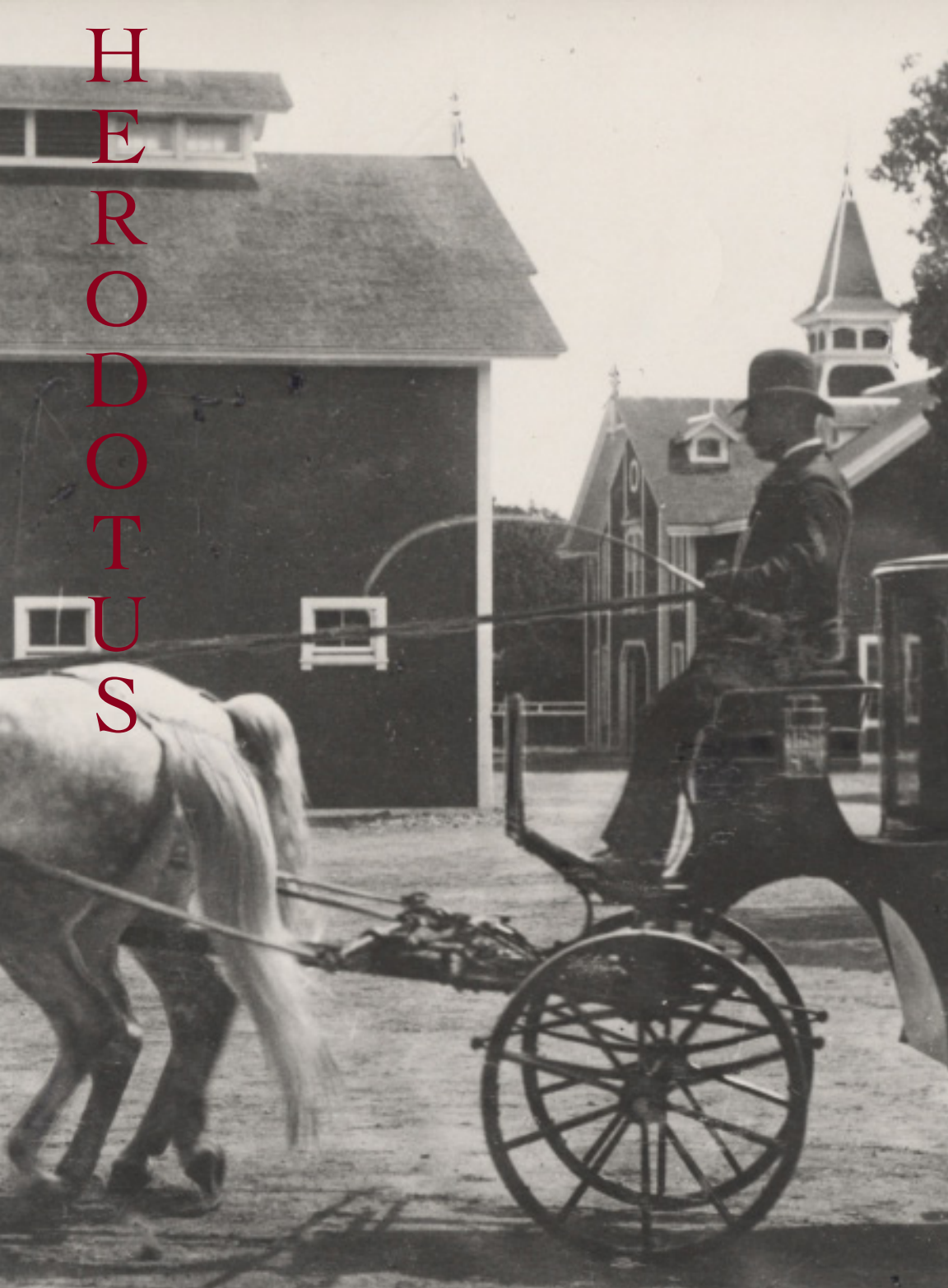
HERODOTUS



Volume XXXV • Spring 2025

Stanford University Department of History

HERODOTUS

Volume XXXV

Department of History
Stanford University

Volume XXXV, Spring 2025

…

Herodotus is a student-run publication founded in 1986 by the History Undergraduate Student Association (HUGSA) in partnership with the Stanford Department of History. It bears the name of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the fifth century BCE historian of the Greco-Persian Wars. Herodotus wrote his *Histories* so that "human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvelous deeds . . . may not be without their glory." Likewise, this journal is dedicated to preserving and showcasing the best of Stanford's undergraduate historical work. Submissions are solicited within the university, and contributions are selected through a rigorous peer review process. *Herodotus's* volume numbering system erroneously begins in 1990 rather than 1986. We have, however, chosen to retain the existing system for the sake of continuity.

Editorial Board

Cover Image: Berton W. Crandall, 1882-1979, *Stanford carriages and coachmen*, photographic print, box 7, Stanford Historical Photograph Collection, 1887-circa 1996 (inclusive), Stanford University Libraries Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford, CA.

Editor's Note

The historian's craft is as rich as it is contested. For millennia, humans have debated its purpose, proposing a veritable wealth of interpretations. According to our namesake, history provided a record of humanity's great deeds, ensuring that these achievements would "not be without their glory." In the nineteenth century, historians sought to reduce their discipline to a science, itself a reaction and impetus to those who saw history as an art. Rather than revealing a singular truth, these contests over history highlight the particularities of our past. They reveal the changes and continuities that distinguish each historical moment.

During our 2024-2025 cycle, we at *Herodotus* grappled with the historian's craft. After reviewing our editorial practices, we transformed our timeline to foster greater collaboration both within and beyond our board. To support our future editors, we paired new and returning members within training cohorts. To hear more from our authors—the incredible Stanford undergraduates whose words fill these pages—we instituted an additional round of revisions. Yet, this year was not simply a year of change. Recognizing the remarkable work of past editors, we sought to maintain the depth and breadth exemplified in previous issues. Thus, we have continued to publish eight papers, spanning thousands of years, myriad locations, and a variety of historical approaches.

It is our hope that, through these efforts, we have done justice to our authors, their subjects, and the study of history at Stanford.

HERODOTUS

Table of Contents

The Baas Digs a Shallow Grave

The Political Economy of South African Prison Labor, 1947-1959

Samiya Rana

On March 31, 1954, Elias Mpikwa was brutally murdered.[1] After his incarceration in the Krugersdorp Prison, Mpikwa had been hired out to Johan Snyman on Harmonie Farm through South Africa's convict lease system. When he lagged behind the other laborers, Snyman's son, Matthys, crept up behind him, striking him repeatedly with a pipe until he fell to the ground. His unconscious body was thrown into a lorry and driven away. Mpikwa was then brought to Johan Snyman, the owner of the farm, who had his own vision for punishment. Snyman doubled the length of a green garden hose, thrashing Mpikwa several times. Mpikwa rose with difficulty, struggling to continue to work. Snyman hit him again. Mpikwa fell, but Snyman did not stop. He pounded Mpikwa's limp body until he tired, then passed the hose to his son to do the same. Sambuthle Kangualoe, a witness to the scene, later reported, "I saw Johan Snyman assault Mpikwa by picking up his leg and hitting him on his private parts with the hose." "The only time I heard Mpikwa say anything," Kangualoe claimed, "was when he asked for water."[2]

When the Snymans were brought to trial for murder at Rustenburg, the jury consisted mainly of local Afrikaner farmers.[3] Johan Snyman claimed that he was careful about where he hit Mpikwa, avoiding his face and the front of his body.[4] He denied attacking Mpikwa in a way that was cruel or sadistic. Likewise, Snyman rejected the witness's claim that he

1 "Farmer, Son and 3 Natives on Charge of Murder," *The Rand Daily Mail*, September 17, 1954. The term "baas," used in the title, is the Afrikaans word for boss. Black or Coloured people often employed the word when referring to a white overseer.

2 "On Charge of Murder."

3 Anthony Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005), 207.

4 "Koster Farmer Said He Told Son to Hit Native Convict," *The Rand Daily Mail*, September 23, 1954.

said, "if he [Mpikwa] does not know how to work, I will hit him for a week until he does know."[5] The case received widespread publicity, with one headline reading "Accused's Heart Was Too Weak to Allow Him to Strike Blows – Doctor," a referenced Snyman's physician, Dr. J.J. de Waal, who claimed to have known him since 1945. Citing the accused's coronary thrombosis, de Waal testified that he did not believe Snyman's body was capable of such an attack.[6] The jury reached the mild verdict of "common assault," sentencing Johan Snyman to eighteen months imprisonment and his son to six.[7]

The violence experienced by Elias Mpikwa and other farm laborers was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it was the product and mechanism of a larger legal apparatus. Mpikwa and many laborers in the Rustenburg region were convict laborers. Also known as 9d-a-day men (d referring to pence), they could be hired out from the state for far cheaper than the ordinary 4 pound-a-month wage.[8] By 1958, over 200,000 Africans were employed each year on farms across the country for 9d a day.[9] The violence that farmers unleashed against such convict laborers was often creative in its malice and thorough in its design. Yet, this violence represented only one piece of a broader system—a system built on economic concerns, sustained by a legal veneer, and adaptable to social pressures.

This paper examines the political economy of the prison labor system from 1947-1959, seeking to illuminate the experiences of the Black South Africans caught in its claws. In doing so, I advance two arguments. First, an agricultural labor shortage and the economic interests of rural white farmers leading up to the 1948 general election shaped the development of the convict labor system in this period and into the apartheid era. Second, the lurid descriptions of the system's brutality penned by activists such as Henry Nxumalo and Joel Carlson represented attempts to expose the coercive, involuntary nature of farm labor recruitment, a reality that was contested at the time.

Building the Convict Lease System

The development of the prison labor system under apartheid

5 "Koster Farmer Said," 12.

6 "Accused's Heart Was Too Weak to Allow Him to Strike Blows," *The Rand Daily Mail*, September 21, 1954

7 Sampson, *Drum*, 208.

8 Sampson, *Drum*, 208.

9 Rosalynde Ainslie, *Masters and Serfs: Farm Labour in South Africa* (International Defense and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1977), 16.

was not a novel creation, but rather a legislative wave that arose from two thematic undercurrents in South African history: the command and control of Black labor and the issue of allocating that labor. Following the abolition of slavery in 1834, South Africa's rural Black population gradually shifted from pastoralist-cultivators to rural dwellers. Unable to sustain themselves agriculturally, they depended on wages earned in white industrial regions or on white farms for survival.[10] Central to this process was the conquest and annexation of African land, the creation of impoverished "Native reserves," and the function of these reserves as a source of migratory labor.[11]

The discovery of gold in 1886 increased demand for Black labor in the mines and, as a result, the labor demands of farmers. Established in 1889, the Chamber of Mines set the groundwork for later forms of labor control. To control the movement of African miners, the division established the Native Labor Department in 1893 as well as the first pass laws.[12] The 1913 Native Lands Act, in turn, had a decisive impact on land distribution and the migratory nature of labor. Before its passing, Native laborers often either squatted or participated in "farming on the half," a practice where white landowners supplied seed and land, African peasants farmed, and the profits were shared. The Natives Lands Act, however, demarcated thirteen percent of South Africa's land to reserves—areas designated for Native ownership—and restricted both squatting and "farming on the half."[13] Beneath such legislation laid the notion that work done not in service of white people was indicative of the inherent laziness of Black South Africans. Angry farmers protested that "the Kaffirs [were] too rich to trouble themselves with anything to do with labor" when they congregated on unoccupied farms while white farmers were without servants.[14] The closing of the free market in land ensured African farmers could not compete with white farmers while also facilitating the growth of the Black wage labor force.

The convict lease system itself also had direct precedents in the pre-

10 Colin Bundy, "The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry," *African Affairs*, no. 285 (Fall 1972): 369.

11 Bundy, "Emergence and Decline," 369.

12 Motsane G. Sabela,"A Brief History of Black Labour Control in South Africa: Migrant Labour and Recruitments 1890s-1970s," Ditsong Museums of South Africa, last modified June 15, 2021.

13 Bundy, "Emergence and Decline," 384.

14 Bundy, "Emergence and Decline," 380; "Kaffir" is a racial slur used against Black South Africans.

apartheid era, beginning under British administration in the Cape Colony.[15] By 1806, the hiring out of state prisoners to private employers had become an accepted practice. It was not until the 1870s, though, that this system became widespread. Before apartheid, the single largest employer of prisoners was De Beers, the world's foremost producer of diamonds. In their Kimberly mines, the company hired out 1,100 prisoners per day in 1903 alone. The company continued to use convict laborer until 1932.[16] Following new territorial acquisitions after the Anglo-Boer war, the British extended the lease system to the newly-annexed Transvaal and Orange Free State.[17] The gold mines of the Witwaterstrand also mainly employed this system. Nevertheless, convict labor did not become widespread in public works projects until after the 1910 Union of South Africa, with particular demand coming from the Department of Railways and Harbours.[18] The Prisons and Reformatories Act of 1911 illustrated the racial undertones of the system, which would continue through the apartheid era. By providing "that no European prisoner could be employed where he could be constantly seen by the public," the law protected Europeans from the shame of lease labor.[19] European prisoners were primarily employed in industrial work within prisons while Non-Europeans engaged in manual work for both the government and private individuals.[20]

The mining industry, public works projects, and farmers all competed for convict workers, hoping to capitalize on their cheap labor.[21] The 1930s and 1940s saw heightened competition specifically between mining and agriculture, as African workers grew hostile towards the conditions of farm labor after the reduction of tenant plots.[22] The largest private employer was still the mining industry, and by 1943, the Transvaal alone leased as many as 1,400 prisoners daily to work in the gold mines. When working on public projects or in mining compounds, prisoners were often housed in "road camps." In contrast, because of legal regulations stipulating that prisoners had to be brought back to state prisons each night,

15 T. M. Corry, "Crime and Imprisonment in South Africa with Particular Reference to Prison Labor" (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 1975), 591.

