American perspectives on the Jewish Question in Poland, 1919-21

When Ezra Mendelsohn posed the question, whether Interwar Poland was good for the Jews or bad for the Jews, his own research into Polish Jewish history came to the conclusion that it was both, “the best of times and the worst of times: The best of times in the sense of the extraordinary creativity of Polish Jewry, the worst of times in the sense of the fulfillment of the bleakest prophecies, made mostly by Zionists, concerning the imminent fate of the East European Jewish diaspora.”¹ Whereas Mendelsohn’s conclusion underlines the complexity of interwar Jewish history, his historiographic survey of the literature reveals two seemingly irreconcilable camps of thought, one mostly Jewish, the other mostly Polish. Most Jewish scholars argue that interwar Poland was extremely anti-Semitic, deliberately trying, via pogroms and various forms of discrimination, to destroy its Jewish population.² Most Polish scholars, on the other hand, reject the charge that interwar Poland’s anti-Jewish policies were a rehearsal for the coming Holocaust and emphasize instead the economic, social, political, and even

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military struggles of a recently independent Poland, where Jewish suffering was a mere byproduct of Polish poverty and backwardness.³

In 2000 Jan T. Gross, a Polish-born historian at Princeton, challenged this standard explanation of Polish anti-Jewish policies by pointing to a deeper-seated strain of anti-Semitism that found expression in a series of pogroms during and even after the Holocaust. In his book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland,*⁴ that caused an uproar in Poland and led to a painful reckoning with its past,⁵ Gross charged that Poles killed thousands of Jews, sixteen hundred alone in the town of Jedwabne in July 1941, and that at a time of their own suffering at the hands of the Nazis.

This paper is not trying to settle the question over Poland’s anti-Semitism, but rather attempting to explore American perspectives on the Jewish Question in Poland against the background of peace negotiations, postwar relief, the Polish-Russian War of 1919-21, and the concerns of Jewish diaspora communities, especially those representing the assimilated, non-Zionist American-Jewish establishment. Were the killing and persecution of Polish Jews an omen of things to come, or were Jews simply caught in the crossfire of civil war and resurgent Polish nationalism? An analysis of American reactions and responses to pogroms in Poland between 1919 and 1921 not only shows the interconnectedness between the Jewish and Polish Questions but also underscores the

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³ Mendelsohn, 130-139. For further reading on this question see Yisrael Gutman, “Polish Antisemitism Between the Wars: An Overview,” Yisrael Gutman et al, ed., *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 97-108. Gutman rejects both extreme positions. He argues that Polish anti-Semitism was not the reason for the Nazi Genocide to take place in Poland, but he also refutes the argument that Polish anti-Semitism ceased to exist under Nazi occupation.


basic dilemma of how to label and confront human suffering. This paper contends that American perspectives on Jewish suffering and persecution in postwar Poland reflected some of the same difficulties that continue to plague our response pattern to atrocities and genocide today. First, in choosing and defining the appropriate term to categorize the persecution and killings (pogroms, massacres, or excesses); second, in ascertaining the degree of persecution (in this case the degree of Jewish persecution) due to conflicting reports by Jewish and Polish diaspora communities as well as U.S. government officials, and due to the charge of propagandizing by either exaggerating or downplaying human suffering for political reasons; third, in establishing the causes of discrimination and persecution (in this case the causes of anti-Semitism); and finally, in defining American interests and justifying the need for some sort of U.S. action. In sum, the public relations battle that would ensue between advocates of the Jewish Question and those of the Polish Question served as a barometer of the American temper in confronting crises of humanitarian, ethnic, and nationalist proportions.

In November 1922, Hugh S. Gibson, the American Minister in Warsaw, after spending three years in Poland and repeatedly reporting of Jewish persecutions there, posed the question in a strictly confidential telegram to Secretary of State Charles E. Hughes, as to “how far the treatment of Jews in Poland is a matter of legitimate interest to the United States.” Gibson’s own response followed a few sentences later. “I cannot see

6 Stuart D. Stein suggests in his essay, “Conceptions and terms: templates for the analysis of holocausts and genocides,” that “although there are many differences between most of these pogroms and the mass production killings of the Holocaust, there are also commonalities.” Stein points to the “level of perpetrators, the perceived sources of conflict, the intent and motivations of participants at different levels, and the mobilization of participants” (195) to question the segregation into separate categories. Influenced by Stein’s argumentation, my paper focuses on the American pattern of response to pogroms and genocide and points to commonalities in identifying, labeling, analyzing, and addressing such events. Stuart D. Stein, “Conceptions and terms: templates for the analysis of holocausts and genocides,” Journal of Genocide Research (June 2005), 7(2): 171-203.
that our intervention will help the Jews of Poland but I can see many ways in which it will harm our national interest.” Gibson went on to explain that “this whole question” needed to be considered now because “within a few years at most the question will probably arise in a greatly aggravated and magnified form in connection with Russia, and,” he anxiously added that “whatever steps we take now will establish a precedent which will either help us or hinder us at that time.” While Gibson anticipated a “massacre of Jews on a scale unprecedented in modern times” in Russia as a result of communism’s eventual collapse there, he did give expression to a commonly held conviction that would serve as justification for the persecution of Jews in interwar Poland and be utilized by Nazi Germany to rationalize the genocidal policies against the Jews of Europe:

“Regardless of the denials of Jewish leaders throughout the world, “ Gibson insisted, “there is a strong conviction in the minds of the common people here and in Russia that the Soviet regime is in the hands of the Jews, and that their oppression is Jewish oppression.”

The sheer magnitude of the Jewish Question in Poland was weighing heavily on both U.S. government officials and American Jewish leaders, but for different reasons. Whereas Gibson, the American Minister in Warsaw, warned that excessive U.S. interference in Poland on behalf of Jewish affairs could set a dangerous precedent for future foreign policy decisions involving the persecution of Jews in other countries,

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7 Hugh S Gibson to Secretary of State Hughes, 10 November 1922, “Diplomatic Posts: Correspondence with the Secretary of State, 1919-23,” Gibson Papers, Box 100, Hoover Institution (hereafter cited as HI), Stanford University. In early 1919 a Sub-Committee on the Judiciary of the Senate was investigating Bolshevism in America. In February, testimony by Dr. George Simons suggested that New York’s Lower East Side was a “hotbed of Bolshevism.” This charge drew sharp criticism from Louis Marshall who insisted that most Jews were bourgeois and religious and hence incompatible with the ideology of Bolshevism. More importantly, Marshall expressed concern that statements like these implied that Jews were not patriotic. A ludicrous charge according to Marshall since Jewish enlistment and casualties in the war constituted a higher percentage than those of other American religious or ethnic groups. See “Says Mass of Jews Opposed Bolsheviki,” New York Times, 15 February 1919, 16.
prominent American Jewish leaders feared that an inability to alleviate Jewish suffering there could mean the destruction of East European Jewry as well as the radicalization of Zionism. According to Louis Marshall, head of the American Jewish Committee, the movement of Jewish nationalism was already exacerbating Jewish-Polish relations and led no other than Polish Premier Ignace Paderewski to believe that the Jews were planning to establish an *imperium in imperio*, by trying to create a Palestine in Poland. Despite the absurdity of this theory, which was based on the assumption that the Hebrew word for Poland and the Hebrew name for Palestine were one and the same, it further played into the hands of those, so Marshall, who claimed that the Jews were already undermining the national goal of a “Poland for the Poles.” The Federation of Polish Jews, an organization that did not believe that existing Jewish organizations in the United States properly represented American Jews of Polish origin, painted a most dire picture about the future of relations between Poles and Jews. In a 1924 issue of *Verband*, the federation’s official monthly newsletter, it was suggested that “the leading Poles of today are interested in but one thing: to ruin, and if possible, to annihilate all the Jews who live in Poland.”

Polish-American organizations could not leave such accusations unanswered. Already in November 1918, after first reports of a major pogrom in Lwów reached the American press, the Polish National Department in the United States under John P. Smulski issued a statement vehemently denouncing reports of pogroms that were only “meant to harm [the Polish] Nation.” At the height of demonstrations in May 1919,

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when hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers protested Poland’s persecution of its Jews, W. O. Gorski, Director of the Polish Information Bureau issued a statement denying that any pogroms had occurred in Poland. It all amounted to a “deliberate distortion by German and Austrian sources for the purpose of discrediting Poland.”10 In 1920, The National Polish Committee of America published a booklet titled *The Jews in Poland* to “bring about a better understanding of the necessity for honest and constructive effort in solving a problem that is only made more difficult by attacks and recriminations.” “Poles and Jews must live together in Poland,” the pamphlet insisted, only to qualify that statement by justifying recent pogroms against Polish Jews. “If certain elements of the Polish population have at times apparently persecuted the Jews, the booklet explains, perhaps there was some real reason for their antagonism.” Anti-Semitism, according to the pamphlet, was a recent phenomenon in Poland and a reaction to the Russian Jews’ “stubborn separatism” and “hatred for Poland.” In fact, the argument went, “the universal anti-Polish campaign on account of alleged pogroms” had “irritated the Poles” so much that it “drove them into the anti-Semitic camp.” Besides, the booklet averred, there were fewer victims from pogroms than “from automobile casualties in New York during the same period.”11

