

Beyond Rational Thought: Yeshiva College during the Holocaust

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In “A Scrap of Time,” Ida Fink chronicles the bewilderment that gripped the Jews as they learned of the labor camps and struggled to comprehend their sudden fate at the beginning of the Holocaust.¹ The world of European Jewry became terrifying as the Nazis’ wrath overtook Europe. The term “labor” became the more sinister “labor camp”; “round-up” came to mean grueling forced labor. If European Jews themselves did not fully grasp the horrors that awaited them, it is not surprising that Americans were unaware of the extent of the Nazi regime’s brutality.

American newspapers were unable to accurately report the ongoing events of the war. Misinformation was rampant, and conflicting stories regarding the Jews’ treatment slowly disseminated into America. *The Commentator*, the Yeshiva College official student newspaper, printed such stories, covering the events leading up to the war and the war itself. Somewhat surprisingly, Yeshiva students, a demographic that one would expect to be at the forefront of Jewish activism, did not mobilize in support of European Jewry. In fact, *The Commentator*’s coverage was not radically different than that of other national newspapers such as *The New York Times*.

Before the War

Contemporary American Jews might be surprised at how the Jewish students of that era viewed a possible American entry into World War II. Far from rallying to save the Jews of Europe, students at Yeshiva College were generally unabashed isolationists. Beginning in its third issue, *The Commentator* published editorial after editorial decrying potential American involvement in the emerging conflict in Europe:

We wish to take this opportunity of expressing editorially our direct and unmitigated condemnation of war...The student body of Yeshiva College places itself firmly and enthusiastically behind those organizations dedicated to the preservation of peace. The various student groups deserve the highest praise

¹ Ida Fink, “A Scrap of Time.” *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*. (New York: Pantheon, 1987), Print.

for their initiatives in organizing the peace demonstrations. Yeshiva College considers itself in the ranks of the marchers.²

Similar editorials appeared through the middle of the 1930s. In commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the end of the First World War, *The Commentator* published an editorial urging students to remain opposed to entering a new war, declaring “the same mighty death struggle of imperialism dressed in modern phraseology is with us again.”³ In fact, the editor referred to college students who would hold peace assemblies throughout the country as “enlightened.” The editorial staff urged Yeshiva students not only to reject war as an option, but to actively protest any potential American involvement. As late as 1939, an editorial asserted,

[It is] our firm belief that America will not readily become involved in another world war. We believe that anti-war feeling has run deep into the consciousness of our national life and that the events of the past few years have but served to strengthen our resolve never to become parties again to a new world war.⁴

These pacifist editorials reflect the general consensus of Yeshiva College students as well as college students around the country. *The Commentator* publicized anti-war demonstrations, including a November 1935 mass in the Student Synagogue, where three hundred students “enthusiastically participated in the Nationwide Mobilization for Peace.”⁵ Similarly, a 1936 editorial called for “a militant student front against war.”⁶ This attitude was not unique to Yeshiva, as reported in a 1935 survey by the Associated Collegiate Press. According to the survey, “college students can be expected to oppose vigorously and actively any effort to drag the United States into the general European war...”⁷ One might have assumed that due to the peril faced by European Jewry, Yeshiva students would have been more willing to support American intervention; however, this was clearly not the case.

² “The Peace Strike.” *The Commentator*, New York, April 5, 1935. Print Editorial.

³ “We Want Peace.” *The Commentator*, New York, November 9, 1938. Print Editorial.

⁴ “Our Stand Is.” *The Commentator*, New York, April 14, 1939. Print Editorial.

⁵ “Students Hail United Front Opposing War.” *The Commentator*, New York, November 21, 1935. Print Editorial.

⁶ “Our Last Stand.” *The Commentator*, New York, November 11, 1936. Print Editorial.

