the United States from the 1880s until the 1920s, who fled pogroms and oppression in the Russian Empire, were generally less accustomed to modernity, and more likely to be stringent and traditional in their religious adherence. The New York Intellectuals were, predominantly, the children of these Eastern European Jews, the first in their families to be born in the United States, and from a working-class background.\(^{114}\)

While these immigrants came to the United States with no more than what they could carry in their suitcases, critically, they took with them ideas from the Old World that would be of the utmost importance to the New York Intellectuals: socialism, trade unionism, respect for

literary culture, and familiarity with ideological battles. The children of immigrants who would later become the New York Intellectuals were overwhelming based in principally Jewish areas of New York City such as the Lower East Side (with notable exceptions, such as the Alabama-based Elliot Cohen) and attended college in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. It was there that they sharpened their skills as thinkers and writers. The vast majority of them attended the City College of New York (CCNY), known then as the “Harvard of the Proletariat,” given their lack of finances to afford private universities (City College was free at the time), and the institutionalized antisemitism that led to Jewish quotas at those schools. It was to institutions of higher education such as CCNY that the New York Intellectuals brought the ideas of their parents, where they transformed those ideas to better fit the context of New York and the 1930s, and where they strongly debated the politics of the left. In the 1930s particularly, when the members of the New York Intellectuals later recruited by Elliot Cohen were receiving their education, socialism, communism, and doctrinal disagreements regarding these ideologies were at the crux of one’s social life. One of the greatest fissure points was about Stalin and the Soviet Union. While the vast majority of politically inclined City College students were supportive of the Soviet Union and Stalin’s vision for it, there was a vocal minority opposed to Stalinism in favor of Trotskyism. While the former group had at its behest the Communist Party of the United States, the latter had the much smaller Socialist Labor Party, and it was from this smaller, Trotskyist sector of City College that many of the New York Intellectuals came, such as Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Kristol. Opposed to both capitalism and Stalinism during their time at City College, as Irving Kristol would later say, they were

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117 Ibid.
“trying to figure out our own radicalism, and particularly that absolutely overwhelming question that haunted us, namely, was there something in Marxism and Leninism that led to Stalinism?”

As the Second World War erupted, these anti-Stalinist leftists further had to confront and question their own convictions, as they watched the Soviet Union form an alliance with Nazi Germany, the enemy of both the Jews and the communists. This, in addition to the strictness by which they, as Trotskyists at City College, were forbidden to interact with Stalinists, compelled these blossoming thinkers to question their commitment to communism.

As they matured intellectually, they simultaneously turned to magazines as sources from which they could continue to develop their ideological convictions. While Elliot Cohen’s *Menorah Journal* was read by some members of the New York Intellectuals, in the 1930s and into the 1940s the most important magazine for them was *Partisan Review*. Originally founded in 1934 by the Communist Party of the United States, by 1937 the magazine had relaunched itself as an anti-Stalin, pro-Trotsky quarterly communist magazine, which appealed to the then Trotskyist New York Intellectuals. As the years unfolded and Stalin’s Soviet Union continued to make, in the eyes of the editors of *Partisan Review*, unconscionable decisions, such as the abandonment of Spanish Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, the organizing of the Moscow Trials, and the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the magazine continued its drift away from communism and toward a more moderate socialism, an ideological journey mirrored by the young New York Intellectuals.

In the final years leading up to the formation of *Commentary*, many members of the New York Intellectuals abandoned any dogmatic communist ideology in favor of varied conceptions of socialism. With many of the second wave of the New York Intellectuals having graduated by

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the early 1940s (the first wave had graduated in the 1910s-1920s, like Elliot Cohen), they soon began to look for jobs where they could continue their intellectual pursuits. However, they ran into much the same institutionalized antisemitism that had prevented members of the first wave from entering academia, so they responded similarly to them as well; as one of these second wave New York Intellectuals, Irving Howe, would later state, “When intellectuals can do nothing else, they start a magazine.” So, it was to this group, overwhelmingly socialist, City College educated, New York Jews, that Cohen looked for editors and writers for Commentary. These New York Intellectuals, under the leadership of Cohen, would define the magazine for the first fourteen years of its existence, and in doing so would build the foundation on which a subsequent generation of New York Intellectuals would create a new political ideology: neoconservatism.

Commentary: 1945-1959

Elliot Cohen, when launching Commentary, included as editors in the inaugural issue both members of the younger New York Intellectual generation, as well as their elders, including carry-overs from Contemporary Jewish Record. Clement Greenberg, who had been involved with Partisan Review as an editor since 1940, was the Managing Editor, and Nathan Glazer, a recent graduate of City College, was an Editorial Assistant. Other members of this younger generation, such as Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, would join Commentary within the next ten years. However, Cohen chose other editors who were more of his age and generation, such as Sidney Hook, who had graduated from City College in 1923, and Jacob R. Marcus, a prominent

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120 Dorman, Arguing the World, p. 2.
Reform rabbi and Jewish history scholar who had been involved with *Contemporary Jewish Record*.

This fusion of New York Intellectuals of both the first and second wave in the editorial staff of *Commentary* ensured that, while it was under the editorial leadership of Elliot Cohen, the ideologies of all these different factions – establishment Jews who had worked for *Contemporary Jewish Record*, older and younger New York Intellectuals – were incorporated together in the messages advanced by *Commentary*. During these first fourteen years the magazine quickly gained critical and commercial acclaim, soon becoming a clear equal to previously existing left-leaning magazines such as *Partisan Review* and *Dissent*. What distinguished *Commentary* was, as Elliot Cohen proudly boasted, “that we admit to being a Jewish magazine and they don’t.”121 *Commentary* would assert itself as one of, if not the, quintessential outpost for Jewish intellectual thought. Under Cohen, *Commentary* would serve as the vehicle by which *The Diary of Anne Frank* was first introduced, in English, to American audiences in a serialized format (in the May and June 1952 issues). Under Cohen, *Commentary* was where Philip Roth first published his short story “Eli, the Fanatic,” (in the April 1959 issue) a month before it was made widely available together with Roth’s novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*.

In the monthly issues published between November 1945 and June 1959, several topics were thoroughly considered, discussed, and debated by the authors and editors of *Commentary*. These topics, reflecting the varied ideological backgrounds of those involved with the magazine, highlight the influence of both the past (the ideologies of the American Jewish Committee and *Contemporary Jewish Record*) as well as the present (the New York Intellectuals), and laid the groundwork for the evolution *Commentary* and its contributors would undergo in the decades to

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follow. The three most prevalent positions argued and advanced during these fourteen years were: supporting the political left but opposing the Soviet Union; race relations both generally in the United States and specifically as they pertained to Black-Jewish relations; and questioning but ultimately accepting the merits of Zionism.

Skeptical of Capitalism and Conservatism; Scornful of the Soviet Union

While the American Jewish Committee and *Contemporary Jewish Record* had both previously attempted to present themselves as politically unbiased, *Commentary* had no qualms about presenting itself as critical of capitalism, conservatism (in both major political parties), and overwhelmingly left leaning. Nonetheless, *Commentary* did not hesitate to harshly criticize the Soviet Union or those on the American left who seemed to sympathize with the country, especially regarding its perceived aggressive foreign policy and its antisemitism.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, as the industrial output of the American economy rapidly declined without the government continuing its military orders, the nation entered a severe recession, and *Commentary* writers looked to state planning as the surest path to prosperity. In the June 1946 issue, German economist and Marxist theorist Fritz Sternberg wrote an article titled “The Economic Outlook: The Unsolved Crisis – Can We Have Planning for Full Employment.” The position taken by the article was that planning could indeed lead to full employment in the United States, and in fact was the only way to do so, with the current capitalistic system proving inadequate for the challenge at hand. This thinking was echoed in a December 1946 article, “The Lost Chance for Full Employment: Economic Decontrol and the Coming Depression,” penned by an economist then working for the Office of Price

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Administration, Benjamin Ginzburg, which concluded that the United States, by failing to enact appropriate legislation to ensure full employment, would eventually enter a depression once again. Presuming that the American government would be reactive and not proactive, the author asked that “When the hour of opportunity arrives again, we must then work to make good all the depletions in mass purchasing-power that will have taken place; we must again build up a surplus of purchasing power; and we must put on the controls and keep them there.”\(^{123}\)

Later issues would continue to reflect this narrative, favorable to increased governmental intervention in the economy, as outlined in articles such as “Is the Depression Inevitable? America’s Industrial Potential Under Capitalism,” written by then Brooklyn College economics professor Ben Seligman.\(^ {124}\) Important to note, however, is that all these articles did not necessarily support socialism. While some articles, such as Sternberg’s aforementioned one, did certainly sanction socialism, other articles advocated for New Deal liberalism, such as economist J. K. Galbraith’s August 1951 piece, “Will “Managed Capitalism” Pull US Through? Balance Sheet of Two Decades of Keynes.”\(^ {125}\)

