

"Calm!"

*The Yiddish Press, Jews, and the
Fall of Warsaw, 1915*

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Introduction

As early as the winter of 1914–15, the Yiddish press in Warsaw feared the loss of the Eastern European Jews' side of the story of the First World War. Given the likelihood of others writing the Jewish minority out of history, *Der Moment* encouraged its readers to document everything, lest "all the upheaval, the sacrifice, the suffering, the acts of courage, all the facts that illuminate the attitude of the Jews to the war and of others towards us; all the losses and philanthropic efforts" be forgotten.¹

This documentation effort partially succeeded. Today all of the issues of the Yiddish Warsaw press from the First World War are preserved in the National Library of Israel's digital collections. Nevertheless, the worries of the Yiddish press of the loss of Eastern European Jews' perspective on World War I have come true because contemporary Eastern Europe looks so different from 1915.

Bridging this separation and reconstructing the Warsaw of 1915 takes imagination. Warsaw currently has more than 1,750,000 people,² and all of Poland has a population of a few thousand Jews.³ On January 1, 1914, on the other hand, when Warsaw was reported to have 884,584 residents,⁴ more than 38% were Jewish (and the proportion

briefly rose as high as 45% in 1917).⁵ Warsaw had the largest Jewish population of any city in Europe.⁶ Upon comparison to the other large city captured during the war—Brussels, with a population of about 790,000—Warsaw was the largest city captured during World War I, and that it was substantially Ashkenazi Jewish.⁷ This matters because these Jews spoke Yiddish, and very few people overall, let alone mainstream historians, do today. Yet the fighting on the Eastern Front took place where 4 million of the 5 million Jews in the Russian Empire lived,⁸ and up to 600,000 may have served in the Russian army during the war.⁹ This is quite a large collection of experiences and a significant perspective to miss.

Even Warsaw's role in the war in general is little studied. Only one English work focuses on the First World War from the perspective of Warsaw, and its author, Robert Blobaum laments his lack of knowledge of Yiddish.¹¹ Some work exists in Polish and Russian on Warsaw and on Jews in the First World War, but these are languages with which I unfortunately am not currently sufficiently skilled. In any case, there are few such sources. Overall, the lack of notice of the topic of Warsaw during the First World War likely stems from the even greater suffering during World War II of Russia, Poland, and the Jews, which makes almost anything

1 Laura Jockusch, "Become Historians Yourself! Record, Take it Down, and Collect!": Jewish Historiography in Times of Persecution," *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, Vol. 2 (2005), 82–83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23538317>.

2 "Warsaw Population 2021," World Population Review, accessed November 2021. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/warsaw-population>.

3 "Poland," Institute for Jewish Policy Research, accessed November 2021. <https://www.jpr.org.uk/country?id=244>.

4 Stephen Corrsin, "Language Use in Cultural and Political Change in Pre-1914 Warsaw: Poles, Jews, and Russification," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (January, 1990), 71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4210168>.

5 Robert Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw During the First World War*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2017, 149.

6 Corrsin, "Language Use in Cultural and Political Change in Pre-1914 Warsaw," 69.

7 Chantal Kesteloot, "Brussels," 1914–1918—online: *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds. Ute Daniel et al., issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015–06–30. 10.15463/ie1418.10674.

8 "The Jews of Russia and World War I," Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, accessed November 2021. <https://www.jewish-museum.ru/en/exhibitions/the-jews-of-russia-and-the-world-war-i/>.

9 Eric Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews: Mass Deportation, Hostages, and Violence during World War I," *The Russian Review*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (July, 2001), 419. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2679668>.

10 "The Jews of Russia and World War I."

11 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, x.

else seem trivial.¹² Studying Yiddish-speaking populations requires a working proficiency in Yiddish which is either rare or nonexistent in academic circles.¹³ Since this study focuses on the story of Yiddish-speakers through their own words, their own words are the most important for my purposes.

The few scholars that do study Yiddish texts are likely to be specialists in specifically Jewish matters, and not necessarily wider world events. As a result, they often discuss such questions as the various positions of the Yiddish-language press on assimilation and on Zionism,¹⁴ while showing less interest in how these same sources reflect large pieces of stories well beyond a Jewish context, such as the First World War. Most modern Yiddish scholarship seems to focus on the interwar period, most of it is not connected to larger historical topics, and much of it is in Hebrew.

The result is that the colossal Eastern Front—it had 55 Austrian divisions of nominally 15,000 men each, 61 German divisions of 17,500 men, and 151 Russian divisions of 20,000 men by the summer of 1915—is not studied enough from a major perspective from the time.¹⁵ ¹⁶ The loss of Warsaw by the Russians had great strategic implications, as one contemporary noted, despite being steadfast in his belief that the Russians would ultimately prevail, “an army coming out of Warsaw could not find an advantageous position short of the Bug and the fortress of Brest Litovsk [the eastern borders of

Poland].”¹⁷ This success for the Central Powers may have kept Austria in the war after its disastrous opening campaigns.¹⁸ In view of this significance of the fall of Warsaw, one would hope that the events would be studied from all the available perspectives. Yet what the millions of Yiddish speakers in this region experienced and thought is largely unknown.

This study seeks to help connect these two small bodies of literature—mainstream historians on Poland and on Jews, and Yiddish scholars on the Yiddish newspapers – and tie both back to original Yiddish sources. This will be a first step towards integrating the lives and the thoughts of those Yiddish-speakers, many of whose lives were transformed by the First World War, into the more general story of the war. The fall of Warsaw in the summer of 1915 was a key intersection between World War I and a major Yiddish-speaking (and Yiddish-writing) population, making it a prime opportunity to examine world events through Yiddish eyes. Over the course of a few days centered around the German conquest of Warsaw, the two Yiddish newspapers in Warsaw at the time, *Der Moment* and *Haynt*, reveal fragments of this large, long-overlooked category of war experiences and how they fit into the broader history of the war. In the face of substantial censorship, what one can learn is limited, but the Yiddish Warsaw press still manages to shed some light—in a constricted voice—on this lost perspective at a major point in the First World War. Often what is not written is just as important as what is, and the ways in which what is written is expressed also is crucial.

From the combination of the previous work by historians, the work by Yiddishists, and the text found in these newspapers, one

12 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 4–7.

13 One important exception is the 1979 study by Marian Fuks, *Prasa żydowska w Warszawie 1823–1939*, (Jewish Press in Warsaw, 1823–1939), but one will observe again that it is in Polish, and has a broad focus.

14 Nathan Cohen, “Der Moment,” trans. Rami Hann, *YIVO*, 2010, accessed November 2021. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/moment_der.

15 G. Irving Root, *Battles East: A History of the Eastern Front of the First World War*, (Baltimore, MD: Publish America, 2007), 152.

16 Root, *Battles East*, 53, 62, and 68.

17 Stanley Washburn, *Victory in Defeat: The Agony of Warsaw and the Russian Retreat*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916), 120. <https://archive.org/details/victoryindefeata00wash/page/n7/mode/2up>.

18 Root, *Battles East*, 161.

begins to get an idea of what was on the minds of the writers of the Yiddish newspapers and of the Yiddish-speakers in Warsaw in 1915. These buried experiences are important for a well-rounded understanding of the First World War, and so is what little can be reconstructed of how these experiences were viewed. The precarious military situation was heavily censored, and true loyalties were hard to determine. Nevertheless, one can discern various aspects of how Yiddish-speakers in Warsaw experienced the war.