16 Corry, "Crime and Imprisonment," 591-592.

17 Allen Cook, *Akin to Slavery* (International Defence & Aid Fund, 1982), 8.

18 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 8-9.

19 Corry, "Crime and Imprisonment," 620.

20 Corry, "Crime and Imprisonment," 595.

21 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 9.

22 Kelly Gillespie, "Containing the 'Wandering Native': Racial Jurisdiction and the Liberal Politics of Prison Reform in 1940s South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 513.

getting convict laborers to rural farms proved a logistical difficulty. In 1931, the introduction of the first unique farm labor system, the "6d a Day Scheme," allowed farmers to keep prisoners on their property for months or years at a time. This development paved the way for agriculturists to become greater beneficiaries of the convict labor system. The shift towards this sector, however, was not formalized until the election of the National Party and with it, the prioritization of the farming class. Following the party's rise, the National Cabinet took decisive action, declaring in 1953-1954 that prison labor could not be supplied to private employers other than farmers. Thus, the party radically altered South Africa's labor balance.[23]

A Changing Legal Landscape

From 1931 to 1947, the 6d a Day Scheme governed the convict labor system, putting prisoners under the full control of farmers, including for the provision of clothing and food.[24] Under this system, the 6d a day that a prisoner made went to the Prisons Department, and the individual lost their rights to remission—the potential to reduce their sentence for good behavior. The convict laborer was isolated on a farm, often many miles from any town or representative of state authority, completely at the mercy of the white farmer. Unless that farmer decided to bring him back to the prison, the prison authorities would not see the prisoner again.[25]

The 6d a Day Scheme continued without pause until 1947, when it fell under scrutiny of the Lansdown Commission on Penal and Prison Reform. Appointed in 1945 under the government of Prime Minister Jan Smuts, the Commission was chaired by Justice C.W.H, Lansdown, recently retired Judge-President of the Eastern Districts Local Division of the Supreme Court.[26] It followed liberal reformist efforts and years of research by the South African Institute of Race Relations on the prison system. The Commission hosted sixty-five sittings to hear evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, including town councilors, legal practitioners, and civil servants.[27] One issue of great concern was the "surplus" of Africans in cities, or those Africans who were unemployed in urban areas and thus deemed a threat to general order. The final report produced by the Commission reflected a deep hostility towards Africans it considered "won't works." In particular, it expressed support for the creation of new courts

23 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 9-10.
24 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 11.
25 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 11.
26 Gillespie, "Containing the 'Wandering Native'" 509-510.
27 Gillespie, "Containing the 'Wandering Native'" 509-510.

with the intent to send unemployed urban Africans entering the criminal justice system to farm labor colonies.[28]

Although it failed to challenge the assumptions underlying the convict labor system, the Lansdown Commission did condemn the 6d a Day Scheme and highlighted some of its abuses.[29] The report protested how, when prisoners were rented out, they were often not located again by prison authorities unless "returned by the farmer on account of any trouble" or by means of escape or voluntary return to the prison.[30] Additionally, the Commission highlighted that prisoners were not consulted on whether they desired to engage in farm labor. Yet, as a result of their hiring, they could lose the right to remission of a quarter of their sentence, a benefit that convicts serving a sentence of twenty-eight days or more were eligible for. The Commission also noted how, while nominally serving imprisonment, most prisoners under the scheme were outside the control of Prisons Department officials and at times many miles away. "Evidence has shown that not infrequently such prisoners desert and, on return to jail, report unfavorable conditions of employment and treatment," it reported.[31] Difficulties in contacting the farmer employer after relatives or friends had paid a prisoner's fine also caused frequent delays in a convict's scheduled release. Sometimes, these incumbrances resulted in the illegal detention of a prisoner for several days after the Prisons Department had accepted their fine.[32]

Gives these failures, the 6d a Day Scheme was abolished in 1947. Almost immediately, however, it was reintroduced as the "9d a Day Scheme" or the "Volunteer Scheme," a program which remained in place from 1947 to 1959.[33] This reintroduction was largely in response to an agricultural labor shortage made known to the Minister of Justice by farmers themselves. Following 1932, South Africa's enormous industrial expansion drew large numbers of both Black and white labor to the cities, fueling the imbalance. Compounding this impact, farm wages lagged behind other sectors.[34] In 1952, the average farm laborer's income (which

28 Gillespie, "Containing the 'Wandering Native'" 513.

29 Union of South Africa, *Report of Penal and Prison Reform Commission 1947/ "Lansdown Commission"* (Pretoria, South Africa, 1947), 132.

30 Union of South Africa, *"Lansdown Commission,"* 132.

31 Union of South Africa, *"Lansdown Commission,"* 132.

32 Union of South Africa, *"Lansdown Commission,"* 132.

33 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 13.

34 Corry, *Crime and Imprisonment*, 626; Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. 2, South Africa 1870-1966* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 146.

included food and clothing) was just over three pounds a month while a mine laborer's earnings were double that amount.[35] In pursuit of higher wages, some 232,000 Africans entered the industrial labor force between 1940 and 1950, the bulk coming from white farms.[36] Responding to this context, the "9d a Day Scheme" provided farms with a cheap labor supply and ensured that the Prisons Department saved on the costs of maintaining convicts.[37] In 1952 alone, 40,553 prisoners were processed through the scheme.[38] Between 1957 and 1958, 199,312 convicts were hired out to farmers annually for 9d a day.[39]

The Lansdown Commission was quick to underscore how the 9d a Day Scheme differed from the 6d a Day Scheme. Nominally, the new system required that laborers consent to being hired out, paid prisoners themselves for their labor as opposed the state (although only after the satisfactory completion of a contract), and preserved the prospect of remission.[40] However, the Commission also had several objections to the new Scheme, including how it gave employers undue power to label a prisoner's work as "unsatisfactory" and thus eliminate the possibility of remission. Ultimately, it recognized the 9d a Day Scheme as an improvement but concluded that "it is not one which should be used save for such an emergency in the shortage of farm labor as was represented to the Minister."[41]

The 9d a Day Scheme was coupled with "The Inter-Departmental Scheme," also referred to as a "Volunteer Scheme." "The Inter-Departmental Scheme" was a systematic forced labor operation orchestrated by the Secretary for Justice, the Secretary for Native Affairs, and the Commissioner of the South African Police.[42] Drawn up by the Department of Native Affairs, the document explained:

> It is common knowledge that large numbers of natives are daily being arrested and prosecuted for contraventions of a purely technical nature. These arrests cost the state large sums of money

35 Wilson and Thompson, eds., *History of South Africa*, 146.

36 Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934-1948* (Cambridge University Press 1983), 188.

37 Corry, *Crime and Imprisonment*, 627.

38 Corry, *Crime and Imprisonment*, 627.

39 Ainslie, *Masters and Serfs*, 22.

40 Union of South Africa, *"Lansdown Commission,"* 159.

41 Union of South Africa, *"Lansdown Commission,"* 159.

42 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 15.

> and serve no useful purpose. The Department of Justice, the South African Police, and this Department have therefore held consultation on the problem and have evolved a scheme, the object of which is to induce unemployed natives now roaming the streets in the various urban areas to accept employment outside such urban areas.[43]

"The Inter-Departmental Scheme" outlined how Natives would be detained and handed over to an employment officer, who would offer them work in rural areas with priority given to farm labor. If the Native refused such employment, they would be returned to the South African police for prosecution.[44]

Despite their varying presentations, these labor schemes resulted in largely the same treatment for prisoners. Under both systems, laborers were given the same "uniforms" that consisted of sacks with holes cut out for their head and arms (which could also serve to identify escaping "volunteers"), locked and monitored in the same compound, fed the same maize porridge, and punished with the same whips.[45]

The Rise of the National Party

The farm labor shortage not only influenced the various schemes that governed the prison labor system but also the 1948 general election, which ushered the National Party (NP) into power. The inability of the main opposition, the United Party (UP), to organize Transvaal agricultural interests enabled the National Party to bring together a new alliance of class forces under its banner.[46] In turn, the election had wide-reaching implications for South Africa's prison labor schemes. Euphemistically termed the "Native policy," the NP's major platform point was to harness the African population's labor power in service of the white economy.[47] Leading up to the election, both parties had outlined solutions to the urbanization of African labor. More specifically, the National Party produced the Sauer Report while the United Party created the Fagan Report. To an outside observer, the distinctions between the two reports appeared marginal. Both advocated regulating the movement of Africans through racial separation, creating a system of centralized control for this

43 Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs, *The "Inter-Departmental Scheme,"* General Circular No. 23 of 1954 (Pretoria, South Africa, June 14, 1954).

44 Department of Native Affairs, *The "Inter-Departmental Scheme."*

45 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 15.

46 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme,* 235.

47 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, 235.

movement, establishing district labor bureaus, replacing multiple passes with one document, and building Native reserves for migratory laborers. Their critical point of departure concerned whether the "surplus" population of Africans should be residentially located in cities or kept on a controlled basis in rural areas. In other words, the Reports differed on the forms of labor control they presented and, by implication, which white classes were to be its major beneficiaries.[48]

The United Party's Fagan Commission argued that the urbanization of the African population was an irreversible process.[49] The shift from country to town, it asserted, was a movement occurring in all countries. This urbanization demonstrated that developing industries still offered opportunities for substantial incomes in ways that agriculture did not.[50] In support of this claim, the Fagan Report cited how agriculture produced only 12.5% of the Union's 1936 national income even though it engaged 64% of the population.[51] The document also emphasized the need for an excess labor supply in industrial spheres. It gave priority to the maintenance of an urban surplus labor army, reflecting the demands of constituents in industry and commerce.[52] By contrast, the Report's recommendations around Native reserves, labor bureaus, and the pass system did not cater to rural farmers' needs.[53]

The Fagan Commission also argued that local authorities should no longer send unemployed Africans to rural areas. Instead, it argued, they should allow for African to permanently settle in urban areas through a policy focused on stabilizing labor.[54] Part of the driving force behind this strategy was the conditions of Native reserves themselves, which faced overpopulation, soil erosion, and a lack of arable land, as well as the large population of Natives already informally settled in urban areas.[55] The migratory labor system often separated African males from their families, a phenomenon that the Commission argued contributed to the spread of venereal disease and tuberculosis due to a lack of organized medical

48 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, 235.

49 Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Native Laws Commission/"Fagan Commission" 1946-1947* (Pretoria, South Africa, 1948). Henry Allan Fagan, A.S. Welsh, A.L. Barrett, E.E. von Maltitz, and S.J. Parsons authored this report.

50 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"* 5.

51 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"* 6.

52 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme,* 236.

53 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission."*

54 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission."*

55 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"*15.

services for family units.[56] Separation from their families, the Commission worried, paved the way "for restlessness and discontent, prostitution, loose morals, rape, and general criminal tendencies" among African men in industrial centers.[57] Likewise, African females left on Native reserves would be more prone to "loose morals" as well as "a lack of discipline in the home and consequent evil effects on the children."[58] Part of the Commission's concern, then, was the morality of separated Native families in addition to their ability to carry disease. From an economic standpoint, the Report argued that the migratory system would ensure that African laborers remained unskilled because their work was temporary and also casual workers because they were unskilled.[59] Overall, the Fagan Commission's rejection of influx control and insistence that reserve industrial workers should be allowed to permanently settle with their families in urban areas was diametrically opposed to the policy aims supported by organized agriculture.[60]

The National Party's Sauer Commission took a vastly different stance on the "Native question," opposing the creation of a permanent urban labor reserve and the reduction of influx controls.[61] Its Report outlined the aims of the apartheid principle, which was based on absolute racial segregation and the notion of "Christian Guardianship," whereby the National Party would help non-white racial groups "in a natural and healthy way, materially as well as spiritually, in accordance with their own national heritage, aptitude and vocation to develop and ultimately manage their own affairs in an independent and responsible manner."[62] The Sauer Commission shared the concerns of the Fagan Commission surrounding the deterioration of the land on Native reserves. Consequently, it suggested bringing together a body of experts to investigate further economic development in designated Native areas by means of agriculture, grazing, forestry, and the development of industries and transport facilities.[63] Rather than providing social and welfare services to Natives in the cities, the Commission suggested that they could move to the reserves, which would

56 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"* 39.
57 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"* 37.
58 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"* 37.
59 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission,"* 37.
60 Department of Native Affairs, *"Fagan Commission."*
61 United National Party, *Report of the Color Question Commission of the United National Party/"Sauer Commission" 1948* (Pretoria, South Africa, 1948)*;* Paul Sauer, G.B.A. Gerdener, E.G. Jansen, J.J. Serfontein, and M.D.C. De Wet Nel penned this report.
62 United National Party, *"Sauer Commission,"* 3.
63 United National Party, *"Sauer Commission,"* 8.

instead provide such assistance. Thus, the National Party's policy more firmly entrenched racial segregation.[64]

The Sauer Report argued that Natives in urban areas should be seen as migratory citizens and the process of urban settlement halted.[65] Furthermore, as urbanization was in conflict with the policy of racial segregation, Native "entry into cities [would be] made subject to all possible restrictions and [Natives]...informed about the disadvantages of urbanization and the advantages of a national home of [their] own."[66] In contrast to the United Party, which sought to keep the reserve army of labor in urban areas, the National Party advocated its maintenance in rural areas, thus prioritizing the needs of white farmers.[67] Those Natives working in urban areas would also be considered temporary employees, obligated to return home when not in the service of white economic interests.[68] This provision formed just one piece of the National Party's agriculturally-oriented economic program, which promised farmers the state's focused concern and protection as well as an adequate supply of agricultural laborers.[69] Towards these goals, the party's election manifesto asked voters to support the apartheid principle, a developing concept of harsh segregation and separate development, which had not yet been outlined into detailed policy.[70]

In many ways, the 1948 election was just as much a question of urban settlement or apartheid as it was one of industrial versus agricultural interests.[71] The stances of the two parties were fundamentally shaped by their class basis.[72] The United Party voiced the interests of those in mining, industry, and finance. These sectors included English and Jewish voters who stood to benefit from the industrial revolution sweeping through the country and who were prepared to accept some of its potential social consequences.[73] On the other hand, the National Party had a base rooted in the countryside and was still largely dominated by the interests and

64 United National Party, *"Sauer Commission,"* 10.

65 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, 237.