As important as it is to recognize and acknowledge the slight variance in opinions articulated in Commentary, it must be made clear that they were almost all from the political left, with the diversity being between liberalism and socialism, although at this time the further left opinion was more prevalent and sometimes even more radical ideas were tolerated. Communist


\(^{125}\) It is important to note that J. K. Galbraith was not Jewish. Commentary was a Jewish magazine, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, with Jewish editors and predominately Jewish writers. However, non-Jews such as Galbraith, along with notables such as George Orwell, did write articles for the magazine, with some pertaining to Jewish issues and others relating to broader, and not necessarily Jewish, issues.

intellectuals and activists, such as Will Herberg, Karl Polanyi, and Lewis Corey were published in *Commentary*, arguing that support for Marxism could be rooted in Judaism,\(^{127}\) that the free market was obsolete,\(^{128}\) and that freedom could only be found in economic planning,\(^{129}\) respectively. Furthermore, in the year before the 1948 presidential election, which would see the Democratic Party divided between liberals who supported incumbent president Harry Truman and socialists/communists who supported former vice president Henry Wallace, *Commentary* published two articles critical of the president and favorable of his more left wing political opponent. Journalist James Wechsler considered the purity of Truman’s leftism in his March 1947 article “Did Truman Scuttle Liberalism? The Progressives’ Complaint and the Administration’s Record,”\(^{130}\) while social critic David Bazelon argued the following month that the American left support Henry Wallace.\(^{131}\) Years later, as the United States elected and then reelected Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower as president, the first Republican to serve in that position since the onset of the Great Depression, *Commentary* bemoaned this development and mocked the voters behind it, with journalist Karl E. Meyer describing the success as “The Triumph of the Smooth Deal” in a December 1958 article,\(^{132}\) while sociologist Dennis Wrong reiterated this point in a January 1959 article titled “The Perils of Political Moderation: Our Self-Defeating Party System.”\(^{133}\) Throughout the Cohen years, *Commentary* consistently published


authors belonging to the political left, and oftentimes even further left than the Democratic Party, clearly conveying the beliefs held by the editors and writers alike. Yet as firm as their convictions may have been, and as left leaning as they were, as the next paragraphs will show, Cohen’s *Commentary* still supported the United States and rejected the communism of the Soviet Union and its allies.

As willing as the editors and writers of *Commentary* were to criticize the United States’ economic and political systems, they did so not out of hatred of the country but out of a desire for its improvement, as is made clear in their staunchly pro-American, anti-Soviet Cold War stance. As has been made clear in the previous chapter, the roots of *Commentary* were firmly planted in patriotism for the United States and disapproval of the Soviet Union. The American Jewish Committee, for their part, had been outspokenly anti-communist and anti-Soviet since 1917, in part to deflect the charges of a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy, in addition to condemning Soviet purges against religious Jews in the 1930s. The New York Intellectuals, while coming from a far left political background with distinctly Russian roots, had been firmly entrenched in the anti-Stalinist, anti-Soviet, pro-Trotsky part of the left. Consequently, it is understandable why the magazine focused on the antisemitic incidents perpetrated by Stalin and the Soviet Union, publishing articles such as one written former Russian minister Solomon Schwarz (a minister in the 1917 Provisional Government) in June 1949 titled “The New Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union: Its Background and Its Meaning.”

In the wake of the Doctors’ Plot and the death of Stalin in 1953, London-based sociologist Franz Borkenau (who focused his research on understanding totalitarianism) published an article in *Commentary* that contended that Soviet

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antisemitism was less connected to its leadership and instead deeply ingrained in the state’s ideology.135

Just as vociferously as Commentary condemned Soviet antisemitism, writers for the magazine decried Moscow’s foreign policy as a modern example of imperialism, supported U.S. action to contain communism, and condemned American leftists who supported the Soviet Union. The horrors of the authoritarian regime were discussed, as former Soviet prisoner Emilia Liss offered her own personal retelling of her experience in a March 1951 article, “A Slave Laborer in Soviet Siberia: A Personal Account.”136 The crimes of the communist regime were further discussed by journalist Melvin Lasky, who denounced the Soviet judicial system as reliant on torture and forced confessions, comparing its cruelty to that of the Spanish Inquisition, a connection relevant and relatable to many of the Jewish readers.137 Commentary attacked Soviet foreign policy just as vociferously as the previously mentioned articles criticized the Soviet imperial system. Peter Meyer, a historian of Eastern Europe writing in March 1952, considered the motives for Soviet foreign policy, arguing that their intention was global domination, and that their means to that end would manifest as Soviet imperialism. The concept of the Soviet Union as an imperial power was revisited by British historian of Eastern Europe and Russia Hugh Seton-Watson, who authored a piece for Commentary in May 1953 examining “the colonial system of the USSR.”138

As obvious as it was to the editors and writers of the magazine that the Soviet Union was a global menace, they recognized that this was not a universally held view among the American

left, so they condemned those branches of the left that still held a favorable view of it. Granville Hicks, a former communist turned democratic socialist, wrote “The Liberals Who Haven’t Learned: Why the Soviet Illusion Still Lingers” for *Commentary* in April 1951. In his piece, Hicks attempted to explain and then eviscerate the reasons why portions of the American left still supported the Soviet Union, decrying that state and all it stood for as advancing "brutal revolutionary totalitarianism.”

*Commentary* further discussed ways in which the Soviet threat could be challenged. While the magazine found much to oppose in President Truman’s domestic agenda, there was an acceptance of some of his and Congress’ policies to address the “Red Menace.” In 1951, then PhD candidate (and later English literature professor) Robert Langbaum wrote “‘Limited War’ as the Path to Peace: The Case for Containment,” an article in support of both the Korean War as well as broader actions to contain the Communist Bloc. Going even further than that, Irving Kristol, by then on the staff of *Commentary*, wrote a blistering article in 1952, condemning liberals and leftists who supported the right of American communists to exist in society. There was room for discussion and pushback, as evidenced by the publishing of a reply to Kristol’s article in July 1952 that argued in favor of the rights of American communists, written by law professor (and father of modern privacy rights) Alan Westin. Nevertheless, *Commentary* opposed the Soviet Union and supported the United States in the Cold War in the first fourteen years of its existence and dedicated numerous pages of its issues to advancing this

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narrative, as well as its support for leftist policies in the United States. Another matter the magazine often discussed during this time was race relations in the United States.

**Race Relations: Against Bigotry, for Reasons both Idealistic and Practical**

Following the atrocities of the Second World War and the state-sponsored antisemitism of the Soviet Union, antisemitism became less socially acceptable in American society than it had been before. Consequently, many Jews and Jewish institutions felt secure enough of their situation in the United States that they began to speak out more openly and fervently against American racism. As the last chapter noted, both the American Jewish Committee and *Contemporary Jewish Record* felt uncomfortable broaching the topic of racism in the United States, not for lack of sympathy for Black Americans, but due to the perceived precariousness of Jewish existence in the country. Emerging from the ashes of the Holocaust, and with the United States positioning itself as the global champion of human rights in comparison to the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union, *Commentary* felt empowered to discuss American racism, doing so for the betterment of both the nation as well as the Jewish community.

In the first several years of the magazine, race was first broached as an issue from a distance, as manifestations of prejudice were brought to the reader’s attention. Dr. Mordecai Grossman wrote an article in April 1946, titled “The Schools Fight Prejudice: An Appraisal of the Intercultural Education Movement,” in which he supported the concerted efforts of some schools to foster a learning environment fit for students regardless of class, color, or creed. Just as *Commentary* shined a light on instances of success on the front of combating racism, it highlighted examples indicative of the deep entrenchment of discrimination. In an August 1946

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article, “Race Discrimination in Trade Unions: The Record and the Outlook,” Herbert Northrup (who would go on to teach about and research the labor market and race at the University of Pennsylvania) examined the existence of racism in American labor unions, decrying its prominence across nearly all sectors. He concluded that while no future was assured, the best way forward, for all working-class Americans, was to ensure that labor unions represented their class interests, crossing the color barrier. Further instances of American bigotry were discussed by lawyer and housing expert Charles Abrams in his May 1947 article “Homes for Aryans Only: The Restrictive Covenant Spreads Legal Racism in American,” in which he wrote about discrimination in housing.144

The fight for equality and Civil Rights did not exist in a vacuum, and Commentary sought to show just that to its readers, as several articles argued that the United States needed to reject racism to maintain credibility in its Cold War struggle. Journalist (and City College graduate) Carl Dreher directly addressed this in his August 1947 article, “Racism and America’s World Position: The Potential of Democratic Nationalism,” in which he argued that, as deeply rooted in American society as racism was, the United States needed to reform its national identity so that it would be “anti-racist, anti-fascist, and progressive” or else the nation would be “forfeiting to Russian nationalism, enlightened enough to shun racism, the opportunity to demonstrate the irreconcilability of nationalism and racism under modern conditions.”145 This sentiment was shared by journalist and lawyer Carey McWilliams, who wrote “Does Social Discrimination Really Matter? “Exclusiveness” in a Democracy” in November 1947, articulating the notion that

exclusiveness was corrosive to democracy, and antithetical to the values on which the United States was founded.146