The outline of a terrible ordeal starts to emerge. For the Jews in this time and place, there was the suffering that all of the people living in Poland at the time experienced: massive military casualties, shocking insufficiencies and shortages in the Russian army, a horrifying intimacy of the war to civilians, and a catastrophic economic collapse. But for these Jews specifically, there were also the vituperative agitations from Catholic Polish neighbors, and, perhaps worst of all, the tsarist authorities. The Russian army in particular was causing great suffering to the Polish people as Warsaw fell, and to the Jews even more so. Perpetually accused of espionage, the Jews were singled out, leading to pogroms and eerily sinister schemes of deportation, of which Warsaw avoided the worst. Yet one also observes a life beyond the misery of war and persecution, a flourishing cosmopolitan culture that defied it all.

Der Moment and Haynt

To integrate the experiences and perspectives of Jews around the time of the Germans' capture of Warsaw in 1915 into the narrative of the First World War, one must reconstruct those experiences and perspectives. The process commences with understanding

what the Yiddish newspapers can reveal and the significance of these newspapers to the Jewish community.

According to historian Khone Shmeruke, Warsaw was the "metropolis of the Yiddish press in Eastern Europe."¹⁹ Warsaw had two newspapers in Yiddish at the beginning of World War I, *Der Moment* and *Haynt*. Over its history, *Der Moment* usually printed about 30,000 copies of each issue,²⁰ but at the beginning of the war, it was experiencing a golden age. In 1914, *Der Moment* sold 60,000 copies on workdays and 90,000 on Fridays, even reaching 150,000 during its coverage of the 1913 Beilis blood libel trial. Meanwhile, *Haynt* consistently sold 100,000 copies.²¹

The demographic of readership cannot be determined clearly, but historian Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow claims that *Haynt*'s readers were mostly middle class.²² However, the paper also reached the poor, and Nalewajko-Kulikow describes how *Haynt*'s serialized *shund* ("trash") novels were discussed "on the streets, in the shops, [and] in the cafés" by Jews of all backgrounds.²³ This stands in contrast to the smaller Hebrew paper in Warsaw, as well as the Jewish Polish-language newspaper, read

19 Kalman Weiser, "A Tale of Two Pryluckis: On the Origins of the Warsaw Yiddish Press," *Gal-Ed* Vol. 22 (2010), 94. https://www.academia.edu/44789761/A_Tale_of_Two_Pry%2C5%82uckis_On_the_Origins_of_the_Warsaw_Yiddish_Press.

20 Arthur Fiszer, "Der Moment," *Encyclopaedia Judaica: Second Edition*, Vol. 14, eds. Fred Skolnik et al., (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 2007), 430.

21 Zofia Borzyminska, "Della Storia Dalla Stampa Periodica in Yiddish," trans. Laura and Olek Mincer, *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (January-August 1996), 245. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41287046>.

22 Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, "Di Haynt-Mishpokhe': Study for a Group Picture," *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis: Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, eds. Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 254. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004291812>.

23 Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, "Who Has Not Wanted To Be an Editor?": The Yiddish Press in the Kingdom of Poland, 1905-1914," trans. Jaroslaw Garlinski, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, Vol. 27 (2015): 283-284.

by the assimilationist elites.²⁴ *Der Moment* and *Haynt* also seem to have reached far beyond Warsaw. For example, in the July 19, 1914 issue of *Der Moment* (one year before the editions most investigated in this paper), one sees that the newspaper hoped to sell throughout the entire Russian empire, Austria, and Germany, though the beginning of the war meant that *Der Moment* could now only sell throughout the Russian empire.²⁵ ²⁶ Interestingly, Kalman Weiser says that *Der Moment's* readership in Warsaw consisted primarily of the so-called "Litvaks," who were Jews from outside of Poland, not necessarily from Lithuania. These people were mostly refugees even before World War I, were more secular than native Warsaw Jews, and did not always get along with them.²⁷

In any case, there is general agreement that the two papers fiercely competed for the same pool of readers. Their rhetoric was so ferocious, in fact, that they sometimes ended up in court against each other. In one episode of the papers' squabbles, the highly esteemed Hillel Zeitlin left *Haynt* and began working for *Der Moment*; soon thereafter, *Haynt* wrote an article claiming that this turncoat had been seen eating pork at the train station!²⁸ Indeed, *Haynt* was generally considered the less "serious" paper.²⁹ According to Weiser, *Jackanizm* was a Yiddish word coming from the name of *Haynt's* founder and main editor. It meant "sensationalism."³⁰ However, these papers had journalists who would go to great lengths to write good stories. For example,

Noah Pryucki, the chief editor of *Der Moment* in 1915, embarked on a treacherous expedition in disguise in 1906 in order to investigate a story on the Siedlce Pogrom.³¹ In this way, we see the way that these two papers, despite being rivals, functioned as key tenets in the Jewish community in Warsaw.

Censorship, Military Situation, and Loyalties

Grasping how censorship manifested itself in the Yiddish newspapers of World War I Warsaw is critical to the reconstruction of the Jewish experience of the fall of Warsaw. This is because censorship both restricts what was documented, affecting what can be learned today, and was itself a major part of everyday experience for many Jews. One cannot learn today what their fully unfettered voice sounded like precisely because they were denied the right to express it in print. Therefore, although the censorship certainly complicates the reconstruction task, it does not completely preclude it. Learning about censorship can tell about the experience of censorship itself. Moreover, like the discussion above of the newspapers themselves, understanding censorship can also help us understand the limits of these newspapers and what they can reveal about being Jewish in Warsaw in the summer of 1915.

As it turns out, the censorship of the Yiddish press was both omnipresent and severe. In fact, it was because of this censorship that the Yiddish press was actually still quite novel in 1915. Only after the 1905 Revolution did Russian censorship ease up slightly, allowing Yiddish daily newspapers for the first time.³²

24 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 34.

25 *Der Moment* (Warsaw, Poland), July 19, 1914, pg. 1. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/dmt/1914/07/19/01/?e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1>.

26 *Der Moment* (Warsaw, Poland), July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

27 Weiser, "A Tale of Two Pryluckis," 113.

28 Weiser, "A Tale of Two Pryluckis," 110.

29 Borzyminska, "Della Storia Dalla Stampa Periodica in Yiddish," 245.

30 Weiser, "A Tale of Two Pryluckis," 102-103.

31 Weiser, "A Tale of Two Pryuckis," 99-100.

32 Nalewayko-Kulikow, "Who Has Not Wanted To Be an Edi-

The censorship was still heavy, however. During the Beilis trial, when many Jews felt that they all had a personal stake in the outcome, one *Haynt* journalist evidently crossed the line. He was sent to jail in 1915 as a result.³³

In 1915, the Russians did not even pretend that they allowed a free press. At the bottom of the last page of the July 18, 1915 issue of *Der Moment*, a line in Russian stands out in a paper otherwise in Yiddish. It reads, "Approved by the military censors of Warsaw, 5th of July, 1915"³⁴ (the Russian authorities used the Julian calendar, and so long as there was Russian control over Warsaw, the Yiddish newspapers always included Julian dates in parentheses). Each of the issues of *Der Moment* and *Haynt* published in July, 1915 had something similar written on the bottom of the last page. In the spring of 1915, all personal letters written in Yiddish and Hebrew were simply banned, with Russian officials citing the burden of censoring them all.³⁵ The two Yiddish newspapers—as well as the Hebrew one—were banned on July 18, 1915, which unfortunately means that there are no Yiddish papers during the last few days before the fall of Warsaw.³⁶

Even within the issues of the papers that were permitted to appear in July, 1915, the Russian censorship was bald-faced. On the front page of each issue in the rival papers, the main article is titled exactly the same: "A Report from the Headquarters of the Supreme Commander." The papers then proceed to

quote the official military point-of-view without critical comment. Despite the best efforts of the Russians, however, the picture that they showed of the military situation was not very rosy.