⁷ Survey by the Associated College Press quoted by *The Commentator* in October 1935

The students' apparent indifference to the plight of European Jewry appears to stem from a lack of recognition of the danger the Jews of Europe faced, the gravity of the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Nazi regime. The idea that Hitler was planning to exterminate European Jewry was not known recognized until a few years later.⁸

The Yeshiva students' ignorance is demonstrated by the morbidly ironic usage of specific words in a pre-Holocaust world. They repeatedly used the word "holocaust" as a term for what would happen if America participated in another war.⁹ They called on readers to "protest against the insidious forces fomenting war and Fascism in this country."¹⁰ The disaster, to them, would not come from staying out of the war, but from entering.

The most striking example of their naiveté of the unfolding calamity is the light-hearted manner in which they repeatedly referred to the Nazis. The 1939 Purim edition of *The Commentator* had multiple jokes about the Nazis that would certainly be considered offensive today.¹¹ One headline read "Assimilators Expelled as Novel Non-Aryan Policy Takes Effect," quipping about a new "Non-Aryan policy" at Yeshiva. In jest, they referred to a "Propaganda Minister" at Yeshiva College. Another article referred to a Professor as the "uber-Fuherer" and talks about "Ratzis," apparently a contraction of Rabbi and Nazi. Similarly, a news article in March 1940 mentioned an incident in which the sophomore class woke up the dormitory yelling "The Nazis are here," "Run for cover" and "Stop, please stop."¹²

The first *Commentator* editorial acknowledging the dire Jewish situation in Europe was printed in October 1939, just seven months after the aforementioned Purim edition. The author recognized that 3,500,000 Polish Jews were in danger. He wrote,

We can about [sic] guess what will happen to those who fall under the yoke of the Nazi regime. Untold persecution lies in store for them, coupled with economic and physical isolation.

Although initially it seems that the author might have been aware of the

⁸ "The American Experience - America and the Holocaust." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. Web. April 14, 2011.

⁹ See, for example, "The Peace Strike." and "We Want Peace."

¹⁰ "The Peace Strike."

¹¹ *The Purim Commentator*, New York, March 1, 1939. Print Editorial.

¹² "Sophs Dust of Siddurim and Rabbenu Tam Tephillin, Then Take Over Minyan." *The Commentator*, New York, March 13, 1940. Print Editorial.

physical danger the Jews faced, his next sentence reveals the purpose of the editorial:

Who can deny that such circumstances are abominable? But there is at least one ray of hope. Though the tactics of the Mad Dog of Europe have usually brought undying misery upon the Jewish population, at least the spirit of Judaism will not be killed. The Yeshivoh will continue to thrive and the spirit of Judaism should remain intact.¹³

While Americans recognized that the Jews of Europe were in danger, they still believed that the Jewish communities of Europe would at least remain spiritually intact. After all, Jews had lived in Europe for centuries and had survived past persecutions.

Although one might think the realization of the increasing persecution would change Yeshiva students' attitudes towards American intervention in Europe, this was not the case. The editorials advocating for America not to involve itself in the war continued even as the Jewish problems in Europe began to be recognized. Editorials and articles from 1939 to 1941 continued to promote isolationism.¹⁴ Moreover, there were no editorials that gave more than a cursory mention of what was happening to European Jewry.¹⁵

During the War

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor completely altered the American attitude towards involvement in the Second World War. Following the attack, President Franklin Roosevelt famously called December 7, "a date which will live in infamy" and Congress declared

¹³ Jacob E. Goldman, "Maybe I'm Wrong." *The Commentator*, New York, October 11, 1939. Print Editorial.

¹⁴ "War is Denounced at Peace Meeting." *The Commentator*, New York, November 29, 1939. Print Editorial; "Peace Lies in Isolation, Says Villard." *The Commentator*, New York, November 27, 1940. Print Editorial; Charles Shoulson, "Maybe I'm Wrong." *The Commentator*, New York, January 8, 1941. Print Editorial.

