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The Holocaust, Canadian Jews, and Canada's "Good War" Against Nazism

This paper examines the Canadian Jewish response to the Holocaust during the Second World War. Rather than disparaging the Canadian Jewish community for timidity in its dealings with Canadian institutions or suggesting that Canadian Jews were disinterested in their European brethren, historians need to contextualize Canadian Jewish actions within the domestic power structures of the 1940s and the confines of the Canadian Jewish imagination. With the Canadian Government censoring the Holocaust, the Canadian Jewish community framed the European Jewish tragedy around the idea of resistance to bolster Canadian sympathy for European Jews and give meaning to the Holocaust.

Cet article analyse la réaction des Juifs canadiens face à l'Holocauste. Plutôt que de dénigrer la communauté juive canadienne pour sa timidité ou son indifférence, les historiens doivent remettre les actions juives canadiennes dans le contexte des structures nationales de pouvoir des années 1940 et des limites de l'imagination de l'époque. À cause de la censure gouvernementale, la communauté juive canadienne a pensé la tragédie des Juifs européens autour de l'idée de résistance afin de renforcer la sympathie des Canadiens et de donner du sens à l'Holocauste.

On October 16, 1942, Prime Minister Mackenzie King opened up Canada's Third Victory Bond drive in Montreal by describing what the war against Nazi Germany meant for Canadians. According to King, Hitler's war was a Manichean clash between two diametrically opposed philosophies. "The Nazi doctrine of a superior race implies the subjugation and, if Nazi deeds so demand, the extermination of all other people," King warned. Hitler hoped to secure German hegemony in Europe through the wholesale destruction of "other races" and through "a war of extermination against religion."¹ While King spoke, the most deadly period of the Holocaust was underway. Jews across Poland were being systematically removed from ghettos and transported to the extermination camps of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. By mid-June 1942, approximately one quarter of the Jews who would be exterminated by the Nazis had been killed; by February 1943, the Nazis had murdered 4.5 million Jews.² Yet, King did not refer to Jews once in his speech. Instead, he used blanket terms like "religion" and "races" when referring to Hitler's victims. King's speech epitomised the Canadian Government's policy of methodically keeping Jews outside of its war propaganda, lest Canadians associate the sacrificing of Canadian lives and resources with saving Jews. Both the Canadian Government and the Canadian Jewish community were concerned that antisemitism would undermine unity and hinder the war effort. Yet, Canadian Jewry understood the Canadian war effort through the paradigm of Hitler's war against Jews. In response to government censorship of the Holocaust and to build Canadian sympathy, Canadian Jews emphasized that European Jewish victims were not mere hapless victims, but partisans fighting for liberty.

To understand the seeming contradiction of Canada fighting a war of liberation while refusing sanctuary to Jews, historians focus on three aspects of the Canadian bystander experience: Canadian antisemitism, knowledge of the Holocaust, and

the Canadian Jewish responses. The foundational work on Canadian antisemitism is Irving Abella and Harold Troper's *None Is Too Many*, which provides copious documentation showing that the decision to prevent Jews from escaping to Canada was "a political decision."³ Numerous studies have followed, showing that antisemitism manifested itself differently amongst the English-speaking elite, Québécois nationalists, and populist movements. Despite variation, the tragic consequence of Canadian antisemitism was the same: a lack of political will to make Canada a sanctuary for Jews trying to escape Europe.⁴

Historians also debate whether Canadians comprehended or believed during the war that Jews were systematically being exterminated by Hitler.⁵ The conventional position is that the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945 saturated Western media with horrific images of Nazi atrocities and led to a realization of the Holocaust.⁶ Some scholars have challenged this argument, noting that the majority of victims found in concentration camps were not Jewish since the extermination camps were located in Eastern Europe and were either destroyed by the Nazis or liberated by Soviet forces. Since the Canadian press failed to delve into "the centrality of antisemitism in Nazi ideology" and de-emphasized the Jewish identity of Hitler's victims, scholars have argued that the Holocaust was minimized in Western discourse and even within Canadian-Jewish circles until the late 1960s.⁷

The suggestion that the Western public remained unaware of Hitler's destruction of Europe's Jews has bled into the occasionally disparaging discussion about the North American Jewish community's response to the Holocaust.⁸ Holding true to Michael R. Marrus' observation that there is a "strong tendency" in the historical literature on bystanders to "condemn, rather than to explain,"⁹ historians have indicted the Canadian Jewish community for being timid in its negotiations with the Canadian Government and for failing to draw the public's attention to the Jewish tragedy in Europe.¹⁰ Max Beer condemns the Canadian Jewish community for being apathetic to European Jewry, claiming that Canadian Jews were more interested in being perceived as patriotic than in saving the lives: "as the war progressed loyalty to Canada and support for the war effort became the overriding issues for the community and the leadership and concern for their European brethren faded into the background."¹¹

This article will attempt to unravel the various conflicting interpretations that surround Canadian responses to the Holocaust by examining the relationship between the Canadian war effort and domestic antisemitism. Whereas the Canadian Government attempted to solidify support for the war by universalizing the victims and focusing on the Nazi perpetrators, Canadian Jews sought to build sympathy for Jewish victims by presenting European Jewry within the confines of the military struggle to defeat tyranny. For Canadian Jews, framing the Holocaust around the theme of resistance—rather than victimization—worked to give meaning to the enormous loss of life. The Canadian Jewish Congress' negotiations with the Canadian Government

progressed slowly to ease immigration regulations and secure an avenue for Jewish refugees to escape Nazi-occupied territories through neutral countries. Canadian Jews saw Germany's defeat as the best hope for saving Europe's Jews.