One indicator of censorship was the lack of explicit concern about the war. Reading the news reported in Yiddish newspapers on a surface level suggests that there was nothing to worry about. In one article in *Haynt* quoted from the *Russky Invalid*, the author argues that the Germans knew they would lose the war. In fact, "the current stormy attacks and assaults by the Germans upon us, the French, and the Italians—that all is nothing more than an effort to ward ordinary German people away from simple and practical considerations [about the hopeless state of the war]."³⁷ Meanwhile, the official military report on the front page of the newspapers narrates battles along the Vistula River, the Pilica, the Wieprz, and even near the Bug to the southeast of Warsaw. To the northeast, Russian troops were withdrawing behind the Narew River "in order to assume a more concentrated position."³⁸ A quick glance at a map shows that, from this description, Warsaw and hundreds of thousands of Russian troops were very near to being fully encircled by the Germans! Nevertheless, the printed stories from the front were of one Cossack brigade that captured 280 German soldiers, or of three regiments of Siberian and Turkestani troops outnumbered two-to-one who pushed back a German assault. The fact that the Russians had to stoop to such small actions to find good news hints at how unfavorable the military situation was at that moment, and one must imagine that many of the readers of the *Der Moment* would have realized as much. Another indicator of censorship was the fact

tor?", 302-303.

33 Nalewayko-Kulikow, "Who Has Not Wanted To Be an Editor?", 302-303.

34 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 4.

35 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 139.

36 Joanna Nalewayko-Kulikow, "Die Jiddische Schule der Erwachsenen: Warsaw Yiddish Press and German-Jewish Contacts in 1915-1918," trans. Tristan Korecki, *Acta Poloniae Historica* Vol. 113 (2016), 90. https://www.academia.edu/29339620/_Die_jiddische_Schule_der_Erwachsenen_Warsaw_Yiddish_press_and_German_Jewish_contacts_in_1915_18_Acta_Poloniae_Historica_2016_no_113.

37 *Haynt*, July 18, 1915, pg. 2.

38 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

that news reports would often refer to “bitter attacks,” rather than spelling out the brutal implications of this fighting.³⁹ This parallels the frequent uses of the term “a sharp fight” and other such euphemisms that Paul Fussell finds in censorship (self-imposed and otherwise) situated on the Western Front.⁴⁰ The full truth was unsuitable for expression, so it was only alluded to, but the half-truths that were told in its place were arguably just as transparent. On July 16, *Haynt* mentions that top Russian officials in Warsaw visited the front line that day, which demonstrates how close the Germans had to have been to Warsaw. The last official announcement of the same day—one cannot help but wonder if it was directly linked with the situation they had just seen on the front line—was that the military was effectively taking complete control over the economy in Warsaw.⁴¹

The real military situation was pretty grim for the Russians in Poland. Almost immediately after the Gorlice-Tarnow Offensive began on May 1, 1915 to save Austria (and hopefully eliminate Russia as belligerent), the Russian front line had crumbled. Two Austrian armies and one German army had concentrated against one Russian army in the center of the Russian line, and this Russian army was routed, leaving a large hole in the center of the Russian front line.⁴² By July, 1915, months after the initial attack, the Russians were still being forced constantly eastward, and now armies of the Central Powers were pushing southward from the north and northward from the south as well. Amidst the already chaotic retreat, crowds of refugees mixed with the soldiers and further degraded the command structure.

39 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

40 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 191.

41 *Haynt*, July 16, 1918, pg. 5 (extra edition).

42 *Root, Battles East*, 137-142.

The Russians would soon have to give up not only on holding Warsaw, but because of the imminent fall of Warsaw, all Poland.⁴³ On July 26, the Russians began their evacuation of the city, and on August 5, Germans entered the city without much of a fight.⁴⁴

This was, obviously, not the outcome which the official reports published in the Yiddish press. As mentioned above, however, those same reports contained enough hints for inhabitants to figure out what was really happening. Moreover, the account of American war correspondent Stanley Washburn, who was present in Warsaw at the time, suggests that informal circuits of information like rumor—as well as the increasingly undeniable fact of the intensifying sounds of artillery fire and the flood into the city of ever more wounded soldiers—held a larger sway over Varsovians’ attitudes on the military situation than official reports. Nevertheless, Varsovians apparently held out hope that the Russians would hold Warsaw as late as July 30.⁴⁵

In the meantime, though, the newspapers did not show any of this. Likely a result of Russian censorship, articles in *Der Moment* and *Haynt* are often quoted, in full, of articles written by other newspapers. This suggests that the editors did not dare express any opinions of their own: they only commented on Jewish issues, and even then, in a restricted manner. For example, one such article in *Der Moment* was titled “‘Russky Invalid’ on German Plans.” The article begins by saying simply, “The *Rus. Invalid* Number 144 writes,” and the entirety of the rest of the article is directly quoted, occupying half a page despite the fact that the newspaper was just a four-page broadsheet.⁴⁶

43 *Root, Battles East*, 150-152.

44 *Root, Battles East*, 156-157.

45 Washburn, *Victory in Defeat*, 86, 90, and 102.

46 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 2.

Most telling of all about the weighty presence of censorship, however, is the uncanny similarity between many of the articles in the two rival papers. For almost half of the articles published on July 16 and July 18, 1915 (July 17 was Shabbos, so neither newspaper published), the articles were identical to each other down to the sentence structure, and almost verbatim. Giving a relatively literal translation of the beginning of an article titled "A Note from Austria to America" in the July 18 edition of *Der Moment* and titled "Austria and America" in *Haynt* on the same day serves to illustrate this. *Der Moment* begins, "From Vienna, it is announced that the Austro-Hungarian government has handed over to the local American envoy a note. This note draws attention to..." (Fun Vien teylt men mit, az di Estraykh-Ungarishe regirung hot ibergegeben dem higen Amerikanishen gezandten a note. Di dozike note makht oyfmerkzam...)⁴⁷ Similarly, *Haynt* writes, "From Vienna, it is reported that the Austrian government has handed over to the local American ambassador a note, which draws attention to..." (Fun Vien meldet men, az di Estraykhishe regirung hot ibergegebn dem higen Amerikanishen posol a note, vos makht oyfmerkzam...)⁴⁸ Given the strong similarities one sees just from these short excerpts, there is no need to see the rest of the article. This is only one of many instances where articles paralleled each other to an uncanny point of similarity. It is as if they are different translations of one original text provided to both papers.