In addition to the Cold War realities shaping support for civil rights, *Commentary* also appealed to the left wing political ideology of its core readers, rebuking racism as fundamentally conservative. The March 1951 article in the sociological part of the magazine, penned by political scientist Paul Kecskemeti, was “Prejudice in the Catastrophic Perspective: Liberalism, Conservatism, and Anti-Semitism,” and it concluded that prejudice was inherently a conservative phenomenon, and additionally one that fomented other forms of hate.147 Racism aided antisemitism, and vice versa, so the article attempted to advance a leftist approach in which both, and generally all, forms of bigotry were addressed. The relationship between racism and conservatism was further discussed in an April 1952 article, “Racist Dress Rehearsal for November: The South’s “Conservative Revolution” Tastes Victory,” in which pollster Samuel Lubell examined the failure of North Carolina Senator Frank P. Graham as exemplifying the failure of Southern Liberalism, driven exclusively by southern white supremacy.148 Lubell argued that the South, with racism at the forefront of its politics, was undeniably and unchangeably conservative, and he predicted that this would be a thorn in the side of the national Democratic Party as it walked a fine line between the political desires of southern, rural, white voters and northern, urban, Black voters.

The final way in which *Commentary* discussed race relations in the first fourteen years of its existence was regarding the overlap of antisemitism and anti-Black racism. On March 16,

1958, Nashville’s Jewish Community Center was bombed, and in the wake of the attack a local rabbi received a phone call from someone saying they perpetrated the attack, as a member of a group called the Confederate Union. On the phone, they told the rabbi’s wife that “We have just dynamited the Jewish Community Center. Next will be the Temple and next will be any other n*****-loving place or n*****-loving person in Nashville. And we’re going to shoot down Judge Miller in cold blood.” Sociologist Jackson Toby, in his May 1958 article discussing this attack for Commentary, included this quote for a simple reason: to show the reader the thinking of violent white supremacists. For them, Jews were an enemy, as they were the allies of Blacks. Whether or not a Jew could come to terms with civil rights on an ethical or moral basis, this sought to show that for self-preservation Jews needed to join the fight against racism, for they too were in the crosshairs. That same day, a synagogue in Miami was bombed by white supremacists, and this was discussed by Nathan Perlmutter, the Regional Director of the Florida division of the Anti-Defamation League, in the June 1958 edition of Commentary. Furthering the message of Jackson Toby, Perlmutter advocated for Jewish support for civil rights and against segregation, showing segregationists and white supremacists to be a common enemy for Blacks and Jews alike.

Together with Cold War politics and race relations, the third and final most prominent topic during the fourteen years of Elliot Cohen’s editorship was the one most specific to Jews: Zionism and the State of Israel.

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150 I was unable to discover any further information about the Judge Miller referenced here.
Zionism and Israel: Not Beyond Reproach, But Accepted

The question of Zionism, whether it was possible, practical, or worth pursuing, was addressed on May 14, 1948, when the State of Israel was proclaimed. This did not put to rest debate surrounding the newly formed state. However, it did fundamentally reshape the conversation. As discussed in the previous chapter, the American Jewish Committee and *Contemporary Jewish Record* were never Zionist entities, but as the Nazi terror developed in the 1930s and 1940s, and the world refused European Jews any refuge, they came to begrudgingly and tacitly condone Zionism. The New York Intellectuals, correspondingly, were never particularly supportive of Zionism. As former communists, they viewed with disdain nationalist movements as bourgeois and detracting from the greater proletarian struggle; Trotsky, himself Jewish and supported by many of the New York Intellectuals in the 1930s, described Zionism as “a tragic mockery of the Jewish people.” Nevertheless, the editors of *Commentary* would be forced to contend with the creation of the State of Israel, and while they often criticized and questioned its nature before it came into existence, after it was formed it was open to questioning but never entirely rejected. As Irving Kristol, when reflecting on his thoughts on Zionism at the time, later said, “Like all socialists in those days I was a universalist. Socialists in those days were not Zionists… With the DP [Displaced Persons] camps I realized that these people needed a place of refuge. And with the Holocaust, I felt God owed us something and that state of Israel was what he gave us.”

In the three years between the founding of *Commentary* and the State of Israel, the former dedicated many pages to contemplating the potential for Zionism’s success. While at this point the magazine was not particularly receptive towards Zionism, its editors did allow for the Zionist

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perspective to be represented. Mosche Smelansky, a leader in the Zionist movement, was allowed to publish “A Palestinian’s Solution: A Pioneer Zionist Offers a Program for Arab-Jewish Peace” in March 1946, in which he offered an optimistic outlook on the region. His hope, as outlined in the article, was that Jews and Arabs would coexist as neighbors, living in their own separate states. His opinion was joined by that of another leading Zionist, Ahad Ha’am, who had his article, “Building Palestine on Realities: A Historic Admonition of Zionist Hopes,” published in April 1946. In addition to these articles speaking out in favor of the establishment of a Jewish state, other articles sought to question the credibility of Arab opponents to Zionism, as historian of Eastern European Jewry Bernard Weinryb attempted to do in his March 1946 article, “The Arab League: Tool or Power?” Finally, while not explicitly Zionist, the decision, in the December 1946 issue, to republish “The Journey to Zion” by Jehuda Halevi, an eleventh-century Sephardic poet who attempted to settle in Jerusalem shortly before his death, appears to be a wink toward Zionism. 

But the Zionist narrative was not the only perspective presented, as anti-Zionist opinions, as well as those proposing alternatives to a fully independent Jewish state, were published by Commentary before the foundation of the State of Israel. In August 1946 an article by lawyer Ernest Munz, called “Nationalism is the Enemy: Has Zionism Taken the Wrong Road?” was published. In it, the author argued against the Zionist desire for an independent Jewish state, stating that pursuit of this would lead Jews and the entire world to disaster. This pessimism was reiterated in the following issue by a rabbi, Victor Eppstein, in his article “Empire and

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156 Ahad Ha’am, “Building Palestine on Realities: A Historic Admonition of Zionist Hopes,” Commentary, April 1946, pp. 54-57.
158 Ernest Munz, “Nationalism is the Enemy: Has Zionism Taken the Wrong Road?,” Commentary, August 1946, pp. 101-106.
Zionism: A Bankrupt Partnership – A Realistic Approach to Arab-Jewish Cooperation,” in which he proposed a joint venture between Jews and Arabs for the region, instead of separate states.  

Perhaps one of the harshest anti-Zionist perspectives came not from a writer of *Commentary*, but from an invested reader. In the July 1948 “Letters from Readers” section of the issue, a man named Hans Kohn (who stated that he belonged to the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey) decried Zionism as “the new Sabbatian intoxication which seems to have seized Jewry and which will lead, psychologically and politically, to more tragic consequences than the first Sabbatian movement did.” Alternatives, seeking to placate both Zionists and anti-Zionists, were offered as well, as economics professor Alvin Johnson suggested in his January 1947 article, “Palestine: A Possible Solution – The Case for a Non-Territorial Federal States.”

In 1948 Zionism succeeded in achieving its ultimate goal: the formation of a Jewish state in *Eretz Yisrael*, which was immediately engulfed in war. As this conflict was raging *Commentary* took the position of a neutral observer, publishing articles such as journalist Jon Kimche’s December 1948 article, “Tel Aviv: Messiah in a Business Suit – Israel’s New Leadership Emerges,” which sought to focus less on the ongoing conflict and more on simply understanding the nascent Jewish state. As the dust settled, and the Israeli War for Independence concluded, diverging opinions were still accepted, as can be seen when comparing

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160 Further research into who Hans Kohn was shows that he was an Austrian-born Jew who lived in Mandatory Palestine from 1925-1934 before moving to the United States. He was a philosopher of nationalism, and soon after this letter was published, he became a professor at City College. Kohn opposed the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states in the region, supporting instead the formation of a binational state.
161 Hans Kohn, “Letters from Readers – A New Sabbatianism?,” *Commentary*, July 1948, pp. 87

Little was written about Israel for the following few years but beginning in 1952 and increasing with the rise of Nasser in Egypt and the 1956 Suez Crisis, a new narrative began to emerge from the pages of Commentary: Israel was a Western bulwark in the Middle East against the Soviet Bloc. An article published in May 1952, written by journalist Mark Alexander and titled “The Near East’s Communist-Fascist Front: An Ominous Alliance Against Israel and the West,” was the first article to do this. Alexander made the point that Arab political success in the preceding few years, aided by the Soviet Union, came from a convenient coalition of communists and far right nationalists, and that in this partnership “the Communists… [were] the junior partners of the alliance.”164 This posed an existential threat to nations, such as the United States and Israel, that were dedicated to anti-fascism, and in the opinion of the author, underscored the importance of Israel as an American ally against the Soviet Bloc. Echoing this sentiment shortly before the Suez Canal Crisis, historian Walter Laqueur wrote “The Moscow-Cairo Axis: Its Aim: To Drive the West Out” in May 1956, condemning Nasser and the alliance he was forming against Israel as being not only against Israel but against the United States.165 He would continue to connect the dots between Arab Nationalism and the Soviet Bloc in his April 1957 article, “How Real is Arab Nationalism? Nasserism Paves the Way for Communism.”166

End of an Era

Commentary, developed and edited by Elliot Cohen, fostered a new generation of Jewish thinkers, and created an outlet for the American Jewish community. While Cohen had much to be proud of, he was unable to escape his manic depression, which resurfaced with an increased ferocity in 1956. He spent the next two years in and out of medical facilities, where he received psychotherapy, including shock therapy, to no avail. Cohen returned to Commentary full-time in 1958, but he was not the same man who founded it thirteen years prior: he was described as “a shrunken, shaken man,” 167 far from his former glory.