Keeping the Holocaust out of "The Good War"

When Prime Minister Mackenzie King brought Canada's declaration of war before Parliament on September 10, 1939, his stated purpose was to defend freedom, the British Empire, and Western civilization. King's three hour speech made no mention of Jews, but focused on Germany's violation of international conventions. Hitler's "wanton disregard of all treaty obligations" and dastardly use of "terrorism and violence," according to King, demanded that Canada join the Christian crusade against Nazi Germany to save the liberal order:

The forces of evil have been loosed in the world in a struggle between the pagan conception of a social order which ignores the individual and is based upon the doctrine of might and a civilization based upon the Christian conception of the brotherhood of man, with its regard for the sanctity of contractual relations and the sacredness of human personality.¹²

Following the declaration, the Canadian Government embarked on a public opinion campaign to solidify support behind the war effort by depicting Canada as the antithesis of Nazi Germany, contrasting Canadian "biracial" political character and its large immigrant population with Nazism's master race philosophy.¹³ Although a significant aspect of the program to demonize Nazi Germany was shedding light on Nazi atrocities, the Canadian Government neglected drawing attention to the extermination of Europe's Jews. King's speeches throughout the war explicitly excluded any mention of Jews. At Chateau Laurier on September 17, 1941, King argued that the core of Germany's national chauvinism was the Prussian militaristic mentality:

It is the real force behind the Nazi terror. It is the real secret of German power. It remains the implacable foe. The German war machine, the inhuman monster which the Prussian mind has created and continues to direct has already ravaged a whole continent and impoverished, enslaved, strangled, or devoured millions of human lives. It is a dragon which can only be slain by fighting men.¹⁴

There are two reasons why King specifically minimized the Jewish tragedy in his speeches. First, he was more concerned about Hitler's threat to Christianity than to Jews. Following a tortuous line of logic, King became convinced that Hitler was murdering Jews in order to destroy Christianity. King arrived at this notion following a meeting with two prominent Zionists, Archibald J. Freiman and Chaim Weizmann on May 9, 1941. When Weizmann made the point that Nazism was an antichristian

philosophy, King took it to mean “that Hitlerism was not aimed against the Jews fundamentally but at Christianity through the Jews. That what Hitler was out to destroy was Christendom. I believe in this he [Weizmann] is right. He [Hitler] does not want a brotherhood of man. He wants to have his fellow-men ruled by an armed guard.”¹⁵

Second, King sensed astutely that Canadians were uninterested in the murder of Jews and hostile to the idea of Canada becoming a haven for Jewish refugees. He said as much to Emil Ludwig, a German-Jewish historical writer, who appealed to King on June 11, 1944 to allow Jewish refugees to settle in Canada to escape Hitler: “I explained to him again the nature of the political problem, the difficulty of a leader of a govt. bringing up this question on the eve of an election but agreed that Canada would have to open her doors and fill many of her large waste spaces with population once our own men had returned from the front.” Rescuing Jews was not politically expedient. Frustrated that offering his sympathy was not enough, King wrote in his diary following Ludwig’s visit: “I must say when one listens to accounts of their [Jewish] persecutions, one cannot have any human sympathies without being prepared to do much on their behalf.”¹⁶ While there was political capital to be gained by decrying Hitler’s atrocities, focusing on the Jewish aspect of the Nazis’ murdering rampage was counterintuitive in King’s mind. More effective was suggesting that the Nazi scourge threatened Canadians directly on the home front. Images in war bond advertisements often presented Canada’s most vulnerable members, such as women and children, in danger of capture, to invoke compassion from Canada’s paternalistic culture.



Gordon K. Odell, 1941-42, Canadian War Poster Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library.¹⁷

The most elaborate fundraising operation, "If Day," simulated the occupation of Winnipeg by mock Nazi forces on February 19, 1942, but paid no heed to the Nazi persecution of Jews, despite its intended purpose of awakening the Canadian imagination to the horrors of the Nazi threat. Terror was envisaged through an emergency blackout at 7 AM amid the screaming of air raid sirens to recreate the London blitz. The Nazi attack on liberty was embodied by troops attired in Wehrmacht uniforms burning books in front of the public library. These Nazis targeted the freedom of the press, with the *Winnipeg Tribune* being printed in German and renamed *Das Winnipeg Lügenblatt*.¹⁸ Premier John Bracken, his cabinet, and the mayor were arrested, churches were closed, and a curfew imposed. However, there were no reports in the local press that these mock Nazi soldiers rounded up Jews specifically. No indication that Jewish shops were targeted and looted. In fact, *Life* magazine's coverage of the spectacle noted that the "Nazis' close[d] the Protestant and Catholic Church," apparently leaving synagogues alone.¹⁹ Presumably, due to the absence of antisemitism in this fake Nazi assault on Winnipeg, the Canadian Jewish press refused to cover the event.²⁰