It is important to note that even after Warsaw changed hands from Russia to Germany, the censorship policy remained largely the same.⁴⁹ The editors of *Der Moment*

and *Haynt* met with the new Commandant von Arnim on August 5, the very day the Germans entered the city (hardly something that could ingratiate them with the Poles who viewed the Jews as spies). They were permitted to resume printing, but, as Nalewayko-Kulikow says, the editors would be held "personally responsible for the content they published until a censorship office was established." Therefore, the first issue under German rule was very "neutral in tone." They seem to have had good reason to be so because, even once the censors (at least one was Jewish, another was a Lutheran pastor; I have not been able to find information on the Russian censors before the fall of Warsaw) were in place and some days were crossing out "half" of the what was submitted by the newspapers, these censors reported to Hindenburg and the German High Command that the Yiddish newspapers wrote "the meanest lies and calumnies about the German army."⁵⁰ In a statement translated by *Haynt* in its August 8 issue, the Germans warn papers in Warsaw that publishing anything that could lead to unrest would lead to punishment.⁵¹ The vagueness of the warning suggests arbitrary judgment and punishment.

The heavy censorship of the press during the period around the fall of Warsaw also relates to a curious phenomenon of professed loyalties. Laura Engelstein records the efforts of the various ethnic groups across the Russian empire to demonstrate their loyalty to the state after the outbreak of war, highlighting the efforts among the Jewish population. One person of note was Naftali Friedman, a Jew in the Russian Duma (parliament). He continued to profess his loyalty well after the state's poor treatment of

47 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

48 *Haynt*, July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

49 Nalewayko-Kulikow, *Die Jiddische Schule der Erwachsenen*, 103.

50 Nalewayko-Kulikow, *Die Jiddische Schule der Erwachsenen*, 96-99.

51 *Haynt*, August 8, 1915, pg. 3.

the Jews was clear.⁵² Similarly, according to Washburn, ethnic Poles supposedly held strong pro-Russia positions.⁵³ Washburn's surprise was echoed more recently by Blobaum, who has examined the Polish Warsaw press's enthusiastic denunciation of the Austrian Polish press and the many voluntary enlistments into the Russian army on top of low rates of draft evasion.⁵⁴ This evidence of some Polish support of the Russian regime, especially among the elites after the 1905 Revolution, contradicts the national narrative that Poland projects. It suggests that not all of the pro-Russian sentiment appearing in Warsaw's newspapers was fake.⁵⁵ One wonders how much this observation about Polish newspapers in Warsaw can be generalized to the Yiddish papers.

Certainly, the Yiddish newspapers offer a rich source base to consider the question of national and imperial loyalty. One example is when *Der Moment* profusely praises the recently published report of an ostensibly neutral American philanthropist who described the POW camps for Germans and Austrians in Siberia as "excellent." Another example from *Der Moment* is an article emphasizing the desire of a majority of members in the Duma for a show of unity by electing a Duma president who will have support from every party.⁵⁶ Furthermore, according to Edward Waysband, the Polish and Jewish populations both "tried to assert their respective Russian loyalties often at the expense of the opposite side." He attributes this to a deliberate Russian policy of divide-and-rule. The Polish print lashed out against the Jews in part because it could not go against the Russians, and the Jews focused their attention

on Polish antisemitism because they could not criticize the antisemitism of the Russian army.⁵⁷ Evidently, these displays of loyalty to the Russian state had an element of genuity, but were encouraged and exaggerated through censorship. The true feelings of the Yiddish-speakers—as well as the other subjects of the Russian empires—about the Russian empire is not quite clear.

Thus, censorship hinders one's ability today to reconstruct the real situation in 1915 Warsaw, but one must remember that contemporaries also faced this censorship. The uncertainty of information and the opacity of loyalties that censorship invariably creates must have in itself been a part of the experience of being in Warsaw in 1915.

Generalized Suffering

It is important to locate the experience and perspective of Warsaw Jews in 1915 in the larger context of wartime horror. Everyone in Poland suffered terribly during the First World War, and the specificity of this shared trauma defined much of how all Varsovians would have perceived the period around the fall of Warsaw. Reconstructing the Jewish experience of the fall of Warsaw requires examining how actual events affected people as well as how people framed or learned of those events.

The Eastern Front was brutal. The obvious place to start from here is with the military personnel in the half-disintegrating Russian army. Even before the heavy losses during the Great Retreat, on the Eastern Front, the Russian empire had suffered around

52 Laura Engelstein, *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War, 1914-1921*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56.

53 Washburn, *Victory in Defeat*, 82.

54 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 28-29.

55 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 53.

56 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 4.

57 Edward Waysband, "In Job Dulder's Balances: Petr Guber and Russian-Polish-Jewish Relations during World War I." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (2019), 326-328. Doi:10.1353/pan.2019.0020.

700,000 casualties by the end of 1914 alone (in comparison: 140,000 German and 500,000 Austrian casualties over the same period).⁵⁸ By the end of the war, 100,000 Jewish soldiers of the 600,000 who served died.⁵⁹

Despite this, the Yiddish newspapers investigated in this paper conspicuously avoided discussing this topic. When, upon the arrival of the Germans, Haynt is at last able to say something about Russian casualties, it cites a German figure of 1,058,869 Russian POWs held by the Central Powers, a shocking number to read even today.⁶⁰ But even while the Russians were in control of Warsaw, the Yiddish newspapers showed that their thoughts turned towards the suffering soldiers. *Der Moment* could not explicitly discuss the miseries of the soldiers, but it did use a less direct method to hint at the issue: *Der Moment* used that American report praising POW camps in Russia as a basis for hope of renewed pressure on Germany to treat the Russian soldiers in POW camps in Germany better.⁶¹ Hiding behind praise for the Russian army, *Der Moment* manages to make a small reference to the individuals suffering for it.

Even more unbroached in the Yiddish papers was the appalling management of the Russian army and its supplies. At the beginning of the war, more than 30 percent of the men were without rifles in many units of the Russian army, with some units lacking arms for as much as 50 percent of their men.⁶² During the campaigns of 1915, one German gas attack had especially grisly effects because, according to G. Irving Root, all of the gas masks were sitting idly "in the supply centers in Warsaw." On this occasion, the Russian artillery expended ammunition firing on some of its infantrymen

who were trying to surrender, but during the final German push to capture Warsaw, the entire Russian 2nd Army was short of effective ammunition.⁶³ An eyewitness claimed that in one instance, "fewer than 200" artillery shells were brought to the Russian front line at this time when 30,000 were available for use. Russian soldiers reputedly often had to resort to improvised clubs as weapons. This was the army that was standing between the Germans and Warsaw.⁶⁴ In a similar thread, Root cites a Russian patrol who threw six grenades one day in close combat with the Austrians, of which only one grenade exploded.⁶⁵ Given the heavy censorship discussed earlier in this paper, it should be no surprise that not a whiff of any of this seems to have made its way into *Der Moment* and *Haynt*.

In addition to the casualties and the poor state of the military, the Eastern Front was also characterized by large civilian involvement and casualties. Populations lived in terror of the unseen enemy: both the Germans and the Russians accused each other of war crimes in their respective occupied zones, and both were correct.⁶⁶ In *Der Moment*, a list of several names appears of Varsovians executed by the Germans on June 24 in German-occupied Poland, something that could not have left readers at ease.⁶⁷ *Der Moment* also conveys the dangers of occupation to its readers when it translates a German official announcement after the fall of Warsaw. The Germans first claim that their only quarrel was with the Russians, but then signal their intention to apply the death penalty to anyone who aided the Russians in any capacity or who even just had knowledge of Russian plans and did not report them. *Der*

58 Root, *Battles East*, 115.

59 "The Jews of Russia and World War I."