In May 1959, Elliot Cohen committed suicide at age sixty. 168 He was eulogized in the June 1959 issue of Commentary, which remembered him as “The moral force here at work, emanating from the American Jewish community, passed into the nation at large, invigorating the most varied areas of American intellectual life.” 169

For the next several months the American Jewish Committee searched for someone to fill the void left behind by Elliot Cohen’s untimely death. In the end, they selected a young man who would spend the next thirty-five years leading Commentary, and in doing so transform both the magazine and the American political scene. His name: Norman Podhoretz.

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Chapter 3: Norman Podhoretz, the Neoconservatives, and the Evolution of *Commentary*: 1960-1970

The February 1960 issue of *Commentary* contained the last vestige of the magazine as it previously existed and the first glimpse into its future. It began with a final tribute to the man who had founded the magazine, Elliot Cohen, in the form of the unabridged eulogy Lionel Trilling delivered at his funeral. Trilling, who was first published by Elliot Cohen back in *Menorah Journal* in the 1920s, paid homage to his mentor by calling him “the only great teacher I have ever known.” But the issue also highlighted the evolution of the magazine, as the cover and layout had been entirely redesigned. Most importantly and impactfully, where the name Elliot Cohen had previously been, in every issue of *Commentary* since 1945, was a new name, as the American Jewish Committee had selected the magazine’s second editor: Norman Podhoretz. A man with a new vision, Norman Podhoretz got to work as he set out on his path of reshaping the magazine as he saw fit. Little did he know that in a little over a decade, his efforts to mold *Commentary* to meet his ideological framework would face intense criticism from intellectuals and readers alike, and his subsequent reaction and reconsideration of his principles would lead him and his magazine to embrace the nascent political ideology that would come to be known as neoconservatism.

In the years that followed Podhoretz and *Commentary’s* rightward turn towards neoconservatism, a rift emerged between the magazine and its sponsoring organization, the American Jewish Committee. This can be seen in a letter written in 1987, nearly two decades after *Commentary* had fully transformed into a neoconservative platform, by Alfred H. Moses,

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the chairman of the National Executive Council of the American Jewish Committee. Addressing
Matthew Brown, an American Jewish Committee Vice President, Moses wrote:

I find it very troubling that AJC publishes a magazine that regularly and vigorously
champions a viewpoint that is so fundamentally at odds with its view of Jewish
interests… I shall be frank enough to admit to you that were the decision mine I would
not end the relationship with Commentary at this time, but I do want AJC to consider
conscientiously the conflict posed by the divergent views represented by Norman and
itself and to start to deal with it in a serious way… As I see it, and I believe AJC sees it,
Commentary’s position does not help in our dealings with the rest of America.171

As this internal document shows, the political shift that Podhoretz and Commentary undertook
was a drastic one, and one that members of the American Jewish Committee leadership viewed
as antithetical to their ideas and their interests. The objective of this third and final chapter is to
explore the reasons for this transformation so that it and its roots can be better understood.

As the previous two chapters have shown, the ideologies of successive generations of
American Jews were influenced by their intellectual forebears. The ideas and identities of the
American Jewish Committee and its leadership during its first three decades influenced the
writers and editors of Contemporary Jewish Record. Elliot Cohen, who helped cultivate younger
New York Intellectuals, inherited the remnants of Contemporary Jewish Record and blended its
existing staff and concepts with his mentees and beliefs to form Commentary. Norman Podhoretz
similarly inherited the institutional ideology of the magazine and his fellow New York
Intellectuals. The turn towards the political right and formation of neoconservatism was a radical
departure from the previous way of thinking, as well as a culmination of a specific intellectual
pathway of the previous sixty years.

President (DGX) Subject Politics/Election – Party Platform Committee 1984-1985 to David M. Gordis – Executive
Vice President (DGX) Administration Blaustein Hilda Katz Leadership Institute 1987, Box #12, Folder Publications
Commentary DGX 87, American Jewish Committee Archive, New York, New York.
The intersection of political and personal identity in shaping the ideology of organizations, magazines, and individuals alike has been a crucial aspect of the previous two chapters. The American Jewish Committee, along with its founders and those who led it for the first four decades of its existence, reflected its upper-class stature and German Jewish roots, as well as the perceived precarious situation of American Jewry, in its bipartisanship, patriotism, and non-Zionism. These ideas were embraced by the writers and editors of *Contemporary Jewish Record*, who accepted it but with their own distinct difference, particularly on Zionism, which can be attributed to their viewing it as a way to save European Jewry from the wrath of the Third Reich. *Commentary* was influenced by its predecessor and its sponsor, as well as by Elliot Cohen and the New York Intellectuals who came to serve as its writers and editors. They brought with them their left wing politics, their patriotism and anti-Soviet opinions, and their acceptance of Zionism. More confident of the American Jewish position post-Second World War, they spoke out in favor of civil rights. Upon assuming the editorship in 1960, Podhoretz inherited all that came before, but he attempted to move *Commentary* in a different direction, away from its distinct Jewish identity and further towards the political left. But due to both his personal background, being a poor Jew from Brownsville in Brooklyn, and the greater societal developments of the 1960s – the rise of the New Left, with its anti-establishment, anti-American, and anti-Zionist impulses, and the radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement – Podhoretz, along with other New York Intellectuals and *Commentary*, returned to his Jewish identity and moved to the political right.

To come to this realization, one must first understand Norman Podhoretz: his roots, his development, and how he became the editor of *Commentary* at the age of thirty. After exploring the editor’s background, this chapter will consider the political ideologies advanced by
Commentary, as well as how and why they shifted, by examining its articles and key themes in the 1960s. It will conclude with Podhoretz’s 1970 epiphany, and his subsequent return to Judaism and repudiation of the New Left, illuminating what led the magazine and its editor to embrace what came to be known as neoconservatism.

Norman Podhoretz: How He Made It

“One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan – or at least from certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn to certain parts of Manhattan. I have made that journey…” So began Norman Podhoretz’s 1967 memoir, “Making It,” in which he attempted to summarize that journey, the one that took him from the working-class neighborhood of Brownsville to Midtown Manhattan in a matter of thirty years. The unique journey that led to him becoming Commentary’s editor in 1960 offers incredible insight into the way Podhoretz came to comprehend the world around him. Furthermore, understanding how he made it provides insightful information about how and why he was the man to meet the moment, and the man to help create and lead the neoconservative movement.

Norman Podhoretz was born on January 16, 1930. The son of Julius and Helen Podhoretz, Norman was a first-generation American, as his parents and their families came from Galicia, then a predominantly Jewish region, in 1912 and 1920, respectively. As newcomers to the United States, the Podhoretz clan appeared alien to the native Americans – his grandfathers “[kept] their full beards and sidecurls, [and] dressed in long black coats and hats to match,” and his grandmothers “wore unadorned ankle-length dresses and shaytlach (the wigs – cheap, rarely

174 Ibid.
washed and often smelling unpleasant – that married women were required [by an Orthodox Jewish understanding of Jewish law] to wear.”¹⁷⁵ Neither his grandparents nor parents would ever learn much English, and the young Podhoretz first spoke with such a thick Yiddish accent that he was oftentimes mistaken for a “greenhorn,” someone fresh off the boat.¹⁷⁶ However, the forces of American assimilation soon addressed this matter, as he was placed into a remedial speech class as a kindergartener at Public School 28.¹⁷⁷

As the young Norman Podhoretz grew up in Brownsville, several things became clear to him. The first was the ethnic tensions that defined his Brooklyn neighborhood. Occupied nearly equally by Jews, Italians, and Blacks, the streets were rife with conflict among the three groups, and Podhoretz himself was involved in these scuffles, recalling the several times he fought and lost.¹⁷⁸ His lesson from these fights – “It was okay to be beaten, as long as you didn’t run away.”¹⁷⁹ The second was his growing awareness of his and his family’s financial situation. As he later recorded in *Making It*:

I no longer remember when or in what form I first discovered that there was such a thing as class, but whenever it was and whatever form the discovery took, it could have only coincided with the recognition that criteria existed by which I and everyone I knew were stamped as inferior: we were in the *lower* class. This was not a proposition I was willing to accept, and my way of not accepting it was to dismiss the whole idea of class as a prissy triviality.¹⁸⁰

In addition to this recognition, Podhoretz soon came to see within himself a strong literary ambition, a desire to write and, through his writings, climb the social ladder.¹⁸¹ Coupled with this literary ambition was a budding intellect, so apparent to those around Podhoretz that he was

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¹⁷⁹ Ibid
¹⁸⁰ Ibid
allowed to skip two grades. Yet as much intellectual potential as he displayed, as well as the ambition that fostered his scholastic pursuits, the limits of his Jewish, working-class roots (his father worked as a milkman) stood in the way of him achieving greatness. They were only overcome due to the guidance Podhoretz received from one of his high school teachers, Harriet Cashmore Haft, whom he referred to as “Mrs. K” in Making It. As he would later note, “for three years, from the age of thirteen to the age of sixteen, I was her special pet… she worked on me like a dementedly ambitious mother with a somewhat recalcitrant son.” Not only did she push him to sharpen his mind, but she sought to instill in him the culture that he was lacking, taking him to Manhattan to visit the Frick Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and to theaters.

As the years passed and Norman Podhoretz grew and matured, he internalized the lessons of his youth and aimed to pursue higher education. A brilliant and well-rounded thinker, he graduated high school third in his class in 1946, excelling in all his academic studies except physics, which prevented him from being the valedictorian or salutatorian. Wearing a hand-me-down suit from his uncle, before graduating Podhoretz interviewed with Harvard, NYU, and Columbia as places where he could continue his academic pursuits. Receiving offers to attend all three universities and pushed by Mrs. Haft to attend Harvard where he could enter “a life of elegance and refinement and taste,” he ended up selecting Columbia, as they made him the best financial aid offer via the Pulitzer Scholarship.

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183 Podhoretz, Making It, pp. 8-9.
184 Podhoretz, Making It, pp. 11-13.
185 Jeffers, Norman Podhoretz: A Biography, p. 10.
186 Jeffers, Norman Podhoretz: A Biography, p. 11.
It is important to note here two key distinctions between Norman Podhoretz’s journey, and that of many of his fellow New York Intellectuals. As a younger member of the group, Podhoretz entered college only a year after the conclusion of the Second World War, when the institutional antisemitism that had defined elite universities during the interwar period was subsiding. That is not to say that he did not face any antisemitism, as he certainly did, however Podhoretz most memorably experienced antisemitism on the streets of Brownsville, coming from Italian or Black boys; at Columbia, his interactions with antisemitism were few and far between. By contrast, the older New York Intellectuals largely experienced antisemitism from American educational institutions, leading most of them to City College. Furthermore, while many (if not most) of the New York Intellectuals came from Jewish families and neighborhoods where socialism was widely embraced, Podhoretz’s father was a leftist and a Zionist who “never went in for the socialism or communism that dominated the thinking of most immigrant Jews in New York.”

While many members of the New York Intellectuals went through a phase of belonging to the Trotskyist left, he had not.

At Columbia (and the nearby Jewish Theological Seminary, where he studied dispassionately at his father’s urging), Norman Podhoretz began to transform himself into the man who would take the helm of *Commentary* in a little more than a decade. There he found himself, for the first time, truly introduced to “the heritage of Western Civilization… a repository of the universal, existing not in space or time but rather in some transcendental realm of the spirit – that very realm I had dreamed of in the days of Mrs. K.” While Podhoretz saw himself as achieving his dreams at Columbia, he was thrust into the world of what would later be known as

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189 Podhoretz, *Making It*, p. 43.
WASPs – white Anglo-Saxon Protestants – as they dominated the university.\textsuperscript{190} Despite, or perhaps driven by, this reality, he soon became “a reasonable facsimile of an upper-class WASP,”\textsuperscript{191} and after adjusting to the rigorous academic standards of Columbia he became a star student. By his senior year, he was taking a class with Lionel Trilling, the first tenured Jew in Columbia’s English department and an older member of the New York Intellectuals, who was an inspiration for Podhoretz. Trilling was known to be a harsh grader, but he had a fondness for his pupil and recognized him as special, awarding him an A+ in his course on the English Romantics, as well as a recommendation for three graduate fellowships.\textsuperscript{192} Awarded both the Kellett Fellowship and a Fulbright Scholarship, at the age of twenty Podhoretz set off to Cambridge University’s Clare College in 1950.

At Cambridge Norman Podhoretz took comfort in his English education, while continuing his scholarly activities and building his reputation. Cambridge, similar to Columbia, was dominated by WASPs, and in the United Kingdom he was welcomed and celebrated by his peers and professors alike for his intelligence and his personability. Podhoretz greatly enjoyed the fact that Cambridge did not assign him letter grades for his assignments, and that he was allowed a relative degree of independence in his studies. As he would later write, “Under the circumstances I found myself able to relax as never before in all my years in school… I would sit in my study… and read – not, as in the past, in a frantic rush to finish and formulate a view, but at a slow and easy pace.”\textsuperscript{193} Embracing the English educational way, Podhoretz enthusiastically continued to prepare himself for a career as a literary critic and had his first opportunity to have a piece of his published, which was ironically a review of Lionel Trilling’s new collection of

\textsuperscript{190} Jeffers, \textit{Norman Podhoretz: A Biography}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{192} Podhoretz, \textit{Making It}, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{193} Podhoretz, \textit{Making It}, p. 71.
essays, *The Liberal Imagination*.\(^{194}\) His European location, in addition to his surplus of funds, due to his receiving two fellowships, allowed Podhoretz to travel, and he visited Paris, Athens, and Tel Aviv. While never having been a fervent Zionist, he wrote about his impression of the new Jewish state to Lionel Trilling, who in turn recommended that his friend, Elliot Cohen, ask “that remarkable undergraduate of mine who went to Cambridge and who reviewed my book for *Scrutiny*” to write an article about his trip to Israel for *Commentary*.\(^{195}\) Cohen enthusiastically passed Trilling’s letter to Irving Kristol, who reached out to Podhoretz and asked him to write such a piece. This was Podhoretz’s first interaction with the magazine he would run in eight years.

In the Spring of 1952 Norman Podhoretz took his Cambridge comprehensive exam and achieved the distinction of earning a “first,” the highest possible grade, and was awarded his MA.\(^{196}\) Having graduated from Cambridge he was uncertain as to his future and decided to spend the summer with his mentor, Lionel Trilling, at Trilling’s summer home in Westport, Connecticut.\(^{197}\) There Podhoretz contemplated his future with Trilling and Trilling’s wife, Diana. While there he visited the offices of *Commentary*, following up on his correspondence with Irving Kristol and meeting Elliot Cohen for the first time, before deciding to allocate the remainder of his Fulbright funds to pursuing a PhD at Cambridge.\(^{198}\) Yet only a year after returning to the United Kingdom, Podhoretz was confronted with the stark reality that his supervisor, and other Cambridge professors, were unimpressed with his draft dissertation. As much as he had found an intellectual home there, presenting himself as a facsimile of WASP,
they had turned against him. Podhoretz, who submitted a thirty-page portion of his draft thesis on Disraeli’s political novels, was told “[to] go back to your own country and, if you must be a critic, focus on its literature, not ours.” Not only that, but he had been called to serve his country – the Selective Service had drafted him. As a PhD student Podhoretz had been able to defer the draft, which he did several times before, but this time was different. Dejected, in the Summer of 1953 he left Cambridge and the United Kingdom behind and returned to the United States.

From 1953 to 1955 Podhoretz served in the U.S. Army’s Army Security Agency, and simultaneously began his involvement with Commentary. Through Lionel Trilling he had been introduced to the magazine as well as the New York Intellectuals behind it, whom Podhoretz would refer to as “The Family.” They had shaped his political views, and he found their revisionist liberalism to suit the attitudes he had developed studying literature. In addition to embracing their leftist views, he supported their patriotic outlook and belief in the United States – in Europe Podhoretz was forced to defend the United States as he never had before, and “the sheer vulgarity of the anti-Americanism one came upon everywhere in Europe pushed… [him and his friends] into the unaccustomed role of patriotic defenders.” It was in the fall of 1953 when he first began his formal involvement with Commentary, as he wrote a monthly piece for the magazine with the express desire “to see my name in print, to be praised, and above all to attract attention.”