The obscuration of the Holocaust was mandated throughout the Canadian propaganda infrastructure. The two government agencies that controlled information regarding Canada's war effort—the Wartime Information Board (WIB) and the National Film Board (NFB)—were remarkably silent about the mass murder of Jews, even during the liberation of the concentration camps. Throughout most of the war, both agencies were led by John Grierson, the commissioner of the NFB and the WIB's General Manager until 1944. Although he focused on presenting different aspects of the war effort to build unity among Canadians, Grierson also produced documentaries that dealt with aspects of Nazi atrocities. These films were carefully edited and scripted to avoid referencing the unique tragedy befalling Jews. When asked by his American Jewish friend Arthur Gottlieb in 1944 why the NFB "has maintained a virtual silence about Hitler's war against the Jews," Grierson initially tried to justify the NFB's stance by claiming that "there just is no contemporary footage about the rumours we keep hearing about." Gottlieb remained unconvinced and pressed Grierson further: "you know bloody well the killing machine against the Jews goes on unchecked. Let's face it. Canada is an anti-Semitic country that couldn't give a damn about the Jews." Grierson admitted that he was not entirely wrong and that the government was "willing to be led, rather than to lead a Canadian public opinion that is frankly anti-Semitic, particularly in Québec." On why the NFB had produced no documentary on Jewish refugees, Grierson explained that his hands were tied:

The Cabinet War Committee declared Canada's information policy on this issue: remain silent. Ottawa ordered all atrocity stories held up until they could be verified....Government policy has spared Canadian civilian morale and some possible guilt feelings. Mr. King's government has long depended upon Québec's votes and seats in Parliament, and English Canada fears be-

coming awash in a sea of Jewish refugees. The government is not prepared to lose votes on the Jewish issue. It is a closed subject at the NFB.²¹

NFB productions consistently censored the Holocaust for the duration of the war. Both the NFB's major series on the Second World War, *Canada Carries On* and *World In Action*, took exceptional care to avoid discussing Europe's Jews, instead describing the war experience from multiple perspectives and delving into the political implications of the Nazis' bid for hegemony in Europe. In the 1942 film, *War for Men's Minds*, the NFB examined Nazi ideology at length without mentioning Hitler's antisemitism. The film states that the heart of the Nazi "creed was violence," which the narrator contrasted with the British liberal tradition: "And in every quarter of her [Britain's] Empire – wherever her subjects aspired to the freedom of self-government – Britain held up this old liberal ideal of change by gradual reform."²² Even in its short documentary in 1945 on the liberation of the concentration camps, *Behind the Swastika: Nazi Atrocities*, the NFB continued to obscure the nature of the victims by claiming that atrocities were directed against individuals who challenged the Nazis' tyrannical rule. In one scene, as the camera panned across liberated, emaciated prisoners, the narrator declared, "These are the men who dared to defy the Fuehrer, free thinking men who believed in the democratic principles, Jews and Gentile. Their only crime was that they were anti-Nazi. They were herded into concentration camps and left to the mercy of sadistic guards, who beat, starved, and murdered them in thousands."²³ Although concentration camps were created to hold political prisoners, by 1945, many concentration camps, such as Belsen, held thousands of Jews who had survived death marches from evacuated extermination camps.

Lack of reliable information about the Holocaust cannot explain the Canadian Government's decision to keep the Holocaust out of the public spotlight. A substantial quantity of intelligence on the extermination of the Jews was collected and analysed by foreign governments and forwarded to the Department of External Affairs and even the Wartime Information Board. One of the most detailed and earliest sources available was a confidential series entitled "Report on Jewry," prepared by a team of researchers in Britain's Ministry of Information.²⁴ Using intercepted correspondence mainly between Jewish informants in Europe and the Middle East and American Jewish charity agencies, the British compiled lengthy reports on the conditions facing European Jewry, attached translated copies of the correspondence, and distributed the material to its Allies. The fifth report, dated February 9, 1943, and received in Ottawa on May 14, 1943, covered the period from September to December 1942, and began by making clear that the latest information "brings the toll of deportation and mass murder a stage further towards the apparently intended climax of complete extermination." With regards to Jewish efforts to effect rescue, the writer noted that "it is an ironical fact that considerable facilities for immigration have now been offered by the Western Hemisphere when apparently insuperable barriers have arisen in Europe."²⁵ What followed was a breakdown by occupied country of the

anti-Jewish laws being enforced and the number of Jews being deported to the East. Of particular note was the section on Poland, which documented the acceleration of the Final Solution from "first hand accounts from deportees in Poland, sent by underground routes through neutral intermediaries to London." Under the header "Mass Murder on Polish Territory," the British author warned that the Nazis were speeding up their extermination campaign against Jews, chronicling that "during September rumors began to accumulate from many sources regarding a plan for the wholesale massacre of the Jews deported to Russia and Poland." These "rumors" were now facts, according to the report, and there was solid evidence that "there was a plan behind these measures [deportation] to exterminate immediately the largest possible number of Jews." According to various sources listed, half of the Warsaw Ghetto had been "liquidated" by October 1942.²⁶ As early as November 12, 1943, External Affairs also had accounts from Jewish partisans who had witnessed the Jewish communities of Bendin, Dabrowa and Sosnowiec being rounded up and sent "to the annihilation camp at Oswiecim."²⁷