60 *Haynt*, August 6, 1915, pg. 1 (mistakenly pg. 5 under July 18).

61 *Der Moment* July 18, 1915, pg. 4.

62 Root, *Battles East*, 55.

63 Root, *Battles East*, 146.

64 Root, *Battles East*, 154-155.

65 Root, *Battles East*, 146-147.

66 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 59.

67 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 3.

Moment's translation must have been of crucial importance to the Yiddish speakers because the Germans had posted the announcement throughout the city, but only in German and Polish (not Yiddish).⁶⁸

Although *Der Moment* probably could not openly express it, one further perceives a frightened mood in an article about a government call for supplies on July 16. With the Germans at the gates of Warsaw (whether the military would admit it or not), Russian officials in Warsaw were now scrambling to find gas masks (one wonders if they searched those supply centers that Root mentions).⁶⁹ Ordinary citizens were effectively being asked if they had gas masks to distribute in the face of a feared chemical attack on the city!

The impact of the war on civilians in Warsaw was more than just fear, though. By the end of 1914, with the German army entrenched 50 miles from Warsaw, 100,000 mostly Jewish refugees flooded into the city, while 260,000 mostly Catholic Poles fled the city.⁷⁰ These represented very large numbers for Warsaw, and indicated the disarray that resulted from fear and suffering caused by the war. Also, by the summer of 1915, zeppelins were bombarding the city, killing dozens of men, women, and children.⁷¹ Dozens more died even during the comparatively little fighting of the German entry into Warsaw.⁷² The Yiddish newspapers do not talk directly about the civilian deaths, but *Der Moment* is able to slip past the censors by using the *Lusitania* as a sort of proxy. In this foreign context, beseeching the Americans to enter the war on Russia's side despite months having

passed since the sinking, the author of the article is able to openly bemoan the perceived great tragedy of innocent women and children being killed in the war.⁷³

This civilian hardship blends with the economic woes of the war. *Haynt* contains references to acute sugar shortages and increasingly less frequent train shipments of necessities.⁷⁴ Also, the flight of business from Warsaw is clearly shown. For example, many craftsmen are said to be moving to Samara (in the interior of European Russia) because they can make more money there.⁷⁵ Elsewhere, *Der Moment* mentioned on July 18 that photographers had done well during the war so far, but that they, too, were beginning to face difficulties because nobody was having their picture taken anymore.⁷⁶ This "too" hints that most people were doing poorly. With the photographers specifically, however, there is a mystery. As of July 13, the Russian governor of Warsaw ordered that everyone in Warsaw must have a passport with a photograph and personal information, and that—mirroring the ominous vagueness of the later German statement about press censorship—anyone "who does not follow the above-mentioned regulations will be brought severely to account."⁷⁷ If everyone suddenly needed a photograph, why was the photography business suddenly struggling?

Although Blobaum does not answer such a specific question as that, he depicts a much more drastic economic situation in Warsaw than the censored Yiddish papers would lead one to believe. According to him, there were already major food shortages in the first winter,⁷⁸ and by early 1916, coal shortages were

68 *Der Moment*, August 6, 1915, pg. 1.

69 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

70 Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 17

71 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 31-34; Washburn, *Victory in Defeat*, 88.

72 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 52.

73 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 2

74 *Haynt*, July 16, 1915, pg. 3.

75 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

76 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

77 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 4.

78 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 82.

so severe that only 20 percent of the pre-war number of industrial workers could find jobs in factories!⁷⁹ Just by the end of 1914, Warsaw's economic output decreased by 70-75 percent! These economic hardships, he says, "dwarfed those of Berlin, Vienna, and Petrograd, to which the fall of empires has been attributed."⁸⁰

However, some of the greatest suffering the tsar's subjects in Poland endured also came at the hands of the Russian army. Even in peacetime, with half of its peacetime force stationed in Poland, the Russian army demanded an unequal burden from Poland, which they viewed as untrustworthy.⁸¹ However, during the war, this only increased. Peasants who lived near the front line constituted a disproportionate amount of the 15 million soldiers that the Russians sent to war over the course of the conflict, which undoubtedly affected Poles who were at the edge of the empire. Also, the Russians considered the Poles' loyalties doubtful (especially the Jews'), so Poles were often dispatched to far away fronts.⁸² Haynt testifies to another source of distress. Not speaking out against anyone in particular, Haynt reports that many university students did not have newly required documents with them, and were now being arrested.⁸³ These new regulations and the mix-ups resulting from them were because of the Russian army's campaign to catch spies, which was already biased against Polish subjects.

However, the greatest troubles the Russian army caused did not begin until the commencement of the Great Retreat. During the rout, many Russian soldiers did not act with cohesion and discipline, turning on the Polish and specifically the Jewish population. The

official narrative of this violence stated that the army began a scorched earth policy, drafting any man of military age on the spot and driving herds of cattle eastward towards Russia as it retreated.⁸⁴ It is worth noting that this was Polish earth the Russians were scorching, Polish men the Russians were impressing into the army, and Polish cattle they were driving eastward. Excesses from this policy inevitably followed, so on July 9, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich issued an order that Russian soldiers who destroyed private property would be executed. However, a caveat effectively made the rule moot: private property could still be destroyed "when the military situation and general military objectives require it." Moreover, other high ranking Russian commanders totally disagreed with the Grand Duke's apparent hesitations, giving instructions to destroy all crops as the army retreated.⁸⁵ By late August, just after the fall of Warsaw, Russian troops were being ordered to transform the land they passed over into a "desert," even intentionally burning down the forests.⁸⁶

Warsaw itself was severely ravaged by the Russians during their retreat, though Yiddish newspapers tried to portray it in a positive light. The Russians evacuated workers, money, and even factories as they left, rousing some protest from the Poles despite the usual regime of official complete support. As one pro-independence Pole wrote, "They took everything that was theirs and much that was ours."⁸⁷ The Russians requisitioned, exploded, or tossed into the Vistula anything of worth. Metal—from church bells, door knobs, pipes, coins, and more—was

79 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 42.

80 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 22.

81 Root, *Battles East*, 57.

82 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 40.

83 Haynt, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

84 Root, *Battles East*, 149.

85 Paul Robinson, *Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich: Supreme Commander of the Russian Army*, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), 250.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brown/reader.action?docID=3382594>

86 Root, *Battles East*, 160.

87 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 51-52.

the main target, something that the Yiddish newspapers affirm.⁸⁸ Citing new guidelines from the authorities, *Der Moment* tries in vain to strike a reassuring tone. Yes, everything copper, bronze, brass, tin, aluminum, and lead had to be handed over, but only when the metal constituted most of the value of the tool.⁸⁹ This was then followed by an article announcing that the Russian government was starting a campaign to collect donations for those affected by the war in Poland.⁹⁰ That the Russian authorities were supporting their subjects in Poland was a hard sell when they were quite literally taking the money out of their pockets.