The public relations battle that waged between 1919 and 1921 and that would continue to flare up throughout the interwar period can be divided into two camps. On the one hand, officials in the U.S. State Department, staff members of the American Relief Administration, constituents of the National Polish Committee of America, and President

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Wilson himself,\textsuperscript{12} insisted upon unequivocal support of an independent and democratic Poland despite its shortcomings. On the other hand, representatives of Jewish relief organizations, the American Jewish Committee, and the Jewish Press blamed the Polish government for a series of pogroms and a deliberate policy to reduce Poland’s Jewish population. Where officials in the Wilson administration saw Poland in an epic struggle against Bolshevism that could entail innocent Jews getting caught in the crossfire of war, members of Jewish relief organizations deplored the fact that the Polish government was using the fight against Bolshevism as a pretext to kill Jews.

Declared independent after years of partition and occupation, Poland had emerged as a fragile republic from the ruins of the Great War. It found itself in the midst of civil war, while fighting wars of expansion at the same time. By laying claim to territories in Eastern Galicia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, and White Russia, Poland, according to some, seemed to embark on a course of imperialism. Nationalist Polish armies tried to drive out Bolshevik fighters and at the same time prevent the spread of communism.\textsuperscript{13} The Jews of Poland, the Ukraine, White Russia, and Russia, were caught in the crossfire. The already uneasy historical relationship between Poles and Jews was thus further exacerbated against the background of war and the Polish government’s struggle against Bolshevism.

\textsuperscript{12} Christopher Salisbury makes the point that Wilson’s commitment to Poland had grown out of his staunch support for Polish relief during the war and claims that “the Polish Question came to occupy a crucial place amid Wilson’s desperate attempts to stamp his own idealized mark on Allied war aims (and within each of the belligerents’ war-waging agendas)—a status that would last well beyond the war’s conclusion and on to the peace-making stage of Versailles.” Christopher S. Salisbury, “For Your Freedom and Ours: The Polish Question in Wilson’s Peace Initiatives, 1916-17,” \textit{Australian Journal of Politics and History} Vol. 49, No 4 (2003): 500. Mieczyslaw B. Biskupski, “The Diplomacy of War-Time Relief: The United States and Poland, 1914-18,” \textit{Diplomatic History} Vol. 19, No. 3 (1995): 431-451.

The outbreak of a series of pogroms starting right after armistice\textsuperscript{14} and reaching a peak in the spring of 1919, raised concern in Paris, where discussions for the reorganization and reconstruction of postwar Europe were still under way. The Polish Question\textsuperscript{15} had turned into one of the most intractable problems at the Paris Peace Conference and a special Commission on Polish Affairs was instructed by the Supreme Council to work out Poland’s frontiers in the east, where competing claims by Bolsheviks, White Russians, Ukranians, Latvians, Estonians, and Baltic Germans greatly complicated the situation.\textsuperscript{16} President Woodrow Wilson’s vision of a Europe constituted of democratic states was in danger of drowning in a sea of ethnic, religious, and ideological conflicts. While the Wilson administration was trying to address the mounting economic and humanitarian crisis caused by the war with the help of the American Relief Administration (ARA) and a staff of fifty-thousand volunteers throughout Europe, it did not have a panacea for the numerous boundary disputes and the rising religious as well as ethnic tensions inside these new states. Herbert Hoover, who headed the Herculean task of reconstructing and feeding war-ravaged Europe, believed like Wilson that prosperity would eventually return stability to Europe and contain the spread of Bolshevism. But

\textsuperscript{14} Violence began with the infamous pogrom in Lwów (Lemberg) that took place in November 1918 and was well documented by the Jewish Rescue Committee. The locally administered committee recorded hundreds of depositions from victims and eyewitnesses in the pogrom’s immediate aftermath and some of them were published in Stockholm and Vienna in early 1919. An interesting look at the Lwów pogrom as a social ritual is William W. Hagen, “The Moral Economy of Popular Violence: The Pogrom in Lwów, November 1918,” in Robert Blobaum, ed., \textit{Anti-Semitism and its Opponents in Modern Poland} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 124-147.

\textsuperscript{15} The Polish Question was also tied to the Allied policy toward Russia, which was “confused and uncoordinated,” and even included the possibility of a reconstituted Russian federation that was at odds with a commitment to Russia’s independent border-states. See Charlotte Alston, “‘The Suggested Basis for a Russian Federal Republic:’ Britain, Anti-Bolshevik Russia and the Border States at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919,” \textit{History} (January 2006), Vol. 91, Issue 301:24-44.

reports about the persecution of minorities were seriously undermining the credibility of these newly created states and Wilson’s postwar vision of peace and democracy.