66 United National Party, *"Sauer Commission,"* 11.

67 United National Party, *"Sauer Commission."*

68 United National Party, *"Sauer Commission,"* 11.

69 *Die Kruithoring.* March 1, 1944, quoted in O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, 235.

70 *Die Transvaler,* April 21, 1948*,* quoted in O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, 237.

71 For a characterization of the 1948 election as one between urban settlement or apartheid, see Brian Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (Penguin African Library, 1964), 129.

72 Bunting, *South African Reich*, 127.

73 Bunting, *South African Reich*, 127.

concerns of rural farmers.[74]

When the election finally took place, the National Party won a surprising victory. It received a total of seventy seats while the United Party received only sixty five, polling 140,000 fewer votes.[75] Notably, the National Party won a secure base among the farmers of the Transvaal and now controlled 56 of the 66 rural constituencies outside of Natal.[76] This victory came in part due to a provision in the constitution that favorably weighed rural constituencies within the electoral system. That year, a new delimitation meant rural constituencies gained more seats at the expense of urban constituencies, a change that allowed a minority of the electorate to control a majority in parliament.[77] Because of the power of white farmers as a constituency for the National Party, their demands for subsidies, Black labor, and better protection remained priorities for the newly elected regime despite the fact that agriculture was less significant in the economy than other rising industries.[78]

The election of the National Party thus ushered in the apartheid system and had far reaching consequences for the convict labor system, particularly in its support for farm jails.[79] As outlined by the Sauer Commission, the party's commitment to migrant labor increased pass law convictions from 176,000 in 1948 to 694,000 in 1968.[80] In 1947, the United Party's minister of Justice, Mr. H.G. Lawrence, had told a meeting of farmers at Bethal that he was considering creating prison outstations to address the labor shortage. One farmer offered to build, at his own expense, a jail to hold one hundred convicts if he could obtain their services for fifteen years. The United Party had built one farm jail in Bellville, but it wasn't until the victory of the National Party that this system was fully established.

Farm jails allowed local farmers to buy shares in the cost of building each jail and draw labor in proportion to that share. The Department of Prisons would then cover daily expenses, such as the salaries of warders

74 Bunting, *South African Reich*, 127.
75 Bunting, *South African Reich*, 130.
76 Bunting, *South African Reich*, 237-238.
77 Ainslie, *Masters and Serfs*, 17-18.
78 Ainslie, *Masters and Serfs*, 18.
79 Wilson and Thompson, eds., *History of South Africa*, 147.
80 Ainslie, *Masters and Serfs*, 41. The first figure represents convictions and while the second represents prosecutions. Even with this difference, though, the increase still stands. The prosecution rate was high enough in 1968 to justify this general observation.

and the price of food, charging fifteen to fifty cents a day for each prisoner.[81] A study from the South African Institute of Race Relations found that the total cost to the farmer for investing in a prison amounted to no more than 40 cents per worker per day.[82] By 1952, four farm prisons had been built in Bethal with a capacity of 350 people. Other jails were built in the same year in the Paarl district and the Orange Free State.[83] Farm jails made use of equally frightening methods of labor recruitment as did the 9d a Day Scheme and Inter-Departmental Scheme, often employing "ghost squads." Apartheid facilitated their greater use, strengthening existing schemes and perpetuating systematic prison labor.

Henry Nxumalo's Exposé

Efforts to expose the violence of the convict labor system to the wider South African public, many of which were initiated by *Drum Magazine*, provide some of the richest first-hand accounts of its operation. Established in 1951, *Drum* was a South African publication that sought to capture Black life through an irreverent blend of fiction, scandal, political commentary, crime stories, jazz, female models, and exposés of systemic injustices.[84] The magazine's cast of Black journalists became known as the "Drum Boys," who preached the motto "live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse." Together, they produced works on topics ranging from sports to sex across the color line.[85] One of the Drum Boys, Lewis Nkosi, described the writing team as "the new Africans cut adrift from the tribal reserve—urbanized, eager, fast-talking, and brash."[86] Issues of *Drum* were passed from hand to hand in streets, clubs, and trains, read and reread. The magazine produced more copies than any other African publication, distributing 240,000 issues each month across eight countries.[87] With its energized writers and wide audience, *Drum* gave voice to the brutal totality of apartheid and the defiant vibrancy of Black urban life.

One of *Drum's* earliest staff members was sports editor Henry

81 Wilson and Thompson, eds., *History of South Africa*, 147.

82 Ainslie, *Masters and Serfs*, 24. The study in question occurred in 1972.

83 Wilson and Thompson, eds., *History of South Africa*, 147-148.

84 "Henry 'Mr. Drum' Nxumalo (1917 - 1957)," The Presidency Republic of South Africa, accessed November 15, 2024; For the date of establishment, see "Drum Magazine," South African History Online: Towards a People's History, last modified October 10, 2019.

85 "Drum, South African Magazine is Published," African American Registry: Today's Africana Almanac, accessed November 26, 2024.

86 "Drum, South African Magazine."

87 "Drum, South African Magazine."

Nxumalo, who became known as "Mr. Drum" for his series of heart-racing investigative journalism stories. Examples included "Bethal Today" and "Mr. Drum Goes to Jail," a piece he went to jail to write.[88] Nxumalo sought to shed light on the brutality faced by Black South Africans, often risking his own life to provide first-hand accounts of systemic injustices.[89] When Nxumalo learned of Elias Mpikwa's murder and several others in the Rustenberg region, the cacophony of violence captured his total attention. In the previous year alone, two other Africans had been killed in that area.[90] A Peter Breedt had punched and kicked an African to death in the street. Two brothers from the Gouws family had attacked Joseph Mokwatsi with a hosepipe and shoved their feet into his neck until he died. Snyman himself had assaulted another prison laborer.[91]

Nxuamlo's plan was simple: he would go directly to Harmonie Farm, the site of the murder and the most infamous farm in the region, and record everything he saw and experienced.[92] His vivid writing dramatized his experience, painting in vulgar detail the violence on Harmonie so as to depict in shocking narrative an unexposed system of injustice. After the publicity of the Snyman trial, Harmonie was very short on labor, so Nxumalo was quickly offered a job for four pounds a month with meals.[93] On his first night, he wrote of his struggle to sleep on the bare floor with only a sack for a bedsheet. He described how rumors of Elias Mpikwa's ghost, who was said to haunt the compound, kept him fearfully awake.[94] At five in the morning, Nxumalo was awoken for a ten-hour shift in the hot fields, weeding between rows of never-ending maize.[95] During their short mealtimes, fellow laborers shared gruesome stories of Johan Snyman, who they called "Umabulal umuntu," or "he who killed a man."[96] Many did not have passes, so they were unable to leave the farm without facing immediate arrest.[97]

After four days on the farm, Nxumalo's body grew weak, and he went to see the baas to tell him the work was too grueling for him to

88 Sampson, *Drum.* For the name "Mr. Drum," see "Drum Magazine."
89 Sampson, *Drum*.
90 Henry Nxumalo, "I worked at Snyman's Farm," *Drum Magazine,* March 1955.
91 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
92 Sampson, *Drum*, 208.
93 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
94 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
95 Sampson, *Drum,* 210.
96 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
97 Sampson, *Drum*, 211.

continue. In response, the man asked to see his pass, tore it slowly into small pieces, and threw those remains onto the lawn.[98] As Nxumalo later reported, the baas said, "now you haven't got a pass, you can't leave without my permission. I can have you arrested and put in jail. If you don't want to work fast like the others, I'll hand you over to the police and have you charged for refusing to work."[99] He then led Nxumalo into a bathroom and shut the door. Nxumalo waited in anticipation, his stomach churning with fear. The baas reiterated, "if Jantjie [the overseer] complains about your work I'll beat you up and then have you arrested." He slapped Nxumalo across the cheek before ordering him to face the wall. He then landed three hard kicks on Nxumalo's body and asked, "now will you work hard tomorrow?" Nxumalo responded, "yes, baas" before being met with another strike across the face.[100]

That night, Nxumalo snuck away from the farm and took refuge with a friend in Koster. When he arrived at the train station the following morning, the police were inspecting passes. "There's a laborer escaped from one of the farms," he overheard someone say.[101] Nxumalo slipped onto the train just as it was leaving, returning safely to Johannesburg where he recorded his experiences in the *Drum* article entitled "I worked on Snyman's Farm." The piece was published in March of 1955.[102] Having lived four days as a farm laborer, Nxumalo recorded and transmitted the brutality of the experience to the *Drum*'s wide readership. Life on the farm itself, however, was not the only aspect of the prison labor system that Nxumalo would report on.

"Voluntary" Recruitment

Both the 9d a Day Scheme and Inter-Departmental Scheme were often referred to as "the Voluntary Schemes" due to their provision that prisoners should be consulted before committing to farm labor.[103] By 1958, over 200,000 Africans per year labored on the farms under the combined acts. During the period from 1957 to 1958 alone, 199,312 men were sent from prisons to work on farms for 9d a day.[104] Despite the supposedly voluntary nature of labor contracts, horrific accounts penned by figures like

98 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
99 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
100 Nxumalo, "Snyman's Farm."
101 Sampson, *Drum*, 213.
102 Sampson, *Drum*, 214.
103 Cook, *Akin to Slavery,* 13.
104 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 16.

Henry Nxumalo spoke to the coercive practices used to round up laborers.

Before his investigative journalism at Harmonie Farm, Nxumalo had visited Bethal, a farming district in the Eastern Transvaal known for its flogging and brutal punishment of workers. In 1947, there had been three incidents of extreme violence. A farmer had assaulted two of his laborers, set his dog on them, flogged them, and chained them together for a night. Another foreman had struck a laborer with his whip and set his dog on him. And a third foreman was found guilty of ill-treatment.[105] In his article "Bethal Today," published in March of 1952, Nxumalo journeyed to Bethal and recorded conversations with some fifty laborers across eight different farms.[106] His study illuminated how Black South Africans were coerced into various contracts. When he visited the Johannesburg Pass Office to pursue a job in Bethal, Nxumalo found hundreds of Africans queuing around the building to obtain passes to stay in the city. Nxumalo told an official that he had no pass, gave his name as George Magwaza, and was taken to an employment agency. There, he spent the night in a filthy compound with other pass-less Africans.[107] The next morning, Nxumalo was brought with fifty other recruits to the "attesting officer" with a large contract sheet. The clerk explained to the gathered crowd:

> You're going to work on a farm in the Middelburg district; you're on a six-months' contract. You will be paid three pounds a month, plus food and quarters. When you leave here you will be given an advance of 5s. for pocket money, 10s. 5d. for food, and 14s. 5d. for train fare. The total amount is 1£. 9s. 10d., and this amount will be deducted from your first month's wages. Have you got that? [108]

"You will now proceed to touch the pencil," he concluded, holding one above the contract sheet. The fifty recruits ran past and touched the pencil as they sped by. Nxumalo picked up a copy of the contract sheet which declared:

> The above Contract of Service was read aloud, interpreted and fully explained to the above-mentioned natives, who acknowledged that they understood the same and voluntarily affixed their signatures (or marks) thereto in my presence…

105 Sampson, *Drum*, 23.
106 Henry Nxumalo, "The Story of Bethal," *Drum Magazine,* March 1952.
107 Henry Nxumalo, "Mr. Drum Finds Out," *Drum Magazine,* March 1952.
108 Nxumalo, "Mr. Drum Finds Out."

