

## Contending with Horror: Jewish Aid Work in the Russian Civil War Pogroms

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### Abstract

*This article explores the subject of Jewish aid work in the former Russian Empire during the Russian Civil War. It considers responses of Jews to the civil war pogroms in the context of Russia's "continuum of crisis," or nearly eight continuous years of military conflict and political instability from 1914 to 1921. It argues that Jewish aid organizations during the Russian Civil War relied on people, institutions, and practices established by their predecessors during the First World War. Jewish aid workers during the Russian Civil War looked to their immediate past as they developed tactics and strategies to navigate a period of political chaos and mass violence. This history demonstrates several continuities within the Jewish public organizational sphere across the revolutionary divide. It shows that Jewish aid workers' ability to adapt ideas and institutions that had originated before the October Revolution enabled them to assist communities caught up in subsequent wartime and revolutionary upheavals.*

### Introduction

**Foundations: Jewish Aid Work in Russia during the Great War, 1914-1917**

**As Good as Forgotten? Jewish Aid Work in a Year of Revolutions**

**On the Eve of Catastrophe: Jewish Aid Work in 1918**

**United by Necessity: The Jewish Central Aid Committee in Kiev**

**From Red Cross to Red Star: Jewish Aid Work under Bolshevik Rule**

**Between Whites and Reds**

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## Conclusion

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## Introduction

Not since the seventeenth-century rebellion led by Bogdan Khmel'nitskii, had the Jews of Eastern Europe experienced suffering on a scale comparable to what occurred in the years immediately following the Russian Revolution of October 1917. During the nearly four years of the Russian Civil War, attacks on minority populations, including Poles, Mennonites, and especially Jews, became an almost daily occurrence. The Jewish communities of Ukraine and Belorussia suffered a particularly shocking fate, with most of the pogroms committed by Ukrainian forces and the anti-Bolshevik Volunteer Army. Anti-Jewish violence reached a peak in 1919, concentrated in Ukrainian territories west of the Dnieper River. Hardly a single Jewish community was spared as troops advanced and retreated across the region, indiscriminately butchering, raping, and torturing Jews, and plundering and torching their homes and neighborhoods.

Nokhem Gergel was among those who witnessed these atrocities. A Jewish aid worker and political leader in Ukraine at the time, he helped to compile documentary materials about the pogroms. Gergel pored over the findings for years afterwards; in a study published in 1928, he concluded that some 50,000 Jews had been killed in Ukraine from 1917 to 1921 – a figure that dwarfed the number of murder victims during earlier waves of anti-Jewish pogroms in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia.<sup>1</sup> But numbers alone fail to capture the true extent of the devastation, for the pogrom's perpetrators left a staggering trail of human suffering in their wake: thousands of children without parents; thousands of raped women; dozens of towns burned to the ground, the majority of whose residents suddenly became homeless refugees – and this still accounted for only a fraction of the destruction. Not until the Second World

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum Gergel, "Di Pogromen in Ukraine 1918-1921," *Shriftn far ekonomik un statistic 1* (1928); the English translation of this article appeared more than twenty years later, as Nahum Gergel, "The Pogroms in Ukraine in 1918-21," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 6 (1951): 237-252.

War would the Jews of Eastern Europe suffer a calamity comparable in its destruction to that of the Russian Civil War pogroms.

A little-known but remarkable aspect of this tragic history is that Jewish relief workers, including Gergel himself, arrived in the aftermath of the pogroms to assist the survivors. They worked to distribute clothing, treat wounds, clean up damaged properties, care for orphans, organize shelters, bury the dead, and much more. These aid workers came on behalf of a coordinated effort led by Jewish organizations and community activists in the regions ravaged by fighting and marauding to assist pogrom victims.

There are understandable reasons as to why Jewish aid work in these years has remained an understudied subject. It is only recently that the growth of scholarly and public interest in the Russian Civil War pogroms has helped to shed light on this dark and neglected chapter of Jewish and Ukrainian history. Earlier studies that laid the groundwork for the present wave of research had other concerns: they sought to explain the historical context in which the pogroms emerged, identify their origins and perpetrators, and reveal their devastating impact on the victims.<sup>2</sup> Their concerns were wholly reasonable given the devastating nature of the events that the authors sought to explain and document. By contrast, the subject of how Jews responded to the pogroms has been considered to a much lesser extent. It is true that some scholars have explored various strategies of Jewish resistance to pogroms in early twentieth-century Russia—most notably self-defense, political lobbying, and efforts to document the pogroms. However, little is known about the ways that Jews employed relief work and self-help as responses to anti-Jewish violence during these years.<sup>3</sup> Important and recent

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<sup>2</sup> These studies include Peter Kenez, “Pogroms and White Ideology in the Russian Civil War,” *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, eds. John D. Klier, Shlomo Lambroza, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 293–313; Vladimir P. Buldakov, “Freedom, Shortages, Violence: The Origins of the ‘Revolutionary Anti-Jewish Pogrom’ in Russia, 1917–1918,” *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, eds. Jonathan Dekel-Chen, David Gaunt, Natan M. Meir, Israel Bartal, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 74–91; Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917-1920*, trans. Timothy J. Portice, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); and most recently, Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917–1921*, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> On Jewish political responses to pogroms from 1903-1920 see Vladimir Levin, “Preventing Pogroms: Patterns in Jewish Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Russia,” *Anti-Jewish Violence*, 95-110. Notable studies of pogrom documentation include Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, (New York: Oxford University

studies by Michael Beizer and Jaclyn Granick have shown that American Jews effectively mobilized international networks to aid East European Jewry during the pogrom years.<sup>4</sup> Here I closely examine humanitarian campaigns led by the Jews of the former Russian Empire themselves.

Casting a spotlight on aid work allows for a new angle on the pogroms, one that enables an understanding of the response by Jewish leaders and organizations at the time. This study of aid work underscores that at a time of catastrophic violence and victimization, Jews in the erstwhile tsarist empire undone by revolutionary upheaval continued to seek ways to exercise agency and influence over their lives through organized activism. This study is thus an attempt to challenge the regnant historiography of East European Jewry, or, to quote Jonathan Dekel-Chen, to balance our knowledge of “what was done to Jews from outside forces” during the Russian Civil War with what “Jews...themselves did in their daily lives and how they maneuvered within the often treacherous waters of late Imperial Russia and the early Soviet Union.”<sup>5</sup> While recognizing the profoundly disturbing impact of anti-Jewish violence in this historical moment, my focus here is to provide a closer look at the daily, though less dramatic concerns that occupied Jewish activists—the work of building institutions and serving the community at a time of acute need.

This study considers Jewish aid work not only during the years of the Russian Civil War but more broadly in the context of Russia’s “continuum of crisis,” or nearly eight continuous years of intense military conflict and political instability from 1914 to 1921.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach is particularly relevant to understanding the

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Press, 2012), chapter 1; Alexandra Garbarini, “Power in Truth Telling: Jewish Testimonial Strategies before the Shoah,” *Kinship, Community, and Self: Essays in Honor of David Warren Sabean*, eds. Jason Coy, Benjamin Marschke, Jared Poley, Claudia Verhoeven, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 170–184. On Jewish self-defense during pogroms, see Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), chapter 7; Inna Shtakser, *The Making of Jewish Revolutionaries in the Pale of Settlement: Community and Identity during the Russian Revolution and its Immediate Aftermath, 1905-07*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chaps. 3-5.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need: Russian Jewry and the Joint, 1914-1924*, (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2015); Jaclyn Granick, “Humanitarian Responses to Jewish Suffering Abroad by American Jewish Organizations, 1914-1929” (PhD. Thesis, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen, “Defusing the Ethnic Bomb: Resolving Local Conflict through Philanthropy in the Interwar USSR,” *Anti-Jewish Violence, 186-203*; 186.

<sup>6</sup> Studies that locate the 1917 revolutions within Russia’s first total war experience include Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*,

Jewish experience of war and revolution. Oleg Budnitskii's work, to take one example, has demonstrated links between anti-Jewish violence perpetrated by the Russian Army during the First World War and the Civil War pogroms.<sup>7</sup> In the present study I, too, consider Jewish responses to the pogroms in connection with pre-revolutionary developments. I will argue that Jewish aid organizations during the Russian Civil War relied on people, institutions, and practices established by their predecessors during the First World War. This study will demonstrate specific ways in which Jewish aid workers during the Civil War looked to their immediate past as they developed tactics and strategies to navigate a period of political chaos and increasing anti-Jewish violence. If we trace the development of Jewish aid work across the continuum of crisis, we can, in fact, identify numerous continuities within the Jewish public organizational sphere across the revolutionary divide. Aid workers' ability to adapt ideas and institutions that had emerged in Russian civil society on the eve of the Revolution enabled them to provide daily, ongoing support to communities caught up in subsequent wartime and revolutionary upheavals.

This study draws upon numerous personal accounts written by aid workers and political leaders, most of which were published in the years following the pogroms, in Russian and Yiddish.<sup>8</sup> In these accounts, former activists focused primarily on chronicling what they had witnessed firsthand; beyond this, they also endeavored to explain the origins of the pogroms and the political setting in which they unfolded. In some accounts, the actions of the authors are relegated to the margins of the histories they relate, mentioning their roles – as relief workers, for example – only in passing and with minimal details. It is as if the writers' memories of providing relief – the ordinary, daily, even mundane work of distributing food, finding housing, caring for children, and so forth – became eclipsed by the shocking violence and suffering they witnessed. At the same time, these aid workers recognized and reflected upon the historical significance of the events in which they actively intervened. Thus Yitzhak Giterman, whose story as

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and most recently Laura Engelstein, *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War, 1914–1922*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Budnitskii, *Russian Jews*, 225–240.

<sup>8</sup> As examples, see references to twelve accounts published in the 1920s and early 1930s by some of the aid workers we will meet in these pages, in Gergel, "The Pogroms in Ukraine," 237 note 2.

an aid worker we will follow in the pages to come, wrote in an autobiographical essay published in 1931 that the significance of what the Jews of Russia experienced from 1914 to 1921 had yet to be fully grasped by his contemporaries. “Future generations,” he instructed, “will have to contend with the horror we endured in 1919.”<sup>9</sup> Giterman provides clues about the overall significance of his message, which lie buried in his account; many of those who worked alongside him wrote in the same manner. These clues must be disengaged from their narrative surroundings, and together with the aid workers themselves, deciphered in the social context of their times. It is also important to read these accounts with a critical eye for the authors’ own biases and agendas, whether institutional, political, or personal. I have tried wherever possible to corroborate their claims and descriptions with information drawn from contemporary Jewish newspapers in Russian and Yiddish, as well as records of Jewish organizations, including charters, protocols, and correspondence now preserved in archival collections.



*Fig. 1: Yitzhak Giterman*

<https://onegszabat.org/en/biographies/>

Our discussion of Jewish aid work begins with the Petrograd-based Jewish Committee for Aid to War Victims (known as the EKOPO, according to its Russian acronym). The Petrograd Jewish Aid Committee’s activities have been surveyed in various scholarly works; the present study identifies it as a predecessor and model for Jewish aid organizations operative during the Russian

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<sup>9</sup> Yitzhak Giterman, “Avtobioger,” in *Oyf di khurves fun milkhomes un mehumes: Pinkes fun gegent komitet “Yekopo” in Vilne (1919–1931)*, ed. Moyshe Shalit (Vilna:EKOPO, 1931), cols. 842–865; 862.

Civil War.<sup>10</sup> We will trace the ways in which EKOPO workers continued to be active in the field, bringing with them the strategies and principles they acquired during the First World War as they moved across various parts of the former Russian Empire, and continued their work well into the early years of the Soviet regime. We begin with the EKOPO's founding during the First World War and the center of its efforts in Petrograd. We then follow the organization and its workers during the February and October Revolutions of 1917, as the EKOPO developed new tactics and strategies in order to continue assisting civilians in a situation of ongoing war and impending collapse of political authority. Our focus then shifts geographically to revolutionary Ukraine, where Jewish aid workers and organizations concentrated their efforts from 1917 until the early 1920s. The region changed hands no fewer than seven times during this period as various armies advanced and retreated, among them Reds and Whites, as well as Ukrainian, Polish, and German forces. Jewish organizations continued to provide relief without interruption throughout these years, building central and local institutions to support civilian populations at a time of increasing violence and anarchy. Still active when the Bolsheviks consolidated their rule in Ukraine in 1920, these pre-revolutionary Jewish aid organizations and their veteran staff were absorbed into the first state-authorized Jewish organization of Soviet times, known as the *Evobkom*, which operated until 1924. The article concludes with a

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<sup>10</sup> Two pioneering essays on the EKOPO are Il'ia Trotskii, "Samodeiatel'nost' i samopomoshch' Russkogo evreistva," in *Kniga o Russkom Evreistve ot 1860-kh godov do revoliutsii 1917 g.*, (New York: Soiuз Russkikh Evreev, 1960), 471–497; and Mera Sverdlova, "Ha-vaad ha-yehudi le-'ezrat nifga'ei ha-milhamah (EKOPO) be-Russia, 1914-1916," *Yahadut zemanenu* 4 (1987): 269–288. More recent studies include Steven J. Zipperstein, "The Politics of Relief: The Transformation of Russian Jewish Communal Life during the First World War," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry IV: Jews and the European Crisis*, ed. Jonathan Frankel, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 22–40; M. A. Sverdlova, "EKOPO ve-hasiyu'a le-nifga'ei ha-milhamah be-mers-oktober 1917," *Shvut* 13 (1998): 19–30; Peter Gattrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); A. S. Tumanova, "Evreiskie obshchestvennye organizatsii v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny, na primere Tambovskoi gubernii," in *Mirovoi krizis 1914–1920 godov i sud'ba vostochnoevropenskogo evreistva*, eds. Oleg V. Budnitskii et al., (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005), 124–142; Yevgeniya Pevzner, "Jewish Committee for the Relief of War Victims (1914–1921)," *Pinkas* 1 (2006): 114–142; Joshua Karlip, *The Tragedy of a Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), chapter 2; Simon Rabinovich, *Jewish Rights, National Rites: Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), chapter 5; Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, chapter 1; and my own "Fighting 'On Our Own Territory': The Rescue and Representation of Jews in Russia during World War I," *Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22, Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution*, eds. Adele Lindenmeyr, Christopher Read, Peter Waldron, (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 79–105.

discussion of three aid workers' individual trajectories as public activists during the interwar years. Some of the aid workers active during the years of the Russian Civil War years later left the Soviet Union and some stayed, but none of them abandoned their identities as community activists. That so many of them helped to lead, and in some cases, to establish new Jewish public institutions suggests the extent to which the experience of the pogroms and the response to them shaped a generation of East European Jews.