Canada's Department of External Affairs also received reports from Governments-in-Exile, specifically Poland and Czechoslovakia, which revealed that Jews were being hunted and murdered *en masse* throughout Europe. Following the razing of Lidice, Dr. Hubert Ripka, the Czechoslovakian Secretary of State, informed Vincent Massey, High Commissioner for Canada in London, on two separate occasions, June 2 and 17, 1942, of the terror unleashed by the Nazis at Lidice and Lezaky in retribution for Reinhard Heydrich's assassination. On February 26, 1943, Jan Masaryk, Czechoslovakian Foreign Minister, told Massey of the continuing efforts of the Nazis to squash resistance in Czechoslovakia, noting that in the week following Heydrich's death, 1,288 individuals had been murdered by the Nazis. Interestingly, Masaryk also pointed out that Kurt Daluge, who was appointed Deputy Protector of Moravia and Bohemia following Heydrich's death, had "intensified the anti-Semitic measures" and "expedited the deportations." By the end of 1942, only 18,000 Jews remained of the 90,000 Jews in pre-war Bohemia and Moravia. In Slovakia, an additional 76,000 Jews had been deported to Poland, leaving only 19,000 Jews, most of whom Masaryk said were awaiting their own deportation to concentration camps.²⁸

Recent historical research confirms that Masaryk's report to Massey was quite accurate. From June to December 1942, 61,490 Jews were transported from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to Theresienstadt Camp, which served as a transit camp for Jews destined for the extermination camps further east.²⁹ Between March and August 1942, an additional 58,000 Jews, accounting for seventy-five percent of Slovak Jews were also deported mainly to Auschwitz.³⁰ Moreover, Heydrich's death provided an impetus to accelerate the Final Solution. Heinrich Himmler blamed the Jews for his friend's death and told SS officers that "it is our sacred obligation to avenge his death, to take over his mission and to destroy without mercy and weakness...the enemies of our people."³¹ Although the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews was

taken some time in September–October 1941, historians agree that Heydrich's assassination generated an atmosphere of revenge against the Jews and "accelerated the extermination process," not just in the Protectorate, but throughout German-occupied Europe.³²

Information on the Holocaust was not restricted to the confidential files of Canada's External Affairs; detailed reports of the Holocaust also made their way into Wartime Information Board files. These reports could have been used as a source for its fundraising campaigns and propaganda materials, but were not. In late 1942, the WIB received a copy of *Bestiality...unknown in any previous record of history*, a grisly document on the crimes perpetrated against Poles. Although this report was commissioned by the Polish Government-in-Exile, and thus framed Germany's crimes against all Poles, it did contain a section on the "destruction of the Jewish population." Ghettos were described as places of death, which had "incredibly miserable conditions, the mortality is enormous, and it is an everyday phenomenon for dead bodies to be lying in the streets." However, the method of murder had quickened from death by starvation and disease to mass shootings and asphyxiation. British Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, was quoted as estimating that 700,000 Jews had been murdered in Poland by the summer of 1942. Most of the Lublin ghetto had been transported "over a period of several days to the locality of Sobibor...where they were all murdered with gas, machine-guns and even by being bayoneted." The Poles warned that the "Jewish population in Poland is doomed to die out in accordance with the slogan, 'All the Jews should have their throats cut, no matter what the outcome of the war may be.'" ³³ Bracken's estimate was no exaggeration. A Nazi radio telegram to Adolf Eichmann that was intercepted by British intelligence – but not understood for decades – put the figure of Jewish death in the Reinhard Camps for 1942 at 1,274,555.³⁴

Numerous research papers in the WIB files centred racial thinking at the heart of Nazi ideology. Most notably the WIB collected Wiener Library's *The Nazis at War* bulletin³⁵, which translated and contextualized Nazi press statements and speeches about war aims.³⁶ Many other analyses on Nazi racism in the WIB files were written by Britain's Ministry of Information. In one document on German education, the author noted that "the Nazi system is based on the twin myths of racial purity and racial superiority. Its aims are the glorification of the German people and their domination of all other peoples by conquest."³⁷ In another document discussing German war aims, copious documentation demonstrates that Hitler was carving out a colonial empire in Europe based on a racial hierarchy to be achieved in two stages: enslavement and extermination. The Jewish extermination was essential to this mission:

Nazi Germany aims to go back not only to the days of slavery, but ultimately, to the still more primitive times before slavery, on which enslavement in its day was a forward step, -- namely the times when victors simply extermin-

nated the vanquished, as in the jungle. The start has been made with the Jews, then with the Poles, -- to be continued elsewhere.³⁸

Despite this 20,000-word document only referencing Jews in two other locations, this minimization of the Holocaust should not be taken to mean that information was unknown. Rather, Hitler's crimes against Jews were so familiar that the report explained its minimal treatment by claiming "the systematic German policy of extermination of Jews everywhere and taking over their places by Germans are too notorious to need quotations in proof."