Along these same lines, the destruction and evacuation of Warsaw's factories is somehow portrayed positively in the Yiddish papers. Laying it out as a collective challenge that the people of Warsaw could work together to overcome, one article in *Der Moment* begins, "Is it possible to move factories from one place to another?" The author then goes on to argue that it was indeed possible (except for a few cases, like sugar factories), that it would be necessary to keep the factories from falling into German hands if they get closer to Warsaw, and that if the Germans seemed like they were going to take the city, Varsovians would manage to accomplish the task.⁹¹ As for the "evacuation and destruction of property and goods" bluntly announced by the Russian authorities, citizens were reassured that this would only occur "if it is necessary because of military reasons," it would be localized, and people would be able to claim compensation at a later date.⁹² Again, there were indications enough for a reader of the Yiddish newspapers to know that the

military situation was not so optimistic as the authorities would want the people to believe, and it was clear that Varsovians kept ending up being on the receiving end of great misfortune. The Russian army was supposed to protect Warsaw from the dreaded Germans, but instead was an enormous encumbrance.

Suffering of the Jews

On top of all of the hardships that the Jews shared with the ethnic Poles in 1915, Jews tended to have them worse, while other hardships specifically were reserved for them. Understanding this point of distinction is essential to understanding the specific Jewish experience of the fall of Warsaw. It is worth emphasizing that even if not every uniquely Jewish hardship impacted every Jew individually, just as not every hardship on the Eastern Front impacted everyone in Poland individually, the existence of these hardships and the awareness of these hardships (likely largely through the Yiddish newspapers) would have determined much of their perceived reality. Even if a Jewish reader of a Yiddish newspaper were hypothetically somehow lucky enough to have no other unique experience of the war from their quality of being Jewish than this, readers of the Yiddish newspapers would have at the very least been acutely conscious of numerous ways in which Jews were undergoing an even harsher ordeal than the general population in this time. That, in turn, would have made their lived experience and perception of the First World War (and in this case, the fall of Warsaw) unique from an ethnic Pole who read a Polish newspaper even while finding themselves in the same time and place as a Jew who read a Yiddish newspaper.

One of these hardships peculiar to the Jewish experience of the war was the heightened

88 Root, *Battles East*, 156.

89 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

90 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

91 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

92 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

antisemitism they suffered at the hands of their Polish neighbors. Polish antisemitism has had a long history: even before the war, relations between Jews and Poles in Poland were worsening. A major boycott against Jewish goods was one example.⁹³

Der Moment's "Small Feuilleton" section on July 18, 1915, references this boycott in an interesting manner. The story is about a gentile janitor named Siewierski who puts an ad in a Yiddish newspaper looking for work. Finding the ad was very shocking, as the author begins the piece by saying, "I read it over again, rubbed my eyes, and read it over once more. No, not any kind of mistake." Some Jews read Polish newspapers and Yiddish newspapers, but the Polish do not read Yiddish newspapers, so this man had to have been searching for a Jewish employer, reasons the author. However, he must have known the backlash he would get if he did so. The author concludes that this janitor Siewierski bought the ad as a personal protest against the boycott against the Jews and not as a real search for work, a conclusion that elates the author because it means that not every Pole shares the antisemitism expressed by the Polish press. The author describes wanting to run out into the street and shout, "There is a division! There is a division!"⁹⁴ The whole premise of this article alone—explaining the shock that a Pole would place an ad in a Yiddish newspaper—is telling about the interethnic relations in 1915 Warsaw.

Indeed, Polish antisemitism around the time of the fall of Warsaw in particular could be quite acrimonious, but campaigning against it was also where *Der Moment* and *Haynt* most found their own voice, as seen above. The Russians did not seem to censor the press on

these matters, so *Der Moment* and *Haynt* were able to print quite clearly what the Poles were doing and saying about Jews. At one point, when talking about the Jews that the Russian army had "evacuated" from many areas in Poland, *Der Moment* relates how many Poles had seized the Jews' stores and business on a large scale. It also shows the reaction of Polish newspapers to the disappearance of Jews from many regions. According to one Pole, people had once said that if one took away the Jews, nobody would be able to eat because the Jews were the merchants.

Now this was "laughable." According to another account: "When one walks now in the street, one's heart fills so much from the sight of the virtuous, clean displays in the stores. The streets also look completely different. Once, the area in front of the stores was full of garbage; today it is clean."⁹⁵ The fact that this sort of rhetoric and these sorts of feelings were so common amongst the Polish population and particularly the Polish press was extremely unsettling for editors and journalists of *Der Moment*. They did not lose any opportunity to denounce it. To take just one example, at the end of an article criticizing the German press, *Der Moment* sees a window to attack the Polish press. It compares the antisemitism found in the German newspapers to that found in a Polish newspaper in order to demonstrate a point of how bad the Germans were!⁹⁶

Historians can give some explanation for this high level of antisemitism. According to Blobaum, the relations between Jews and Poles in Warsaw before the war were already deteriorating, and during the war, as people faced food shortages all over Europe and blamed the "profiteer"—invariably Jewish in people's minds—Warsaw was particularly susceptible to

93 Nalewayko-Kulikow, "Who Has Not Wanted To Be an Editor?", 301.

94 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

95 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

96 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 2.

the general increase in antisemitism because of the massive influx of Jewish refugees.⁹⁷ Food shortages and Jewish refugees made a potent brew for antisemitism, just as Belinda Davis shows in the context of her study of Berlin during the war.⁹⁸ According to Blobaum, at first, Polish newspapers in Warsaw felt sympathy for the refugees, but talk soon turned to their alleged tendencies towards “freeloading” and disease.⁹⁹ Indeed, due to the conditions they were forced to live in once in Warsaw, these refugees did suffer greatly from diseases.¹⁰⁰ Of course, the main sufferers of this were the Jews themselves, not those who agitated against them for their diseasedness. In fact, the Jewish population as a whole suffered disproportionately. Not even including the refugees, Jewish child mortality in Warsaw had increased by 70 percent as early as 1915, and it would become far worse as the war progressed.¹⁰¹ For some Polish anti-Semites, though, this was all the more proof of their beliefs. These sentiments became so paranoid that, in one case, some ordinary Poles in Warsaw even blamed the Zeppelin attacks on the Jews! This was part of a broader suspicion that the Jews were pro-German. For example, near the beginning of the war, a false rumor spread that a pro-German article had appeared in *Der Moment* provided an early contribution to this idea of the Jews in Warsaw as traitors. The fact that, when the Germans entered the city, they were applauded by some Jews who had been fearing an impending pogrom in light of the rise in antisemitic passions could not have helped.

97 Robert Blobaum, “A Warsaw Story: Polish–Jewish Relations During the First World War,” *Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis: Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky*, eds. Glenn Dynner and François Guesnet (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 271–272. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004291812_013

98 Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin*, (Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 126–128.

99 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 37.

100 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 94.

101 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 167.