### **Foundations: Jewish Aid Work in Russia during the Great War, 1914-1917**

The Petrograd Jewish Committee to Aid War Victims (EKOPO) experienced meteoric growth during the First World War. Founded in August 1914, the organization expanded in unexpected ways over nearly four years of war to become the largest federated Jewish organization in Russian history, and one of the most active civic associations among Russia's many national minorities. By the end of Russia's participation in the war, the EKOPO had aided more than 238,000 Jews through nearly 170 local committees, providing for essential, daily needs such as shelter; money for bread, train fare and heating fuel; and assistance with long-term resettlement needs including job training, schools for children, adult courses in Russian language, and legal advice.<sup>11</sup> Its reach extended throughout the Empire: the historic heartland of Russian Jewry in the Pale of Settlement, as well as Habsburg Galicia, which Russia occupied twice during the war. The EKOPO's aid workers also followed nearly 100,000 Jews who resettled in Russian territories which had been opened to Jews by imperial decree after August 1915. New communities of nearly 9,000 Jews sprang up in the cities of Penza and Tambov, among others; thousands more alighted in cities along the Volga River such as Saratov, while others ended their journeys much further east, in the cities of Omsk, Tomsk, and Irkutsk in Siberia.<sup>12</sup>

The EKOPO's emergence as the preeminent Jewish public institution in Russia resulted from multiple factors. First, we might consider what kind of workers the organization attracted to its ranks, and the types of ideas and strategies they introduced into the practice of Jewish aid work. Secondly, it is important to identify the relationships that the EKOPO established with external bodies, most

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<sup>11</sup> These statistics appeared in the EKOPO's newspaper *Delo pomoshchi* 1-2 (January 20, 1917), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-14, 65-66. On the case of Jewish wartime aid work in the city of Tambov, see Tumanova, "Evreiskie obshchestvennye organizatsii."



notably the state and international philanthropies, both of which together provided the bulk of its funding.

The EKOPO was founded at a meeting of August 18, 1914, held by members of the Petrograd Choral Synagogue's Governing Board. Its initial organizing committee consisted of thirty-seven members of Petrograd's Jewish elite, including members of the Duma, the city's rabbis, and other notable figures. The well-known lawyer and political activist G. B. Sliozberg served as director; the banker M. A. Varshavskii, president of the Petrograd Jewish community, was the first chairman. The following month, the group received authorization from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to operate as an independent organization and opened ten regional committees for the purpose of local fundraising.<sup>13</sup>

The EKOPO's founding members had a limited goal: to provide mutual aid to families of Jewish reservists. By late 1914, however, it had become clear that significant-sized civilian populations in the Pale of Settlement needed emergency aid as well. These consisted of two groups in particular: tens of thousands of refugees who had fled in search of safety from war zones; and Jews whom the Russian Army had forcibly deported from front zones, based on the largely unfounded suspicion that Jews spied on behalf of the Germans. In spring 1915, the Russian Army initiated a systematic policy of deporting expellees, resulting in the expulsion of as many as 300,000 Jews to the Russian interior.<sup>14</sup> The EKOPO's agenda therefore evolved throughout the war. While it initially focused on providing emergency aid such as clothing, transportation, shelter, and food, by late 1915 the organization had begun to provide resettlement services, including job training, schooling, and legal aid.

As the needs of recipients and range of its services expanded over the first two years of the war, so did the EKOPO's organizational structure and staff. Jewish community charity had been traditionally operated from within synagogues, and distributed at the private discretion of rabbis or small circles composed of elite benefactors. In the decades before the war, however, several Jewish public organizations had sought to distance themselves from such religiously-affiliated forms of giving; instead, they attempted to emulate Russia's growing number of secular private associations and civic organizations. To that end, they

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<sup>13</sup> *Otchet Tsentral'nogo Evreiskogo Komiteta pomoshchi zhertvam voiny s nachala deiatel'nosti, Avgust 1914 goda po 30-e Iunia 1917 goda* (Petrograd, 1918), 8-9 (hence *Otchet EKOPO*).

<sup>14</sup> Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 137-150.

appropriated concepts and methods of “rational” or “scientific” charity: they founded chartered organizations that held regular meetings, were open to dues-paying members, conducted public fundraising campaigns, operated on fixed budgets, and made their activities transparent and accountable to the public through periodic publications.<sup>15</sup>

During the war, the EKOPO delegated much of its work “in the field” to three leading Jewish public organizations that fit this mold. The oldest and most venerable of them was the OPE (Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among Russian Jews). Founded in 1863, the OPE pioneered the concept of modern Jewish schools that combined secular and religious education. The second oldest, founded in the 1880s, was the ORT (Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Artisanry among Russian Jews), which oversaw labor training, job bureaus, subsidized workshops, and savings and loan societies. The youngest of the three, the OZE (Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population, founded 1912), ran stationary and mobile clinics and children’s centers.

These three organizations had their central offices in Petrograd but operated through networks of local branches across the Pale of Settlement. During the war, they came under the EKOPO “umbrella,” as it were, becoming connected to a Central Committee in Petrograd from which they received their funding and organizational guidance. Parallel divisions were established using the same model outside Petrograd as well, including in Moscow, Kiev and Vilna. The Moscow committee called itself the Jewish Aid Society (EVOPO). In Kiev, the organization was known as the Kiev Society for Aid to Jews (KOPE). In 1916, the Kiev and Moscow committees formally united with the Petrograd EKOPO, from which they received substantial funds.<sup>16</sup>

Each aid committee, whether based in Petrograd, Moscow, Kiev or elsewhere, operated according to a “center and provinces” model: the central office employed and coordinated the work of dozens of aid workers, known as authorized emissaries, or agents, who traveled and served the surrounding provinces. The EKOPO’s employment of emissaries reflected a key principle of

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<sup>15</sup> On Russian civic associations before and during the war, two important works are Adele Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice: Charity, Society, and the State in Imperial Russia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Joseph Bradley, *Associations in Tsarist Russia: Science, Patriotism and Civil Society*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> *Otchet EKOPO*, 7–8.

scientific philanthropy: that aid organizations should investigate the needs of their applicants so as then to create a rational plan of aid.<sup>17</sup> In Jewish communities that already operated their own mutual aid societies, EKOPO emissaries helped to organize and fund local initiatives; in other locations, they established and directed the work of entirely new committees. The EKOPO's ability to function as it did depended in large part on its traveling emissaries, who served as links in an organizational network that spanned the length of the empire. The emissaries helped to coordinate services amongst the three partner organizations, communicated real-time information and counsel from the field to the central decision-making bodies, and not least, enabled the distribution of aid directly to recipients on the ground.

The EKOPO practiced innovative and rational strategies not only by attempting to unify and centralize Jewish aid work, but also by attracting new kinds of public activists to serve in its offices and as emissaries in the field. The new activists tended to be young, and their ideals often combined traditional Jewish values and radical politics, as well as the intelligentsia's belief that the educated person should apply their profession to fight for basic human rights and justice on behalf of the poor.<sup>18</sup> The new workers came to community activism from across party lines as liberals, socialists, and Zionists. In spite of ideological differences, they shared the belief that aid work among Jews was both a moral obligation and an opportunity of national and political significance, a means to modernize Jewish community life and ameliorate the various underlying conditions that caused widespread poverty. Thus, the ORT introduced labor programs with the goal of making the Jewish working population less inclined to engage in petty trade and more "productive," while the OPE promoted modern Jewish schools in the hopes of educating Jews who would be equally familiar with Russian culture and with their familial Jewish heritage.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the aid workers who joined the EKOPO emerged from similar political, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Nokhem Gergel, for example, was born in 1887 in the shtetl Rotmistrivka in Ukraine and raised in a traditional Jewish home. While studying for a law degree in Kiev, he became a fervent proponent of

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<sup>17</sup> I believe the EKOPO's leaders looked to the Russian "guardianship" (*popechitel'stvo*) as a model. These were charities that employed local agents to investigate the needs of the poor. See Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice*, chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>18</sup> "Delo ustroeniia," *Delo pomoshchi* 12 (November 20, 1916), 1-4.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Gennady Estraiikh, "Changing Ideologies of Artisanal 'Productivisation': ORT in Late Imperial Russia," *East European Jewish Affairs* 39/1 (2009): 3-18.

Yiddish culture and joined the OPE, where he advocated for the introduction of Yiddish-language education in secular Jewish schools. He also became involved in Jewish national politics as a member of the Socialist Zionist party. Gergel moved to Petrograd in his late twenties, and in 1914, volunteered for the EKOPO shortly after the war began. In 1915-16 he aided Jewish refugees in the Kielce, Vilna, and Minsk regions as a traveling aid worker. The EKOPO's board then elected Gergel to serve on its Central Committee – a gesture that indicates the degree to which his abilities as an aid worker were respected and valued. He remained on the Central Committee until the end of the war, and served as its secretary for a time.<sup>20</sup>

Nokhem Shtif followed a trajectory similar to that of Gergel. Born in 1879 in Rovno, Shtif spent his youth in Kiev studying law. He wrote for both the Yiddish and the Russian press, and experimented with Jewish socialism and Zionism. Soon after the war began, he moved his family to Petrograd from Vilna, where he had previously worked for the Yiddish publishing house Kletskin. He joined the EKOPO in the first months of the war, first as a traveling agent in Kovno and Chelm provinces, and later as a secretary at the EKOPO central office, where he managed the organization's correspondence and edited its two bi-monthly relief work newspapers in Russian, *Pomoshch* (Aid) and *Delo pomoshchi* (Aid Work).<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 2: Nokhem Shtif  
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shtif\\_Nabum.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shtif_Nabum.jpg))

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<sup>20</sup> “Gergel,” in *Oyf di khurves*, 732–733. On the OPE’s Yiddish-language proponents at the turn of the century, see Brian Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late Imperial Russia*, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009), 8, 12, chapter 10.

<sup>21</sup> Nokhem Shtif, “Oytobiografye fun Nokhem Shtif,” *Yivo bleter* V/ 3-5 (March-May 1933): 195-225, here 198-199; “Nokhem Shtif,” in *Leksikon fun yidishe shraiber in Ratn-farband*, ed. Chaim Beider, (New York: Congress of Jewish Culture, 2011), 384.

Jewish aid workers in other parts of Russia shared backgrounds which had much in common with Gergel and Shtif. In 1915, 29-year-old Eliyahu Gumener was sent by the EKOPO as an emissary to Podolia and Ekaterinoslav provinces of Ukraine (a post he kept until 1920). Born near Kovno, he had studied law, affiliated with the Socialist Zionists for a time, and contributed to both the Russian and the Yiddish press.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Yitzhak Giterman combined a passion for secular Jewish culture with community organizing. Born in 1889, he rebelled against his Hasidic upbringing after moving to Kiev as a young man, going on to acquire a European education and take part in the exciting projects of new Yiddish literary circles. In 1915, at the age of 26, he began to work for the Kiev Aid Society (KOPE) as an emissary in Volynia province, where he helped thousands of Jews who had been expelled from occupied Galicia into the Russian interior.<sup>23</sup> Like Gumener, he remained active in the same region until 1920. During years of wartime aid work, both Gumener and Giterman helped to build centralized institutions and networks that provided direct aid across large territories to tens of thousands of refugees. The values that propelled them into relief work, as well as the practical skills they gained during the war years, shaped their work in later years.

Young Jewish aid workers may have supplied the EKOPO with talent and spirited dedication to civic service, but its social status and power as an organization derived almost entirely from its connections to the state. Because the Russian government relied on the country's public sphere to aid refugees during the war, the Ministry of the Interior designated the EKOPO to conduct relief among the Empire's Jewish population in August 1915. From the Special Conference on Refugees within that Ministry, the EKOPO received 17 out of 31 million rubles of its income.<sup>24</sup> In Sliozberg's role as director, he became

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<sup>22</sup> Elijah Gumener, *A kapitl Ukrayne (Tsvey yor in Podolye)*, (Vilna: Farlag Sh. Shreberk, 1921). For biographical information, see "Eliyahu Gumener," in *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye*, ed. Zalmen Reyzen, (Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1928), 551–552. Gumener is also listed as one of the EKOPO's plenipotentiaries in *Otchet EKOPO*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Giterman, "Avtobioger," 842-850. See also Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2009 [2007]), 95-97.

<sup>24</sup> The Russian government allocated nearly 500,000 rubles in 1915; 5,879,000 rubles in 1916; and 10,800,000 rubles in 1917. *Otchet EKOPO*, 13.

recognized as the de facto representative of Jewish interests, appearing regularly before state authorities to advocate for the organization's needs, and by extension, those of the Jewish population. As we will see, Jewish aid work organizations that succeeded the EKOPO after 1917 would aspire to regain the influential status – and state funding – that it had been granted during the World War.