While lack of information cannot explain the Canadian Government's silence on the Holocaust, there is evidence that any effort to tie Canada's war effort to Hitler's atrocities against European Jews would alienate Québec opinion. The most palpable expression of antisemitic derision over Canada's fight against Nazism was a series of anti-Jewish riots in Montreal in anticipation for the April 27, 1942 plebiscite on whether the Government should be released from its promise not to institute the draft. On March 17, 1942, following an anti-conscription meeting with Liberal MP Jean-Francois Pouliot sponsored by the League for the Defence of Canada, an estimated 450 youths paraded down a predominantly Jewish section of Saint Laurent Boulevard, yelling "À bas les Juifs!", smashing several shop windows, and initiating several violent altercations with local Jewish residents in front of the Young Men's Hebrew Association. The police managed to chase the demonstrators away, arresting eight youths.³⁸ Although a larger and more violent anti-conscription riot had unsettled the city a month earlier following a speech by Henri Bourassa, which left a dozen police officers injured, it had been devoid of antisemitic expression.³⁹ The Montreal press insisted that the antisemitism in Québec should not be exaggerated. Torchy Anderson of the *Montreal Gazette* wrote: "don't think that all the people of Québec are shouting 'À bas la conscription,' and breaking Jewish shop windows. The great majority of them are reading the world news in the newspapers—and understanding it."⁴⁰ The *Montreal Daily Star* agreed, maintaining that "these young men should not be taken seriously."⁴⁴

Moreover, antisemitic conspiratorial beliefs within Canadian society tempered Canadians to remain sceptical of Jewish atrocities. As John Grierson explained, "I remember how propaganda in the First World War contained atrocity stories that proved invented or exaggerated....Besides, we and the Yanks are sensitive to German propoganda that continues to insist that the Jews are pulling the Allies' political strings." With the latent belief in Canada that the Jews somehow were driving the war, the Canadian Government mandated a "remain silent" policy and "ordered all atrocities help up until they could be verified." Grierson understood this to be a gag order: "How in Hell's name do we verify what's going on in the heart of Nazi Europe?"⁴² Similar to the United States, where atrocity stories were believed to be exaggerated to alter America's isolationist stance,⁴³ some Canadians, especially populists

who adhered to the Social Credit philosophy, denied that the Holocaust happened.⁴⁴ By distancing war aims from the Holocaust, the Canadian Government ensured Canadians did not get the impression that “the Jews” were controlling policy. Government statements, therefore, on Nazi atrocities tended to avoid mentioning Jews, as they were a dividing issue amongst Canadians. To better serve the war effort, the Canadian Government framed the discourse on Nazi atrocities around Germany’s illiberal and antichristian policies.

The Canadian Jewish War Effort and the Holocaust

Britain’s declaration of war on Germany in 1939 was received with relief by Canadian Jews. Even before Canada issued its own declaration of war, poet and editor for the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, A. M. Klein championed the West’s decision to fight Nazi Germany, even if it led to another world war resulting in “a holocaust [of] stupendous proportions.” The question of the Jewish diaspora’s support of military conflict, for Klein, had been settled by Hitler years earlier:

The reaction of Jewry permits of no ambiguity. For six years the Nazis have carried on a relentless war against our people, a war directed against the defenceless, inspired by no reason save the instincts of savagery, and conducted without let-up, without restraint, without quarter. Its objective has been shouted from the roof-tops, and has been echoed across the world—the utter destruction, the complete annihilation of Jewry.⁴⁵

Supporting the war effort was of the utmost importance since Klein rightly suspected that Jews “shall not survive a British defeat.” A. B. Bennett, a founder of the Canadian Jewish Congress, described this sentiment years later: “the feeling of helplessness, of aloneness in a world of cruelty gave way to a spirit of Militancy. The Jews had allies in the fight against Hitlerism.”⁴⁶ Supporting the war effort and saving Europe’s Jews were interrelated in the minds of Canadian Jews. Ending Hitler’s reign over Europe and preserving the British Empire was paramount to saving Europe’s Jews.

In the early years of the war, Samuel Bronfman, president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, reiterated the sentiment that the lives of European Jews could only be safeguarded by the military defeat of Nazism. At the Inter-American Jewish Conference less than a month before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Bronfman stated: “immediately as our country declared war against the Nazi barbarian, the Canadian Jewish Congress forthwith geared its activity to one end—a maximum war effort upon all fronts. All other problems became, by the very nature of things, purely incidental; for the supreme objective included all the subsidiary goals.”⁴⁷ In Samuel Bronfman’s fiftieth birthday address, he reaffirmed Canadian Jewry’s loyalty to the Crown: “How imperative it is for us, living in the land of freedom, to do all that we can, and more, to preserve the Empire, to save Europe from itself, to safeguard the

principles of decent human conduct, and, by glorious deed, to ransom our brothers from their captivity."⁴⁸ While Bronfman emphasized that the freedom of all peoples was at stake, he made it clear that the Jews had a special interest in the war.