The number of natives attested on this Contract sheet is…

_____
ATTESTING OFFICER[109]

Of the fifty laborers that Nxumalo interviewed, thirty-two attested that they had been tricked into coming to Bethal.[110] One laborer, a cousin of a *Drum* staffer named Arthur, reported that he had been in search of work for nine weeks and was taken by a baas who said he could provide farm work. He was then left in a yard for three days with six other men, and they could not leave. On the fourth day, the group was told by a white man to hold a pen in their hands. They were then retroactively told that, through this action, they had signed a contract for six months' work, which could only be canceled if they paid money. Given that they had none, these men were loaded onto a lorry, taken to a compound with a high stone wall, and told to sleep in a dirty mud-walled room. In the morning light, they were herded into the fields and met with guards yelling "*Le jele nama ea Kalajane, kajeno le tla e patela*" [You have eaten the meat of a cheat and today you will pay for it]. The laborers were forced to work in a straight line and constantly whipped and cursed at by looming overseers. It took nine months for the men to be free again.[111]

Nxumalo found that most Bethel laborers were under contracts, some recruited by agencies such as "African's Guardian." Some reported that they had been tricked to sign agreements they did not understand or that were offered them as an alternative to serving jail time for being without a pass. Others spoke of the cruelty of farmers such as "Mabulala" [The killer] or "Fakefutheni" [Hit him in the marrow]. Nxumalo met laborer Casbert Tutje in the hospital after he had been thrashed by a baas for drinking beer at a Christmas party. Another one of the laborers was only fourteen years old.[112]

Joel Carlson—a lawyer who devoted his life to the anti-apartheid cause and the championing of often overlooked farm laborers—shared similar lurid reports of the coercive nature of the contract labor system.[113] In

109 Nxumalo, "Mr. Drum Finds Out."

110 Nxumalo, "The Story of Bethal."

111 Henry Nxumalo, "Bethal: The Story of a Contact," *Drum Magazine,* March 1952.

112 Henry Nxumalo, "Bethal Today: Drum's Fearless Exposure of Human Exploitation," *Drum Magazine,* March 1952.

113 Jim Dwyer, "Joel Carlson, 75, Lawyer Who Fought Apartheid in 50's," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2001.

Fordsburg, where Carlson worked, pass law arrests took place both day and night.[114] Each morning, Carlson arrived to receive the *kwela-kwela* trucks, police vans made from old army trucks that were covered with mesh and used to pick up offenders. *Kwela-kwela* is an African dance step, a name given to the trucks because of the jump required to board them. To load the trucks, policemen would swing their sticks, shouting "Kom, kom, Kaffir." The prisoners would then have to jump to attention and heave themselves inside.[115] How prisoners were processed and placed "voluntarily" near Fordsburg is perhaps best explained through the figure of Oom Piet, or Piet de Beer.

Oom Piet was a chubby, short man with a ruddy face. As Carlson described, his official title was "the prisoner's friend," and he had worked in public service for many years. He held some resemblance to Winston Churchill, a likeness that he sought to highlight by donning a rose in his buttonhole, a bow tie and spats, and a series of strange hats. Oom Piet's office was decorated with a photo of the troopship *Mende*, which had carried a Zulu regiment in World War I. The vessel had sunk with all hands, and the picture showed Piet and other whites commemorating those Zulus who had bravely laid down their lives. Another photo showed local councils of Black South Africans dressed in bowler hats and high starched collars standing behind seated, white officials. Piet confessed that there were very few "decent ones" among Black people—those that "knew their place." "Most of them," however, were "won't works."[116]

Every morning, sunburned white farmers gathered in Piet's office among the photographs. As they waited, Piet would go into the prison yard and greet the convicts with his professional title, which he had made up himself: "I am the director of public prosecutions."[117] He would proceed to highlight his incredible powers, also imagined: "I have the power to take you to the court or withdraw the charges against you." Piet would then appeal from the depths of his heart:

> I am also the prisoner's friend and I am here to help you – the help I have is work. Now you have a choice, the choice is between going to jail or taking up work. Mind you, if you go to jail you will work. Yes, you will get hard labor, you will be sentenced to work for six months or a year, who knows for how long? It is for the court

114 Joel Carlson, *No Neutral Ground* (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), 8.
115 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 8.
116 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 11.
117 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 12.

to decide. What will you have at the end of your time in jail? No money and no job.[118]

He would end with the decisive question, "Now which do you want? Do you want to go to jail or let me withdraw your case and go to work?"[119]

When he had gathered a sufficient number of "volunteers," Oom Piet would return to his office, greeting the farmers with friendly handshakes. The farmers would summon their "boss-boys," hardened Africans armed with whips or sticks, who would march the new laborers into trucks. All pretense of civility swiftly vanished.[120] Those who had chosen the other fate—waiting for the court's verdict—were met with no greater justice. Carlson reported that a commissioner could finish sixty-six cases in ten minutes. The prosecutor would call a name and mention a section of the law, one he knew from memory. He addressed himself to the commissioner alone. The interpreter did not wait when the prisoner, confused and afraid, hesitated to speak, instead pleading guilty for him. The policeman then moved the prisoner down the line. The newly convicted could not ask questions, for his justice had been served.[121]

The Ghost Squads

In another graphic account of how Africans were involuntarily forced into prison labor, Joel Carlson described his experience working with Innocent Langa, a client. Carlson recounted how, in mid-June 1957, Langa reported the disappearance of his older brother, Nelson. The siblings worked together in Johannesburg as street cleaners on a limited contract.[122] One day, Nelson walked the streets on his way back from work, still dressed in his uniform and carrying his broom. Abruptly, he was abducted, forcibly loaded onto a *kwela-kwela*, and only had time to shout to a nearby beerseller to tell his brother what was happening. When Innocent heard the news, he made inquiries with police stations, courts, and local contacts about his brother's whereabouts. These efforts were to no avail. For Carlson, the course of this story was not unfamiliar. He concluded that Nelson Langa had fallen into the hands of the "ghost squad," a group of plainclothes policemen that formed in the 1950s.

118 Carlson, No Neutral Ground, 12.
119 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 12.
120 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 13.
121 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 14.
122 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 46-47.

Nelson Langa's experience was part of a broader phenomenon where, due to insufficient pass arrests to meet labor demands, police would dress as civilians to trap unsuspecting Africans. The ghost squads drove *kwela-kwelas*, snatched up innocent passerbyers until the truck was full, and deposited them at a local police station.[123] The officers often disregarded if a person's pass was in order, if they were legally employed, and if they could pay the necessary fine.[124] In the case that papers were in order, they could easily be confiscated or torn up. In the case that funds were available, the fines could be pocketed without anyone being the wiser.[125] In theory, those abducted had the right to contact their families, but a survey from the South African Institute of Race Relations between 1955 and1956 found that "because of the large numbers involved even [that right was] denied them in practice."[126]

After Innocent Langa enlisted Joel Carlson's help, it took numerous days of searching before they were able to trace Nelson through the Farm Labor Bureau to a farm prison in Bethal. It was there that the farmer described to Carlson how he had erected a prison on his property. For 13,000 dollars, he had built the facility, and since then, the department sent all available laborers to his land once every month. His "good friend" Tom Martin from the Farm Labor Bureau had delivered Nelson along with a group of other "boys" in his latest batch of workers.[127] When Nelson was finally able to bring his case to court, he described the experience of abduction as follows:

> At about three o'clock when I was about to knock off work, some gang, some police dressed in civil clothes came to me. They said to me "Pass"… I said to them, "I have not the Pass on me. We don't carry the Passes when we work." They said, "We are arresting you." I said, "Here is my badge with the number of my work and here is the broom that I use in my work." They said, "We have nothing to do with that. Get on the *kwela*." I got on. The *kwela* continued with the lot of us that were in it, passing along the streets arresting people in the same way I was arrested and put on the lorry…We were taken to the Old Pass Office in Johannesburg. There each one of us were called out by name and after the names were called out we were told

123 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 47.
124 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 16-17.
125 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 17.
126 Cook, *Akin to Slavery*, 17.
127 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 48.

> we were to be given work…On Thursday we were put on the troop carrier and taken to Bethal.[128]

Nelson also reported that when he asked the policeman to call his employer, the response he received was "voetsak!" Translated into English, the answer was "go to hell!"[129]

Though Nelson Langa's case received some attention, it did not upset the prison labor system. The injustice was dismissed as the fault of a "Bantu clerk," whose carelessness had allegedly misled white officials.[130] Convict labor would only face exposure in 1959, when Joel Carlson brought forward a series of habeas corpus applications that elicited widespread public outcry. Still, Langa's experience illustrated one of the ways in which "voluntary" farm laborers were recruited through decidedly involuntary means.

Conclusion

After decades of prelude, the prison labor system arose in its 1950s form through a farm labor shortage and the overrepresentation of rural farmers in national politics. These stressors drove the election of the National Party, and with it, the adoption of apartheid as outlined in the Sauer Commission Report. The National Party ensured that the distribution of Black labor benefitted rural constituencies, partly through the coercive recruitment of convict laborers. Nxumalo and Carlson's harrowing accounts captured the realities of this recruitment and the brutality and violence that accompanied farm work, both elements of the system that were denied by the Afrikaner press.

The convict lease is itself a case study in the structural elements that scaffolded the apartheid regime. Beneath the state edifice of apartheid was the notion that Native South Africans were a labor force that had to be properly exploited and distributed to various competing economic interest groups. Among these groups were the farming industry, mining industry, and growing industrial centers in the predominantly white cities. Ultimately, the convict lease was one mechanism of many used to allocate and control Black labor. Its design, however, was particularly harsh given the undesirability of farming posts and the considerably inhumane conditions that accompanied them. Sharp restrictions on freedom of

128 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 55-56.
129 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 56.
130 Carlson, *No Neutral Ground*, 66.

movement allowed for the criminalization of tens of thousands of Black South Africans, who could then be forced into roles that served the white economy while their own "Native reserves" fell into poverty. It was against this backdrop of the harsh slashes and contours of racialized law that the garish prison labor system bared its teeth. On a nightmarish scale, it facilitated disappearances, torture, and involuntary labor. And yet, it was but a small piece of the National Party's larger project of racial control. Its horrors have thus been buried, lost in a graveyard of apartheid's skeletons.

Bibliography

"Accused's Heart Was Too Weak to Allow Him to Strike Blows." *The Rand Daily Mail*, September 21, 1954.

Ainslie, Rosalynde. *Masters and Serfs: Farm Labour in South Africa*. International Defense & Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1977.

Bundy, Colin. "The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry." *African Affairs*, no. 285 (Fall 1972): 369-388. https://www.jstor.org/stable/720845

Bunting, Brian. *The Rise of the South African Reich*. Penguin African Library, 1964.

Carlson, Joel. *No Neutral Ground*. Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973.

Cook, Allen. *Akin to Slavery*. International Defence & Aid Fund, 1982.

Corry, T.M. "Crime and Imprisonment in South Africa with Particular Reference to Prison Labor." PhD. diss., University of Cape Town, 1975. http://hdl.handle.net/11427/12305

"Drum Magazine." South African History Online: Towards a People's History. Last modified October 10, 2019. https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/drum-magazine.

"Drum, South African Magazine is Published." African American Registry: Today's Africana Almanac. Accessed November 26, 2024. https://aaregistry.org/story/drum-south-african-magazine-is-published/.

Dwyer, Jim. "Joel Carlson, 75, Lawyer Who Fought Apartheid in 50's." *The New York Times*, December 4, 2001. https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/04/world/joel-carlson-75-lawyer-who-fought-apartheid-in-50-s.html

"Farmer, Son and 3 Natives on Charge of Murder." *The Rand Daily Mail*, September 17, 1954.

Gillespie, Kelly. "Containing the 'Wandering Native:' Racial Jurisdiction and the Liberal Politics of Prison Reform in 1940s South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 499-515. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41345710

"Henry 'Mr. Drum' Nxumalo (1917 - 1957)." The Presidency Republic of South Africa. Accessed November 15, 2024. https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/henry-mr-drum-nxumalo-1917-1957.

"Koster Farmer Said He Told Son to Hit Native Convict." *The Rand Daily Mail*, September 23, 1954.

Nxumalo, Henry. "Bethal: The Story of a Contact." *Drum Magazine,* March 1952.

Nxumalo, Henry. "Bethal Today: Drum's Fearless Exposure of Human Exploitation," *Drum Magazine,* March 1952.

Nxumalo, Henry. "I worked at Snyman's Farm." *Drum Magazine,* March 1955.

O'Meara, Dan. *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934-1948*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Sabela, Mostane G. "A Brief History of Black Labour Control in South Africa: Migrant Labour and Recruitments 1890s-1970s." Ditsong Museums of South Africa. Last modified June 15, 2021. https://ditsong.org.za/en/a-brief-history-of-black-labour-control-in-south-africa-migrant-labour-and-recruitments-1890s-1970s/

Sampson, Anthony. *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*. Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005.

Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs. *The 'Inter-Departmental Scheme,'* General Circular No. 23 of 1954. Pretoria, South Africa, June 14, 1954.

Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs. *Report of the Native*

Laws Commission / "Fagan Commission" 1946-1947. Pretoria, South Africa, 1948.

Union of South Africa. *Report of Penal and Prison Reform Commission 1947/"Lansdown Commission."* Pretoria, South Africa, 1947.

United National Party. *Report of the Color Question Commission of the United National Party/ "Sauer Commission" 1948.* Pretoria, South Africa, 1948.

Wilson, Monica and Thompson, Leonard, eds. *The Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. 2, South Africa 1870-1966*. Oxford University Press, 1971.

Petitioning on the Periphery

The Politics of Women's Petitions to Repeal the Massachusetts Intermarriage Ban, 1839-1843

Alexa Kupor

As the 1837 autumn chill began its slow descent on Massachusetts, Angelina Grimke penned a defense. Amidst her travels for a statewide antislavery lecture tour, this speaker spent many of her free moments responding to a critique of her advocacy for women's antislavery organizing. Grimke—whose correspondence placed her in Brookline in late August, Boylston by October, and southeast towards Holliston by mid-month—wrote in defense of woman's right to participate fully and equally in the antislavery cause. Far from meriting critique, Grimke argued, the exercise of this liberty allowed her to "fulfill the great end of her being, as a moral, intellectual and immortal creature."[1] Within her writings and speeches, Grimke displayed a particular fervor in upholding the right to petition. The "abridgement" of this liberty, she believed, would render women no more dignified than "mere slaves, known only through their masters."[2] In the moments between her written rejoinders, Grimke's orations drew swaths of listeners. News of these crowds would soon propel her into the ranks of the radical abolitionists' most prominent leaders.