In its capacity as the official provider for Jewish welfare in Russia, the EKOPO was also able to establish ties with international Jewish philanthropies in Europe and North America. Nearly a quarter of its budget came from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint, or JDC) in New York, founded in November 1914 for the purpose of collecting and distributing funds to Jewish war victims abroad.<sup>25</sup> After the February and October Revolutions this partnership between Russian and American Jewry proved highly consequential for the EKOPO and its successors, for whom the Joint's support became a lifeline.

### **As Good as Forgotten? Jewish Aid Work in a Year of Revolutions**

“The February Revolution caught the EKOPO at a time of intense activity,” recalled its director G. B. Sliozberg.<sup>26</sup> By early 1917, the organization's reach extended across the entire Empire, serving nearly 250,000 Jewish refugees in some 2,000 locations that spanned from occupied Galicia to Siberia. The needs of Jewish civilians remained particularly acute in Galicia and Bukovina, territories that Russia occupied a second time after the Brusilov Offensive in summer 1916. There, “even in the death throes of the tsarist regime,” as one baffled aid worker wrote, the Russian Army and recently installed civilian authorities continued to expel Jews.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Jaclyn Granick, “Waging Relief: The Politics and Logistics of American Jewish War Relief in Europe and the Near East (1914-1918),” *First World War Studies* 5/1 (2014): 55-68; 57.

<sup>26</sup> G. B. Sliozberg, *Dela minuvshikh dnei: zapiski russkago evreia*, Vol. 3, (Paris: Pascal, 1933-1934), 368.

<sup>27</sup> “*Otchet o deiatel'nosti Kievskogo obshchestva dlia okazaniia pomoshchi evreiskomu naseleniiu, postradavshemu ot voennykh deistvii, 1918 g.*,” Russian State Historical Archive, St. Petersburg (*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv*; hence RGIA), f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 190, ll. 1-6, here 3.

Russian Jews euphorically welcomed the change in government after the Tsar's abdication on March 2, 1917. The enactment of civic emancipation also stoked many Jewish activists' ambitions to pursue rights of political and cultural autonomy for the Jews as a national minority. The EKOPO's leaders seemed poised to take on a central role in such a project: the organization had acquired status and recognition, one that capably represented Jewish interests before the Russian government and directly served the people with its network of health care, education, and emergency relief services across the Empire.<sup>28</sup> Its network of centralized and local committees provided a ready-made institutional infrastructure for Jewish national autonomy in Russia.

As exciting new prospects emerged for the EKOPO, its staff maintained the ongoing, daily work of coordinating and funding aid work throughout Russia. Jewish relief organizations believed that the refugee crisis might soon abate, even if the country remained indefinitely embroiled in war. The Provisional Government, formed by liberal and socialist politicians in the State Duma, had already taken steps to forbid any further expulsions of civilians from zones of military importance. In one of its first acts, the new government granted amnesty to all Russian citizens who had been forcibly displaced from their homes because of wartime administrative decrees. Among the millions of refugees were hundreds of thousands of Jews who could now make their way home, no longer as refugees but as citizens who possessed rights of free movement and residence.

It was also widely assumed that the provisional government would increase funding for organizations that helped refugees. The selection of Prince G. E. L'vov as Prime Minister in the new government would have certainly supported such expectations. As the leader of the Zemstvo Union for a decade before the war, L'vov had strongly advocated for the expansion of Russia's burgeoning civil society; during the war years, he transformed the Union into the Empire's largest provider of health, education, and emergency aid to the military and civilians.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Outline of the History of the Ekopo, since its foundation, in August 1914 (to the end of 1919)," December 14, 1920. Archives of the Joint Distribution Committee, New York, AR 1919–1921/4/36/1/253.4/1–31, here 31. Russian Jewish activists debated how to establish effective institutions of national autonomy at a series of conferences held in spring 1917. It is telling that the EKOPO sent several representatives to take part in the proceedings. At these conferences, the idea of the All-Russian Jewish Congress was discussed; the Congress later met in June 1918. Simon Rabinovitch notes that twice as many public organizations as political parties took part in planning the All-Russian Jewish Congress (*Jewish Rights, National Rites*, 224).

<sup>29</sup> On L'vov's wartime efforts see Thomas Earl Porter with Lawrence W. Lerner, *Prince George E. L'vov: The Zemstvo, Civil Society, and Liberalism in Late Imperial Russia*. (Lanham, MD:

These promising signs notwithstanding, government funding for refugees gradually shrank, even as the price of food skyrocketed. By summer 1917, the EKOPO's quarterly allocation from the government had been delayed; L'vov himself resigned after just four months in office, in favor of his Minister of War, A. F. Kerenskii. Refugees did not rank very high among the new Provisional Government's problems, – which included the need to enact fundamental political reforms, quell mass strikes and disturbances, and maintain the country's part in a war against the German, Habsburg, and Ottoman armies. As one Jewish aid worker conceded at the time, “relief work is a very modest task compared to the enormous problems that now face Russia,” even if “hundreds of thousands of war victims...are still suffering and demand our tireless attention and aid.”<sup>30</sup>

Jewish refugees did indeed remain in dire need. The EKOPO's statistics chief, G. Prussakov, estimated that some two thirds of the registered refugees' existence depended almost entirely on subsistence allowances from the government (*paiki*); these were issued as monthly monetary payments calculated according to the prices of food.<sup>31</sup> Recipients of the monthly subsidies included women with young children, widows, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled – people categorized as dependent or unable to work. To account for inflation, the Provisional Government had increased the *payok* from 6.5 rubles to 7.5 rubles per person in early 1917. However, Prussakov calculated that average food and housing expenses amounted to no less than 13 rubles per person per month, and these costs continued to rise steadily throughout 1917.<sup>32</sup>

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Lexington Books, 2017) , 169-204; on the wartime work of the Union of Towns and Zemstvos, a useful overview can be found in William Gleason, “The All-Russian Union of Zemstvos and World War I,” in *The Zemstvo in Russia: An Experiment in Local Self-Government*, eds. Terence Emmons, Wayne S. Vucinich, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 365-382.

<sup>30</sup> “*Novyi poriadok i delo pomoshchi*,” *Delo pomoshchi* 5–6 (March 25, 1917), 3; on the status of Jewish aid work in early 1917, see also Sverdlova, “*EKOPO ve-hasiyu'a le-nifga'ei ha-milhamah*,” 20-21; Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, 35-36.

<sup>31</sup> In Russia, soldiers' wives and children had the right to state assistance in the form of *paiki* according to a pre-war law of June 25, 1912. See Liudmila Bulgakova, “The Phenomenon of the Liberated Soldier's Wife,” in *Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, Volume 2*, ed. Adele Lindenmeyr, (Waldron and Read), 301-326; 301.

<sup>32</sup> G. Prussakov, “*Sostav i rasselenie bezhentsev i vyselentsev-evreev*,” *Delo pomoshchi* 1-2 (January 20, 1917), 18–20; see also Trotskii, “*Samodeiatel'nost' i samopomoshch*,” 497. Prussakov's estimate allowed for about 9 rubles for food and 4 rubles for housing per month, though he noted that costs varied between front zones and the interior. Moreover, he had made these estimates in January 1917, before inflation grew rapidly in the wake of the February Revolution.



Like many other civic organizations in wartime Russia, such as the Union of Zemstvos, the EKOPO helped its recipients by supplying the difference between their *paiki* and the minimal cost of living. But once the EKOPO had lost its own source of state funding, it had to look to other kinds of income to supplement the growing costs of food and housing. It spent accumulated reserves; it also looked to small, but regular private donations from Russian Jewry, even though in 1917 these shrank to a fraction – nearly by 18 times – of what they had been on average over the previous two years.<sup>33</sup> The EKOPO's greatest source of support, however, came from its overseas partner in New York, the Joint, which sent nearly \$450,000 in monthly installments (over five million rubles) from March to December 1917.<sup>34</sup>

In the attempt to minimize expenses, the EKOPO Central Committee in Petrograd cut its staff and began to close local aid committees. Nokhem Shtif lost his job in September 1917, when the EKOPO could no longer afford to print *Delo pomoshchi* (Aid Work), the bi-weekly newspaper that he had edited for the previous year.<sup>35</sup> It was a bad sign, he wrote, that even the Jewish press took little notice of the paper's closure – and an indication of the more fundamental problem, that the widely shared spirit of voluntarism seemed to have vanished. Perhaps, he wrote Shtif, this was even a sign that “the refugees had been as good as forgotten by Jewish society.”<sup>36</sup> Although frustration understandably led him to exaggerate, his comments are indicative of the dramatic shift then occurring in Russian Jewish society.

Shtif needed to address problems of his own, as well. Scarce food and intense surveillance of non-Bolsheviks made life in Petrograd increasingly unbearable. He held out for nearly a year; then, as he wrote, “hunger finally struck my family,” and in late 1918, they left in search of better living conditions.<sup>37</sup> He joined numerous other aid workers who had fled the city. Some set out for Moscow, the country's new capital and an emerging center of Jewish culture as a

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<sup>33</sup> Sverdlova, “EKOPO ve-ha-siyu'a le-nifga'ei ha-milhamah,” 21.

<sup>34</sup> *Orchet EKOPO*, 12; Granick, “Humanitarian Responses to Jewish Suffering Abroad,” 90-91.

<sup>35</sup> “*Di hilfərbeyt*,” *Hilf* no. 1-2 (1919), 15. Shtif was likely the author of this article (he also edited *Hilf*), in which he recounted important events in Jewish aid work before the October Revolution.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Nokhem Shtif, “*Oytobiografye fun Nokhem Shtif*,” *Yivo bleter* V, nos. 3-5 (March-May 1933), 198-200.

result of wartime displacement.<sup>38</sup> Still others opted for Kiev. This was the case of Shtif's colleague at the EKOPO, Nokhem Gergel, who had made the move earlier in 1918.<sup>39</sup> Resettling in Kiev made sense for several reasons. Perhaps for some aid workers, moving to Ukraine represented a kind of homecoming: as noted above, Shtif hailed from Rovno, and Gergel from Rakhmistrovka (in Volynia and Kiev provinces, respectively). Moreover, the right-bank and central regions of Ukraine remained active war zones; having spent years as relief workers "in the field," both Shtif and Gergel could expect their skills to be useful in these areas. But undoubtedly the decisive factor that drew Jewish activists to Ukraine at this time was their hope of developing independent forms of Jewish cultural and political life. With longtime centers of Jewish cultural life in Warsaw and Vilna still under German occupation, the climate in revolutionary Kiev, by contrast, seemed to offer a wholly plausible setting for realizing such aspirations.<sup>40</sup>

Emboldened by the February Revolution, Ukrainians began their own experiment with national independence in spring 1917 by setting up a socialist-dominated parliament (Rada) that recognized the Provisional Government. Of crucial significance for Jews, in June 1917, the Ukrainian Rada offered rights of self-determination to the region's three largest national minorities – the Poles, the Russians, and the Jews – and established three separate offices tasked with building institutions of self-governance among these respective groups. In January 1918, the Rada formally declared independence from Russia's new Bolshevik government and proclaimed itself the Ukrainian National Republic. Shortly thereafter, the Ukrainian government passed the Law of National-Personal Autonomy, which for Jews meant recognition of Yiddish as a national language and state funding for Jewish institutions under the authority of a Jewish Ministry within the government. The tasks of the Jewish Ministry – the first political office of its kind in history, as Henry Abramson observes – consisted of "preparing legislation to develop the infrastructure of Jewish autonomy in Ukraine, and dealing with requests for assistance from the public."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 35-38.

<sup>39</sup> "N. Gergel," *Oyf di khurves*, 732-735.

<sup>40</sup> Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 52-54.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times: A Prayer for the Government*, revised edition 2018 ([Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999]), 112. The Jewish Ministry began with the status of a Vice-Secretariat and only in January 1918, following the passage of the

It is striking that many of the Jewish Ministry's staff had spent the preceding years working for the EKOPO and its partner organizations. The UNR's first Minister of Jewish Affairs, Dr. Moyshe Zilberfarb, had worked during the war as an inspector of savings and loan cooperatives for the Jewish Colonization Society (EKO).<sup>42</sup> His colleagues at the Ministry included Isai Khurgin of the Petrograd ORT of the war years and Yakov Lestschinsky, who since 1914 had worked for the ORT in Ukraine, collecting data about the economic status of Jewish refugees and setting up employment bureaus.<sup>43</sup> Khurgin was named Zilberfarb's deputy (head of the Department of General Affairs), a position that subsequently went to Nokhem Gergel and later to Lestschinsky.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Avrom Strashun had helped to found dozens of refugee schools for the OPE during the war; after moving to Kiev, he became the head of the Jewish Ministry's Department of Education.<sup>45</sup>

The direct path leading from wartime aid work to revolutionary national politics was not followed only among Jews after 1917. A parallel transition was made by Armenian, Latvian, Ukrainian, and other national activists in post-revolutionary Russia. Peter Gatrell explains that their move from public service to political leadership made complete sense, given that "administrative practice within the national organizations [during the World War] gave them ready-made institutions, trained personnel, and direct experience of rule."<sup>46</sup>

Despite the number of public activists that served in the Jewish Ministry's ranks, that office seems not to have provided any direct funding for Jewish aid work in 1917. The public organizations for labor (ORT), health (OZE) and education (OPE) and their umbrella organization, the Kiev Society for Aid to Jews (KOPE), apparently worked independently of the Jewish Ministry. Moreover, as we will see below, Zilberfarb expressed little awareness of – or concern for – the

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Law of National-Personal Autonomy, was elevated to the status of a government ministry. The term "Jewish Ministry" is used consistently throughout this essay to avoid confusion.