As a result, the recently formed Committee of Jewish Delegations (Comité des Délegations Juives), comprised of emissaries from Palestine, the United States, Canada, Russia, the Ukraine, Great Britain, and Poland, and representing the interests of nine million Jews, submitted a proposal to the Council of Four that requested the protection of various religious, national or linguistic minorities in the newly formed states. In response, the Supreme Council appointed a small committee known as “The Committee on New States and For the Protection of Minorities” which would conduct over sixty meetings from May to December 1919. The resultant minority protection treaties\(^{17}\) entitled racial, religious, or linguistic minorities to guarantees of civil, political, and religious rights. One of the key champions of the minority treaties was Louis Marshall. Proud of his accomplishment, Marshall not only regarded the treaties as “the most important contribution to human liberty in modern history,”\(^{18}\) but also as the best vehicle to safeguard the rights of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.

Yet the discussions in Paris about the legal protection of minorities had little bearing on the chaotic events on the ground in Poland. As early as February 1919, Colonel W.R. Grove of the American Relief Administrations had warned that unless the

\(^{17}\) The principal powers at the Paris Peace Conference (Great Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and Japan) would all eventually sign international treaties with the states of eastern central Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece) concerning the rights of national minorities. These conventions were to be guaranteed by the League of Nations and would be reinforced by similar passages incorporated in the peace treaties themselves. The Peace Conference thus created the framework for the international protection of minorities through various legal constructs (minority protection treaties, the minority protection sections of the peace treaties, and the Covenant of the League of Nations), but the task of setting this protection in motion and developing concrete procedures would fall to the League of Nations itself. Jozsef Galantai, *Trianon and the Protection of Minorities* (Highland Lakes, New Jersey: Columbia University Press, 1992).

“Interallied Economic Council takes steps to relieve this situation by furnishing raw material, the ground is fertile for trouble.””\(^{19}\) Poland was lacking basic necessities and was in desperate need of food and supplies. Amid economic despair and the tensions of civil war, excesses against minorities, especially against Poland’s Jews were on the rise. To the Poles, the minority treaties amounted to a humiliation and limitation on the nation’s sovereignty, implying that Poland required supervision by foreign bodies to implement such rights. Despite eventually ratifying the treaties, Poles continued to oppose them, accusing Jews as the prime movers behind such kind of foreign interference in Poland’s internal affairs. In April 1919 new pogroms erupted in the cities of Pinsk, Lida, and Wilna, all located in territories recently occupied by the Polish armies after defeating the Bolsheviks.

Reports about these horrific events reached members of Jewish relief organizations and key members of the American Relief Administration (ARA) almost immediately.\(^{20}\) As a matter of fact, Herbert Hoover, head of the ARA in Paris, received news about the Pinsk massacre from his private secretary Lewis L. Strauss. On 11 April, Strauss, who was also serving as liaison between Jewish relief and aid operations run by the ARA, was handed a badly mutilated telegram from Warsaw that brought terrible news about a Jewish massacre in Pinsk. On the night of 5 April about a hundred Jews had gathered in a synagogue to discuss the distribution of funds and supplies, when suddenly Polish soldiers smashed down the doors and ordered the Jews into the street. After

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\(^{19}\) Report by Colonel W. R. Grove to General Kernan at the American Mission in Warsaw, February 27, 1919, Hugh S. Gibson Papers, Box 79, “Subject File, American Mission of Relief for Poland, 1919,” HIA.

\(^{20}\) It was a well-known fact that the ARA had the best connected telegraph system all over Europe. According to Herbert Hoover, the ARA was “the best source of political and economic information from everywhere in Europe. See Herbert Hoover, \textit{The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson} (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 90, 113-14.
women and children and some men had been separated, the Polish troops declared the remaining thirty-seven Jews Bolsheviks and Red Army collaborators, lined them up against the wall, and machine-gunned them.  

Hoover was concerned and upset. In a letter to Paderewski he made clear that the Pinsk affair was a matter of “extreme gravity” and that the “most vigorous investigation should be made at once.” When Paderewski insisted that the Pinsk affair had been an execution of Bolshevists, traitors against the Polish state, Hoover related to the Polish prime minister that representatives of the American Jewish Committee happened to have been in the city on the day of the massacre and had recounted a dramatically different version of the events in question. Their report of a massacre of Jewish civilians—not Bolshevik agents, but men who had gathered in a synagogue with their wives and children to collect relief items—had been immediately relayed to their colleagues in the United States, leading to intense media coverage there. The Pinsk matter, Hoover warned Paderewski, “could develop into a most serious embarrassment to all of us in connection with the relief of Poland.”  