Blobaum notes, however, that unlike many other places at the time, no pogrom did end up occurring in Warsaw during the First World War or its immediate aftermath.¹⁰²

Unsurprisingly, these sorts of accusations of espionage and traitorous loyalties were extremely widespread. One sees numerous references, direct and indirect, even in the Yiddish newspapers that demonstrated fears of espionage. For instance, in the article quoted from the *Russky Invalid* about German plans, the author off-handedly mentions the supposedly extensive spy network the Germans have in Russia.¹⁰³ Similarly, the villain, “Fritz,” in the part of a serialized shund novel (“Through Fire and Sword”) that appears on July 18 in *Haynt* is a French deserter and German spy during the Franco-Prussian War who is trying to find and exploit the heroine Marie.¹⁰⁴ Partly due to the lack of a clearly definable front in Poland that divided the opposing armies, especially during the Great Retreat’s great movement and confusion, civilians were easily suspected as spies on the Eastern Front.¹⁰⁵ For the Russian army in particular, Jews comprised an “unreliable element.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, official policy stated that Jews could not become officers in the Russian army.¹⁰⁷ Then, once the war was underway, Cossacks overhearing Yiddish conversations often thought they were hearing German, something that further increased suspicions.¹⁰⁸ As a result of these fears of espionage, the Russian authorities ordered the halt of German-language learning in schools and ordered its replacement with English and French, something that *Haynt* expected would

102 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 136–140.

103 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 2.

104 *Haynt*, July 18, 1915, pg. 2.

105 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 57–58.

106 Lohr, “The Russian Army and the Jews,” 406.

107 “The Jews of Russia and World War I.”

108 Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 17.

decrease trade with Germany and increase it with the Allies even after the war.¹⁰⁹ Also, the fears led to more discrimination. In Courland, Haynt announced, the Russians were now allowing "homeless" Jews to find work in the fields, so long as they did so away from the rivers.¹¹⁰ The Russians did not want the Jews near strategically important areas near the combat zones because they believed they would then be in a favorable position to help the Germans.

With all of these suspicions abounding, it should not be too surprising, then, that pogroms proliferated throughout much of Eastern Europe. As mentioned above, Blobaum points out that what was perhaps surprising was the absence of a pogrom in Warsaw by either the Russians or the Poles. During the Russian retreat, Russian soldiers (especially Cossacks, who may have instigated as many as 80 percent of the pogroms in 1915), frequently joined by locals, multiplied their pogroms. In 1915, there were 19 separate reports of pogroms in Vilna alone! Unfortunately, these were only the token of worse to come. During the subsequent Russian Civil War, a series of pogroms on an unprecedented scale was carried out across Eastern Europe, particularly in those regions to which the "evacuated" Jews were "evacuated," killing up to 100,000 Jews.¹¹¹ It was during this time of upheaval that this author's great-grandmother's family escaped Ukraine by bribing a Romanian border guard.

Yet, whereas Warsaw's Yiddish newspapers contain some commentary about Polish antisemitic actions and words, discussions of anti-semitism when the Russians were responsible were censored. There are no direct references to the pogroms that were

going on at all, and one of the few references to Russian antisemitic actions was a reprint of a Russian governor's recent declaration in Eastern Siberia that the Jews in his region did not have any right to "immovable property" and that all what they currently possessed was now to be "liquidated." It is printed entirely without comment from any of the editors.¹¹²

Often, a narrative of oppression of the Jewish people during a given time period culminates in a discussion about pogroms. However, there was something even more disquieting in progress while German forces converged towards Warsaw in the summer of 1915. By the end of 1915, official Russian statistics recorded 3.3 million war refugees, a large underestimate according to historian Peter Gatrell, and by 1917 there were more refugees in Russia than the entire industrial working class.¹¹³ Of those, a very large number were Jews because, during the course of the war, the Russian army expelled 500,000 to 1,000,000 Jewish civilians eastward (as well as 250,000 ethnic Germans).¹¹⁴ In fact, the Jewish refugees who suddenly flooded into Warsaw in early 1915 were refugees because the Russian army had driven them from their homes elsewhere to begin with, though most of the expulsions occurred during the Great Retreat.¹¹⁵ Historian Eric Lohr rejects categorizing these deportations as ethnic cleansing because the deportees were mostly sent from non-Russian ethnic regions into regions of ethnic Russians dominance.¹¹⁶ I would argue that just because the destinations of the deportees do not fit the most common pattern of ethnic cleansing does not mean that it cannot be considered ethnic cleansing: Lohr himself quotes a Russian general alluding to the

109 Haynt, July 18, 1915, pg. 2.

110 Haynt, July 18, 1915, pg. 2.

111 Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews," 416-418.

112 Der Moment, July 16, 1915, pg. 2.

113 Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, 3.

114 Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews," 404-406.

115 Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews," 410.

116 Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews," 419.

need to “cleanse” his region of “the unreliable element” to assuage fears of espionage.¹¹⁷ The deportations are a form of cleansing that had a different intent from most, namely, to remove the targeted population from proximity with the enemy rather than from proximity with the “desirable” ethnic group. However, the characteristics of destination are not what one would think should define ethnic cleansing, the characteristics of the expulsion are.

Whether or not the Russian actions officially count as “ethnic cleansing,” they were appalling. In a chilling display of foreshadowing, the Russian army crammed Jews into overcrowded trains and sent them eastward. High mortality rates resulted. The reason why the deportations did not include the entire Jewish population was apparently simply that there were not enough trains.¹¹⁸ The exact death toll is not clear, but Engelstein says that “tens of thousands” died.¹¹⁹ Beyond the enormous impact on the deportees themselves, the policy also significantly influenced the course of the events on the Eastern Front. Despite the critical need for trains to aid the Russian army’s retreat, railroads were clogged by the Jews the generals insisted on deporting,¹²⁰ and so were its roads.¹²¹ Also, the lands once cultivated by the expelled ethnic Germans, for example, were not producing food, at the same time as Russian cities faced food shortages.¹²² In the void left by one expelled group, the Russians tried to substitute another. *Der Moment* reports on July 16 that the “homeless” Jews now were allowed to work in the fields, and reports the ambivalent reaction of the Jewish Aid Association. It was good that the Jews could find work now and

that the number of workers in the fields was now increased, but they also said that most of these Jews were from cities and did not know how to work in the fields.¹²³ Altogether, the chaos created across the Russian empire by the mass deportations may have even contributed to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution.¹²⁴

Resilience

Besides the great suffering that Warsaw Jews experienced and witnessed all around them during the First World War—both from living in Poland at that time and from being Jewish living in Poland at that time—the Yiddish newspapers also show that they did not let this suffering constitute their entire lived experience of the war.

The Yiddish newspapers, as to be expected, never discuss the deportations themselves, but, as already seen, they do give some evidence of reactions to all of the “homeless” Jews generated by the “evacuations.” It is interesting to see how the newspapers repeatedly use the neutral, almost euphemistic terms “homeless” and “evacuations.” These reactions contribute greatly to what one can learn about the perspectives of Warsaw Jews around the time of the German conquest of Warsaw, as well as their experiences of having to deal with the deportees.

One example of the Yiddish newspapers revealing information about Jewish reactions to the expelled Jews is when *Der Moment* cites the same Deputy Friedman who pledged the loyalty of the Jews in the Russian empire to the tsar as now working tirelessly in the Duma

117 Lohr, “The Russian Army and the Jews,” 412–413.

118 Lohr, “The Russian Army and the Jews,” 411.

119 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 58.

120 Lohr, “The Russian Army and the Jews,” 418.

121 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 72.

122 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 81–82.

123 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 2.