During the first several years of the war, the Canadian Jewish Congress focused on promoting recruitment and fundraising. In 1940, the CJC opened a recruiting center for Canada's military in Montreal. It distributed a brochure calling for volunteers, emphasizing that the military struggle was not only to protect the British Empire, but also Europe's Jews:

The Nazi hordes are increasing the momentum of the war from day to day—more and more millions of brave men are thrown into the life-and-death struggle for the preservation of their national existence. Hitler has vowed to conquer the British Empire, destroy the Jewish race, and to enslave the whole world. Hitler is fighting desperately, making use of tremendous forces to attain his goal—to become the sole dictator of the world. Hitler's victory would mean the destruction of our Empire and the annihilation of our people. There is only one answer to this challenge: Hitler and his gang must be destroyed.⁴⁹

Indeed many Jews joined Canada's military because they wanted to strike back at the Nazis after reading about the persecution of the Jews, even if they did not yet know that Hitler intended to exterminate them. In a series of interviews in the 1980s by the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, several Jews from Winnipeg remembered enlisting to protect European brethren. One man signed up in 1940 after reading newspaper accounts of Jewish persecution: "it bothered him when he heard how the Jews were being discriminated against in Europe," the interviewer recounted.⁵⁰ A Jewish woman recalled enlisting "partly because of the horror" enacted against the Jews, "though she soon realized that her efforts weren't going to make the difference."⁵¹ Another Jewish man joined the Army just days after Canada's entry into the war, specifically remarking that his "decision to join the service came with a clearer understanding of what was happening in Europe" and was "not motivated by patriotism" but by concern for European Jewry.⁵² Percy Jacobson, a Jewish small business owner who kept a detailed diary documenting the political and social climate in Montreal during the war, noted that his son joined the RCAF in 1939, because, as Jacobson said, "we are Jews and Hitler's persecution of the Jews will go down into history along with the stories of the Spanish Inquisition."⁵³ Historian Gerald Tulchinsky argues that numerous Jews signed up because they had a personal stake in defeating Nazism as both Canadians and Jews. He quotes Rabbi David Monson, who tried to recruit Jews by arguing that they had even more to fight for than Christians: "if Hitler wins, Christians will be slaves. Jews will be committed to death."⁵⁴

By January 1, 1944, 12,000 Jewish people had volunteered for military service.⁵⁵ The

CJC also furnished and operated sixteen recreational centers across the country to help boost morale among military personnel. Thousands of “comfort boxes” and millions of cigarettes were purchased by the CJC and sent to Canadian soldiers on the frontlines.⁵⁶ In 1940, Bronfman personally donated \$250,000 to the Canadian Government to research the technology needed to speed up the defeat of Germany, this was in addition to the one million dollars of war bonds Bronfman purchased annually.⁵⁷ In December 1941, Bronfman emphasized the Canadian Jewish Congress’ dedication to the war effort: “Hundreds of thousands of Jews have been up-rooted from their homes, have been forced into slavery and herded into ghettos. They have been living a life worse than death....To remove this scourge is the mission of all remaining free peoples....They will not lay down their arms until Hitlerism has been completely destroyed.”⁵⁸

By 1942, Canadian-Jewish newspapers were filling up with news that over one million European Jews had been massacred. Much of this information in the press came from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.⁵⁹ The Jewish Labor Committee was especially active in bringing experts on Nazi anti-Jewish policy to Canada to reveal the tragedy befalling Europe’s Jews, to raise funds to feed trapped Jews, and to help them escape. On February 16, 1943, the JLC invited Jacob Pat, a Polish journalist who had escaped to New York in 1938, to speak in Montreal about the situation facing Polish Jews. His graphic descriptions of the Nazi murder of 10,000 children executed in gas vans in a single day in August 1943, and his description of a fifty square kilometer area around the town of Belgite “dotted with fires” radiating from pyres of burning corpses, made the local press.⁶⁰ General Secretary of the WJC, Arie Tartakower, who had fled Poland following the Nazi invasion, was invited to speak in Winnipeg on April 4, 1943 about the ongoing efforts to save Europe’s Jews.⁶¹ The *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* described his talk as a “somber accounting of how 2,000,000 Jews have died in Europe under the scourge of Hitler,” and stressed that “if his figures erred, they erred as under-estimates.” Tartakower insisted that what was needed was the immediate shipping of foodstuffs to starving European Jews and the declaration of various allied countries to provide temporary havens for Jews who had escaped to neutral countries, thus facilitating a route to safety.⁶²

The Canadian Jewish community sought to draw mainstream Canadians’ attention to the Holocaust. Ben Sheps, a CJC official in Winnipeg, wrote Bronfman on July 6, 1942, complaining about the lack of coverage of Jewish atrocities in the mainstream press at the time: “with the exception of a few brief paragraphs in the daily press, little, if any comment has been made by the Canadian newspapers, in Western Canada at least, on these atrocious happenings.”⁶³ Sheps speculated that due to this lack of coverage in the mainstream dailies, “very many [Canadians] are unfortunately unaware of the slaughter of the Jewish civilian population which is taking place in German occupied countries at present.” Hoping to return Canadian sentiment against Nazi antisemitism to what it was “shortly after his [Hitler’s] rise to power,” Sheps urged the

CJC to launch a nationwide protest immediately, before organizations such "as the Jewish Branch of the League for Allied Victory, which is Communist inspired, may take advantage of the situation and endeavor to capture Jewish sympathy."