Grimke's addressed her rebuttals, initially written as letters but later published through the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, to Catharine Beecher. In the lead up to Grimke's lecture tour, Beecher had denounced the speaker's philosophy of female political agency in the Philadelphia

1 Angelina Grimke to Catharine E. Beecher, October 2, 1837, Letter XII: "Human Rights Not Founded on Sex," in *Letters to Catherine E. Beecher, in Reply to an Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), 116. Beecher herself spelled her first name as "Catharine," though Grimke addressed her volume of letters to "Catherine." I use the former spelling.

2 Angelina Grimke to Catharine E. Beecher, August 28, 1837, Letter XI: "The Sphere of Woman and Man as Moral Beings the Same," in *Letters to Catherine*, 113.

press.[3] She rebuked women's involvement in antislavery organizing, marking the practice as a violation of the "beneficent and immutable law" that imposed "different stations of superiority and subordination" upon the sexes.[4] While men, Beecher argued, might appropriately wield public influence in support of causes like the antislavery movement, much of women's engagement improperly inserted "them into the arena of political collision." Of these engagements, she claimed, petitions comprised an especially "obtrusive, indecorous, and unwise" mode of female participation.[5]

Grimke and Beecher's public dispute illustrates just one manifestation of the concurrent nineteenth-century debate concerning the propriety of women's petitions within American antislavery circles. Some antislavery women interpreted petitioning as an efficient mode of organizing that appropriately reflected their rights to citizenship. Among these signers, the practice frequently prompted a recognition and strengthening of their identity as political agents.[6] Others, however, sought to partake in petitioning as a purely ethical statement. While participating in these written campaigns, these women attempted to maintain a deliberate separation from the public-facing, political nature of the medium and instead channeled the conventional ideal of "female moral superiority."[7] By investing women with the "responsibility to teach virtue to others," this call to engage in public causes from a moral stance granted them a novel degree of influence. Yet, the moral superiority ideal also affirmed that women's agency derived from "an extension of their maternal duties" as opposed to presenting an

3 Beecher published her essay with a note addressing it to Angelina Grimke. The piece, Beecher clarified, was written as a response to Grimke's recently published *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* and the news of Grimke's upcoming lecture tour. Originally intended as a private letter, Beecher chose to publish the work "by the wishes and advice of others." She combined her criticism with another letter urging a friend against joining an abolitionist society. Evidently, long before individuals' political disagreements played out in fiery online colloquies, they manifested in public letter exchanges. Catharine E. Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), 4.

4 Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery*, (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), 98.

5 Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery*, 103.

6 See, for example, Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Zaeske tracks the development of women's antislavery petitions from 1831-1854 and argues that the transformations during this period demonstrate how women gradually came to internalize the right to submit political demands and lay claim to full public citizenship.

7 Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Yale University Press, 1990), 12.

opportunity for political mobilization on its own terms.[8] These variations in women's approaches to petitioning exemplify how participation did not always necessitate a subversion of contemporary gender norms. Even while signing her name to a government-addressed petition, a woman could still seek to limit her involvement in public life to purely moral rather than political means.

Since the late 1900s, historians have recognized several distinctive methods by which women publicly participated in the antislavery movement.[9] However, much of this twentieth-century scholarship details women's role in the mainstream political strategies pursued by antislavery advocates. These tactics include appeals crafted to influence (male) voters and the channeling of political power within the Liberty and Free Soil parties centered around securing emancipation and limiting slavery's geographic expansion. A myopic focus on this institutional activism necessarily blinds scholars to the alternative essential tasks dominated by women, such as fundraising, writing, and petitioning. Compounding this neglect, conventional primary sources are also less likely to reveal these less explicitly political approaches that often elude surviving records.[10]

Any history of American antislavery is incomplete so long as it denies the gravity of women's contributions. Nevertheless, this movement was not monolithic in its impacts on female political identification—a point equally worthy of acknowledgement. In fact, many female antislavery advocates shuddered at the thought of associating their work with the public political scene. An investigation into women's uses of petitioning highlights this complexity with particular clarity. Significant proportions of northern antislavery women employed this outwardly political tool to affirm the *apolitical* role expected of their sex. As modern scholars increasingly emphasize, the antislavery movement certainly opened avenues for women to harness a newly accessible political identity. Yet, for many, fears of diminished respectability and refutations of their femininity overpowered any desire to stake a claim to full political citizenship.

In this paper, I examine this tension by examining the intermarriage petitions submitted by women to the Massachusetts House of Representatives between 1839 and 1843. Using these submissions as a case study, I demonstrate how women in the antislavery movement often petitioned from

8 Ginzberg, *Women and the Work*, 14, 16.

9 See, for example, Chapter 8, "The Political Activities of Antislavery Women," in Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

10 Lerner, *The Majority Finds*, 112-114.

an apolitical stance that defended, rather than challenged, their status as moral, conventionally feminine advocates.[11] These remonstrances exemplify how women maintained this stance while nonetheless utilizing petitioning as a tool to further a tangible political goal. Signers, after all, sought an explicit legislative amendment in their pleas to overturn the state's regulation on interracial marriage. However, a notable proportion of female petitioners aimed to minimize the truly political nature of their participation through their choice of petitioning techniques and public presentation. The parallel dialogue within female antislavery societies, the legislature, and the public more broadly suggests that by framing their participation as deliberately apolitical, women sought to preserve a semblance of the feminine virtue and respectability that had offered them any degree of public influence in the first place.

"One of the most efficient instrumentalities which the friends of the slave can employ": The Rise of Petitioning in Antebellum America[12]

Petitioning has long served as a key medium for individuals to transmit their grievances and demands to local and national governments. A right of citizenship enshrined in the American Constitution, petitioning marked a feature of domestic political society as early as the colonial era. The burgeoning antislavery movement of the 1830s, however, sparked the highest recorded per capita petition submissions to Congress, with women disproportionately represented among the signers.[13] In the eighteenth-century, petitioners employed these documents largely for the transmission of individual requests, such as freedom suits submitted by enslaved persons or women's appeals for access to deceased husbands' military pensions.[14] By the start of the 1800s, however, scholars note a widespread "democratization" of the practice, which transformed petitions "from the individual

11 By apolitical, I refer to women's efforts to engage with the antislavery movement as a distinctly moral cause while maintaining a separation from public debates and partisan, electoral politics.

12 American Anti-Slavery Society's Directions to County Anti-Slavery Societies, 1837," in *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844*, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (Peter Smith, 1965), 1:404.

13 Maggie Blackhawk et al., "Congressional Representation by Petition: Assessing the Voices of the Voteless in a Comprehensive New Database, 1789–1949," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2021): 827.

14 William M. Wiecek, "Antislavery during and after the American Revolution," in *The Sources of Anti-Slavery Constitutionalism in America, 1760-1848* (Cornell University Press, 1977), 40–61.

and the supplicative to the public and aspirational."[15] Rather than outlining a specific request from one or two signers, petitions increasingly demanded substantial legislative action and featured tens or hundreds of signatures gathered through organized canvassing efforts.[16] The beginning of the nineteenth-century also witnessed a rise in literacy rates and an explosion in the national newspaper industry, which helped to establish the communication and knowledge networks that allowed for mass petitioning movements to flourish.[17] Consequently, by the time the simmering antislavery movement came to a full boil in the 1840s, organizers harnessed the power of petitioning as a primary form of advocacy.

The proliferation of local antislavery societies further facilitated this surge in antislavery petitions. By 1838, the United States hosted over 1350 chapters of antislavery organizations, many of them separated by gender[18]. Women's societies, especially, wrote, signed, and canvassed petitions in great magnitude, and the rates of women's petitioning rose as female societies expanded across the northern states.[19] Indeed, petitioning played a particularly central role within female antislavery advocacy; a resolution from the 1837 Antislavery Convention of American Women declared the right of petitioning to be "natural and inalienable" and called on all women to fulfill their "duty" to participate regularly "with the faith of an Esther"—the biblical character who wields the power of persuasion to save her people from a lethal fate.[20]

Petitioning proved attractive to women not only for its effectiveness, but also its degree of separation from the corruption associated with the mainstream electoral scene. While still facilitating government interaction, this mode allowed women to maintain some distance from the partisan realm, which became increasingly male-coded in the antebellum era. By the early years of the American republic, electoral politics had gained a reputation for channeling a "masculine ethos" of patronage and social capital.[21] The nineteenth-century political zeitgeist inhabited by anti-slavery advocates largely mirrored this sleaze and partisanship. For instance,

15 Daniel Carpenter, *Democracy by Petition: Popular Politics in Transformation, 1790–1870* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 69, 25.

16 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 3.

17 Carpenter, *Democracy by Petition*, 69-71, 75-76.

18 Lerner, *The Majority Finds,* 112.

19 Lerner, *The Majority Finds*, 120.

20 *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in the City of New-York, May 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1837* (William S. Dorr, 1837), 8.

21 Alan Taylor, "'The Art of Hook & Snivey': Political Culture in Upstate New York during the 1790s," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993), 1381.

after the House of Representatives awarded the 1824 presidential election to John Quincy Adams, rumors of a *quid pro quo* led discontents to dub the results a "corrupt bargain."[22] Under the subsequent presidency of Andrew Jackson, accusations of corruption and an overgrowth of executive power united political opponents in the emergent Whig party.[23] Their consolidation prompted the maturation of the Second Party System and underscored the increasingly partisan, antagonistic nature of national politics. Further, this era period the gradual removal of state property requirements for voting and a subsequent boom in electoral participation rates. With this targeted expansion, the disparity in political access afforded to men and women swelled alongside the sense that the rationale for these differences rested on gender alone.[24]

Notwithstanding—or perhaps because of—its frequent coarseness, partisan politics offered men an opportunity to explore their political interests in vibrant public arenas. Popular politics grew chiefly in the uniquely "male preserves of saloons, streets, and fields," enmeshing political activities within the spaces that men frequented on a daily basis.[25] By the period's standards, man's combativeness and pragmatism "suited him for the rough and violent public world." Women, on the other hand, should not stray too far from the domestic sphere, lest they encroach upon ostensibly "male prerogatives."[26] Petitions, however, allowed women to transmit their opinions on legislative issues from outside this political party machinery, appearing to offer a safely nonpartisan apparatus for women concerned with preserving their moral delicacy. Tellingly, some female antislavery societies resolved to disallow any "sectarian or party feeling to enter and retard the work" of their petitioning.[27] These women frequently characterized this form of engagement as "uniquely female;" they participated not as subver-

22 Everett S. Brown, "The Presidential Election of 1824-1825," *Political Science Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 1925): 384–403.

23 John Joseph Wallis, "The Concept of Systematic Corruption in American History," in *Corruption and Reform: Lessons from America's Economic History*, ed. Edward L. Glaeser and Claudia Goldin (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23–62.

24 Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 625-626, 629.

25 Michael McGerr, "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830-1930," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (December 1990): 866-867.

26 Baker, "The Domestication of Politics," 620, 631.

27 Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society Records, 1834-1846," MSS 34, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, accessed October 22, 2024, 48.

sive nineteenth-century American women, but as archetypal ones.[28]

As the antislavery movement advanced, though, the act of petitioning bled beyond this neat definition, and not all women within the cause categorized this method as a purely apolitical tool. Faced with rebukes against the "political aspect" of their engagement, some female antislavery societies did insist that their involvement remained solely moral. In "its highest and most distinctive aspect," they argued, the cause of antislavery was "a moral, and benevolent one" in which women naturally "operate[d] with propriety and efficiency."[29] Even if their activities appeared to cross the bounds of traditional femininity at first glance, the movement's ethical foundation affirmed their gendered decorum. However, for other female advocates, petitioning offered a favorable opportunity to expand beyond the moral realm of the slavery debate. Women like Grimke, for example, believed their petitioning could function as an inherently public activity that a meaningful recognition of their identity as political subjects. In fact, this recognition was precisely why their involvement was warranted. Women, this sect insisted, had to be acknowledged as citizens rather than engaging merely "through their influence over men" while they "cover[ed] [themselves] with sackcloth and ashes."[30]

By 1840, national antislavery organizations increasingly emphasized electoral mobilization over less outwardly political strategies, including petitioning. In the process, they magnified existing debates over women's involvement in the antislavery cause. In part because of this "woman question," the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) split into two separate organizations. While the AASS continued to stress action outside of institutional politics, the new offshoot, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS), favored ballot-based initiatives over nonpartisan approaches falling under the umbrella of "moral suasion."[31] To many women, "the elevation of party over principle" and of "pragmatism over the rhetoric of morality" presented a "crisis" threatening the propriety of their continued involvement.[32] Apprehensive of "compromis[ing] their respectability" by engaging in a cause now defined as primarily political, a large

28 Ginzberg, *Women and the Work*, 1.

29 "Records of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn, 1836-1838," Lynn Manuscripts 142, Class No. L50, Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn, Lynn Historical Society, 3.

30 Angelina Grimke, "Address to the Massachusetts Legislature," February 21, 1838, *Iowa State University Archives of Women's Political Communication*.

31 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship,* 145-146.