124 Engelstein, *Russia in Flames*, 82; Lohr, “The Russian Army and the Jews,” 419.

for the “homeless.”¹²⁵ In addition, the efforts of the Jewish Aid Association are highlighted on multiple occasions. In Vilna, it was said to support 10,600 of the “homeless” on 200,000 rubles a week, though far more people were not receiving help.¹²⁶ Continuing this aid effort, Jews all across the Russian empire gave money to charity. Yet, the crisis progressed. The author of an article about this so-called “self-taxation” opined that particularly in Warsaw, the campaign was “not going as one would wish,” and that, “unfortunately,” “very many” of the Warsaw Jewish population were totally “indifferent” about the situation. In a meeting of Jewish lawyers in Warsaw recently called to address the matter, only the middle-class lawyers apparently appeared, and not the wealthy. What that meant was that if more money did not materialize from the organization’s affiliates in St. Petersburg, even the “paltry support” that the refugees in Warsaw were currently receiving would cease. Moreover, the next article mentioned that there were several reports of people fraudulently collecting charity money aimed at poor children.¹²⁷ Yet, some divisions and a lack of complete charitable success notwithstanding, the Jewish community in Warsaw clearly pulled off an enormous collective effort to partially provide for so many refugees. The efforts in response to this problem—brought about by the Jewish community’s own government’s discriminatory and counterproductive policies—came at a time when the economy in Warsaw was catastrophically depressed, other Varsovians seemed to have turned their noses in disgust at the Jewish refugees and to have left the Jewish community, and the same Russian regime that was responsible for the

deportations refused to deal with them.

Indeed, even during all this time of suffering, the Yiddish newspapers in Warsaw also testify to a life beyond the suffering. Another way in which one sees this is a high interest in the outside world, especially the outside Jewish world, and large evidence of cultural events even in the midst of times of such hardship. The Yiddish newspapers mention events such as: a letter presented by Woodrow Wilson to some American Jews;¹²⁸ the British conquest of Cameroon;¹²⁹ a “strictly kosher” meal prepared specially for the occasion of a visit of the head rabbi in Egypt to the Sultan;¹³⁰ the execution of a Jewish spy for Germany in London;¹³¹ the visit of a British rabbi to some Jewish soldiers on the Western Front and his meeting with Field Marshal John French; the fighting in Gallipoli.¹³² Even as one would think their predicament at home was all-preoccupying, their interest in people abroad, especially Jews abroad, did not waver.

Similarly, if the number of advertisements for a given topic is indicative of perceived popularity, it is plain that the newspapers’ readers often listened to orchestras and watched many movies, plays, and comedy acts both domestic (Polish and Yiddish) and foreign in origin and subject (e.g., an Italian film, “Spartacus,” and a play about a romanticized life in America, “Madness from Millions”). Almost all advertisements are for entertainment.¹³³ This reminds one of historian Éric Hazan’s description of France in 1793 and 1794. Contrary to popular imagination of the period, even through the Reign of Terror, “In Paris, people enjoyed themselves a lot—when

125 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 3.

126 *Haynt*, July 16, 1915, pg. 3.

127 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 3.

128 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 3.

129 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 1.

130 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 2.

131 *Haynt*, July 18, 1915, pg. 4.

132 *Der Moment*, July 18, 1915, pg. 4.

133 *Der Moment*, July 16, 1915, pg. 4.

they were not starving—, the theaters were full, new buildings were built...”¹³⁴ Despite a terrifying reality, people continued to live their lives. Perhaps they simply sought a veneer of normalcy, but acknowledging that there was more going on than just misery during periods of calamity is still important.

Conclusion

In the first edition of *Haynt* after the capture of Warsaw by the Germans, a short article is titled, “To the Jewish Population”:

Jews! In the bloody history of the past year, a serious moment has arrived. The Polish government and the largest Jewish community has fallen under German control. We should understand the seriousness of such a historic moment.
Calm! – That is what the mantra of every serious man ought to be in such days. Each to his work and his occupation!
– That is what one ought to call for in such days. Let no man forget for a single minute how extremely serious the events are that it has fallen upon us to survive—events upon which the fate of peoples and nations depend. Adults to work, children to class! Every father should prevent his children from wandering the streets, and those who are older should serve as examples for those who are younger.¹³⁵

This article builds upon the themes found in the aforementioned Yiddish newspapers. It

invokes historical weightiness and fear in the face of the unknown information (note the repeated use of the word “serious” (*ernst*)), while projecting resilience and maintaining a level of vagueness through noncommittal statements to avoid trouble with censorship.

By combining an investigation of just a few issues of *Der Moment* and *Haynt* from the summer of 1915 just with mostly English secondary literature by mainstream historians and by Yiddish scholars, this study produced insights into the First World War. Previous work on the entire Eastern Front is sparse, and even less has been done on Warsaw, let alone the fall of Warsaw, a crucial and overlooked moment in the war. What work that does exist on the Eastern Front rarely looks at Yiddish sources, so the fall of Warsaw has not been told from a Yiddish perspective. Likewise, studies of Jews in the war are uncommon, and they largely tell the story through the perspective of Russian decision-making. Finally, studies of Yiddish newspapers are also few, and none of those that do exist cover the fall of Warsaw or other great events of World War I, probably because these historians are most interested in Jewish thought. Overall, none of these satisfactorily integrate the Yiddish perspective into World War I. Nor has this study done so.

However, by gathering together the work done on these various axes and examining the Yiddish Warsaw press in a critical moment in time, this study has made a step in the right direction. One can begin to reconstruct the experience of this Yiddish perspective in this one point in time and space. Despite heavy censorship and uncertain loyalties, one can discern that the Yiddish-speakers in Warsaw were passing through a crucible. As Poland descended into ruin and anguish, the country’s Jews faced additional trauma. Many of these developments would have personally impacted

¹³⁴ Éric Hazan, *Une Histoire de la Révolution Française*, (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2012), 283.

¹³⁵ *Haynt*, August 6, 1915, pg. 2 (mistakenly pg. 6 under July 18).

the readers of *Der Moment* and *Haynt*, while for others, they “merely” transfigured the entire world they knew. In either case, they shaped the World War I that the readers would have perceived. As for this perspective itself, censorship of the newspapers unfortunately limits what one can say for certain, but if this study has managed to help catch a glimpse of it, at least, it can be considered a success. Much clearly remains to be learned from a more thorough examination of what Yiddish-speakers experienced and thought about World War I. The task to reconstruct the Yiddish perspective of the First World War has just begun.

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Appendix



Photo: "Staff of Der moment, Warsaw, 1920s. (Back row, left to right) Mordkhe Spector, A. Almi, Yoysef Tunkel, Moyshe Bunem Yustman, Tsevi Prylucki, D. Druk, Sh. Janowski, Yisroel Khayim Zagorodski (front), Bentsion Chilinowicz, Yisroel Khayim Zagorodski, and Hillel Zeitlin." (YIVO). https://yivo-encyclopedia.org/article.aspx/moment_der

Photo: "Russisches Armierungs-Bataillon verlässt Warschau, 1915." (Russian second-line troops leave Warsaw, 1915.) <https://www.sz-photo.de/?60044309618120829140>





Photo: "Einrücken der deutschen Kavallerie in Warschau im Zuge des ersten Weltkrieges." (Entrance of the German cavalry into Warsaw during the First World War.) <https://www.sz-photo.de/?60044309618120829140>



Image: Haynt (Warsaw, Poland), July 16, 1915, page 1. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/hyt/1915/07/16/01?&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTl----->