Norman Podhoretz completed his military service in 1955, and once he was discharged, he became a full-time employee of Commentary. Elliot Cohen held a position open for Podhoretz

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199 Jeffers, Norman Podhoretz: A Biography, p. 35.
200 Podhoretz, Making It, pp. 87-89.
201 Podhoretz, Making It, pp. 86-87.
202 Podhoretz, Making It, p. 146.
so that when he left the Army he joined on as assistant editor earning an annual income of $7,000.\textsuperscript{203} He rapidly earned a reputation as an exceptional editor and simultaneously came to gain a greater understanding of how the magazine operated. As he would later write, “The Boss” (Elliot Cohen) let him know that while \textit{Commentary} had editorial independence, it also had a responsibility “to the Jewish community... [and] the AJC,” and while Podhoretz argued that this independence meant that “the AJC isn’t supposed to interfere or exert pressure,” Cohen responded that did not mean “we can do what we want; just remember it’s their magazine, not ours.”\textsuperscript{204} This interaction is important to understand, as it offers insight into how Cohen perceived \textit{Commentary} and its relationship with the American Jewish Committee, how Podhoretz had originally understood it, and how Podhoretz would come to see it. After only a three-year stint at the magazine he had grown dissatisfied with his job, due to internal conflict brought about by the time Cohen spent away from the magazine due to his increasingly virulent mental health issues, so Podhoretz left to become a freelance writer.\textsuperscript{205} While he had planned for that to be the end of his involvement with \textit{Commentary}, as fate would have it, it was only the beginning.

In the aftermath of Elliot Cohen’s 1959 suicide, the American Jewish Committee searched for a new editor for \textit{Commentary}, and Norman Podhoretz was selected largely because no one else wanted the position. Marty Greenberg, who had been Podhoretz’s primary antagonist when he worked at \textit{Commentary}, served as the interim editor in the wake of Cohen’s death, and he was widely expected to receive the position.\textsuperscript{206} However, the American Jewish Committee wanted to cast a wide net in their search for a new editor. Irving Kristol, Alfred Kazin, and

\textsuperscript{203} Jeffers, \textit{Norman Podhoretz: A Biography}, p. 51. This is approximately $75,000 in 2022 dollars.
\textsuperscript{204} Podhoretz, \textit{Making It}, p. 221.
Daniel Bell all made it clear that they were uninterested in the role, so quickly Podhoretz became a frontrunner. He was warned by Irving Kristol not to take the position, as Kristol told him “The magazine is okay, it’s a good magazine, but it’s not going anywhere;”\textsuperscript{207} Diana Trilling told him that taking the position would ruin him as a critic, a notion shared by her husband.\textsuperscript{208} They saw \textit{Commentary} as having intellectually stagnated since 1956, when Cohen first was institutionalized due to his manic depression, and further believed that the editor position would be detrimental to Podhoretz’s career prospects. Nevertheless, he met with executives at the American Jewish Committee, and after careful consideration he accepted their offer to become the next editor of \textit{Commentary}. Norman Podhoretz would end up proving the naysayers wrong: he would serve as editor for the next thirty-five years, and in that time, he would expand the magazine’s influence beyond anything anyone, perhaps even Podhoretz himself, could have initially imagined.

\textbf{The Early Podhoretz Years: Commentay 1960-1963}

Assuming control of \textit{Commentary} in February 1960, Norman Podhoretz did much more than just redesign the magazine’s look. He additionally reshuffled the editorial and writing staff, firing everyone except for Sherry Abel, whom he had stay on as managing editor.\textsuperscript{209} Not only was there turnover in staff, but Podhoretz took \textit{Commentary} in a new direction. As he had told the executives of the American Jewish Committee when they were considering him for the editorship, he wanted the magazine to be “more general and less Jewish in emphasis.”\textsuperscript{210} This new path is evident in the articles published from 1960 to 1963.

\textsuperscript{207} Balint, \textit{Running Commentary}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{208} Podhoretz, \textit{Making It}, p. 275.
\textsuperscript{209} Jeffers, \textit{Norman Podhoretz: A Biography}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{210} Podhoretz, \textit{Making It}, pp. 277-278.
During the first three years of Podhoretz’s tenure as editor of *Commentary*, articles focused on examining the political landscape and contentious political issues in the United States, and they did so from a further left wing position. Issues that had never been broached before were tackled, as can be seen in the February 1960 issue and the article in it, “Birth Control and Public Policy.” Written by leading sociologists Kingsley David and Judith Blake, the article even-handedly contemplated the role birth control could play in the new decade and beyond, reshaping American and even global demographics, as well as the evolving debate over the acceptance and increasing commonality of the practice.\(^{211}\) In addition to examining issues surrounding human reproduction for the first time, the magazine considered the nature of the American media in writer Harris Dienstfrey’s February 1961 article, “Sizing Up the Mass Media.”\(^{212}\)

Additionally, *Commentary* tackled the political landscape of the United States, paying particular attention to the ongoings of fringe movements. Columbia law professor Alan F. Westin contemplated the far right of American politics. He attempted to break down the reasons that the John Birch Society was “the most appealing, activist, and efficient movement to appear on the extreme right since the fertile decade of the 1930’s.”\(^{213}\) However, in doing so he asked a deeper question about the susceptibility of the American public, wondering how “when the mass media were featuring the charge by Birch founder Robert Welch that President Eisenhower was ‘a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy’ – three million persons still concluded that the Society was a commendable, patriotic, anti-Communist organization.”\(^{214}\) David Danzig, who was then the program director of the American Jewish Committee, further

\(^{214}\) Ibid.
explored the question of the American far right.\textsuperscript{215} Yet while the magazine explored the American far right, it gave more attention to the American far left, as it was more closely in line with the ideology of Podhoretz and his magazine at the time. \textit{Commentary} considered specific movements and ideas within the American left, such as Nathan Glazer’s April 1961 article on the peace movement,\textsuperscript{216} sociologist Dennis H. Wrong’s February 1962 piece on the relationship between the American left and Cuba,\textsuperscript{217} and political scientist Paul Kecskemeti’s June 1961 writing on the global relationship between Marxism and decolonization.\textsuperscript{218}

Political ideologies, while emphasized in the new \textit{Commentary}, did not fully capture the magazine’s attention, as there was also a greater debate about America’s actions, both internal and external. While Cohen’s \textit{Commentary} had dedicated articles to considering the policies pursued by the American government, they mostly considered how they would impact the American Jewish community. Podhoretz’s revamped \textit{Commentary}, at least in these first three years, had no such self-imposed limitation. Following the 1960 presidential election and the victory of Democrat John F. Kennedy, there were several instances when it discussed the “New Frontier” vision of the administration and how it was actualized. In June 1961 Philip Green, then an assistant professor in Princeton’s Politics department, wrote favorably of the new administration’s vision and how it had shaken the United States from “the group of a malaise so profound that it might almost be described as the central fact of our new society.”\textsuperscript{219} Economist Oscar Gass echoed this support for the Kennedy Administration in his 1961 article, “The New Frontier Fulfilled.”\textsuperscript{220} Despite this, while \textit{Commentary} lauded President Kennedy and his vision

for the country, it did oppose particular policy decisions. Political science professor Joseph J. Zasloff criticized the U.S. policy towards South Vietnam, still in the infancy of intervention, in a 1962 article, “The Problem of South Viet Nam.” Additionally, the issue of race in the United States was still hotly debated and of great importance. Continuing the opposition to segregation advanced by Cohen, the magazine published articles such as “A Commentary Report – The South’s Pupil Placement Laws: Newest Weapon Against Integration” and “James Baldwin as Spokesman”, decrying racism and uplifting leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Yet it would be an article published by Podhoretz on this very matter that would land him in hot water, as his attempt to convey his childhood experience and internal prejudice led to immense and immediate blowback from his fellow Jews on the political left. In the wake of this, and with the gradual rise of the New Left in the following years, the rightward drift of Commentary and its editor can first be seen.

“My Negro Problem – and Ours” and Its Aftermath: Commentary 1963-1967

“We have it on the authority of James Baldwin that all Negroes hate whites. I am trying to suggest that on their side all whites – all American whites, that is – are sick in their feelings about Negroes.” In this infamous February 1963 article he wrote and published in Commentary, the then thirty-three year old Norman Podhoretz turned back to the little boy he used to be in Brownsville to offer a solution to the race issue in the United States, and in doing so he provoked harsh criticism from many in his intellectual circle. His intention was clear: he

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wanted to respond to James Baldwin, someone he greatly admired and respected (and had met as a Cambridge student during his visit to Paris), and Baldwin’s vision for a post-racial society.