Mass meetings began to be organized by the Canadian Jewish community in 1942 to raise awareness of the Holocaust. The purpose of the meetings was not simply to voice the "indignation of all civilized men against the abominable barbarism practised by the Nazi savages against our race," but to create "resolutions and speeches stressing the unity of Jews and of the United Nations in their determination to stop at nothing short of freedom."⁶⁴ The organizers hoped not only to harden Canadian resolve to wage war, but also to stir up public sympathy and compel the government to change its refugee policy. One CJC executive sent a letter to the Montreal Jewish community leadership, stating that "the inhuman sufferings and tribulations of our unfortunate brethren in occupied countries should arouse the conscience of every civilized man and woman.... We must arouse public opinion!"⁶⁵ In October 1942, the Canadian Jewish community organized three mass protests in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal. The Winnipeg Division of the CJC explained that these mass meetings "would focus public attention on the sufferings of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, and would bring about an authoritative expression of opinion which would be spread throughout Canada."⁶⁶

In 1942, Canadian Jews also coordinated memorial services for the Nazis' Jewish victims as a method to raise awareness of the Holocaust and as a means of grieving for their European brethren. Although some community members believed that mourning the dead was counterintuitive while the struggle to defeat Nazi Germany continued, Canadian Jewish memorial services were nevertheless held. The Palestine rabbinate declared December 2 a day of mourning and the Canadian Jewish community followed suit, despite A. B. Bennett's disapproval. Writing in his regular column in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, Bennett argued that memorials were dangerous and could sap energy from the war effort: "can we afford to divert our attention and energy from the practical tasks at hand and indulge in an orgy of unproductive hysteria?" One historian has taken Bennett's words to mean that he was indifferent to the suffering of European Jewry and that this attitude was shared by much of the Jewish community.⁶⁷ However, Bennett was not being apathetic; he believed that this was the time to redouble the Jewish community's efforts to destroy Nazi Germany and save Jewish lives. He ended his column by writing: "does not God in His wisdom expect the human spirit today to speak forth His message in a voice of steel, in the accents of cannon thunder, to silence and [s]lay the rampant genius of evil. Human beings have but measured reserves of nervous strength. We must husband our powers for the great venture of annihilating Hitlerism."⁶⁸ Yet memorial services were held in "nearly every community across the country," the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* reported. In Toronto, Bennett himself opened the Kaddish service in Massey Hall, where several thousand participated. Numerous synagogues

throughout Montreal offered memorial services to mourners. Non-Jewish politicians frequently spoke during these services, often using the Jewish community's grief to consolidate their contribution to the war effort. Thanks to fliers and posters being distributed throughout November, many public schools in Toronto and Montreal assembled their pupils on December 2, regardless of whether or not they were Jewish, and told them of the great suffering that Jews were enduring in Europe. High school students were asked to observe a moment of silence and Jewish labour unions demanded that their workers be allowed to do likewise.⁶⁹

The close association of the war effort and destruction of European Jews for Canadian Jews led Canadian Zionists to politicize Hitler's victims and emphasize Jewish resistance. Indeed, tens of thousands of Jews in Eastern Europe did revolt in ghettos or escaped to join Soviet partisan movements in forests, but the vast majority of Jews—with no access to fire-arms, no training, and surrounded by hostile populations—remained with their families, fearful of Nazi reprisals if they did revolt.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, stories of Jewish partisan activity seemed to confirm that European Jewry had militarized. At a JLC organized mass meeting on October 4, 1941, William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor placed the Nazi mass murders within the context of the military conflict. While he did not minimize the destruction of European Jews—noting that one and a half million Jews had already been slaughtered since the beginning of the war—he asserted that these deaths were attributed to political resistance, the victims having been “starved to death or killed in action resisting their merciless oppressors.” He demanded that Canadian Jews ignore their “personal, petty and immediate interests” and devote their resources to winning the war.⁷¹ Similarly, Jacob Pat emphasized that the Jews were resisting the Nazis and were mobilizing, “awaiting the signal of invasion to spring upon the Nazis from behind.”⁷²