¹⁵ The March 26, 1941 editorial section completely consists of passages from Psalms. Initially, this might appear to indicate some sort of knowledge about the Holocaust. However, it appears that this had nothing to do with the Jews. In March 1941, the United States passed the Lend-Lease Act, which gave war material to the Allied Forces. It is probable that the Psalms are included to acknowledge the growing realization that America will enter the war. This, most likely, has nothing to do with the Holocaust.

war on Japan. The declaration of war was supported by both parties and approved almost unanimously by both houses of Congress. This position reflected the newly awakened American support for war. The American isolationism of the 1930s had transformed into national widespread interventionism,¹⁶ a trend that can be traced in the issues of *The Commentator* following the attack.

Immediately following the declaration of war, *The Commentator's* isolationist leanings disappeared. In a December 1941 editorial, the editors supported the impending war effort, saying America "represents not just a free segment of the world, but all mankind which fights for freedom."¹⁷ In none of the editorials, in the months immediately following Pearl Harbor was there any mention of the Jews in Europe. It is apparent that the switch in Yeshiva students to interventionism had little to do with a sudden drive to save European Jewry. In reality, they were no different than the typical American. Ordinary Americans and Yeshiva students supported the war for the same reason: Japan had attacked America, necessitating retribution.

By mid-1942, the first reports on the devastation of European Jewry arrived. One such report was the Reigner Telegram, a message sent by a representative of the World Jewish Congress informing the Allies of the Nazi's Final Solution.¹⁸ Similar accounts began to arrive from people who had escaped from the concentration camps.¹⁹ In response to these reports, the Allies publically attacked "this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination."²⁰ According to Dr. Jeffery Gurock, "It was known that Jews suffered terribly under Hitler's rule, but news of the Holocaust would not become public until November 1942."²¹

The Commentator published one such report, a narrative account by a Yeshiva College student who witnessed the pillage of Warsaw, recounting the destruction of the Jewish community.²² It is interesting to note that

¹⁶ Harry A. Gailey, *The War in the Pacific: from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995), 51-2.

¹⁷ "Let Freedom Ring." *The Commentator*, New York, December 18, 1941. Print Editorial.

¹⁸ Jeremy Black, *The Holocaust* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008), 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Jeffrey S. Gurock, *American Zionism Mission and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 314.

²² "Landa Discloses Pillage of Warsaw." *The Commentator*, New York, May 1942. Print Editorial.

this was not a front-page story in *The Commentator*. It was instead printed on the final page of news coverage in that issue. This begins a trend; even as the events transpiring in Europe became clearer, they were not widely reported in the national media or in *The Commentator*.

In 1943, the first articles and editorials appeared that directly discussed the persecution of European Jewry. From this point on, the context in which the Holocaust was mentioned was primarily related to the increasing demand for an autonomous Jewish state. This rise in Zionism was not unique to Yeshiva students; American Jews began to recognize the value of a Jewish state.²³ Even if a Jewish State in Palestine would not have saved all of European Jewry, it is likely that many could have escaped Nazi persecution by fleeing to the Jewish homeland.²⁴ In February of that year, Rabbi Mayer Berlin, president of Mizrahi, addressed a “huge gathering” and appealed to American Jewry to “throw off its cloak of smugness and indifference... the world is paying for its indifference to Jewish persecution”²⁵ However, at that point there had been no editorial in *The Commentator* that directly condemned Nazi atrocities.

An early March 1943 edition of *The Commentator* appears to signify a major change in its lack of direct coverage of the Holocaust. A special edition of the paper was published, with all articles directly relating to the potential annihilation of the Jews of Europe. One editorial noted that the world has been silent for the previous ten years but “this publication is our initial attempt...to let our brothers know that we are not forgetting them in this, their darkest hour.”²⁶ The editors specifically acknowledged that this was their first endeavor to cover the events; even they recognized that until this point, *The Commentator* had not devoted significant coverage to the Holocaust. An article headlined “European Jewry Faces Total Extinc-

²³ Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1975), 422.

²⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the rise of Yeshiva students’ Zionism. It is worth mentioning that from 1943 to 1948, *The Commentator* published editorial after editorial attacking anti-Zionists in the Yeshiva College community and in the greater American Jewish world. Perhaps it is possible to argue that this is directly correlated with the rapidly increasing knowledge of what was occurring to the Jews of Europe. See, for example, the March 4, 1943 special edition of *The Commentator*, where they describe Palestine as the only solution for European Jewry.

²⁵ “Praises Palestinian Courage; Demands Free Jewish State.” *The Commentator*, New York, February 4, 1943. Print Editorial.

²⁶ “Save us, O Lord.” *The Commentator*, New York, March 4, 1943. Print Editorial.

על שבר
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The Commentator

דברי תורה
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Cried Unto Thee, O Lord!”**
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tion- Nazi Pattern of Death Threatens 5,000,000 Jews,” relayed what was happening to the Jews, stating,

It is difficult for American Jews living in warmth and comfort to visualize the misery of those clinging to life in the filth, starvation, and disease-ridden inferno of Nazi dominated Europe.²⁷

The Commentator acknowledged that the concept of death camps was so foreign to American college students, that it was extremely difficult for them to comprehend. This is a potential reason for the seeming indifference of both *The Commentator* and the mainstream American media to the plight of European Jewry.

This special edition of *The Commentator* ends with an editorial reproaching Yeshiva students for their apathy to the “unparalleled plight of their people.” Such detachment is understandable given the lack of coverage by *The Commentator* itself. However, the editor continued, “Has [sic] any of them (students) reacted even in a mild way to The Commentator’s editorials on the Jewish situation?” It is unclear to what editorials this refers; the editors themselves recognized that this edition of *The Commentator* was their first attempt to acknowledge the situation. From an outside perspective, it might seem unfair of *The Commentator* to condemn Yeshiva students for not taking action, while at the same time publishing few editorials relating to the Holocaust. The editorial ends by calling for the “genesis of a new attitude on the part of the students.” Despite this call for action, very little change occurred in *The Commentator* or in Yeshiva following this special issue.

For the remainder of 1943, there is no indication of any shift in attitude or concern at Yeshiva College. The final editorial of the spring 1943 semester once again bemoaned the students’ apathy. The editorial stated,

We fear that the Yeshiva student is developing a sort of isolationism, shutting himself away from stark reality. We view with alarm the apathy displayed by many students towards questions, which vitally affect them and their people. That such an attitude is prevalent among many of our people is a sad fact; for it to manifest itself among Yeshiva students is criminal.²⁸

²⁷ European Jewry Faces Total Extinction - Nazi Pattern of Death Threatens 5,000,000 Jews.” *The Commentator*, New York, March 4, 1943. Print Editorial.

²⁸ “A Parting Word.” *The Commentator*, New York, May 5, 1943. Print Editorial.

The students' seeming lack of distress for the Jews in Europe is once again demonstrated. This can be shocking to the contemporary American, who might assume that Yeshiva College students would have lobbied for the United States' intervention. However, before America entered World War II, and even following the attack on Pearl Harbor, student focus was not concentrated on European Jewry.

The trend of apparent indifference of the student body continued until the end of the war. The few editorials that appeared in *The Commentator* regarding the Holocaust upheld the trend of calling on Yeshiva students to take a strong stance. The editorial staff even went so far as to headline a February 1944 editorial, "Students' Lethargy in Jewish Affairs [are] Criminal."²⁹ It is clear that, at this juncture, it was the opinion of *The Commentator* staff that the Yeshiva students were unsympathetic to the reports coming out of Europe. This, coupled with only occasional further editorials by *The Commentator*, indicates that the plight of European Jewry was not an issue at the forefront of Yeshiva College students' minds.