While pressure was mounting on the Polish representatives in Paris to address the persecution and killing of Jews, the situation on the ground kept getting worse. At the
end of April 1919, when Hugh S. Gibson arrived in Poland to assume his duties as the new American Minister to the Legation in Warsaw, there was still wide talk of pogroms. On 1 May 1919, just a few days after his arrival in Warsaw, Gibson walked through the Jewish Quarter, when he noticed that the streets were practically empty. And there was good reason why the Jews were staying inside. All that talk of an imminent pogrom, Gibson wrote in a letter to his mother, had scared the Jews enough so that they “were not taking any chances.” Just a few days later, on 7 May, riots did break out in Kolbuszowa, fueled by political agitation and a case of alleged ritual murder that resulted in the killing of eight Jews. On 27 May, deadly riots followed in Częstochowa, where five Jews were killed, including one doctor, who was hurrying to aid one of the injured.

More bad news about attacks by the Polish army on the Jews of Wilna and Minsk led by May 1919 to major demonstrations in American cities and to mounting public pressure for some sort of U.S. action. The largest demonstration was held on 21 May at Madison Square Garden in New York City and drew a crowd of several hundred thousand people. Calls for U.S. action reached a crescendo when Republican Senator Charles E. Hughes, longtime nemesis of President Wilson, addressed the crowd with the words “if America stands for anything in her service of humanity, then let America speak together by accepting the position of Prime Minister at the head of a coalition government. Yet despite Paderewski’s popularity, the competing visions of a strong Poland either along federalist or incorporationist lines, would lead to serious tensions between the forces of Dmowski and Pilsudski. Macmillan, Paris 1919, 210-213. Wandycz, Soviet-Polish Relations, 1917-1921, 120.

25 Gibson in a letter to his mother, 1 May 1919, “Diaries, 1919 May,” Hugh S. Gibson Papers, Box 69, HIA.


now.” A few days later the New York Times published a front-page article titled, “Jews Massacred, Robbed by Poles.” Political pressure increased and led the Senate to pass a resolution that condemned the pogroms and requested President Wilson to confer in Paris with representatives of Poland. Louis Marshall sent a letter to Wilson urging him to put pressure on Poland that “such atrocities must cease; that the perpetrators be punished and that the necessary steps be forthwith taken to prevent the repetition of these crimes against humanity.”

Yet Wilson also found himself inundated with petitions from Polish representatives and Polish-Americans. A few days after Marshall’s plea to put pressure on Poland, Paderewski appealed to Wilson to quell such “tendentious rumors” and “to put and end to this unworthy activity [demonstrations against Poland], by sending a special mission to Poland, in order to investigate and report on the true state of things, thus dispelling the accusations, under which my country is laboring.” Likewise, Polish American organizations asked the State Department to release all reports written by the American Minister in Warsaw and vehemently denied that any pogroms had occurred in Poland, and Polish workers started to organize demonstrations and on various occasions Jewish and Polish workers even resorted to street-fighting. The largest clashes occurred

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31 “Denies that Poland is slaying Jews,” New York Times, 23 May 1919, 2. W. O. Gorski of the Polish Information Bureau issued a statement denying that any pogroms had occurred in Poland and “that individual quarrels and outbreaks of looting, unavoidable in a half-starved and ravaged country, had been exaggerated and colored.” He also added that the Pinsk affair was not a pogrom but an execution of Bolshevists.
in New York and Chicago, but even smaller cities like Milwaukee witnessed serious clashes between Jews and Poles.\textsuperscript{32}

In June 1919, Hoover suggested that an American commission be sent to Poland to investigate the persecution and murder of Jews in order to pacify public outcry. Hoover wrote to President Wilson that a quick resolution of the matter was in the best interest of the Polish republic. He also advised the president to include at least two prominent American Jews on this investigative committee to serve as advisors to the Jews in Poland. The Polish Jews, Hoover explained, had not been very supportive of a democratic Polish republic. In fact, Hoover argued, the Jews of Poland were peculiarly subject to Bolshevik influence, and those two American Jews could make them realize that their ultimate salvation from the tyrannies they had endured was a democratic Poland.\textsuperscript{33}

Hoover’s advice to the president must be understood within the context of Wilson’s foreign policy and the political currents of the time. Like his Western allies at the peace conference, Hoover was a fierce anti-Communist and saw Bolshevism as the greatest danger to democracy and prosperity.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, he agreed with Wilson’s support of an independent and democratic Poland as a prerequisite for order and prosperity in eastern Europe and a barrier against both a future German threat and the spread of Bolshevism.


\textsuperscript{33} Hoover to President Wilson, 2 June 1919, \textit{The Papers of Woodrow Wilson}, Vol. 60, 39. Hoover wrote years later after the Pinsk incident that the American investigative mission sent to Poland “quieted both the persecutions and the exaggerated reports.” Hoover, \textit{The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson}, 141.