James Baldwin, one of the most eminent intellectuals on American racism, had recently written an article for *The New Yorker* about the Nation of Islam. In this article, he condemned Black Nationalism and looked to a world when color lost meaning as the best hope for whites and Blacks in the United States.225 It is important to note that the article was initially supposed to be published in *Commentary*. Podhoretz had commissioned Baldwin to write him a piece for the magazine, and this is what drove Baldwin to write about Black Muslims. However, Baldwin owed the *New Yorker* a piece, having already spent an advance they had given him, so he directed his agent to offer the piece originally intended for *Commentary* to them.226 Podhoretz was furious, but attempted to console himself by believing that the article – which stood at 20,000 words – was too long for the *New Yorker* to publish. It was not, and on November 17, 1962, they published Baldwin’s piece under the title “Letter from a Region in My Mind.” It would later become the chapter “Down at the Cross” in Baldwin’s masterpiece, *The Fire Next Time*. Podhoretz was incensed:

No greater violation of the ethics of the trade could be imagined than Baldwin had committed in taking an article he had been invited to write by the editor of one magazine and giving it to the editor of another. I considered taking legal action but dropped the idea as unseemly.227

He ultimately concluded that Baldwin had robbed him of this article for a single reason: Baldwin was Black.228 Perhaps feeling as he did when he was a child, when it was the Black children of

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228 Ibid.
Brownsville who attacked and tormented him for being a Jew, Podhoretz lashed out, and in doing so he unleashed pent-up racial resentment.

Turning inward, Podhoretz wrote “My Negro Problem – and Ours” as a counter to Baldwin, discussing his boyhood hatred of Blacks, as they were his tormenters, the bullies who mocked and beat him. Attempting to put to paper what (he believed) many of his fellow white liberals were too afraid to say out loud, he acknowledged his own bias and contempt for Blacks. Podhoretz’s answer to racism was to make “color…disappear and that means not integration, it means not assimilation, it means – let the brutal world come out – miscegenation.”

James Baldwin appreciated Podhoretz’s candor, writing to him that “It was important, more important than I knew, for such things to be said; and they had to be said in public.” Despite Baldwin’s approval, the article was met with widespread condemnation.

Internally, the American Jewish Committee was critical of the piece, and it received immense backlash from members of the Jewish community for its publication. The head of the Detroit office of the organization, Abraham Citron, wrote to John Slawson, his counterpart at the New York office, decrying Podhoretz as “out of tune with the direction of events in that he feels his ‘solution’ is somehow complementary and acceptable… he is naïve and paternalistic in his ‘offer.’” Citron went further in his complaint, saying that “He wants to get rid of Negros. His civilization, his liberalism, his conscience will not permit him to shoot them or segregate them or isolate them or send them away. So he says let’s interbreed them away.”

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232 Ibid.
Employees of the American Jewish Committee were not the only ones who voiced their displeasure—numerous letters were written to the New York office of the organization from Jews across the United States, expressing their disgust at them for giving Podhoretz a vehicle to spew what they saw as his hate. One such letter, written by Israel S. Sherman\(^{233}\) and directed to the president of the American Jewish Committee, asked for the cancellation of his *Commentary* subscription, as he could not tolerate its “intellectual garbage and insults to fellow citizens because of their darker colored skins… [as it is] dangerous to ideals of our American way-of-life.”\(^{234}\) He added that, at the next meeting of his local Welfare Board, when the topic of allocating funds to Jewish agencies arose, he would argue against providing funds to the AJC.

Other Jewish magazines and institutions capitalized on Podhoretz’s article to condemn the American Jewish Committee. The Reconstructionist movement’s magazine, *The Reconstructionist*, declared the article to be “offensive and obnoxious” and subversive to American Jews.\(^{235}\) Additionally, the American Jewish Congress, in a February 14, 1963 press release, mocked Podhoretz as “super-sensitive to any hurt to himself while being woefully insensitive to what was happening to others.”\(^{236}\) Even *Commentary* itself was inundated with

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\(^{233}\) The only thing known about Israel S. Sherman, other than the fact that he wrote the letter with the return address of 133 Cannon Street, Poughkeepsie, New York, is that in 1966 he wrote and self-published a 170-page book titled “Peace Through Common Sense.” As far as the author could tell, it is only located at several law school libraries—including the law school libraries of Cornell, Columbia, Yale, and Harvard—and could not be accessed.


The Reconstructionist Movement is a branch of American Judaism that was formed by Mordecai Kaplan from the 1920s to the 1950s, before it seceded from the Conservative Movement in 1955. Reconstructionist Judaism views Judaism as an ever-evolving civilization and not a religion.
arguments against Podhoretz’s article, as is evident when examining the “Letters from Readers” that were published in the three following issues. The fact that there were enough letters received by the magazine that it felt obliged to publish letters for the next three months underscores the intensity of the pushback it and its editor received in the wake of the publication of “My Negro Problem.”

The overwhelming harshness of the response to “My Negro Problem” took Norman Podhoretz aback and led him to begin to question the political convictions he had held. Even so, for the next few years he maintained a similar editorial position as he had from 1960 to 1963, continuing to focus less on Jewish issues and more on general political issues, at home and abroad, and doing so from a politically left bias. Yet while this support for the left remained, Podhoretz’s allegiance to the left was not ironclad. He questioned it, particularly the “New Left,” which he had entertained as early as its 1962 founding. He had initially aimed to align Commentary with the movement that would later become the “New Left,” with its disdain for the existing liberal order. Podhoretz had even been invited by Tom Hayden, a leader of the New Left, to review and comment on the foundational document of this political movement, the Port Huron Statement, in 1962. But as the movement gained traction, Commentary began to express reservations about the movement. It questioned the motives of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, which saw students protest for the right to speak on political issues on campus. In 1965, Nathan Glazer, who was by then a sociology professor at Berkeley, wrote an article that argued Americans “must be concerned and disturbed” by the events, as they represented “the rise of new forms of political action which aroused deep

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237 It is worth noting that Jews played a major role in the founding and advancement of the New Left, similar to their role in the creation of neoconservatism. Some notable examples are Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Mark Rudd.
emotions and whose legal status was in doubt.”239 Activist Tom Kahn echoed these fears about the New Left in a 1966 article, articulating his hope that the movement would be “a new beginning” for the left in its efforts to improve the United States, as well as his fear that it would “disintegrate, as a consequence of sectarian or defeatist policies… and the cynical disillusionment which would follow would darken, not illuminate, the prospects for a Great Society.”240 It is important to note that, while both of these articles expressed skepticism and criticism regarding the New Left, they did so from the left, not necessarily opposing the movement’s objectives but more objecting to how they were attempting to accomplish them. However, from 1967 until 1970, that would change, as Commentary and Podhoretz became even more opposed to the New Left, driven by opposition to its anti-Israel and anti-establishment inclinations.

**From Questioning to Quitting the Left: 1967-1970**

In the wake of Israel’s stunning success against its Arab neighbors in the 1967 Six-Day War, Norman Podhoretz and Commentary began to return to their Jewish origins. In the weeks and months before the outbreak of conflict, there was a fear that the coming war would lead to the destruction of Israel, the explicit goal of the Arab armies and their leaders, who spoke about driving the Jews into the sea. This created immense anxiety for many American Jews, who feared a second Holocaust in their lifetime. However, Israel won a resounding victory in the Six-Day War, capturing the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and most significantly, the West Bank and Old City neighborhood of Jerusalem, where Judaism’s holiest

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sites lay. This instilled in many American Jews, including Podhoretz, a keener sense of their Jewish identity.²⁴¹

Following this conflict, Commentary turned back to its roots as an outwardly Jewish magazine, as for the first time under Podhoretz’s leadership it focused heavily on Jewish issues and the Jewish state. The August 1967 issue contained two articles about Israel, leading Jewish historian and Conservative rabbi Arthur Hertzberg’s “Israel and American Jewry” and historian Walter Laqueur’s “Israel, the Arabs, and World Opinion.” Both articles lauded Israel’s military success, while also considering the obstacles that lay ahead: for Hertzberg, the lack of New Left support for Israel was troubling,²⁴² while Laqueur emphasized the rising anti-Zionism among the Soviet Bloc and the Third World.²⁴³ It was the focus of Hertzberg’s article, the anti-Israel sentiment common among members of the New Left, that became an issue that further turned Podhoretz away from the political left.

Another factor that contributed to this turn away from the left was the rise of Black Nationalism and organizations that advocated that ideology, such as the Black Panthers, whom Commentary opposed for several reasons. The magazine had previously supported the idea that greater action was needed after the achievements of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to rid American society of the remnants of racism. Civil rights activist Bayard Rustin wrote an article for the magazine in 1965 making exactly that point.²⁴⁴ However, what differentiated Rustin’s argument from the Black Panthers (and likeminded Black Nationalist organizations) was the fact that, while he pushed for continued efforts to drive out

discrimination, he wanted to do so through the existing political system, while the Black Panthers entirely rejected the existing American society. Several articles condemned the Panthers for their anti-establishment ideology, such as those written by then Columbia instructor Stephen Donadio, and historian Theodore Draper. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the Black Panthers aligned themselves with the Palestinian plight, seeing both peoples (Black Americans and Palestinians) as fighting oppression. To the now overwhelmingly Zionist Jewish community, including Podhoretz and the other editors and writers for *Commentary*, this view could not be further from the truth, and they harshly condemned this Black anti-Zionism (and the conspiratorial antisemitism they believed it often led to), as shown in sociologist Earl Raab’s 1969 article, “The Black Revolution and the Jewish Question.”