<sup>42</sup> "M. Zilberfarb," *Oyf di khurves*, 745-746.

<sup>43</sup> *Oyf di khurves*, 773-775; Gennady Estraiikh, "Jacob Lestschinsky: A Yiddishist Dreamer and Social Scientist," *Science in Context* 20 (2007): 215-37.

<sup>44</sup> Moyshe Zilberfarb, *Dos yidische ministerium un di yidische avtonomie in ukraine* (Kiev: *Yidisher folksfarlag*, 1919), 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> E. Tcherikower, *Antisemitizm i pogromy na Ukraine 1917-1918 gg. (k istorii Ukrainsko-Evreiskikh otnoshenii)* (Berlin: *Izd. "Ostjüdisches Historisches Archiv,"* 1923), 66-67; Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times*, 57-68.

<sup>46</sup> Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 195.

challenges that faced Jewish relief organizations in Ukraine at the time, most importantly, growing welfare needs and dwindling resources.

In the course of 1917, the Kiev Aid Society (KOPE) assisted nearly 8,000 registered Jewish refugees within central Ukraine, as well as within Russian-occupied Galicia and Bukovina. Of that number, nearly 31,500 refugees were to be found in the provinces of Kiev, Volynia, Podolia, and Chernigov, while the majority – about 50,000 – were in Galicia.<sup>47</sup> The KOPE's emissaries in the field included long-time aid workers who had been there from the start of the war. In eastern Galicia, Dr. F. E. Lander, a military doctor and former OPE activist from Petrograd, had been stationed with his regiment since his arrival in late 1914. For years he had been discretely aiding local Jewish communities, beyond his daily duties at a military hospital in Tarnopol. He continued to work remotely for the KOPE throughout 1917 to set up local aid committees and allocate money. He also traveled by car to distribute food, fuel, shoes, and money for medical care and education to those most in need in towns such as Zholkiew and Tarnopol.<sup>48</sup>

Lander's partner, S. Gomel'skii, had also worked in Galicia and Podolia province since 1914. Both men crossed paths with the legendary folklorist and writer S. An-sky, who visited the region twice on behalf of the Petrograd EKOPO, first in early 1915 and again in January 1917. Upon his arrival in the area for the second time, Ansky found the two men still working "with great devotion" on providing aid, as he wrote; he estimated that the milk, bread, and eggs they distributed over the years "saved hundreds, even thousands, of people from starvation."<sup>49</sup>

In Volynia province, Giterman continued to work as the KOPE's representative with about 19,000 registered refugees. He shuttled between local committees in Lutsk and Zhitomir, while also coordinating services with the OZE and ORT to

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<sup>47</sup> RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 190, ll. 1-3.

<sup>48</sup> S. Iu. Gomel'skii, "V okkupirovannoi Galitsii i Bukovine," *Delo pomoshchi* 12 (November 20, 1916), 6-12, here 11; on Lander's pre-war work with the OPE as an "educational inspector," see Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy*, 153-154.

<sup>49</sup> An-sky's 1917 return to Galicia is described in the fourth volume of his Yiddish war memoir, *Khurbn Galitsye*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel as S. Ansky, *The Enemy at His Pleasure: A Journey through the Jewish Pale of Settlement during World War I* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), quoted here 224-225; on Lander and Gomel'skii, see also 79-83, 135-140, 224-226, 240-244. An-sky described his encounters with Lander and Gomel'skii in 1915; see his diary entries of January 23 and February 27, 1915, in *The 1915 Diary of S. An-sky: A Russian-Jewish Writer at the Eastern Front*, trans. Polly Zavadiivker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

run homeless shelters, medical clinics, and schools and to distribute food and supplies.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, in Podolia province, Eliyahu Gumener remained in the role he had first taken on in 1915 as an emissary for the EKOPO. In addition to providing food and shelter, he worked with returning Jewish refugees and local populations to appraise property lost in the war and apply to regional commissions with their claims. Gumener estimated that the claims of some 2,000 people in Podolia province alone totaled about four million rubles.<sup>51</sup>

The population of homeless Jews in Ukrainian territory grew steadily throughout 1917. In summer 1917, the Russian Army's disastrous Kerensky Offensive in Galicia prompted a flood of human displacement into the Russian interior. A number of months earlier, the government had ordered the repatriation of all Galician deportees, including nearly 10,000 Jews.<sup>52</sup> As An-sky wrote, this news delighted the refugees at first, but they "soon experienced a bitter disappointment." Aid workers attested to the struggles that most were caught up in after coming home. Gomel'skii observed refugees returning to Podolia province: they had spent years in exile and returned empty handed, with no money for food. He saw people who had walked barefoot over long distances, focused on the sole goal of return.<sup>53</sup>

More problems ensued once the refugees arrived at their destinations. In the town of Satanov, returning deportees found their homes stripped of doors, windows, and ovens. To make matters worse, their Ukrainian neighbors, including a few who had occupied the "abandoned" homes, regarded the returning Jews as "dangerous competitors." Other Jews found their homes occupied by military authorities. In response, some Jews simply left without attempting to reclaim their properties.<sup>54</sup> An-sky wrote that the homeless crammed into every least space they could find, including synagogues and study houses, barns and stables.<sup>55</sup> Gomel'skii also described homeless families sleeping on the streets, others in earthen pits covered by sheets. Traditional family life appeared to be breaking down; in one town, he observed evidence of child

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<sup>50</sup> RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 190, ll. 1, 4; Giterman, "Avtobioger," 860.

<sup>51</sup> E. Gumener, "Vegen di hizkes fun der milkhome," *Hilf* nos. 1-2 (1919), 27-30.

<sup>52</sup> Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 179.

<sup>53</sup> S. Iu. Gomel'skii, "V okkupirovannoi Galitsii," 7.

<sup>54</sup> "Di hilfərbeyt," 18; "Fun podolier gubernie," *Hilf* 1-2 (1919), 43.

<sup>55</sup> An-sky, *The Enemy at His Pleasure*, 231.

prostitution on the street as he watched a twelve-year-old boy serve as the “broker” between the “young ladies and gents.”<sup>56</sup>

The Kiev Aid Society lost significant sources of income in 1917, including what the Petrograd EKOPO had supplied throughout the years of Russia’s participation in the Great War. In response, the organization spent down 3.48 million rubles from its reserves in 1917, nearly the same amount it had spent over the preceding three years. In September, the organization cut subsidies to nearly half of its regional committees, eliciting angry protests from desperate recipients.<sup>57</sup> The OZE’s ambulatory clinics, the OPE’s schools, and the KOPE’s food stations continued to function throughout the region, but now at a fraction of their former capacity.

When Zilberfarb later reflected on Jewish aid organizations in Ukraine in late 1917, he described them as once vibrant and powerful bodies that had become shadows of their former selves. Having aided the Jewish masses so effectively during the Great War, they seemed to have suddenly given up and retreated when more difficult times had set in. He characterized the change in harsh terms: The old relic, which was known before the Revolution as the *kehillah* (the community governing board), had entirely decayed; the younger institutions – the local sections of OPE, OZE, KOPE, ORT, and others – had retired somewhere in a corner and emitted no signs of life. There was no one left to whom to turn with even an inquiry or questionnaire.<sup>58</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that as Minister of Jewish Affairs, Zilberfarb dealt with the practical challenges of trying to build institutions of Jewish autonomy at local levels. He could no longer look to the defunct *kehillah* to gather information about the needs and characteristics of local populations; nor, as he wrote, could he rely on the “younger,” more recently founded public organizations, that had apparently expired without hope for revival. That Zilberfarb portrayed the Kiev Aid Society and its workers as having somehow

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<sup>56</sup> “*Otchet o deiatel’nosti Kievskogo obshchestva*,” RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 190, l. 2; Gomel’skii, “*V okkupirovannoi Galitsii*,” 7, 11. In his memoir, An-sky claims to have heard the story from Gomel’skii, but he may have also read it in *Delo pomoshchi* (*The Enemy at His Pleasure*, 236).

<sup>57</sup> RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 190, l. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Zilberfarb, *Dos idishe ministerium*, 29-30 (translation adapted from Moses Silberfarb [Zilberfarb], *The Jewish Ministry and Jewish National Autonomy in Ukraine*, trans. David H. Lincoln [New York: Aleph Press, 1993], 42).

willingly “retired somewhere in a corner” suggests his lack of knowledge about the basic issues with which they were faced. Zilberfarb also neglected to mention the dedicated Jewish aid workers, such as Giterman and Gumener, who *had* remained committed to their posts and whose experience and skills allowed them to carry on aid work both then and in subsequent years.

### On the Eve of Catastrophe: Jewish Aid Work in 1918

The October 1917 Bolshevik coup in Petrograd halted all sources of government funding for public organizations. The legality of public organizations such as the EKOPO came into question, and the new laws that separated church and state provided a framework that allowed the government to dissolve any Jewish organizations. Yet the Petrograd EKOPO did not undergo this fate. In February 1918, it came under government supervision when the Jewish Commissariat within the People’s Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (known as the Evkom) assumed control of its finances and operations.<sup>59</sup> Sliozberg recalled, with characteristic understatement, that the EKOPO and its partners managed to “continue their work amidst great difficulties, and without funds.”<sup>60</sup> He did not exaggerate the latter point: soon after the decree of December 27, 1917, concerning the nationalization of banks, the EKOPO’s assets of nearly 3 million rubles in the Azov-Don Bank vanished.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, transfers of overseas funds from the Joint Distribution Committee had become impossible by that time.<sup>62</sup> Thus, within months of the October Revolution, the EKOPO lost more than 80% of its former income.

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<sup>59</sup> In an ironic turn of events in Vitebsk, the local Evkom division simply shut down the EKOPO committee in September 1918 and began running the old-age home, thus becoming a provider of that same type of “ethnically partisan welfare” against which it had railed with ideological fierceness, as Beizer (39) points out. See Arkadii Zel’tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki 1917–1941* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006), 48-49.

<sup>60</sup> H. Sliosberg [G. B. Sliozberg], “Memorandum on the EKOPO, of Petrograd,” July 20, 1920, JDC NY AR 1919-1921, Item ID 232748, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> The EKOPO remained solvent in 1918 by borrowing nearly 2.74 million rubles from the Zionist Organization of Russia (ZOR). The ZOR raised 15-20 million rubles in donations following the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 and wanted to salvage the funds by moving them out of Soviet Russian borders. The ZOR’s loans to the EKOPO were later repaid in London in hard currency supplied by the Joint Distribution Committee. Sliozberg describes this scheme in *Dela minuvshikh dnei*, 3:369-375.

<sup>62</sup> Granick, “Humanitarian Responses to Jewish Suffering Abroad,” 90-93; Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, 38-41.

The EKOPO's leaders weighed the prospect of closing their doors during the first half of 1918, but then made a strategic decision. In June of the same year, the Petrograd EKOPO formally united with the Moscow Jewish Society for Aid to War Victims (the EVOPO).<sup>63</sup> The unification made sense for numerous reasons: it allowed the two organizations to pool their scarce resources and continue to operate in a centralized fashion. No less importantly, the move provided the Petrograd Committee with proximity to the country's new seat of power. The Petrograd office continued to operate informally well into the late 1920s, but the Moscow branch became the headquarters for all official business.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, new challenges had arisen for Jewish relief organizations. Homelessness among refugees remained an urgent and growing concern. One of the Kiev Aid Society's correspondents reported seeing thousands of families living near railroad stations in train cars and earthen pits, repeating – but on a growing scale – the predicament of homeless families as recorded by An-sky and Gomel'skii during WWI. The dire situation reminded Gergel of the catastrophic military expulsions he had witnessed in 1915. In his view, the earlier episode appeared as “nothing compared to what is happening now.”<sup>64</sup> Even more devastating was a swelling wave of anti-Jewish violence in Ukraine that had started following the October Revolution. Contemporary observers such as E. Tcherikower referred to the outbreaks as pogroms, which he defined in this case as spontaneous riots perpetrated by hungry, demobilized soldiers in the Ukrainian and Red Armies, as well as by peasants. The violence most often targeted Jewish property rather than persons, but occasionally led to beatings and the humiliation of Jews.<sup>65</sup> The violence and frequency of these riots grew throughout 1918.

In early 1918, the Jewish Ministry and the Kiev Aid Society (KOPE) worked together to respond to the violence. Nokhem Gergel undoubtedly played a key role in forging links between the two agencies, working as he did for both of them simultaneously, as General Secretary for the Kiev Aid Society and as

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<sup>63</sup> Sliosberg, “Memorandum on the EKOPO,” p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> N. Gergel, “*Di hilfarbeyt un melukkeh-mitlen*,” *Hilf* 1-2 (1919), 22.

<sup>65</sup> Tcherikower., *Antisemitizm*, 53-54, 105-106; Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews*, 79. Following Tcherikower, Irina Astashkevich has described this as the “first wave” of pogroms that preceded three additional waves of increasingly murderous violence against Jews in late 1918, in “The Pogroms in Ukraine in 1917-1920: An Alternate Universe,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2013), 4.