Ghetto uprisings were given prominence in the Canadian Jewish press because they reinforced the perception that Jews were fighters against Nazi tyranny. The *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* noted that Jewish resistance demonstrated the national spirit of the Jewish people: “They gave their lives so that Israel, as a living force, might go on.”⁷³ The *Jewish Western Bulletin* stated that comparing the uprising to Stalingrad was “apt” and hoped that it would “inspire further active resistance.”⁷⁴ By situating Jewish resistance within the context of a war of liberation, Canadian Zionists argued that Jews constituted a nation that deserved a state. A. M. Klein contended that the uprising “stands as a constant tribute to Jewish valour” and “gave the lie to the repeated and malicious slanders of Nazidom”⁷⁵ that the Jews were ‘parasitic’ and did not possess the spiritual energy to work and build a state.⁷⁶ Acclaimed Canadian Jewish correspondent for the *Toronto Star*, Pierre van Paassen, agreed: “Those men and women of Warsaw’s Ghetto died that Judaism may live. They went under in order that Jewish children may laugh and play tomorrow in the free sun of a Jewish Commonwealth in Eretz Israel.”⁷⁷ Even after the war, at a rally in Toronto celebrating

the opening of Palestine to Jewish immigrants, Jewish MP David Croll continued to associate European Jewry with the Allies:

Let the world not forget that the Jews were the first people who fought the Nazis, and suffered; who bore the brunt of the vicious persecution and who lost 6,000,000 souls, more than was lost by all the Allied armies during the war. Let the world not forget, also, that on every battlefield, in every land, the Jewish fought on the side of the Allies."⁷⁸

The Canadian Jewish focus on resistance can also be explained by the spiritual crisis that had enveloped their community. At Holy Blossom Temple, news of the Holocaust heavily impacted religious life. At the Annual Congregational Dinner on April 12, 1945, the synagogue paid homage to the Canadian Jewish soldiers who had served both their country and their morals to fight against Nazism. In a prepared speech, Rabbi Abraham Feinberg explained that the war and the destruction of European Jewry had shaken his congregation's faith. Canadian Jews had been traumatised by Hitler's war against the Jews and he saw his role as maintaining Jewish morale: "Every current of conflict, every hurricane of disaster, even from far-off Majdanek, every cold blast of insecurity and fear sweeping through Jewish hearts, inevitably swirls around the Rabbi." Feinberg noted that membership at the Temple had "increased enormously" as Canadian Jews attempted to understand the spiritual meaning of the Holocaust: "at no point in our tumultuous and tear drenched past has the danger of physical destruction and spiritual demoralization been as great." The synagogue's religious school had also dramatically grown in size, reaching nearly 300 pupils despite the facility originally being designed for only 175. Feinberg explained that under the leadership of Peter Hunter and Heinz Warschauer, the school "has been enlarged in physical scope and in spiritual intensity." Even children were questioning Jewish practices and traditions as they heard about the tragedy befalling European Jewry: "No Jewish child is exempt from the disillusioning impact of the Nazi extermination-program, anti-Semitic pressure in the immediate environment, the faith-undermining growth of materialistic rationalism and the increasing indifference to Jewish practice and values in the average Jewish home."⁷⁹

Conclusion

The Canadian Government lacked the political will to rescue Jewish refugees who had been smuggled out of Hitler's empire during the war. The priority of Prime Minister King and his Liberal caucus was to have the country united under their leadership and to conduct the war effort. Broaching the issue of Jewish extermination in Europe would inevitably put more pressure on Canada to open its borders to Jewish refugees, which could undermine the Liberal base of support in Québec. Thus, throughout the war, the topic was avoided. When mobilizing the Canadian war effort, government propaganda suggested that the Nazis were conducting a ruthless

campaign to eliminate liberal elements within Europe who opposed Nazism philosophically or through religious conviction.

In stark contrast to the Canadian Government, Canadian Jews viewed the Holocaust and the war as intertwined. Since they believed that the Nazis had been waging a war against the Jewish people since the 1930s, they interpreted the military conflict as war to liberate Jews. Therefore, Canadian Jews threw themselves behind the war effort as they believed it was the most tangible and promising means to save European Jews. When evidence saturated Canadian Jewish newspapers in 1942 that Hitler's war against Jews had devolved into an extermination campaign, Canadian Jews organized numerous protest meetings, drawing in experts on the refugee crisis and observers of European conditions to raise awareness of the catastrophe in the hope of building public pressure on the Canadian Government to open its doors. Although some of the CJC leadership voiced opposition to the flurry of emergency meetings, they were not apathetic to European Jewry, but worried that a wave of defeatism would flood the Canadian Jewish community and lessen its resolve to fight. To give meaning to the massive loss and to address the spiritual crisis that gripped them, Canadian Jews emphasized heroic acts of resistance to present European Jews as allies in the fight against tyranny and bring the Holocaust into the Canadian war narrative.

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William Lyon Mackenzie King, *Canada and the Fight for Freedom* (Freeport, NY: 1944), 210-20.

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Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 286.

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Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1983), 7-8.

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Right-Wing Nationalism in French Canada from 1929-1939, trans. Madeleine Hébert (Montreal: Robert Davies Publishing, 1993).

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Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Meridian, 1987), 157.

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King Diary, June 11, 1944, 1.

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Behind the Swastika: Nazi Atrocities (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada NFB, 1945).

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