In August 1919, an American Commission headed by Henry Morgenthau, Brigadier General Edgar Jadwin and Homer H. Johnson arrived in Warsaw to investigate charges of pogroms against Jews. After weeks of inquiry, however, the commissioners were unable to submit a unanimous report. Morgenthau admitted in a letter to Gibson that they “had no end of arguments in trying to agree on a joint report—we finally concluded to hand in separate reports.” There was no agreement on defining the nature, severity, or even the causes of Jewish persecutions in Poland. Alone the term “pogrom” became a matter of controversy and was abandoned in favor of the word “excess.” Hugh Gibson himself, the American Minister in Warsaw, tended to avoid the words pogrom or massacre in his accounts to the state department, and after having been severely criticized by Jewish leaders for his reporting on the Jewish Question in Poland, defiantly expressed his dislike for this war over words, noting that “if a Jew is injured it is called a pogrom. If a Christian is mobbed, it is called a food riot.”

The principal difference of opinion between the separate reports, however, lay in the evaluation of the cause of anti-Semitism in Poland. Whereas Morgenthau stressed the turmoil of fighting in the war’s aftermath and Poland’s recent independence as one of the

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35 President Wilson was determined to appoint a Jew, yet American Jewish leaders were opposed to it. Henry Morgenthau did not want to accept the appointment at first but gave in to Wilson in the name of “good citizenship.” Leaders of the Jewish establishment did not want a Jew appointed to the commission for fear of being used for propagandistic purposes. Morgenthau was also considered somewhat of a “loose cannon” and a fervent anti-Zionist, which did not garner him much trust from American Zionists. See Henry Morgenthau III, *Mostly Morgenthau: A Family History* (New York: Ticknor&Fields, 1991), 197.

36 It is interesting to note that the three key members of the commission did not have any familiarity with either Polish or Yiddish, and hence conducted all hearings with the help of interpreters. Henry Morgenthau III, *Mostly Morgenthau*, 198.

37 Henry Morgenthau to Gibson, 14 January 1920, Hugh S. Gibson Papers, Box 54, “Correspondence, Henry Morgenthau, 1919-23,” HIA.

38 See Jadwin and Johnson Report as printed by The National Polish Committee of America, *The Jews in Poland*, 1920, ARA – European Unit, Box 609, “General Office File, Poland Report, Jews in Poland,” HIA.

39 “Hugh S Gibson, Minister in Poland, to Acting Secretary of State, Frank Polk, 2 June 1919,” *FRUS*, Vol. II (1919), 758.
major contributing factors to anti-Jewish policies and actions, Jadwin and Johnson gave more weight to Jewish separatism that had existed since the Middle Ages as the major cause of Polish hostility. According to Morgenthau, it was up to a democratic Polish government to restore peace and order and to treat all its citizens equally. Invoking Abraham Lincoln’s famous words, he encouraged the Polish government to create a united rather than a divided house because “a house divided against itself can not stand.”

Jadwin and Johnson, on the other hand, insisted that “this process of restoration is not solely dependent on the good will and exertions of the Poles themselves.” On the contrary, their investigation revealed that the ball was in the Jewish court. After all, it was “the history and the attitude of the Jews, complicated by abnormal economic and political conditions produced by the war [that] have fed the flame of anti-Semitism at a critical moment.” In other words, the commissioners’ disagreement came down to culpability: was Polish anti-Semitism primarily a product of war and economic turmoil, or was it the Jews’ fault due to their separatism? For Morgenthau, the ultimate solution to the Jewish problem lay in the hands of Polish authorities, for Jadwin and Johnson, it was up to the Jews to prove themselves as citizens supportive of an independent Polish republic that constituted a key barrier against Bolshevism.

Many American Jews feared that the Jewish Question was not only being subordinated to larger geopolitical interests but that the American minister in Warsaw, who had served as the commission’s point man in Poland, was deliberately downplaying

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the number of pogroms and the severity of the situation. Gibson had drawn the ire of a number of prominent American Jews such as Louis Marshall, head of the American Jewish Committee, and Felix Frankfurter, a close Wilson friend, future Supreme Court Justice, and activist in the Zionist movement at the time. Even after Wilson sent an American commission to investigate the Jewish Question in Poland, Marshall continued to express indignation over Gibson’s bias in reporting.42

The controversy over Gibson’s reports had apparently begun with the publication of a confidential telegram in the press that stated that “no pogroms with our knowledge had taken place in Poland.” Unfortunately for Gibson’s standing with the Jewish press and American Jews, this statement had been made by the Military Attaché in Paris but was wrongly attributed to Gibson. Although the State Department tried to repair Gibson’s reputation by showing all of his reports to various prominent Jews, who in turn advised others to have “utmost confidence in Gibson” again, the damage had been done.43