Director of General Affairs in the Jewish Ministry.<sup>66</sup> Gergel advocated strongly for the cause of relief work before the Ukrainian government's Ministry of Internal Affairs, making it a point to keep the Ministry informed about developments among the Jewish population. In March 1918, these efforts met with some success, securing modest funds for aid to Jewish victims of the pogroms.<sup>67</sup>

Gergel's attempts to obtain government support for Jewish aid work were disrupted in April 1918, when German troops arrived in Kiev and installed the right-wing Ukrainian Pavlo Skoropads'kyi in power, to rule according to German imperial interests.<sup>68</sup> The fate of Jewish relief work during the months of the "Hetmanate-Ukrainian" regime is difficult to reconstruct with certainty. Skoropads'kyi's regime formally abolished rights of national autonomy, leading to the dissolution of the Jewish Ministry and the prohibition against public meetings or business conducted by organizations. However, the extent to which the government actually enforced these rules is unclear. Kenneth Moss, for example, has suggested that "local autonomy, relative cultural freedom, and relatively livable political and economic conditions" persisted in Ukraine even under Skoropads'kyi.<sup>69</sup> Information from the Kiev Aid Society's records and aid workers' personal accounts supports the view that Jewish public organizations continued to function quietly throughout 1918. Thus, despite the official ban on private fundraising, the Kiev Aid Society conducted a donation drive, one that produced significant yields – enough to fund nearly one half of the budgets of its local aid committees in 1918.<sup>70</sup> At an October 1918 meeting in Kiev, the Kiev Aid Society attempted to coordinate aid work according to the "center and provinces" model used earlier during the Great War. The KOPE's leaders also maintained regular contact with the Petrograd EKOPO, to whom they reported regularly about economic conditions in Ukraine and about those of pogrom victims in particular. This contact culminated in a visit to Kiev, in summer 1918, by the EKOPO's long-time Petrograd leaders Leonty Bramson, Meir Kreinin,

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<sup>66</sup> "N. Gergel," *Oyf di khurves*, 734. Gergel's unpublished handwritten Yiddish monograph, now in the YIVO Tcherikower Archive, sheds much light on the period of Skoropads'kyi's rule.

<sup>67</sup> Gergel, "*Di hilfärbeyt*," 25-28, here 27-28; *Kniga pogromov. Pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v period Grazhdanskoï voiny. 1918-1922 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov*, ed. L. B. Miliakova (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007), 11.

<sup>68</sup> Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 518-520; Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews*, 88-102.

<sup>69</sup> Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 52.

<sup>70</sup> RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 190, l. 4.

and Aleksandr Zalkind, who hand-delivered and dispatched money for aid work.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these important efforts, Gergel lamented that by late 1918 Jewish aid work had been reduced to a fraction of its former extent.<sup>72</sup> The KOPE still ran a few meal stations that served kosher food in larger cities, but its presence had virtually disappeared in the smaller towns and shtetls. The Society for the Health of Jews (OZE) in Ukraine, too, had been reduced to a staff of just two paid workers who together ran all the children's shelters in twelve cities, including Kiev, Zhitomir, Berdichev, and Ekaterinoslav.<sup>73</sup> Even more troubling, Jewish public organizations simply lacked the capacity to address the sporadic, but increasingly frequent pogroms in 1918 that left hundreds of Jews as victims of property damage, theft, beatings, and even murder and rape. It is telling that the KOPE received requests for weapons, rather than financial aid. In a letter of December 14, 1917, for example, one S. Vertgeim of Dubno appealed to the KOPE to send weapons so Jews in the town might preempt an anticipated pogrom or defend themselves, if necessary. "Tomorrow is shrouded in the shadow of uncertainty," he wrote.<sup>74</sup> Neither Kiev's Jewish aid organizations nor the political establishment was prepared for the magnitude of what was soon to come.

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<sup>71</sup> Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, 41, 43.

<sup>72</sup> Gergel, "Di hilfärbeyt," 23-24, 28.

<sup>73</sup> "O deiatel'nosti Ukrainkogo komiteta, 1918 g.," RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 195, l. 1.

<sup>74</sup> "K sobytiiam v Dubno (Volyn)," December 14, 1917, in Tcherikower, *Antisemitizm*, 197-198.

### United by Necessity: The Jewish Central Aid Committee in Kiev

Jewish political life remained riven by conflict despite the urgent need for a response to the rise in anti-Jewish violence in Ukraine. In December 1918, following the end of the Great War and German withdrawal from Ukraine, the Ukrainian National Republican government, now known as the Directory, reclaimed Kiev, and Jews regained their two representative institutions. The Ministry of Jewish Affairs reopened, now with Avrom Revutsky, a Labor Zionist, as the new minister. The Nationality Council also resumed its work as a popularly elected pre-parliamentary advisory body. Dominated by Zionists, the Nationality Council vied for authority with – and only reluctantly recognized the authority of – Revutsky’s left-wing Ministry. The lack of consensus between the two groups proved to be of fateful consequence for Jewish relief work in 1919.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the conflict between the Zionists and the socialists, Gergel expressed confidence that the Jewish Ministry would reliably fund the Kiev Aid Society and its partner organizations. Unfortunately, the Directory held Kiev for less than two months, and its tenure was as brief as it was tumultuous. By late December, anti-Jewish violence had erupted on various fronts of the Civil War. The Red Army rapidly approached Kiev in December and January, sending the Ukrainian Army, under Semion Petlyura’s authority, into a hasty retreat. As Ukrainian troops relinquished territory in central Ukraine, they carried out brutal attacks on Jews, killing dozens in the Volynian towns of Ovruch, Berdichev, Zhitomir, and others. Gergel estimated that 85 pogroms took place in those two months alone. Like the earlier, first wave of pogroms, these violent outbursts involved theft and property damage, but with this significant difference: according to Irina Astashkevich,

the outbursts of violence carried out by Petlyura’s army and armed groups of people under the command of the military chieftains of various allegiances were characterized by a high intensity of violence, mass rape and murder and a high level of criminality.<sup>76</sup>

The eruption of intense violence caught Kiev’s Jewish aid organizations in a precarious position, just as they had begun to align themselves with the latest

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<sup>75</sup> Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews*, 143.

<sup>76</sup> Gergel, “The Pogroms in Ukraine,” 240; Astashkevich, “The Pogroms in Ukraine,” 4.

regime in power. Gergel remained a key figure during the crucial weeks of reorganization in December and January, working in a dual role within the Jewish Ministry and the Kiev Aid Society. His priority was to establish funding for Jewish aid organizations on what he called “a proper government foundation,” that is, from the Directory government. It is telling that Gergel looked back to the Petrograd EKOPO as a precedent. He recalled that in spring 1915 its leaders had lobbied the tsarist Ministry of the Interior and received substantial funds to aid Jewish refugees. The Directory had recently founded a Department of Refugees within its own Ministry of the Interior, and Gergel argued that the Kiev Aid Society should appeal to that body for funds, which it promptly did. Initial attempts to secure government funding yielded disappointing results, however. In December 1918, when the KOPE requested allocations to offset expenditures incurred earlier in the year, the Department of Refugees agreed to cover only 15% of the needed budget.<sup>77</sup>

The effort to secure Directory funding for pogrom victims required more than just appeals; it took a concerted political campaign at the highest levels. The Nationality Council and the Jewish Ministry responded with a combination of internal lobbying and external propaganda, designed to bring about public exposure of the Directory’s allegedly negligible response to the pogroms. The immediate trigger had been the government’s statement of January 10, in which the authorities denounced the pogroms and their perpetrators but also exhorted the Jews to curb their “sympathies” for Bolshevism; the government was thus openly blaming the victims for their misfortunes. The Jewish Nationality Council emphatically condemned the statement, accusing the government not only of having failed to protect its Jewish citizens from deadly antisemitic violence, but also of repeating the same canards that had initially incited the perpetrators. The Council demanded that the Directory take immediate steps to enforce law and order; conduct investigations of the pogroms with the goal of identifying and punishing the perpetrators; organize security forces in local communities to preempt future attacks; and lastly, distribute funds for pogrom relief directly to Jewish public aid organizations.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gergel, “*Di hilfärbeyt*,” 25-27. Another article that appeared in the same edition of *Hilf* included a transcription of discussions that the EKOPO leaders had held with tsarist ministers in May 1915: “*A nitfärefentlikher dokument vegen der hilfärbeyt*,” 59-68.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum, January 1919 [day of month not given]. CAHJP P10a/I/2/28/p.1; Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews*, 81-83.

At a meeting of cabinet ministers on January 15, Revutsky firmly restated these demands. “I demanded that the government provide aid for the victims,” he wrote, “and force the civilian administrations to take complete responsibility for all acts of violence in their [respective] regions.” His request met with a positive reply. A few days after the January 15 meeting, the cabinet agreed to supply five million rubles in state funding (about \$400,000) to the Jewish Ministry to distribute as aid to victims of Zhitomir, Berdichev, and Ovruch pogroms.<sup>79</sup>

Revutsky now had to allocate the funds, and here he faced a problem. “The problem was not to decide what form the aid should take or how to distribute it,” he explained, “but rather, which establishment should have control of it.”<sup>80</sup> He referred to the rivalry between the Ministry of Jewish Affairs (led by socialists, including himself) and the Nationality Council (led by Zionists), whose members refused to recognize Revutsky’s authority. Each group vied for a portion of the five-million-ruble pie, hoping to distribute the aid under its own name, thereby enlisting allies for their respective parties. While they bickered about their mutually exclusive interests, the underfunded KOPE and its partners remained compromised in their ability to provide any practical help to pogrom victims.

Revutsky sought to defuse the conflict by making the transfer of government funds conditional upon the creation of a united, central, and representative Jewish aid committee. Thus in the second half of January, members of the Jewish Ministry and Nationality Council put aside their narrow interests and sponsored the formation of a Jewish Central Committee to Aid Pogrom Victims.<sup>81</sup> It would include representatives from all political parties and public aid organizations, thus unifying Kiev’s disparate Jewish political and cultural organizations into a coordinated, public service body.

The Central Aid Committee was registered in Kiev on February 3, 1919. Its charter laid out a comprehensive mission to provide six categories of aid to Jewish pogrom victims: 1) donation of warm clothing, food, and money; 2) help in

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<sup>79</sup> A. Revutsky, *In di shvere teg oyf Ukrayne: Zikhroynes fun a yidishn ministr* (Berlin: Yidisher Literarisher Farlag, 1924), 183, 184.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* The founding of the Central Committee (known in Russian as *Tsentral'nyi evreiskii komitet pomoshchi postradavshim ot pogromov*) is also described in Gumener’s memoirs, *A kapitl Ukrayne*, 76. I am grateful to Michael Nutkiewicz for sharing a draft of his translation in progress of this section of Gumener’s memoir.

acquiring education, work or labor retraining; 3) provision of medical care and funded hospital stays; 4) care of orphans or children of disabled parents in shelters, including education and job training; 5) collection and editing of facts about Jews who suffered from pogroms; and 6) defense before government institutions and courts of the interests of Jews who had suffered in the pogroms.

To implement these plans, the Central Committee expected to establish or revive local branches through its plenipotentiaries. In addition, the Committee received authorization directly to administer institutions such as soup kitchens and tearooms, low cost housing, shelters, and orphanages, as well as schools, labor and legal bureaus, and medical clinics.<sup>82</sup> Given the divisiveness that characterized so much of Jewish political life in those revolutionary times, the formation of the Central Aid Committee represented a remarkable act of unification across party lines. The Committee's charter allowed each Jewish organization and political party in the city to elect two delegates to sit on the Committee's board for one-year terms, regardless of the group's size. In addition, its triad of official languages – Yiddish, Russian and Ukrainian – enabled pragmatic and ideological inclusivity for its various constituents.<sup>83</sup> That it attracted nearly all of Kiev's Jewish intelligentsia from across the political spectrum was a testament to its representative structure.

The Kiev Aid Society, with Gergel still at the helm, played a prominent role within the new Central Aid Committee. In one of his first acts on the Committee, he led a delegation that devised a plan with Revutsky to distribute government aid in Zhitomir and Berdichev. Shortly thereafter, the Jewish Ministry transferred 1.5 million rubles (roughly \$100,000) to the newly constituted Central Aid Committee for that purpose.<sup>84</sup> One aid worker decried this meager sum as “a single drop in a sea of need,” but the funds actually provided a badly needed influx of cash to aid workers in the field.<sup>85</sup>

As noted, many of the aid workers brought years of experience from the front zones of World War I. In fact, veteran aid workers filled the Central Aid Committee's ranks. The committee continued the strategy of employing

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<sup>82</sup> *Ustav Tsentral'nago Evreiskago komiteta pomoshchi postradavshim ot pogromov* (Kiev, 1919), 1-2, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Revutsky, *In di shvere teg*, 196. These were to be the only funds that the Jewish Ministry received from the UNR government.

<sup>85</sup> “Di pogrom-khvalye,” *Hilf* no. 1-2 (1919), 26.

traveling aid workers; these commuted between the Kiev headquarters and the provinces. The committee also continued to rely on stationary aid workers, who had developed knowledge of local conditions and populations.<sup>86</sup> Giterman had continued working for the KOPE in Volynia province without interruption since 1915. Gumener had also remained at his post, serving Jews in Ekaterinoslav and Podolia provinces.<sup>87</sup> Among the Committee's leaders, too, were several battle-tested public activists. The Kiev lawyer and former ORT leader, S. B. Ratner, was elected as chairman, and Dr. F. E. Lander became secretary.<sup>88</sup> Gergel, Lestschinsky, and Shtif all joined the board, as well.<sup>89</sup>

Revutsky recalled that the “united relief committee began to work with significant energy.”<sup>90</sup> It revived the EKOPO's strategies for rational philanthropy. In one of its first moves, the Central Aid Committee revived the aid work newspapers that the EKOPO had published in Petrograd under Nokhem Shtif's editorship from 1915 to 1917: *Pomoshch* (Aid) and *Delo pomoshchi* (Aid Work). In Kiev, the new committee tapped Shtif to edit its Yiddish-language newspaper, *Hilf* (Aid). In the first edition, printed in February 1919, Shtif described *Hilf* as an heir to *Delo pomoshchi*. Much like its Russian-language predecessor, the paper's aim was “to make clear to the entire Jewish world what is being done and what needs to be done for war victims.”<sup>91</sup> The language suggested a broader category of potential aid recipients than only victims of the recent pogroms to include victims of the preceding years of military conflict, as well.