32 Ginzberg, *Women and the Work,* 69-70.

proportion of women reduced their petitioning rates.[33] The Massachusetts intermarriage petition campaign demonstrates how many women resolved this predicament over the propriety of female antislavery organizing: they resolved to petition from an explicitly apolitical stance.

"This odious, this damnable law": Support for Intermarriage in the Antislavery Movement[34]

Northern antislavery organizers used petitioning not only to promote emancipation nationwide, but also to advocate for state-level reforms protecting the liberties of their free Black neighbors. While some national antislavery societies endeavored "to emancipate immediately" the millions of enslaved individuals in the South, regional chapters across Massachusetts also organized their own petition campaigns, imploring the state legislature to adopt constitutional amendments, reform legislation, or transmit their requests to the federal Congress.[35] The intermarriage petition campaign made up one such effort, urging the repeal of a state law that prevented marriage between a white person and "a negro, Indian, or mulatto." Tracing back to a 1705 slave code, this statute remained among the Commonwealth's laws as late as 1839.[36] Several years of coordinated petitioning, however, proved successful. In February of 1843, the state legislature ultimately repealed the ban.[37]

The Massachusetts intermarriage ban became a primary target for petitioning campaigns as antislavery advocates incorporated state-recognized marriage rights into their core privileges of citizenship. Northerners frequently denounced southern states for denying the enslaved the right to a valid marriage. Consequently, the legal legitimacy afforded by a marriage contract became central to ideals of northern Black "political equality."[38] In addition, the destruction of "the matrimonial institution" constituted a frequent moral critique wielded against slavery. The enslavement of individuals was said to "[part] those whom God hath joined together," contra-

33 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 146.

34 "Massachusetts Legislature," *National Aegis,* February 5, 1840.

35 "Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society."

36 Amber D. Moulton, *The Fight for Interracial Marriage Rights in Antebellum Massachusetts* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

37 Moulton, *Fight for Interracial Marriage*; "Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court," 1843, Bills (Legislative Documents) and House and Senate Journals, State Library of Massachusetts Digital Collections.

38 Moulton, *Fight for Interracial Marriage,* 85.

dicting both divine and legal righteousness.[39] Thus, by imposing artificial divides among those who providence had created equal, the Massachusetts intermarriage ban appeared to perpetuate one of the most egregious branches of the slavery system. Deriding the General Court for conditioning individual rights "on the matrimonial *taste* of the Legislature," the antislavery press claimed that the state's Black population would remain as "impotent as chattels" so long as their license to "affection and love" was restricted to their own racial category.[40] A truly free and equal citizen, these writers argued, would be liberated from social and legal distinctions in addition to physical bondage. An organized petition campaign presented an efficient and coercive tool to attain this liberation.

"Warm hearts and willing minds": Women Petition for Repeal[41]

Between 1839 and 1843, the Massachusetts House of Representatives recorded a total of 97 petitions explicitly advocating the repeal of the intermarriage ban.[42] Signers submitted the vast majority of these appeals on printed templates, which organizers frequently distributed in the antislavery press for local societies to cut out and canvas independently. Women signed and distributed these petitions in great volume. A comparison of the ways women and men self-identified on the petition templates, however, suggests that a non-negligible proportion of female signers characterized their engagement as squarely apolitical in contrast to their male counterparts. This method provided a low-risk resolution for women faced with the antislavery movement's increasing politicization. Though not all women employed this apolitical presentation while engaging in the cause, an examination of its mechanisms underscores the heterogeneity in women's reckoning with the question of feminine propriety prompted by their entry into antislavery reform.

The Petitioners' Choices

39 "Sixth Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society," May 1839, Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Pamphlet Collection, Cornell University Library Digital Collections, 8.

40 "The Intermarriage Law," *The Liberator,* March 10, 1843.

41 "Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn," 25.

42 These numbers and the subsequent counts are based on the petitions recorded in the Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions. The count encompasses the contents of three folders: "House Unpassed," "Passed Acts," and "Passed Resolves." For the sake of consistency, they do not include the petitions that urged a general repeal of all laws imposing racial distinctions upon Massachusetts residents. See Appendix A for a full numerical breakdown of the intermarriage petitions received by the state House during this period.

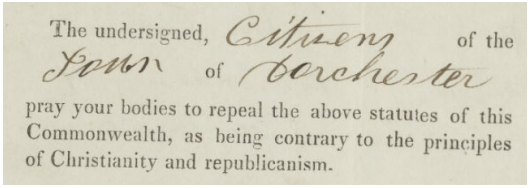

The undersigned, Citizens of the Town of Dorchester pray your bodies to repeal the above statutes of this Commonwealth, as being contrary to the principles of Christianity and republicanism.

Figure 1: Petitions included a blank space after "the undersigned" to indicate a mode of collective identification. In this petition, signers chose the term "citizens." Petition of William Tucker, House Unpassed 1840, Docket 800, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University.

Properly analyzing these petitions requires looking beyond what they requested of the legislature—content that the AASS mostly standardized. Instead, the relevant variance occurred in how signers identified themselves at the top of these forms. Intermarriage petition templates, like most in the antislavery movement, contained blank spaces for organizers to fill in specific information, like their state, town, or county. After completing these blanks, they could then distribute the customized forms. The choices petitioners made in completing these gaps offer a glimpse into the extent to which their gender impacted their mode of self-identification.

29 of the 97 recorded petitions used a printed template that contained a blank space for a collective term of identification, indicated by a gap between the customary "the undersigned" and the spot to indicate the petition's town of origin.[43] Of the 14 printed petitions with all-female signers, 13 filled the blank with the gendered term "women" or "females." 8 of the 10 all-male petitions, however, were signed as "citizens," while only 2 chose the term "men."

Within this set of petitions, most male signers identified themselves as active electoral agents rather than generic male individuals. Their choice suggests that they perceived their engagement as an intrinsically political act. Only rarely did male signers petition the state legislature as "men" or "residents;" more frequently, they signed as operative "citizens," the people upon whom legislators depended for their elected post and public approval. The men's gender needed not be clarified linguistically, for legislators would understand the inherently gendered nature of their identification as citizens or voters. "Citizens," then, likely worked as a gendered stand-in term for male signatories, one that surely reminded the General Court of their political weight.

Women, on the contrary, often employed an explicitly gendered mode of collective identification, minimizing any declaration of their stake in local politics and policy. While women's petitioning scholar Su-

43 The petition templates without this particular blank are addressed later in this paper.

san Zaeske asserts that these signers "avoided naming their relationship to the state," their choice to identify as "women" or "females" as opposed to "citizens" may also be interpreted as a clarification of this relationship: one predetermined solely and completely by their sex.[44] This rhetoric created space for women to petition without identifying with the political nature of the legislature to whom their pleas were addressed. Evidently, as Zaeske charts on a national scale, a substantial proportion of Massachusetts female petitioners "presented themselves and expected to be heard as ladies" rather than politically engaged residents with substantial public influence.[45] Accordingly, their language reinforced this choice.

Examples of petitions with *both* male and female signatories echo this gendered distinction. In some instances, mixed-gender petitions displayed men and women's signatures in separate columns. An 1840 petition from the town of Concord, for example, featured distinct signature lists entitled "males" and "females."[46] Each gendered list was written on its own sheet of paper and then pasted onto the petition text. This mode of inclusion suggests that not only did petitioners distinguish their signatures by gender, but they also likely canvassed separately among men and women. Historians note that, by participating in the public act of petitioning together, mixed-gender groups risked accusations of "improper sexual mixing." Their collective involvement could cause the legislature to deem the petition "indecorous" and reject it entirely.[47] The choice of these petitioners to present each gendered list in isolation suggests their intention to avoid such charges.

To sign a petition solely with other members of one's sex likely presented an easy decision. By contrast, filling in the space provided for the signers' collective mode of identification constituted a more complex question. The Concord submission, along with several other mixed-gender petitions, employed the more ambiguous term of "inhabitants," suggesting the impropriety of applying a category like "voters" or "citizens" to female signers. "Inhabitants" may share a common place of residence, but the term lacks the sense of political agency implied by "citizens" or "voters." The latter pair more explicitly claim a stake in the welfare and policy of their community. Consequently, once female signatories joined, the proper collective identity of the petitioners may have shifted from one of engaged,

44 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship,* 51.

45 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship,* 51.

46 Petition of William Gallup, House Unpassed 1840, Docket 788, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University.

47 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 52.

electorally influential citizens to mere dwellers who had little in common except their neighborhood. In some cases, the House recorded instances of male and female petitioners signing in the *same* columns. They too often identified themselves as more passive "inhabitants." For petitioners that assumed a different collective identification, the House clerk occasionally tallied their signature counts separately by men and women. Gender distinctions evidently permeated numerous stages of the petitioning process.

Of the remaining intermarriage petitions, 62 featured a template that differed in an important respect: it contained only one gap, which was intended for petitioners to specify their town.[48] Given their lone blank, these forms did not require signers to choose a collective identification that might indicate their level of political authority. Nonetheless, the habit of identifying by sex and a corresponding degree of citizenship proved difficult to shake among organizers. 16 of the petitions using this template—11 of which were all-male—added in "citizens" or "legal voters" despite no explicit signal to do so.[49] Additionally, 7 all-female petitions specified their status as "women," while myriad petitions in which men and women signed together added "inhabitants" or "persons" or tallied signatures by gender. Evidently, indicating a group's gender and resultant agency to the legislature was sufficiently customary that organizers went out of their way to write in this information. To include this gendered identification, they crossed out words, added arrows pointing to additional text, or otherwise took creative liberty with their methods. Even when a template presented no direct opportunity to mention these gendered

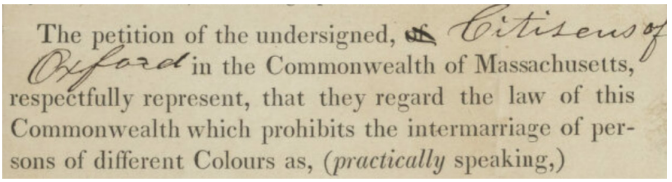

The petition of the undersigned, ~~of~~ Citizens of Oxford in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, respectfully represent, that they regard the law of this Commonwealth which prohibits the intermarriage of persons of different Colours as, (*practically* speaking,)

Figure 2: Some all-male petitions, like this one, crossed out "of" and added "citizens" to indicate gender even when the template provided no space to do so. Petition of John O. Burleigh, House Unpassed 1842, Docket 1153, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University.

48 By at least December 1842, this template was published in *The Liberator* as a state campaign for local organizers to cut out and canvas. This appearance indicates that the template had become a standardized form, and its missing blank was not an aberration. The remaining six intermarriage petitions recorded by the House were handwritten, not printed.

49 5 of these "citizens" collectives included women among their signatories. 2 came from all-female petitions, while the other 3 were mixed-gender. It is important to recognize that while men often composed large proportions of the petitioners identifying as "citizens" before the legislature, there were certainly cases in which women joined in this declaration.

details, its users found a way to add them, underscoring the significance of self-identification in communication with the legislature.

Petitioners' Historical Context

Among female signers, these choices to accentuate gender and avoid actively asserting political identity are best understood as a reaction to women's growing awareness of the societal implications of their participation in petition campaigns. While some women reacted by increasing their involvement, others contemplated retreating from the antislavery cause to protect their uncontaminated moral identity.[50] Those in the latter group exercised considerable influence within female antislavery societies, leading to increased divisions over whether women's "proper" form of engagement would be purely moral or more explicitly political.

This conflict materialized at the 1837 national Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, where Angelina Grimke presented a resolution that women should "no longer remain satisfied in the circumscribed limits with which corrupt custom and a perverted application of Scripture have encircled her." Instead, the resolution stated, she should do "all that she can by her voice, and her pen, and her purse" to strengthen the antislavery cause.[51] The proposal—which ardently rejected sex-based limitations upon women's antislavery activities—provoked strong indignation from many delegates. The convention only adopted Grimke's resolution (with amendments) after "an animated and interesting debate respecting the rights and duties of women," which the meeting minutes left undetailed.[52] Nonetheless, 12 of the dissenters "wished to have their names recorded" as voting against it, staunch enough in their opposition to request public distance from the resolution's claim.[53]

Though the convention proceedings contain no records of the debate over this resolution, its substance can be reasonably reconstructed by considering the arguments put forth by female antislavery advocates wary of asserting an underlying right to political citizenship. To these women, there existed an essential distinction between communicating with legisla-

50 For further discussion on this point, see Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

51 *The Anti-Slavery Convention*, 9.

52 *The Anti-Slavery Convention*, 9.