The New York Times

The minimal coverage in *The Commentator* can be understood in the greater context of limited coverage by a national paper, *The New York Times*. Laurel Leff, associate professor of journalism at Northeastern University and Holocaust researcher, argues in *Buried by the Times* that the Jewish publisher of the *Times*, Arthur Hays Sulzburger, intentionally downplayed the unfolding situation in Europe. Leff asserts that Sulzburger's anti-Zionistic leaning led him to remove most coverage of the genocide from the front page of the *Times*.³⁰ Leff provides many such examples, including the fact that only six times during the 2076 days of war were the Jews identified as the victims of the Nazis.³¹ Furthermore, there were very few editorials published by the *Times* that discussed the Jews and their plight.³²

Leff rejects the idea that this was due to a lack of information on the unfolding situation. She contends that even though journalists were barred from reporting directly from Europe, enough information was available

²⁹ Harold Schulweis, "Students' Lethargy in Jewish Affairs Criminal." *The Commentator*, New York, May 24, 1943. Print Editorial.

³⁰ Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: the Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005), 42.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2

³² *Ibid.*, 3

that they should have known what was happening at the time. Leff also believes that the lack of coverage by the *Times* was not due to a disbelief of the legitimacy of the reports from Europe. The articles the paper printed did not give the impression that there was a sense of disbelief. In fact, when the *Times* did write about the events in Europe, the paper directly stated that millions of Jews were in danger from the Nazis.

Conclusion

Yeshiva College students during the late 1930s and early 1940s were somewhat apathetic towards the fate of European Jewry, perhaps because they simply did not realize the magnitude of what was occurring in Europe. However, although this appears to be the case before 1941, it does not explain why the editors of *The Commentator* repeatedly wrote about the indifference of the students even late into the War.

Another, somewhat difficult, consideration is that Yeshiva students were not concerned about the situation and willingly turned a blind eye to European Jewry. As troubling as this might be, for a few students this may have been the case. In *The Abandonment of the Jews*, David Wyman argues that if only American Jews had committed to fighting for European Jewry, perhaps hundreds of thousands of lives could have been saved. Wyman criticizes both the American Jewish and non-Jewish leadership for not speaking out against the Holocaust, even as what was happening first became apparent³³. It is disheartening to suggest that this was the case for Yeshiva students, although such a reason is a distinct possibility for their inaction.

Possibly the lack of action was due to the events of the Holocaust taking place very far from Yeshiva College. The students were college undergraduates who were focused on work, campus events, and routine college life. For them to recognize the magnitude of the situation would have been difficult, given the physical distance. It is likely that this played a role in Yeshiva students' apathy during the Holocaust.

Perhaps the most likely reason that Yeshiva College students, for the most part, did not actively protest during the Holocaust is because the entire concept was beyond rational thought. In *At the Mind's Limit*, author Jean Amery, a Holocaust survivor himself, discusses why the entire Ho-

³³ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941- 1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), ix-xii.

locaust violates the very definition of humanity.³⁴ He believes that it was impossible to rationalize what went on at Auschwitz and the other death camps. According to Amery, it is therefore impossible to discuss intellectual reasons for the Holocaust.

The *New York Times*' review of Leff's work utilized this logic to potentially explain why the *Times* did not give much coverage to the genocide in Europe.³⁵ The idea of death camps as well as the extent of the murder was unfathomable to those hearing the horrific reports. The reviewer asks, "How could Sulzberger or any other newspaper executive have comprehended the extent of what was happening in Europe?"

Perhaps a similar consideration can explain the dearth of Holocaust coverage in *The Commentator* after 1942. For Jewish-American students, the entire concept of mass murder and concentration camps was utterly irrational. Even as they heard the harrowing reports, even when *The Commentator* finally called on them to cry out for the Jews of Europe, they were apathetic. Like most Americans, Yeshiva students remained silent.

³⁴ Jean Amery, *At the Mind's End* (Indiana UP, 1980), 1-20.

³⁵ Robert Leiter, "'Buried by The Times': Horror Story." *New York Times*, May 15, 2005. Web. Accessed April 14, 2011.