The newspaper provided the Central Aid Committee with a mouthpiece to address the public. Even so, the Committee's leaders recognized that winning the local population over to their cause would not be easy. The spirit of voluntarism that had been prevalent in 1915 had withered, and many who had supported public organizations in the past with service or donations no longer had the capacity or the will to provide the same support. Nonetheless, aid workers

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<sup>86</sup> *Kniga pogromov*, xviii.

<sup>87</sup> Y. Giterman, “*Avtobioger*,” 850, 861. Gumener's service is detailed in a report to the EKOPO, “*Doneseniia upolnomochennogo komiteta Gumenera o polozhenii vyselentsev i bezhenstev Ekaterinoslavskoi i Podol'skoi gubernii, 1915–1916gg.*,” RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 59, ll. 1–63.

<sup>88</sup> Tcherikower, *Antisemitizm*, 1, 8.

<sup>89</sup> *Kniga pogromov. Pogromy na Ukraine, v Belorussii i evropeiskoi chasti Rossii v period Grazhdanskoi voiny. 1918–1922 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov*, ed. L. B. Miliakova (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007), xviii–xx.

<sup>90</sup> Revutsky, *In di shvere teg*, 197.

<sup>91</sup> “*Di hilfarbeyt*,” 15.

remained defiant in the bid to rouse the people's sympathies. As one worker wrote in a report of December 1918, "we must create an extensive campaign and shatter this deaf wall of inertia, as well as the population's indifference to aid work."<sup>92</sup> To that end, the Central Aid Committee circulated emotional appeals in the press and through its local aid committees. One of these described the recent pogroms as part of a long history of Jewish suffering, and exhorted its readers to prioritize collective needs above their own personal struggles:

However much our personal affairs and concerns may burden us in these difficult times, however much our nerves have been dulled and our conscience numbed to all of the horrors we have endured, the entire Jewish population will rise for pogrom relief work as one being. We are bound to it by the tragedy of thousands of years of Jewish history; we are called to it by the centuries-old solidarity of the Jewish people.<sup>93</sup>

The appeal further asked the local population to undertake practical measures: to create a network of volunteers who could "organize all of Kiev's Jewish population for relief work with pogrom victims." The plan was outlined as follows:

Each building in which Jews live must have its own official representative who will serve as a direct contact with the Committee. The Committee will communicate through such representatives with Jewish residents, in those instances when it needs to rely on the support of the whole Jewish population in order to conduct aid work with pogrom victims. Thus, the immediate task for the entire Jewish population is to hold meetings of Jewish residents in any building where Jews live, and to elect a representative to the Kiev [Central Aid] Committee for that building.<sup>94</sup>

We do not know how many people volunteered to serve as representatives, but the archives do contain copies of a form distributed by the Committee that asked for elected building representatives to submit their names and addresses for the

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<sup>92</sup> "Plan organizatsii reguliarnykh finansovykh sborov po vsei Ukrainy v pol'zu evreev zhertv voiny, 1918 g.," RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 196, l. 3.

<sup>93</sup> "Obrashchenie Tsentral'nogo komiteta (TsK) pomoshchi postradavshim ot pogromov k evreiskomu naseleniiu g. Kieva ob organizatsii pomoshchi," n.d. (probably in or after January 1919), in *Kniga pogromov*, 45-46.

<sup>94</sup> "Obrashchenie Tsentral'nogo komiteta," 46.



Committee’s own records.<sup>95</sup> If the Central Aid Committee deemed it important to gather records of building representatives, as this document suggests, it is possible that the Committee relied on them to interface with the local population and conduct work at a grassroots level.

The efforts to organize support among Kiev’s Jewish population proved effective, particularly in raising funds. Gumener estimated that in the first half of 1919 the Central Aid Committee managed to collect nearly 400,000 rubles in private donations (about \$25,000).<sup>96</sup> The sums went toward local emergency aid in pogrom-stricken towns, including food, clothing, and medical care.

Yet just as the Central Aid Committee began to build an infrastructure for pogrom relief, they were confronted with the prospect of yet another regime change. Moreover, by February 1919, the support for the Ukrainian republican experiment had nearly vanished among Jewish activists of all political parties.<sup>97</sup> In a statement issued that month, the Nationality Council accused the Ukrainian national army and its leaders of “the crime of non-intervention during the Jewish pogroms that were perpetrated before their eyes.”<sup>98</sup> Expressing sentiments very close to these, Revutsky resigned his post as Minister of Jewish Affairs in late January.<sup>99</sup> He questioned the very premise that aid work served Jewish interests as long as the Ukrainian government remained in power. He conceded that while humanitarian aid remained a moral imperative, its limits had to be recognized: relief was an “ex post facto” action, he wrote, that could neither preempt future attacks on Jews nor address the underlying political conditions that enabled large-scale anti-Jewish violence. The assumption that aid work could serve Jewish interests was as illogical as the belief, in his view, that “measles could be cured by

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<sup>95</sup> The questionnaire was used by later Jewish relief organizations, including the Evobkom. It is preserved in that organization’s archive (copy at the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; original TsDAVO f. 2497, op. 1, d. 11, l. 21).

<sup>96</sup> Gumener, *A kapitl Ukrayne*, 76.

<sup>97</sup> As noted above, the Jewish Ministry had already begun to lose the confidence of many Jews and members of the Nationality Council in early 1918 (Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews*, 85).

<sup>98</sup> “The last attempt (The visit of members of the Jewish National Secretariat to Professor Mezietch [Kost’ Matsievych], the Ukrainian Minister for Foreign Affairs),” February 28, 1919. CAHJP P10a/I/2/23/4-5.

<sup>99</sup> Simon Rabinovitch, “Jewish-Ukrainian-Soviet Relations during the Civil War and the Second Thoughts of a Minister for Jewish Affairs,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17:3 (2017), 343. In his memoirs (*In di shvere teg*, 197), Revutsky explains he resigned in protest of the government’s failure to denounce or prevent the pogroms; however, Rabinovitch contends that Revutsky resigned solely because his fellow Labor Zionists opposed the alliance that the Directory had concluded with the Entente powers.

applying ointment to the individual blisters.”<sup>100</sup> To deal with mass violence, the root cause and not merely the symptoms had to be addressed. Before all else, the people needed a state that could protect its citizens’ lives.

Like his fellow Labor Zionists, Revutsky believed that the prospect of a Soviet state offered the most promising alternative to Jews; at the very least, he could claim that the Bolsheviks had confronted and actively sought to counter antisemitism in their propaganda campaigns.<sup>101</sup> He left Kiev on January 29, retreating along with the rest of the Directory government to a temporary capital at Kamenets-Podol’sk. He encouraged his colleagues who stayed to work faithfully for the Bolsheviks, whose forces entered the city on February 2, 1919.

### **From Red Cross to Red Star: Jewish Aid Work under Bolshevik Rule**

The Red Army’s southward advance on Ukraine brought the front lines of the Civil War to the heart of Ukraine and its large, historic Jewish communities. A veritable “pogrom wave,” as contemporary observers called it, followed in the wake of a shifting front between the Ukrainian and Red Armies. Gergel estimated that no less than 178 anti-Jewish massacres took place in Kiev, Podolia, and Volynia provinces from February to April 1919. The worst atrocities struck the towns of Proskurov, Felshtin, Zhitomir, and Fastov.<sup>102</sup> They left a trail of thousands of murdered and wounded people, raped women, widows, and orphans in desperate need. Homelessness, already a problem for thousands of war refugees, grew rampant. In the town of Boguslav, for example, some two out of three families became homeless after their homes were burned, demolished, or requisitioned during pogroms.<sup>103</sup>

Even under Bolshevik authority, the Central Aid Committee in Kiev continued to operate, “being as effective as was possible in that difficult time,” as Revutsky wrote.<sup>104</sup> Familiar faces populated its ranks and familiar strategies guided its

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<sup>100</sup> Revutsky, *In di shvere teg*, 197.

<sup>101</sup> The Bolsheviks’ own response to antisemitism owed a great deal to the agency of the Jews themselves, as shown by Brendan McGeever, “Revolution and Antisemitism: The Bolsheviks in 1917,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 51:3-4, 235-252.

<sup>102</sup> Gergel, “The Pogroms in the Ukraine,” 240; Elias Heifetz [Kheifets], *The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine in 1919* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1921), 27-44.

<sup>103</sup> Abramson, *Ukrainians and Jews*, 119.

<sup>104</sup> Revutsky, *In di shvere teg*, 197.

work. The tireless Dr. Lander went on as the committee's secretary, and Gergel continued to lead the Kiev Aid Society. When the new Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republican government founded its Jewish Commissariat, or Evkom, the Commissar chosen to lead it was none other than Isai Khurgin.

Lander quickly established ties between the Central Committee and Evkom. He submitted numerous appeals on behalf of the former, mainly requesting permission for the movement of relief workers to deliver aid across shifting front lines. On February 20, Lander wrote to ask for permission for three aid workers to travel to Poltava and Volynia provinces to distribute clothing and essential supplies to pogrom victims.<sup>105</sup> He received a positive reply to this and similar inquiries. It seems highly likely that Khurgin's position as the Evkom Commissar improved the Central Aid Committee's ability to carry on relief work during the early months of Bolshevik rule in Ukraine.<sup>106</sup>

Khurgin's tolerance notwithstanding, it was widely understood that the Central Committee's days were numbered. For one, its identity as an independent and ethnically partisan welfare organization disqualified its existence on purely ideological grounds. Moreover, the Soviet government simply refused even to identify pogrom victims as a separate category – that is, as victims of violence perpetrated against Jews insofar as they were Jews. Instead, the Bolsheviks categorized civilians who had suffered fighting during the Civil War, including Jews, Mennonites, and others, as “victims of the Counterrevolution.” This category of people was entitled to public aid from the People's Commissariat of Social Welfare (Narkomsobes), which operated a division called “Aid for Victims of the Counterrevolution” (Pomzhekhhor) and within that, a constituent section for aid for pogrom victims. The Pomzhekhhor established local branches in Kiev province where pogroms had occurred, including the towns of Uman, Berdichev, Fastov, and Lipovets. It ran institutions for children and the disabled, distributed food, and helped those who could work to find jobs. However, the Pomzhekhhor had the capacity – or the will – to provide help for only a quarter of those who had applied for aid.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> TsDAVO f. 3304, op. 1, ed. kh. 19, ll. 7–8; Heifetz [Kheifets], *The Slaughter of the Jews*, i-ii. One of the three was Arnold Gillerson, a well-known lawyer.

<sup>106</sup> TsDAVO f. 3304, op. 1, ed. kh. 20, l. 24, 26.

<sup>107</sup> Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, 97. From August to December 1920, the Gubsobes helped 2,332 of its 8,028 aid applicants.

Notably, while the Soviet government claimed that the Pomzhekhor rendered the Jewish Central Aid Committee superfluous, it made an exception for the OZE, which continued to provide medical care for Jewish adults, children, and infants, including numerous pogrom victims. Indeed, throughout 1919, the Commissariats of Health and Education delegated the OZE to treat diseases and wounds among pogrom victims. The OZE appears to have been the most active of all pre-revolutionary Jewish organizations in a number of devastated cities, including Smela, Cherkassy, Berdichev, Uman, Zhitomir, Kiev, and Vinnytsia, where it ran sanatoriums, orphanages, schools, and pasteurized milk stations. Records that detail its work in 1919 document the staggering numbers of those in need of medical attention: OZE staff treated nearly 70,000 children; operated 42 ambulatory and field clinics; and ran sixteen stationary hospitals, equipped with a total of 470 beds.<sup>108</sup>

The impetus to close the Central Aid Committee seems to have come from left-wing Jews organized within the Communist Party as the “Evseksiia,” or “Jewish Section,” which determined that aid to “victims of the Counterrevolution” should be overseen by the state and party, not distributed at the discretion of pre-revolutionary Jewish organizations which the Central Aid Committee represented. Hence, in May 1919, the Central Aid Committee was declared a “semi-legal” organization; the government seized its assets and fired part of the staff.<sup>109</sup> Gumener lamented that this happened during a litany of deadly attacks: 148 in the month of May alone. Thus, “as Jewish blood flowed,” he wrote, “the only institution that at least somewhat helped pogrom victims closed down.”<sup>110</sup>

Yet the Central Committee outlived its official closure in various ways. The Soviet government faced the same quandary that had led the tsarist regime in 1915 to delegate Jewish aid work to the Petrograd EKOPO. As we have seen, government agencies such as the Pomzhekhor could meet only a fraction of the real need; the Commissariats of Health and Education had also been overwhelmed, among other problems, by the sudden appearance of millions of homeless children after the Revolution.<sup>111</sup> It is also possible that government

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<sup>108</sup> TsDAVO f. 2497, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 3, 7-9, 16.

<sup>109</sup> *Kniga pogromov*, xix.

<sup>110</sup> Gumener, *A kapitl Ukrayne*, 77.