53 *The Anti-Slavery Convention*, 9. The next day, Grimke's motion to recognize Congress's power to abolish the "national sin" of slavery lost out to a resolution presented by her sister, Sarah, which instead encouraged mothers "to educate their children in the principles of peace."

tors and "asserting partisan goals." They characterized their petitions as the former. Through these written appeals, their moral requests could arrive on the legislative floor while they remained outside the political sphere.[54] Engaging as "moral warriors" rather than active citizens, this sect held steadfastly to a supplicatory style of petitioning.[55] By maintaining this approach, they sought to render even so inherently public an act as petitioning into an apolitical undertaking.[56]

Even beyond this more cautious group, women in the antislavery movement recognized the risks of intertwining their cause too closely with broader questions of women's rights to political participation. This conflation, they understood, could provoke both internal divisions and external disapproval. Frequently cited as one of the most deliberately political female antislavery organizers, Grimke stressed women's status as equal "citizens of this republic," who remained as thoroughly implicated "in its politics and government and laws" as any American man.[57] Nonetheless, she wrote apprehensively about becoming overly consumed with advocacy "for the rights of woman as a moral, intelligent and responsible being." Despite her vision of female citizenship, Grimke felt concerned that too great an emphasis might "injure that blessed cause" of abolitionism by inviting controversy and distraction.[58] Consequently, she and her sister, Sarah, would endeavor to "ask no favors for ourselves" but still "claim rights for our sex"—including, though certainly not limited to, petitioning.[59]

As a collective, female antislavery societies shared Grimke's caution towards blending antislavery activism with the explosive question of women's equality. Some groups, though, considered even much less ambitious declarations of rights far too radical for their liking. The Salem Female Antislavery Society, for example, resolved in 1839 "to discountenance any proceedings, which have a tendency to create derision of feeling and sentiment among us as abolitionists," choosing to prohibit internal debate over deeper questions of citizenship rather than shoulder the threat of dissension.[60] The Lynn Female Antislavery Society, on the other hand, moved

54 Ginzberg, *Women and the Work,* 80.

55 "Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn," 23.

56 Anne M. Boylan, "Women and Politics in the Era before Seneca Falls," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, no. 3 (1990): 380.

57 Grimke, "To the Massachusetts Legislature."

58 "Angelina Grimke to Theodore Dwight Weld, August 12, 1837," in *Letters of Theodore*, 1:415.

59 "Grimke to Weld, August 12, 1837," 1:416.

60 "Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society," 48.

to promote the "free interchange of opinions and sentiments" at their meetings, potentially allowing—though not condoning—varying perspectives on the knotty "woman question."[61]

As the intermarriage petition movement progressed, tensions among antislavery advocates exacerbated by the politicization of the broader cause fragmented their already fragile coalitions. For some societies, competing views on the compatibility of supporting antislavery and female political equality or expansion proved too antagonizing to coexist. In 1840, the Boston Female Antislavery Society (BFASS), once known as "a bastion of radicalism," formally divided due to internal disagreements over women's organizing.[62] One sect advocated discussions of women's broader political rights, encouraged their attendance at public antislavery conventions, and opposed the influence of socially conservative ministers on abolitionist activity. The dissenting group, by contrast, favored more subdued and orthodox approaches to their work.[63] That same year, the AASS ruptured over similar questions. The ascendant faction of organizers planned to transition the movement away from its prior focus on purely moral appeals to channel power within "every individual constitutional voter."[64] In a clear indication of "the politicization of abolitionism," the petitioning arm of the national movement transferred from the leadership of civilian organizers to Whig politicians.[65] As emphasis shifted from moral persuasion to political coalitions and electoral strength, antislavery engagement became an increasingly weighty political statement.

By placing the efforts of Massachusetts's female signatories in the context of these shifts, this paper grounds their petition rhetoric in their motivations to pursue depoliticization. Abandoning a gendered identification amounted to taking a precarious step into an increasingly political world—a context in which one's very identity as a moral feminine being was at stake. No longer could women easily assert that their petitions constituted "nonpolitical, moral pleas"; their choices in language, instead, would need to prove this characterization and thus protect their own respectability.[66]

61 "Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn," 24.

62 Keith Melder, "Forerunners of Freedom: The Grimke Sisters in MA, 1837-38." *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 103, no. 3 (July 1967): 228.

63 Debra Gold Hansen, "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Cornell University Press, 1994), 45-65.

64 "Sixth Annual Report," 77.

65 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 154.

66 Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 146.

"Politicians in petticoats": The Press and the Legislature React[67]

While many women petitioned cautiously for interracial marriage, the public seldom agreed that they were successful in their efforts to engage apolitically. Marriage, on its own, represented an issue traditionally correlated with the feminine domestic sphere, granting women some authority on the statute in question. However, contemporary society attributed a particular vulgarity to racial intermarriage. As a result, the press and the Massachusetts legislature frequently derided women's petitioning against the intermarriage ban as an inappropriate overreach into the public sphere's licentious branches. Their condemnations suggest that for many, women's petitioning constituted less of a natural right and more of a privilege conditioned upon the social palatability of the cause at hand.

The Press

From the perspective of various newspapers that otherwise supported antislavery principles, the perceived salaciousness of intermarriage threatened the broader movement's legitimacy and the respectability of the women who participated. The incorporation of the intermarriage campaign into the antislavery cause proved deeply contentious. One columnist encapsulated this controversy by describing the move itself to be "as absurd and unnatural an amalgamation as that of the races."[68] As a result of the issue's overlap with the ostensibly taboo notion of interracial sexual relations, members of the press perceived the idea of intermarriage as particularly inappropriate for women's engagement.

These rebukes implicitly set a minimum moral "threshold" that topics would be required to meet in order to justify women's petitioning on their behalf. By the newspapers' judgement, interracial marriage failed to clear this high bar. One publication, for example, warned that petitioning was "prostituted to base and unworthy purposes" once diverted towards intermarriage advocacy by signers otherwise claiming "female refinement and virtue."[69] Opposition also frequently veered into purely misogynistic territory, questioning the marriage status of female signers. A commentor in *Pittsfield Sun*, for instance, sardonically made the "presumption…that [they

67 "1839 House Bill 0028: Report On Sundry Petitions Respecting Distinctions Of Color," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, House of Representatives, February 25, 1839, 7.

68 "Observations on Slavery," *New Bedford Gazette*, May 11, 1835.

69 "The Right of Petition," *National Aegis*, January 31, 1838. The choice of "prostituted" was likely deliberate; stereotypes that oversexualized Black women and amplified the sexual appetite of Black men fueled racist opposition to intermarriage.

were] single with a prospect of remaining so."[70] Although domestic life may have constituted a woman's "proper" sphere, the transition into intermarriage proved too distinctly taboo to remain safely circumscribed by this field of household propriety.

Published in 1839, one series of political cartoons by Edward Williams Clay captures why contemporaries may have regarded interracial marriage as such a socially delicate subject. Through his popular fourteen-part work, "Life in Philadelphia," Clay became one of the most prominent cartoonists depicting northern Black communities during the 1820s.[71] His cartoons frequently illustrated racist portrayals of Blackness, suggesting its discordance with nineteenth-century middle-class urban life. His 1839 drawings, printed by a northern lithographer, punctuated the public's discomfort with the idea of interracial sexual relations.[72]

In one cartoon, John Quincy Adams—an adamant defender of women's petitioning rights in Congress—introduces a fictitious Haitian ambassador to "the 500 ladies of Lynn who wish to marry Black husbands."[73] The cartoon depicts a group of tantalized white women with distorted facial features. Its Haitian ambassador and rows of Black male audience members exhibit grotesque racial caricatures of their physical attributes. Echoing the resort to personal attacks, this piece transformed the signers' physical attractiveness into an object of derision. Simultaneously,

Figure 3: "Johnny Q. Introducing the Haytien Ambassador to the Ladies of Lynn, Mass.," 1839, lithograph, published by J. Childs, New York, courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia Digital Commons.

70 "Miscellaneous," *The Pittsfield Sun*, February 22, 1838.

71 "Edward W. Clay and 'Life in Philadelphia,'" *Reframing the Color Line: Race and the Visual Culture of the Atlantic World*, University of Michigan William L. Clements Library, accessed December 5, 2024.

72 "Edward W. Clay."

73 Edward Williams Clay, "Johnny Q., introducing the Haytien Ambassador to the ladies of Lynn, Mass. Respectfully inscribed to Miss Caroline Augusta Chase, & the 500 ladies of Lynn who wish to marry Black husbands," 1839, Library Company of Philadelphia.

Clay's cartoon exemplified racist apprehensions that intermarriage might disfigure a woman's conventional delicacy and sexual purity—a fear that undergirded much of the opposition to women's petitions to repeal the ban.

Explicitly "inscribed to Miss Caroline Augusta Chase," the cartoon clearly served as a pointed response to the petition signed by Chase and several hundred women from Lynn earlier that year, which urged the repeal of all state laws making racial distinctions.[74] Evidently, the decisions that these women made in identifying themselves to the legislature did not constitute mere trivial markings on one out of hundreds of incoming petitions. On the contrary, they constituted meaningful rhetorical choices that often faced close scrutiny by public onlookers such as Clay.

Another Clay cartoon entitled "Practical Amalgamation" showcased additional social and racial anxieties provoked by the prospect of intermarriage. The piece features two interracial couples in a parlor donned with portraits of John Quincy Adams, Arthur Tappan—a co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society—and Daniel O'Connell—an Irish abolitionist.[75]

Figure 4: "Practical Amalgamation," lithograph, 1839, published by J. Childs, New York, courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia Digital Commons.

74 Petition of Caroline Augusta Chase, House Unpassed 1839, Docket 577, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University. This petition would come to be the partial focus of the House report described in the following section.

75 Edward Williams Clay, "Practical Amalgamation," 1839, Library Company of Philadelphia.

On one end of the couch, a conventionally attractive white woman kisses a Black man with a distorted face. On the other, a stout Black woman sits while being wooed by a white man on his knees. By pairing intentionally unattractive depictions of Black men and women with flattering illustrations of white individuals, the cartoon promoted fears that antislavery activism might induce morally and physically unpalatable interracial romantic pairings and thus deface white honor. The depiction of the two couples on the same couch also referenced the movement's ostensibly improper introduction of sexuality into the public sphere.

Proliferating across the northern press, these provocative statements and illustrations demonstrate the public disdain for women's "encroachment" into the petitioning sphere—particularly when their petitions concerned the topic of intermarriage. This antagonistic reaction exemplifies why women deliberately chose to abstain from making an explicit political identification in their process of petitioning. They risked an acute and consequential public disavowal by failing to do so.

The Legislature

Denunciations of women's participation in the intermarriage campaign were not limited to the bawdy pages of the press. Even the state House, the recipient of the women's petitions, expressed scorn towards women's engagement and often denied their right to petition as freely as any other individual.

On February 25, 1839, the state House Committee on the Judiciary released a strongly worded report opposing the repeal of the intermarriage ban. The piece suggested that by signing their names in support of the statue's removal, female petitioners had ultimately tainted the act of petitioning itself. Citing women's intermarriage petitions received earlier that month, the report questioned whether the initiative met the high standard required to justify "draw[ing] the matrons and maidens of Massachusetts from the retirement of the homes they bless with the virtues."[76] The committee answered in the negative. The issue, they claimed, did not clear this bar, as the existing law imposed the same restriction "to all colors, to all races" and could not therefore be declared unethical.[77] Transmitting a remonstrance to the legislature, the report suggested, proved intrinsically incompatible with the domestic stature of conventional, contemporary women. Further, an intermarriage ban did not qualify as a sufficiently outrageous moral infraction

76 "1839 House Bill 0028," 3. One of the petitions examined by the report was that of Caroline Augusta Chase and other women from Lynn, whom Clay had depicted in one of his 1839 political cartoons.

77 "1839 House Bill 0028," 8.

to permit the transfer of women's high-minded efforts to a sphere outside of the home.

Perhaps, then, the legislature did not understand women to possess any *inherent* political authority. On the contrary, the legitimacy of female petitioners was subject to the propriety of their political aim as judged by the legislature. The signers, if they wished to continue "styling themselves as ladies," would do well "to reconsider their opinions on matrimonial and constitutional rights, and to remove their names from the rolls on which they are written," declared report author William Lincoln—a man who, himself, never married.[78] Rather than engaging with the petitions as the legitimate expressions of their constituents, legislators interpreted these appeals "as proof of little more than that the men of the Commonwealth ought to keep better control over their wives and daughters."[79]

Extending beyond the delicacy of their purposes, condemnations of women's petitioning also worked to undermine broader female political legitimacy. An April 1839 House report, for instance, accused female intermarriage petitioners of forging signatures. The report is notable less for its investigation of organizational errors and more for its tone of scandal and distrust projected upon the female petitioners. The report generally depicted the women questioned by the legislature—often through male authorities answering on their behalf—as lacking any understanding of the documents to which their names were affixed. One man argued before the committee that, before signing the petition, his daughters "did not read or know what its contents were." The husband of the lead signer claimed that nearly all the women "were entirely mistaken in regard to the disabilities of colored people" and would have omitted their name if granted "a correct knowledge."[80]

Though forgery accusations were not an unreasonable topic of consideration, the amount of time devoted to questioning the women's competence indicates that members of the legislature held a deeper mistrust towards female political engagement. For a report prompted by suspicions of fraud, it is notable that such a large proportion of the committee's work centered on investigating the women's ostensible misunderstandings of

78 "1839 House Bill 0028," 16.

79 Amber D. Moulton, "Closing the 'Floodgate of Impurity': Moral Reform, Antislavery, and Interracial Marriage in Antebellum Massachusetts," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3, no. 1 (2013): 7.