Gibson was not only seriously irritated with some American Jews because of their attacks against him, but he also accused them of propagandizing the Jewish Question for ulterior and conspiratorial reasons and “without any regard for the welfare of the Jews in

42 See Louis Marshall to Abram L. Elkus, 19 August 1919, *Louis Marshall: Champion of Liberty. Selected Papers and Addresses*, ed. Charles Reznikoff, Vol. II (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1957), 601-11. Such outrage and indignation by American Jews over atrocities against their coreligionists in Poland could turn into hard political currency. In *Reluctant Ally: United States Foreign Policy Toward the Jews from Wilson to Roosevelt*, Frank W. Brecher looks at the Jewish factor as a motivating agent to investigate the situation of Jews in Poland. He argues that President Wilson’s decision to send an investigative commission to Poland was partly motivated by his concern over Jewish support for the League of Nations. He points to the fact that one of Wilson’s political enemies, Republican Charles Evans Hughes, later secretary of state under President Warren G. Harding, sided with American Jews in their protest over the persecution of Polish Jews, and that the president had good reason to grow concerned over dwindling Jewish support. See Frank W. Brecher, *Reluctant Ally*, 36-37.

43 Acting Secretary of State, Polk, to Hugh Gibson, 23 June, 1919, Hugh S. Gibson Papers, Box 92, The Jewish Question, Poland, Reports by Hugh Gibson, HIA.
Poland.”44 Since the news bureau in Berlin was instrumental in disseminating information about Jewish pogroms in Poland that in turn was picked up by the Jewish press in America, Gibson accused American Jews of wanting to “weaken Poland in the interest of Germany who does not desire a formidable economic or political rival in the East.”

While Gibson did not hide his anger by lashing out against American Jews, he did reassure the State Department that he had been working hard to “render any possible friendly service to prevent excesses or discrimination against the Jews.”45 As a matter of fact, Gibson claimed in a confidential letter to the state department that he had given a large part of his time to the study of Jewish matters. The Jewish Question, he explained, did not start after armistice but had its roots in the old regime, particularly the dreadful discrimination under the Russian system. With the creation of a democratic Polish republic, however, the legal discrimination and inequality were removed and the Jews were given equality before the law in theory, yet in practice, the Jews became more vulnerable and increasingly subjected to physical violence. Gibson also maintained that while excesses and massacres did occur (several hundred Jews had been killed since the signing of armistice in November 1918 by subordinate military authorities in an “arbitrary and sometimes brutal” manner), higher military and civil authorities “did their best to stop all excesses.” He had done his best to speak to Jews and Poles in order to

44 Hugh Gibson to William Phillips, Assistant Secretary of State, 6 July 1919, Hugh S Gibson Papers, Box 92, “The Jewish Question, Poland, Reports by Hugh Gibson, HIA.
45 Hugh Gibson to William Phillips, 6 July 1919, Hugh Gibson Papers, Box 92, “The Jewish Question, Poland, Reports by Hugh Gibson,” HIA.
assess the situation. The fighting with the Bolsheviks and the general disarray in Poland at the time, Gibson surmised, should if not excuse, at least explain such excesses.\(^{46}\)

Gibson’s anger seemed mostly directed at what he called “the Jewish propaganda machine” that was “devoted chiefly to polemics against the Poles and the Polish Government.” Even the Polish Jews, Gibson averred, resented the propaganda coming from mostly American, English, and German Jews and referred to it as “harmful meddling.” “I am sure,” he declared, ”that some of our American Jewish agitators would be surprised at the sort of welcome they would receive from their co-religionists if they were to come here.”\(^{47}\) The thing for American Jews to do, Gibson advised, was “to help lift up Poland and lift their own people along with the country.” The American government was in a position to bring Poles and Jews together, but that work was being “delayed and hampered by the attempt of American Jews to hurt Poland in the eyes of the world.”\(^{48}\)

Gibson’s attempts to counter what he referred to as Jewish propaganda did not end public outrage over Jewish suffering in Poland or prevent an American investigative commission in 1919, but just three years later Gibson’s arguments would carry the day. Political pressure on Poland to prove its democratic orientation and friendly disposition toward the West remained strong only as long as Poland’s frontiers and future hung in the balance and Polish armies were still battling Bolshevik troops. In the end, the publication of the commission’s reports in early 1920 did not result in further actions or resolutions.