<sup>111</sup> Alan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 2. Red Cross officials in Ukraine estimated that 54 orphanages in Ukraine were responsible for 30,000 children, or an average of 556 children per orphanage.

agencies lacked workers who spoke Yiddish or could understand the particular cultural needs of Jews. For example, Gumener expressed dismay after meeting the young Russian appointed to lead the Pomzhekkhor in Kiev. When Gumener informed him of the dire needs among Jewish civilians, the young man “had absolutely no idea of how to go about [aid] work, nor... knew anything about the Jewish population.”<sup>112</sup>

The Soviet government then alighted upon a compromise. In May 1919, it authorized a politically neutral body, the newly formed Soviet Red Cross, to form a Kiev-based “pogrom division.” A vast operation, the Soviet Red Cross operated nearly 400 divisions throughout the former empire.<sup>113</sup> The new pogrom division went by various names, including the “Kiev Pogrom Relief Committee” and the “All-Ukrainian Committee for Pogrom Victims.”<sup>114</sup> To serve as the new division’s Chairman, the Red Cross tapped Il’ia Kheifets, a highly accomplished thirty-four-year-old scholar of criminal law and professor at Moscow University. Kheifets arrived in Kiev in May or June 1919.<sup>115</sup>

The new Red Cross pogrom division recruited its staff almost exclusively from among aid workers at the now defunct Central Aid Committee.<sup>116</sup> Kheifets worked closely with veteran members such as Gergel, Lander, and Giterman, who continued much of the work they had done for the Central Committee.<sup>117</sup> Red Cross workers traveled across devastated territories in summer 1919, trying to help survivors. Gumener spent the summer in Podolia province and described immense needs and staggering shortages, along with his own limited ability to provide aid. Numerous Jewish shelters had recently closed down in Litin, Orinin, and Vinnitsa. Homeless Jews packed the municipal shelters to avoid sleeping on the streets. He described the sight of children wandering alone outside, begging

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<sup>112</sup> Gumener, *A kapitl Ukrayne*, 77.

<sup>113</sup> The Bolsheviks de-authorized the pre-revolutionary Russian Red Cross and replaced it with the Soviet Red Cross in 1918. See Susan Grant, “From War to Peace: Russian Nurses, 1917-1922,” in *Russia’s Home Front in War and Revolution, Book 2*, eds. Lindenmeyr, Waldron, Read, 251-270, here 260-262.

<sup>114</sup> Gumener, *A kapitl Ukrayne*, 77.

<sup>115</sup> Kheifets’s background is discussed in a report for the Jewish People’s Relief Committee in the US: “Hundred Thousand Orphans are Facing Starvation in Ukraina if No Immediate Relief Will Come from America Says Professor Cheifetz,” n.d. (late 1919), Papers of the Jewish People’s Relief Committee - Widener Library at Harvard University (hence JPRC-WLH), vol. 6: seq. 206-207.

<sup>116</sup> Tcherikower, *Antisemitizm*, 2.

<sup>117</sup> *Kniga pogromov*, xxii; Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews*, iii; “Gergel,” in *Oyf di khurves*, 734.

for handouts. A single children's home in Proskurov had kept its doors open using money that it had received earlier from the Jewish Ministry. Meanwhile, Gumener bitterly recalled that the Evseksiia, which had millions of rubles at its disposal, refused – out of ideological rigidity – to fund the one organization whose workers could put this money to real use.<sup>118</sup>

Yitzhak Giterman continued to shuttle between the cities of Zhitomir and Berdichev in summer 1919. Within roughly three weeks, he helped to open several children's shelters, including an orphanage for children whose parents had been killed during pogroms. Like other aid workers in the field, he faced danger every day as he traveled roads where fellow Jews were regularly robbed and sometimes murdered. He only narrowly escaped a similar fate at the hands of an armed gang that encircled his train, and was saved by the arrival of Red Army soldiers. Giterman recalled that his father had forbidden him to work, but his mother had convinced him otherwise. "We must provide for children other than just our own," she told his father, and rendered the final word: "every one of the pogrom orphans must be rescued."<sup>119</sup>

Throughout summer 1919, the Red Cross pogrom division also continued and expanded one of the Central Aid Committee's key projects, to document the plight of victims. Prior to closing in spring 1919, the Central Aid Committee had partnered with the Kiev Yiddish publishing house Folksfarlag to found an "Editorial Collegium" tasked with collecting and publishing primary sources and data about the pogroms.<sup>120</sup> E. Tcherikower was chosen to direct the Collegium. His work consisted of carrying out its daily functions as well as coordinating the larger, long-term project of issuing a series of research monographs and documentary volumes about the pogroms.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gumener, *A kapitl Ukrayne*, 79-80. Gumener writes that "the Proskurov community initially did not want to take this money from the Ukrainian regime, which they held responsible for Proskurov's great tragedy, but later they agreed" (80).

<sup>119</sup> Giterman, "Avtobioger," 862.

<sup>120</sup> On the Folksfarlag, see Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 54-55. On the Editorial Collegium, see *Kniga pogromov*, xviii-xix. Its full title was "Editorial Collegium for the Collection and Investigation of Materials Relating to the Pogroms in Ukraine."

<sup>121</sup> E. Tcherikower, *Antisemitizm*, 1-2. Tcherikower was a natural choice as Chairman, having managed large-scale publishing projects in the past and demonstrated his will and ability to work across party lines in the interest of collective goals. Originally from the central Ukrainian province of Poltava, he had moved to St. Petersburg in 1905, where he became known among the Jewish intelligentsia as an editor, socialist agitator, and author of an important history of the OPE. After

Several veteran aid workers were part of the Editorial Collegium, including Gergel, Lestschinsky, and Shtif. Enlisting aid workers to gather materials about the pogroms was a natural outgrowth of their ongoing travels to investigate the needs of victims. To capture their stories, aid workers for the Red Cross used questionnaires supplied by the Editorial Collegium. In the course of the summer, they interviewed thousands of people, including 15,000-20,000 refugees in Kiev province alone.<sup>122</sup> Aid work and pogrom documentation thus became intertwined endeavors. Shtif recognized this when he reflected upon the voluminous body of materials that the Editorial Collegium had gathered. In the testimony contents, he wrote, “one can hear [the voice of] the victims, but not the perpetrators.”<sup>123</sup>

The Red Cross pogrom division made effective use of these documentary materials. Kheifets included them in reports that he sent to the EKOPO in Moscow and Petrograd; the latter drew upon this information as they debated how best to aid impoverished Jews in Ukraine.<sup>124</sup> Kheifets, a talented and prolific chronicler in his own right, penned an important historical and documentary account in parallel Yiddish and English versions. Published in 1921 in New York, these two volumes advanced fundraising in North America for Jewish pogrom victims during the first half of the 1920s.<sup>125</sup>

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moving to Kiev in summer 1917, he became Chairman of the Zionist-dominated Nationality Council. See Karlip, *The Tragedy of a Generation*, 159-168.

<sup>122</sup> An “Information Bureau” in Kiev then sorted and checked the testimonies against one another. *Kniga pogromov*, xxii, xviii.

<sup>123</sup> Z. Zsaikovsky, “*Di geshikhte fun dem itstikn bukh*,” in Elias Tcherikower, *Di Ukrainer pogromen in yor 1919* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1965), 335-336. The reference is from Shtif’s work *Pogromy na Ukraine (Period Dobrovol’cheskoi Armii)* (Berlin, “Vostok,” 1922).

<sup>124</sup> Sliozberg reported about the Ukrainian pogroms using information he had received from the Red Cross at the EKOPO meeting of November 1, 1919. RGIA f. 1546, op. 1, ed. kh. 204, l. 4. The Red Cross pogrom division’s materials also reached the American Jewish Congress, which published a 71-page pamphlet based on what it had received: American Jewish Congress, *The Massacres and Other Atrocities Committed Against the Jews in Southern Russia: A Record Including Official Reports, Sworn Statements and Other Documentary Proof*, ed. Israel Goldberg (New York: American Jewish Congress in cooperation with the Committee on Protest against the Massacres of Jews in Ukraina and Other Lands, 1920).

<sup>125</sup> Heifetz, *The Slaughter of the Jews* (op. cit.); published in Yiddish translation the same year as E. Kheifets, *Pogrom geshikhte (1919–1920), band 1: Di Ukrainishe shekhitah in 1919* (New York: Arbeter ring bibliotek, 1921).

## Between Whites and Reds

The occupation of Ukraine from July to December 1919 by the White or Volunteer Army created a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions.<sup>126</sup> Troops under the command of former imperial officer Anton Denikin seized major cities on the left bank of the Dnieper, including Kharkov, Poltava, and Ekaterinoslav.<sup>127</sup> His forces, consisting of fiercely anti-Bolshevik and antisemitic Cossacks, peasants, and former imperial officers, left a trail of blood and terror in their wake. As before, aid workers witnessed the pogroms. An OZE worker in the town of Balashev was there when the Volunteer Army entered it on July 1, and wrote that the unit's commanding officer had ordered his troops to kill 65 Jews on the spot.<sup>128</sup> The Volunteer Army carried out an estimated 362 pogroms from July to September alone.<sup>129</sup> Nokhem Shtif describes these pogroms as a "final, annihilating blow to numerous communities, many of which had already endured pogroms earlier in 1919."<sup>130</sup> The three main perpetrators of the Volunteer Army pogroms – former Russian Army officers, peasants, and Cossacks – not only caused suffering on an unprecedented scale, but also irreparably destroyed the basis for Jewish life in many parts of Ukraine. Volunteer forces looted and burned synagogues, hospitals, almshouses, public schools, credit associations and workers' cooperatives – places that had provided refuge and vital welfare services in a time of extreme need. In Belaia Tserkov, the troops turned the Talmud Torah into a horse stable; in the shtetl of Rossov, Cossack troops tore apart the office of the local Jewish credit cooperative, wrecking the desks, tables, cabinets, desks, and archive.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Early accounts include M. Mozin, *V krovavom chadu: K istorii Dobrovol'chskoi pogromshchiny* (Kiev E.S.D.R.P., 1920); S. I. Gusev-Orenburgskii, *Kniga o evreiskikh pogromakh na Ukraine v 1919 g.* (Petrograd, 1921); N. I. Shtif, *Pogromy na Ukraine (Period Dobrovol'cheskoi Armii)* (Berlin: "Vostok," 1922); V. Latski-Bertoldi, *Gzeyras Denikin* (Berlin, 1922); I. B. Shekhtman, *Pogromy Dobrovol'cheskoi armii na Ukraine (K istorii antisemitizma na Ukraine v 1919–1920 gg.)* (Berlin: Ostjudisches Historisches Archiv, 1932). Scholarly accounts include Kenez, "Pogroms and White Ideology."

<sup>127</sup> Magosci, *History of Ukraine*, 532.

<sup>128</sup> The description was published in the ORT Bulletin as "Pogromy v Balasheve (Soobshchenie upolnomochennykh 'OZE)," *Biulleten ORT* no. 3, Petrograd, December 1919; cited from Shekhtman, *Pogromy Dobrovol'cheskoi armii*, 42.

<sup>129</sup> Heifetz, *The Slaughter*, 51; Gergel, "The Pogroms in the Ukraine," 241.

<sup>130</sup> Shtif, *Pogromy na Ukraine*, 31–32.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*



Jewish aid workers in Kiev also faced grave threats to their personal safety from the Volunteer Army, whose soldiers robbed or abducted Red Cross workers based on the assumption that they carried money or would be ransomed if held hostage. Between August and October 1919, Volunteer troops in Kiev killed two members of the Red Cross pogrom division and robbed ten. The two murdered men included a clerk named D. K. Gartglias and I. G. Buchich, an accountant. Soldiers abducted Buchich one night at 3:00 am as he was leaving the Red Cross building on the busy Theater Square Boulevard, held him hostage, and demanded 30,000 rubles from the Kiev Jewish community. The community managed to procure 17,000 rubles with great difficulty; after taking the money, the soldiers refused to return Buchich until the balance was produced. Murdered Buchich's body was later found in a remote part of the city. The Red Cross secretary, M. I. Levenson, was robbed on the street of his shoes, coat, money, and watch. In November, Gergel barely escaped alive after being robbed on the street.<sup>132</sup> On another occasion, soldiers raided a Red Cross storage facility, robbing it of supplies earmarked for pogrom victims.<sup>133</sup>



*Fig. 3: The interior of the offices of the Central Committee for Aid to Jewish Pogrom Victims after being vandalized by members of the Volunteer Army, October or November 1919, Kiev. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research RG 80-89 f. 54591*

<sup>132</sup> "K istorii Komiteta (otdela) pomoshchi postradavshim ot pogromov Rossiiskovo obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta," n.d. (not later than March 1920) in *Kniga pogromov*, 290.

<sup>133</sup> Shekhtman, *Pogromy Dobrovol'cheskoi armii*, 69.