Norman Podhoretz’s decade-long path from left wing radical to vocal critic of that movement reached its conclusion in January 1970. Celebrating his fortieth birthday alone on his upstate New York farm, contemplating his future amidst a midlife crisis, he experienced a life-altering epiphany:

I was finished working and was carrying a martini with me. There I was, walking on this beautiful, chilly, early spring day and the sun hitting the snow. I was feeling very content. I had an excellent drink, and then all of a sudden I had a vision… I saw physically, in the sky, though it was obviously in my head, a kind of diagram that resembled a family tree. And it was instantly clear to me that this diagram contained the secret of life and existence and knowledge: that you start with this, and you follow to that. It all had a logic of interconnectedness.

Podhoretz’s take-away from this vision (he would remain unsure whether it was divine in origin) was that the tree he saw was the tree of life, and it, like all humans and all of existence, was

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guided by natural law. Jews were unique, as they were the people of the law, however he made the crucial distinction that “the Judaism that was true was the Judaism of the Bible, not of the Talmud.” This quote is significant, because in marking this difference Podhoretz is essentially rejecting rabbinic Judaism and its 1,800 year old tradition in favor of only accepting the Torah. He accepted Judaism as the essential and eternal source for truth and understanding, but only his interpretation of it.

Having seen this vision, Norman Podhoretz gained a new faith in Judaism (albeit his unique conception of it) and the supremacy of simple, natural laws, and he returned to Commentary in the summer of 1970 a changed man. For the previous three years, he and the magazine had questioned the New Left and what they considered to be its core tenets: its anti-Americanism, its anti-Zionism and antisemitism, its rejection of assimilation and a color-blind society. From 1970 to his retirement in 1995, Podhoretz would be a full-fledged critic of the left, and ever since Commentary has been a right wing magazine. Although he spent several years after his epiphany attempting to identify his ideology as something other than conservative, preferring to say that he was a “paleo-liberal” and fighting to prevent the New Left from seizing control of the Democratic Party, by the end of the 1970s he had abandoned the Democratic Party and embraced the Republican Party, and the neoconservative label, first coined by Michael Harrington in the late 1960s, stuck, defining both Podhoretz and Commentary.

This ideological shift, motivated by a disdain of the New Left and what was perceived to be its inherent incompatibility with Judaism, was summarized succinctly by frequent

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250 Ibid.
251 Balint, Running Commentary, p. 117.
Commentary contributor (and wife of Irving Kristol) Gertrude Himmelfarb: “yesterday’s liberalism is today’s conservatism.”

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Conclusion

“The deepest meaning of the landslide of 1980 is that the Republicans have a new majority to build on in trying to reverse the decline of American power. They have, that is to say, a truly historic opportunity. And so do we all.”\textsuperscript{253} Norman Podhoretz wrote this for the January 1981 edition of \textit{Commentary}, clearly celebrating Republican Ronald Reagan’s recent 489-49 electoral college landslide over Democrat Jimmy Carter. Equally clear is the message he sought to convey: the Democratic Party had strayed too far to the left, and as a result the Republicans, guided in part by intellectuals such as himself and the other neoconservatives, had formed a majoritarian coalition that would come to dominate American politics. While many aspects of this prediction, made at the onset of the Reagan Revolution, can and rightfully should be questioned, what is undeniable is that American politics did undergo a fundamental reorientation after the 1980 presidential election.

It is clear, as the past three chapters have shown, that Jewish identity played a crucial role in the development of the specific intellectual thread that began with the formation of the American Jewish Committee in 1906, led to it creating \textit{Commentary} in 1945, and culminated in Podhoretz turning the magazine into the leading literary voice within the nascent neoconservative movement by 1970. There is no way that the founders of the American Jewish Committee, nor the editors and writers of \textit{Contemporary Jewish Record}, nor Elliot Cohen and the other older members of the New York Intellectuals, could have predicted this occurrence. Nevertheless, by virtue of the interactions these individuals, institutions, and ideologies had with one another, how they all adapted to the specific context of the age they were in, and by their

shared Jewish identity, the rightward shift that Podhoretz and *Commentary* underwent was indeed a culmination of all that had proceeded it.

This thesis does not conclusively prove that Jewish identity was at the heart of the neoconservative movement, and that is because that is not its intention. Rather, by highlighting this distinct part of and voice within neoconservatism, it draws attention to the oftentimes overlooked role of the Jewish identity many leaders of the movement shared, reestablishes the central role that *Commentary* had in the movement’s development, and attempts to insert primary sources (such as *Contemporary Jewish Record*) that provide a clearer picture of the roots of the movement. The role of Jewish identity is crucial in fully ascertaining the reasons neoconservatism took the stances it did. Furthermore, looking beyond neoconservatism to the greater American political scene, Jews appear to have had a disproportionate impact in leading the developments that occurred in the 1960s. One need only look at the role of Jews in creating neoconservatism, which is the crux of this thesis, as well as their role in forming the New Left, briefly mentioned in the third chapter and discussed at a greater length in books such as *The New Left and the Jews* and *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*. Perhaps considering these developments as being particularly Jewish, shaped by Jews from different socioeconomic, geographic, and religious backgrounds, will allow historians gain a fuller grasp of their origins, so that the present political dynamics can be better perceived.

This, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, is not intended to be the beginning of the end, but rather the end of the beginning, as it calls for further exploration of the less well understood aspects of neoconservatism, and the role of Jews in American political developments at-large.

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As much insight as this paper presents, there are several areas where additional research would be of great benefit to a comprehensive awareness of the role of Jewish identity in neoconservatism. As important as Elliot Cohen was in this story, as a central figure in the foundation and early years of *Commentary* and a leading elder New York Intellectual, there was neither the time nor space to explore his earlier magazine, *Menorah Journal*. That may be of benefit, and worthy of examination. A future avenue of research might include expanding off this thesis by similarly diving into the roots of other branches of neoconservatism, such as Irving Kristol and his magazine, *The Public Interest*. Furthermore, the journey Norman Podhoretz took in the 1960s was not one he took alone; he undoubtedly was in communication with those proto-neoconservatives (such as Kristol), and perhaps they aided one another in their political evolution. Additional research would benefit from an exploration of the influence of other people, as well as other events in the 1960s (such as urban unrest and Vietnam), in further discerning what drove Podhoretz and his fellow neoconservatives from the political left to the right. Having acknowledged this, a single question remains: why does any of this matter?

The answer to this fundamental question comes in two parts: the general and the particular. The general answer to why this thesis, and what it discusses, matters, is that in as turbulent and unclear a political landscape as the United States finds itself in the year 2022, a greater understanding of the intellectual movements that created the current climate deserve examination. Polarization and radicalization are ever-increasing in the United States, with no clear sign of retreating anytime soon. By closely considering the evolution of *Commentary*, its turn from the political left to the political right, as well as the role of Jewishness in this branch of neoconservatism, if not the entire movement, the lessons learned by better understanding the past can aid us in considering the present. In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, when
Donald Trump and the Republican Party, while losing the Senate and the White House, made minor but not altogether insignificant inroads with Hispanic, Asian, and Black voters, a greater knowledge of a past time when an intellectual movement of a minority group slightly altered its political allegiance could be of great benefit, for all its successes as well as its failures.

The particular answer to why this thesis matters rests on its implications for the American Jewish community. Until the rise of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, American Jews were divided in their political allegiance, with those living in major cities with strong Democratic political machines identifying as Democrats, and those living elsewhere oftentimes identifying as Republicans, with a substantial socialist/third-party minority. Brought into what would later be known as the “New Deal Coalition,” ever since the 1932 presidential election the vast majority of Jews have made the Democratic Party their political home, a safe harbor advocating for their shared political objectives of religious tolerance and liberalism. However, the past decade has seen the community face a drastic increase in antisemitism. While much of the increase in antisemitic violence and rhetoric has been coming from the far right, it has increasingly come from the far left, fueled by anti-capitalist antisemitism as well as anti-Zionist antisemitism (most recently brought to the forefront during the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas).

The forces that Norman Podhoretz, Commentary, and the neoconservatives feared from the New Left appear to be on the rise, as a revitalized American left advances. Better understanding the Jewish roots of neoconservatism, and the motivations that drove a previous generation of American Jewish intellectuals from the left to right, informs any present or future change in the political identity of the American Jewish community. So far, that vast majority of American Jews have maintained their ties to the party that has received the lion’s share of Jewish

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256 This topic is discussed at great length by University of Florida political scientist Kenneth D. Wald in his 2019 book, *The Foundations of American Jewish Liberalism*. 
votes since 1932, the party of Jackson, Cleveland, Wilson, and Roosevelt. But if the story of *Commentary*’s evolution has any lesson, it would be that perceived threats to Jewish identity can lead some to trade their allegiance from the party of Roosevelt to the party of Lincoln, or more fitting for the year 2022, from the party of Obama and Biden to the party of Reagan and Trump.
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