\(^{46}\) Hugh Gibson to William Phillips, 6 July 1919, Hugh Gibson Papers, Box 92, “The Jewish Question, Poland, Reports by Hugh Gibson,” HIA.
\(^{47}\) Hugh Gibson to William Phillips, 6 July 1919, Hugh Gibson Papers, Box 92, “The Jewish Question, Poland, Reports by Hugh Gibson,” HIA.
\(^{48}\) Hugh Gibson to William Phillips, 6 July 1919, Hugh Gibson Papers, Box 92, “The Jewish Question, Poland, Reports by Hugh Gibson,” HIA.
While American Jews continued to point to the persecution of Polish Jews and report of various pogroms, the publicity over them died down. In 1922, Gibson made very clear in a confidential note to the State Department, that Jewish propaganda about pogroms was just that, propaganda, and should be ignored. “The Jews,” he explained, “do not demand equal but exceptional treatment.” He even went so far to suggest that when “Jewish demands are pressed and the intervention of the United States is called for, it is not to prevent cruelties and injustices to an oppressed minority, but to secure the aid of a larger power for their selfish ends in a matter which is a purely internal problem of a friendly state.” Gibson’s recommendation on how to deal with such requests in the future was clear and simple, and would become established state department doctrine: The U.S. government was to use its “whole influence” to “secure just treatment for an American Jew,” and should lend its influence on behalf of native elements in a foreign country only in a case of “gross injustice and cruelty, as in the case of Armenian massacres and the like.” 49 This was a rather surprising reference by Gibson, since the United States had not exerted any pressure on the Ottoman government in 1915, to stop the mass killings of its Armenian population. By 1922, the bulk of diplomatic correspondence between Warsaw and Washington D.C. largely concerned financial and economic matters.

Why had the sense of alarm and urgency disappeared by 1922? The Paris Peace Conference, charged with devising a postwar order in Europe, had ended, the United States had refused to join the league of nations and the new administration of Warren G. Harding was celebrating a “return to normalcy.” Herbert Hoover, the chief architect of postwar Europe’s relief and reconstruction operations was confident that the American

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49 Gibson to Sec of State Charles E. Hughes, 10 November 1922, “Diplomatic Posts, Poland. Correspondence with the Secretary of State, 1919-23, Box 100, Hugh Gibson Papers, HI.
Commission sent to Poland in the summer of 1919 had addressed the Jewish matter adequately. Years later in 1958, after decades of Jewish persecutions in Eastern Europe and after the horrors of the Holocaust had become part of public discourse Hoover still insisted that the American Commission “quieted both the persecutions and the exaggerated reports.”\(^{50}\) American Jews, foremost Louis Marshall, chairman of the American Jewish Committee, placed great hope in the Minority Treaty with Poland that guaranteed to safeguard and respect the rights of all racial, religious, and linguistic minorities including the Jewish minority. In the summer of 1919 Marshall proclaimed that “nothing thus far accomplished by the Peace Conference exceeds in importance the Polish Treaty signed at Versailles.”\(^{51}\) But only fourteen months later, at the fourteenth annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee at the Hotel Astor in New York, Marshall conceded that conditions in Poland were “pitiable as during or following the World War.”\(^{52}\)

With the conclusion of the Polish-Russian war in a preliminary armistice on 12 October 1920, and finalized in the Treaty of Riga on 18 March 1921, the Polish nation reasserted its sovereignty and in October 1922 even forcibly incorporated the Lithuanian city of Wilna into its territory. Communist Russia was a reality and the newly independent states of eastern Europe made up a *cordon sanitaire* to contain the spread of communism. In other words, the consolidation of the political situation in eastern Europe was a fait accompli, matters of discrimination and persecution within these countries were believed to have been addressed with the adoption of the minority treaties and were now considered internal matters. Years later, when the Federation of Polish Jews in

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\(^{50}\) Hoover, *The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson*, 141.


America sent a protest to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, urging U.S. action to stop the pogroms against Jews in Poland in 1937, the reply by Pierrepont Moffat, Chief of the Division of European Affairs, explained that “under the accepted principles governing international relations this Government cannot make representations to a foreign government with regards to matters which do not directly involve the interest of American citizens.”

The Wilson administration put pressure on Poland to address the Jewish Question, when the young republic was in disarray, fighting wars of expansion and defense, and greatly depended on western political, military, and economic support. Yet, when Poland’s borders were consolidated and the Polish nation was perceived as a bulwark against Russian and German expansion, matters of Jewish persecution and discrimination were viewed solely as an internal Polish matter. Still, even during the period of public pressure and the publicity surrounding the Jewish Question in Poland between 1919 and 1921, American perspectives were fraught with disagreements over the nature of the killings, the degree of persecution, the causes of discrimination and persecution, and over what sort of U.S. action should be taken if any.

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53 Quoted in Kapieszewski, “The Federation of Polish Jews in America in Polish-Jewish Relations During the Interwar Years (1924-1939),” 64.
54 Reports about the plight of Polish Jews would continue and by 1926 “adverse economic conditions” undid “much of the past relief work, and 1,000,000 people need aid.” See New York Times, 28 May 1926, xx8.