It seems remarkable, in light of the Volunteer Army's perpetration of pogroms, that Jewish aid organizations believed that Denikin would follow his imperial predecessors and provide funding for civilian war victims. As Yosef Shekhtman, a Zionist leader of the Nationality Council, argued at the time, "it is the state's responsibility to provide aid to civilians who have been victimized by violence and destruction in the present civil war."<sup>134</sup> The belief that Denikin had an obligation to provide financial aid to Jewish pogrom victims may seem wholly misguided in hindsight, given that his own troops were responsible for the atrocities. The request appears more plausible, however, if we consider that Jewish activists in 1919 could vividly recall that the imperial government had given 17 million rubles to the EKOPO just a few years earlier. Shekhtman's statement also makes clear an underlying assumption on the part of the Jewish activists: that Denikin was the leader of a regime, as well as of one capable of funding aid work. In reality, however, Denikin was not the head of an established state, but the leader of a transient and highly disorganized military operation. Furthermore, given the virulent antisemitism of so many of his troops and officers, whose loyalty to him was always implicitly in question, aiding Jewish war victims was not a practical imperative on Denikin's agenda. It is unsurprising, then, that the Volunteer Army High Command rejected appeals for funding from Jewish aid organizations in September and again in October.<sup>135</sup>

The Red Cross pogrom division did manage to secure funds from the White military administration in Kiev, which the Volunteer Army held from August 31 to December 16. In September, delegates from the Red Cross pogrom division presented the governor, General N. Bredov, with a detailed report about the condition of Jewish pogrom victims and requested funds for relief. In response, they were offered a loan of one million rubles. "It was a drop in the bucket," wrote Shekhtman: this sum of money would have been spent in a month's time in a place like Fastov, which had by then been devastated multiple times. When the Red Cross appealed a second time for an additional 1.5 million rubles, Bredov agreed, but stipulated that they would first have to repay the initial loan of one million, thus "giving with one hand and taking away with the other." The

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>135</sup> Denikin never established an administrative apparatus to govern the country; instead, he created three military governorships, based in the cities of Kiev, Kharkov, and Kherson. Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919-1920: The Defeat of the Whites* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 155-160.

authorities intended to send a clear message, in Shekhtman's view, that they saw pogrom relief as a "purely internal and private matter for the Jews themselves."<sup>136</sup>

Recognizing that the future of Jewish relief work in Ukraine now depended on American Jewish philanthropy, Kheifets left his embattled colleagues in summer 1919 to undertake a fundraising mission to North America. With the help of the socialist-led People's Relief Committee in New York, he traveled the cities of the eastern seaboard and Canada in late 1919 in a campaign to raise funds for pogrom victims, his primary goal being to establish a resettlement program for some 150,000 Jewish refugee orphans in Canada and the United States.<sup>137</sup>

By early 1920, the Red Army had retaken Kiev and finally managed to oust the murderous Volunteer Army from Ukraine. On June 11, 1920, Kheifets, still in New York, received a telegram with momentous news: in Moscow, the Soviet government had authorized the formation of a new unified aid committee for Jewish pogrom relief – an American-Soviet-Jewish partnership, negotiations for which had been in the works for months. The Red Cross pogrom division would be incorporated into a new organization under the auspices of the People's Commissariat of Social Welfare (Narkomsobes) and thus continue its work under state oversight. Funding and supplies would come primarily from the Joint Distribution Committee in New York.<sup>138</sup>

Thus, the first Soviet Jewish public organization – the Jewish Public Committee to Aid Jewish Pogrom Victims – was registered in July 1920 in Moscow. Known in Russian as the Evobkom and as Yidgezkom in Yiddish, it brought a total of sixteen different groups together in its presidium.<sup>139</sup> The represented bodies

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<sup>136</sup> Shekhtman, *Pogromy Dobrovol'cheskoi armii*, 69-70.

<sup>137</sup> *Di yidishe yesomim fun di milkhome gelitene lands (oyfruf)*. JPRC-WLH, vol. 6: seq. 11-14. Kheifetz gave numerous speeches before Jewish communities, wrote articles for the Yiddish press, and requested audiences with powerful figures in American Jewish politics, including Louis Marshall and Felix Warburg. Responding to appeals published in the Yiddish press, American Jewish families from states including Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Michigan sent in letters in which they offered to adopt children. The People's Relief Committee assisted Kheifets with contacting prospective adoptive families, interviewing them, and completing the required paperwork for adoption.

<sup>138</sup> Telegram to Cheifetz, People's Relief Committee, June 11, 1920. JPRC-WLH, vol. 6: seq. 123.

<sup>139</sup> In Russian, *Evreiskogo obshchestvennogo komiteta pomoshchi evreiam, postradavshim ot pogromov*. The Evobkom's history has been the subject of these essays: Mordechai Altshuler, "Havaad hatziburi hayehudi leezrat nifgaei hapogromim," *Shvut* 9 (1983): 16-34; Iu. Lifshits, "Evreiskaia blagotvoritel'nost' na Ukraine v pervye gody Sovetskoi vlasti (Deiatel'nost'

included seven Jewish socialist parties and three government agencies, whose presence dominated the committee. The Joint Distribution Committee in New York, which provided about three-quarters of all funding and supplies, demanded that the four veteran “national” organizations be included – the EKOPO, ORT, OZE, and Kultur-Lige. Each organization received seats on the Evobkom presidium and all four provided services in their respective realms of expertise. These organizations and their workers were known quantities to the JDC; more importantly, they brought irreplaceable expertise and experience. Giterman served on the presidium and continued to work in Ukrainian provinces that had suffered the worst of the pogroms. His longtime colleagues Lander, Shtif, Gergel, and Lestschinsky joined the Evobkom, as well.<sup>140</sup> Predictably, their presence irked the Jewish Communists, who remained intransigent in their opposition to the principle of distinctly Jewish welfare and had worked hard to eliminate these vestigial remnants of pre-revolutionary Jewish nationalism. Even so, aid to pogrom victims in Ukraine could finally recommence on the basis of the “proper government foundations” that Nokhem Gergel had been seeking since late 1918.

Thus in the first years of Bolshevik rule, Jewish aid work was absorbed by a public-governmental network within the Evobkom, which oversaw local branches in Kharkov, Kiev, and Odessa. By 1922, the Ukrainian division was aiding nearly 131,000 children from Ukraine through orphanages, boarding schools, and famine relief. To be sure, Hebrew, Zionism, prayer, and all religious rituals had been banned from the children’s institutions. Michael Beizer writes that “Jewish Communists were by no means prepared to relinquish control over the children’s minds.” On the other hand, the Evobkom’s institutions ensured that the children were physically safe and received at least some of their education in Yiddish.<sup>141</sup>

The ideological conditions that the Soviet government and Communist Party imposed on Jewish aid work through the Evobkom made the EKOPO formally withdraw from its ranks in February 1921. One by one, EKOPO veteran activists resigned and left the country, with Giterman, Shtif, Gergel, and Gumener

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Vseukrainskogo Evreiskogo obshchestvennogo komiteta pomoshchi evreiam, postradavshim ot pogromov),” in *Evreiskaia blagotvoritel’nost’ na territorii byvshego SSSR. Stranitsy istorii*, eds. D. El’iashevich, B. Khaller (St. Petersburg: Petersburg Jewish University and Institute for Social Workers, 1998), 123–148; Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, ch. 4.

<sup>140</sup> Giterman, “*Avtobioger*,” 864.

<sup>141</sup> Beizer, *Relief in Time of Need*, quote on 124; see also 129, 198.

among them.<sup>142</sup> By May 1924, the Evobkom itself had become a target of NKVD surveillance and arrests. Soon thereafter, the organization was closed down. In accordance with its founding charter, all of its assets were transferred to the Commissariats of Health, Education, and Social Welfare.<sup>143</sup>

## Epilogue

Emigration only temporarily disrupted Jewish aid workers in their commitment to the cultural and material well-being of East European Jewry. Some of them had spent a decade or more of their lives conducting relief in wartime. Their postwar trajectories testify to the lasting impact of those experiences.

Nokhem Gergel left Kiev in February 1921; by December of that year, he had resettled in Berlin. His longtime colleague Nokhem Shtif had left Kiev in 1920, and after an itinerant period landed in Berlin as well, in March 1922.<sup>144</sup> The two worked closely with the immense body of materials they had helped to collect for the Editorial Collegium during the pogroms; a significant portion of these materials had been covertly smuggled to Berlin.<sup>145</sup> Based on these sources, Shtif and Gergel each authored some of the earliest studies of the pogroms. In 1922, Shtif published a Russian-language study of Volunteer Army pogroms, and a Yiddish version followed a year later.<sup>146</sup> Gergel, with whose work we opened this essay, published a statistical survey of the Civil War pogroms in a Yiddish-language social science journal in 1928.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Giterman, “*Avtobioger*,” 864; “Shtif,” in *Leksikon*, ed. Beider, 384; “Gumener,” in *Leksikon*, ed. Reyzen, 552.

<sup>143</sup> Even after the EKOPO’s withdrawal in 1921, the Evobkom retained as its staff members physicians such as F. E. Lander and Boris Eisurovich. Lifshits, “*Evreiskaia blagotvoritel’nost’ na Ukraine*,” 144-146.

<sup>144</sup> “Shtif,” in *Leksikon*, ed. Beider, 384; Shtif, “*Oytobiografye*,” 200.

<sup>145</sup> The Berlin archive became known as the *Mizrakh-yidisher historisher arkhiv* (later the Tcherikower Archive at YIVO in New York). The other part of the archive was transferred to Moscow on the orders of the Soviet government, and served as the basis for numerous pamphlets that the Jewish Section in the Commissariat of Nationalities sponsored in the early 1920s. See, for example, *Materialy ob antievreiskikh pogromakh*, vol. 1: *Pogromy v Belorussii*, ed. Zakharii Mindlin (Moscow: *Evotdel Narodnogo Komissariata po delam natsional’nostei*, 1922).

<sup>146</sup> Shtif, *Pogromy na Ukraine*, idem., *Pogromen in Ukrayne: Di tsayt fun der frayviliger armey* (Berlin: Farlag “Vostok,” 1923).

<sup>147</sup> Gergel, “*Di pogromen*.” Gergel also penned a lengthy monograph, unpublished to date, about the history of the Jewish Ministry during the period of Skoropadsky’s rule.

Both Gergel and Shtif went on as energetic institution builders and public servants. Throughout the 1920s, Gergel worked at the Berlin office of the OZE (Society for Jewish Health) and the ORT (Society for Labor Aid); in 1926, the JDC appointed him its “expert on Russian Jewish affairs.” Both men also strongly advocated for the creation of an institute devoted to Yiddish-language scholarship; this was realized in 1926 as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. In 1929, Gergel was elected to the central YIVO board in Vilna.<sup>148</sup> Shtif opted to return to Kiev in 1926, having been “lured by the unprecedented scale of state-sponsored Jewish cultural development in the Soviet Union,” as Gennady Estraiikh writes. Shtif became a central figure at the city’s Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, and a prolific author in the field of Soviet Yiddish language planning and philology.<sup>149</sup>

Yitzhak Giterman also contributed actively to East European culture and community building throughout the interwar and Second World War years. By 1921, he had relocated to Warsaw, having left Ukraine after nearly seven years as an aid worker.<sup>150</sup> He arrived in Poland “with a well-deserved reputation as someone who combined courage, organizing abilities, and deep Jewish loyalties. Above all, he came to Poland as a natural leader,” writes Samuel Kassow.<sup>151</sup> Recognizing these strengths and abilities, in 1926, the JDC appointed Giterman to manage its operations in Poland. In this capacity, Giterman mentored a younger generation of leaders, among them Emmanuel Ringelblum, together with whom he worked to boost morale and a spirit of self-reliance among Polish Jews in years of rapidly declining material conditions and growing Polish antisemitism. Giterman’s ethos to community organizing unmistakably drew from roots that stretched back to 1915 and his time at the Galician front: “if one measure wasn’t working, then one had to try another – and above all, one had to keep trying.” While other workers debated the merits of various “grand political

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<sup>148</sup> Gergel’s biography is recounted in detail in an obituary after his untimely death as a result of a heart attack in 1931: Nakhmen Meyzel, “*Oyfn frishn kever fun Nokhem Gergel*,” *Literarishe bleter* (Warsaw) no. 48 (27 November 1931), 1-2.

<sup>149</sup> Cited from Gennady Estraiikh, “Nokhem Shtif,” in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (retrieved November 19, 2018, from [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Shtif\\_Nokhem](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Shtif_Nokhem)).

Shtif’s part in Soviet Yiddish language planning is further described in Gennady Estraiikh, *Soviet Yiddish: Language Planning and Linguistic Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 68-72; David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74-77, 86.

<sup>150</sup> Giterman, “*Avtobioger*,” 865.

<sup>151</sup> Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History*, 97.

solutions,” Giterman remained focused on people’s everyday struggles: “humdrum, prosaic measures, half-steps that might make a small difference.”<sup>152</sup>

## Conclusion

We now return full circle to Giterman’s statement in his 1931 autobiography that future generations would have to contend with the horrors of 1919. He could not have imagined just how far in the future that reckoning would take place, let alone envision the next war that would erupt a mere eight years later in his own lifetime. As we observe the centennial of the 1919 pogroms this year, his account indeed enables us to contend with his generation’s travails in that time of total war, revolution, and mass violence. His account reveals something else, too: not only *what* Jews endured in those years, but also *how* they endured. As I have argued, this question becomes clearer if we direct our gaze beyond the watershed year of 1917. Doing so allows us to locate the origins of Jewish aid work in late Imperial Russian civil society and then to observe the continuities that Jewish organizations displayed in their approach to public assistance throughout Russia’s years of crisis during 1914-1921. It requires, too, that we look at figures who have remained hitherto marginal in our understanding of this catastrophic history, and recognize the importance of their work – the “humdrum, prosaic measures” of feeding and sheltering people; the same measures that could mean the difference between death and survival. Regimes in Russia came and went, and came again; armies advanced and retreated, unrelenting in their anarchic brutalization of civilian populations. Through it all, people like Giterman kept on trying to make a small difference by setting up temporary shelters, stations for pasteurized milk, or handing out shoes or train fare for families trying to flee the scene of a pogrom.

It is hoped that future research will provide more answers to some of the questions that have eluded this study. One burning issue to be addressed, I believe, is the gendered aspect of Jewish relief work during Russia’s continuum of crisis. During my research I could not find any autobiographical accounts written by women aid workers comparable to those that I have relied upon here; furthermore, the men whose chronicles form the basis of this study are almost entirely silent on the subject of their women colleagues. It is impossible, however, that women were totally absent from the enterprise of Jewish aid work

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

overall. Indeed, most of the core aspects of wartime aid work, such as caring for children, providing clothing, and serving food have typically fallen to women throughout history. Descriptions of Jewish women who worked for public organizations as traveling aid workers, physicians, and fundraisers do – infrequently – appear in the Jewish press of the time; similarly, photographs of various EKOPO and Evobkom institutions during the First World War and early 1920s depict women as nurses, teachers, and caretakers. What makes women’s contributions challenging to reconstruct is likely that which makes aid work itself an often overlooked topic, both in contemporary accounts and in subsequent historiography: the horrors of the atrocities became engraved in collective memory while the ordinary, daily struggles were quickly forgotten.

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