80 "1839 House Bill 0074: Report on The Petition Of S. P. Sanford And Others, Concerning Distinctions Of Color," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, House of Representatives, April 3, 1839, 16, 23.

petition content as opposed to the mechanisms by which signatures were gathered. Legislators seemed to agree; they bemoaned that the report diverted their own attention away "from more important engagements of public service" and towards "the discharge of an unwelcome task."[81]

Similarly, the legislature did not fixate on how female canvassers occasionally signed other women's names in absentia, a recurring trend among the petitioners. Antislavery women often signed the names of their neighbors who they understood to be generally approving of the cause. One of the canvassers called to testify before the committee, for example, believed herself "authorized" to sign the names of several other women that she knew to be members of an antislavery society.[82] Across all female antislavery petitions recorded by the House, multiple signatures in the same handwriting appeared as a consistent trend—a practice prompted more by the pursuit of efficiency than a desire to consciously commit fraud. Based on this phenomenon, women seemed to be aware that though they acquired strength in numbers, their individual signatures did not, alone, demonstrate an act of notable civic force. The *volume* of names, not the individual identity or agency of each signer, enhanced the gravity of their communications with the legislature; it was "the listing of one's name"—even by another hand—rather than "the actual signing" that constituted "the significant act" within women's petitioning.[83]

The Women Respond

As demonstrated by these critiques, women's careful attempts to avoid asserting political agency often did little to assuage the onlookers concerned over their tainted femininity. The fact that these rebukes frequently crossed into the realm of explicit misogyny reveals that contemporaries perceived the intermarriage issue as a unique threat to their ideals of feminine decorum and sexual purity, which magnified the perceived impropriety of this petitioning cause. These admonishments, like the increasing politicization of the national antislavery movement, caused many women to disengage from public antislavery advocacy. In some cases, though, it impassioned women to reproach the legislature for its delegitimization of female petitioning.

The latter perspective is epitomized by a lengthy 1839 petition,

81 "1839 House Bill 0074," 3.

82 "1839 House Bill 0074," 20, 25.

83 Deborah Bingham van Broeckhoven, "Let Your Name be Enrolled: Method and Ideology in Women's Antislavery Petitioning," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Cornell University Press, 1994), 196.

which called passionately for both the repeal of the intermarriage statute and improved treatment for women engaging with the legislature. Lydia Maria Child, a high-level organizer with the AASS, served as the petition's author and sole signatory. She penned the document, as she described, in "protest against the contemptuous treatment offered to her sisters in Lynn," one of the towns whose female petitioners came under attack in the recently released Judiciary Committee report.[84] With scathing and scoffing rhetoric, Child challenged the view that women's political legitimacy need be *earned* through the palatability of their requests. On the contrary, her petition implied that women intrinsically possessed a level of public authority equal to that of their male counterparts. By doubting the female petitioners' understanding of their own engagement, she concluded, the legislature had failed to recognize this right. In a sardonic reference to the committee's suggestions of female vacuousness, Child remarked that she could "offer no certificate that she understands her own petition." Nonetheless, she confirmed that "she fully comprehends the origin of the law, its bearings past and present, [and] the strong prejudice by which it is sustained."[85]

By asking that her name "be publicly recorded with the honorable Women of Lynn," Child urged a restoration of honor to the women involved in the intermarriage petitioning cause. Ironically, she transmitted her demand through the same medium towards which the legislature had expressed its scorn.[86] For Child, the act of crafting her petition was an intentionally inflammatory and political one. Thus, she channeled a perspective that differed from that of many of the female petitioners whom she sought to defend.

As encapsulated by Child's appeal, nineteenth-century women developed a growing awareness of the political implications of their participation in petition campaigns. While some evidently responded by intensifying their involvement, others—including some intermarriage petitioners—opted for protective withdrawal to safeguard their respectability. The press and the legislature issued frequent, acrid condemnations against female petitioners. Examining the explicit and tacit pressures within these rebukes, including threats to the marriageability, domestic influence, and (already limited) public stature of female signers, reveals the profusely high stakes under which a woman confronted the choice of adding her name to the latest petition canvassed at her door.

84 Petition of Lydia Maria Child, House Unpassed 1839, Docket 577, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University.

85 Petition of Lydia Maria, 2.

86 Petition of Lydia Maria, 2.

Conclusion

Petitioning, a key force in the United States' history of political engagement, has long offered constituents the opportunity to place demands before their government representatives. A tangible expression of the "countability of voice," petitions served as a cornerstone of antislavery organizing, particularly within women's societies.[87] The example of Massachusetts's intermarriage petitions, however, indicates that this methodology did not always necessitate claims of political agency among its participants—claims which modern historians like Zaeske have suggested might emerge from a fuller view of the movement. Certainly, petitions carved out a distinct avenue for women to advocate outside of mainstream politics. Yet, they also ignited a tempestuous debate among antislavery advocates, who broke into factions as they disputed the most acceptable form of women's participation within their movement. A historiography that depicts antislavery organizing as uniformly empowering for female participants risks obscuring the manifold pressures and priorities that women balanced as they entered the cause.

Additionally, the press and the state legislature's reactions to these petitions affirm that much of nineteenth-century society considered women's petitioning an improper extension beyond their rightful domestic context. These observers, perceiving interracial sexual relations as particularly distasteful, condemned women's petitions as utter abominations against contemporary womanhood. The public remained uneasy about suggestions of women's political agency—even if the female petitioners themselves often intended to abstain from exercising such claims.

It would be a historical inaccuracy to claim that *all* women engaged in antislavery petitioning as an apolitical endeavor. Indeed, many believed that women could not fully aid the antislavery cause so long as they remained confined by traditional morality and domesticity. Angelina Grimke argued passionately that "women *could* do, and *would* do a hundred times more for the slave if she were not fettered" by ideas of her "appropriate sphere."[88] Though she occasionally worried that talk of women's rights might incite needless discord within antislavery circles, Grimke believed in the positive power of petitioning to promote women's claim to equal citizenship rights. Similarly, Massachusetts abolitionist Lydia Maria Child

87 Carpenter, *Democracy by Petition*, 39.

88 "Angelina Grimke to Theodore Dwight Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier, August 20, 1837," in *Letters of Theodore*, 1:429.

petitioned the state legislature to defend the legitimacy of female petitioners, clarifying that this recognition represented a matter of "respect" rather than an appeal to the "barbarous" dictates of "chivalry."[89]

Female petitioners were far from homogeneous in their perspectives on the relationship between petitioning and their moral, political, and gender identities. Many nineteenth-century female petitioners subverted gender restraints, and their efforts should surely not go unnoticed. Nonetheless, it must also be recognized that for many, the risks of publicly asserting political agency were considerable, forbidding, and in cases like the intermarriage petitioning campaign, not always worth deliberately assuming. A full history of the antislavery petitioning movement bears these truths simultaneously. The nineteenth century witnessed a vast proliferation and democratization of petitioning as a method of governmental communication. But for all the conventions it appeared to upend, traditional notions of women's respectability, in many instances, retained their durability and allegiance.

The antislavery movement culminated, in a physical sense, on the battlefields of the Civil War. Soon after this violent turn, debates over women's political status would be reignited by the next question of female citizenship to surface: women's suffrage. Again, more conservative female public figures found themselves arrayed against a radical branch urging full voting rights for adult women nationwide. Though women participating in the antislavery cause were far from monolithic in their attitudes towards female political agency, the movement certainly increased their awareness of the rapid politicization of domestic social causes. By the end of the century— and, in some cases, beginning as early as the later 1840s—vast swaths of American women would come to conclude that the strategy of moral suasion had exhausted its potency. If they hoped to conduct effective public and social advocacy, they, too, needed to possess political sway, and they required the vote to achieve it.[90] The contestation over this political agency, however, found its roots within the preceding years of antislavery petitioning on the political periphery.

89 Petition of Lydia Maria, 3.
90 Ginzberg, *Women and the Work,* 124-125.

Bibliography

"1839 House Bill 0028: Report On Sundry Petitions Respecting Distinctions Of Color." Commonwealth of Massachusetts, House of Representatives. February 25, 1839. State Library of Massachusetts Digital Collections. https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/items/ab49b2ea-75e7-40df-850a-8c2a8a3597f5.

"1839 House Bill 0074: Report On The Petition Of S. P. Sanford And Others, Concerning Distinctions Of Color." Commonwealth of Massachusetts, House of Representatives. April 3, 1839. State Library of Massachusetts Digital Collections. https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/items/f8ef8683-0268-4e08-804e-42ea69a4e55f.

Baker, Paula. "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920." *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984), 620–647. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1856119.

Beecher, Catharine E. *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/26123/pg26123-images.ht

Blackhawk, Maggie, Daniel Carpenter, Tobias Resch, and Benjamin Schneer. "Congressional Representation by Petition: Assessing the Voices of the Voteless in a Comprehensive New Database, 1789–1949." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2021): 817–849. https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12305.

Boylan, Anne M. "Women and Politics in the Era before Seneca Falls." *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, no. 3 (1990): 363–82. https://doi.org/10.2307/3123393.

Brown, Everett S. "The Presidential Election of 1824-1825." *Political Science Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 1925): 384–403. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2142211.

Carpenter, Daniel. *Democracy by Petition: Popular Politics in Transforma-*

tion, 1790–1870. Harvard University Press, 2021.

Carpenter, Daniel and Colin D. Moore. "When Canvassers Became Activists: Antislavery Petitioning and the Political Mobilization of American Women." *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 479–98.

Carpenter, Daniel, Tobias Resch, and Benjamin Schneer. "The Contours of American Congressional Petitioning, 1789-1949: A New Database." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (September 6, 2020): 817–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12305.

Carter, Greg. *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing.* New York University Press, 2013.

Clay, Edward Williams. "Johnny Q., introducing the Haytien Ambassador to the ladies of Lynn, Mass. Respectfully inscribed to Miss Caroline Augusta Chase, & the 500 ladies of Lynn who wish to marry Black husbands." 1839. Library Company of Philadelphia. https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/Islandora%3A65105.

———. "Practical Amalgamation." 1839. Library Company of Philadelphia. https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/Islandora%3A65140.

"Edward W. Clay and 'Life in Philadelphia.'" *Reframing the Color Line: Race and the Visual Culture of the Atlantic World*, University of Michigan William L. Clements Library. Accessed December 5, 2024. https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/reframing-the-color-line/edwardclay/.

"Edward Williams Clay." *Politics in Graphic Detail: Exploring History through Political Cartoons*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Accessed December 5, 2024. https://digitalhistory.hsp.org/hint/politics-graphic-detail/person/edward-williams-clay.

Foeman, Anita Kathy and Teresa Nance. "From Miscegenation to Multiculturalism: Perceptions and Stages of Interracial Relationship Development." *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (1999): 540–57. http://

www.jstor.org/stable/2645869.

Ginzberg, Lori. *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*. Yale University Press, 1990.

Grimke, Angelina. "Address to the Massachusetts Legislature." February 21, 1838. *Iowa State University Archives of Women's Political Communication*. https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2022/02/23/address-to-the-massachusetts-legislature-feb-21-1838/.

———. *Letters to Catherine E. Beecher, in Reply to an Essay on Slavery and Abolition, Addressed to A. E. Grimke.* Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/53852/53852-h/53852-h.htm.

Hansen, Debra Gold. "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics." In *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, 45–65. Cornell University Press, 1994.

Hoganson, Kristin. "Garrisonian Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Gender, 1850-1860." *American Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1993): 558–595. https://doi.org/10.2307/2713309.

"House No. 46 Report of the Joint Special Committee." Massachusetts General Court. March 6, 1840. Internet Archive. http://archive.org/details/inhouseofreprese00mass.

Jeffrey, Julie Roy. *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History.* Oxford University Press, 1979.

Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844, edited by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond. 2 vols. Peter Smith, 1965.

Litwack, Leon F. "The Abolitionist Dilemma: The Antislavery Movement

and the Northern Negro." *The New England Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1961): 50–73. https://www.jstor.org/stable/362624.

Massachusetts General Court, House of Representatives, *An Act relating to Marriages between individuals of certain races*. Chap. 0005. Approved by the Governor February 21, 1843. https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/server/api/core/bitstreams/ff25adaa-e65d-41f3-8d9d-bbe39b244eec/content.

"Massachusetts Legislature." *National Aegis* (Worcester, MA), February 5, 1840. America's Historical Newspapers.

McGerr, Michael. "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830-1930." *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (December 1990), 864–885. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2078989.

Melder, Keith. "Forerunners of Freedom: The Grimke Sisters in MA, 1837-38." *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 103, no. 3 (July 1967): 223–249. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89067299289&seq=285.

"Miscellaneous." *The Pittsfield Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), February 22, 1838. America's Historical Newspapers.

Moulton, Amber D. "Closing the 'Floodgate of Impurity': Moral Reform, Antislavery, and Interracial Marriage in Antebellum Massachusetts." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3, no. 1 (2013): 2–34.

———. *The Fight for Interracial Marriage Rights in Antebellum Massachusetts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674286238.

"Observations on Slavery." *New Bedford Gazette* (New Bedford, MA), May 11, 1835. America's Historical Newspapers.

Petition of Caroline Augusta Chase. House Unpassed 1839, Docket 577. Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, HOLLIS 013622572. Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/

wid00004c00225/catalog.

Petition of John O. Burleigh, House Unpassed 1842, Docket 1153. Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, HOLLIS 013622572. Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/wid00004c00237/catalog.

Petition of Lydia Maria Child. House Unpassed 1839, Docket 577. Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, HOLLIS 013622572. Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/wid00004c00225/catalog.

Petition of William Gallup. House Unpassed 1840, Docket 788. Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, HOLLIS 013622572. Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/wid00004c00231/catalog.

Petition of William Tucker. House Unpassed 1840, Docket 800. Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, HOLLIS 013622572, Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Harvard University. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/wid00004c00232/catalog.

Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in the City of New-York, *May 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1837*. New York: William S. Dorr, 1837. https://bkbbphilly.org/proceedings-anti-slavery-convention-american-women.

"Records of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn, 1836-1838." Lynn Manuscripts 142, Class No. L50, Female Anti-Slavery Society of Lynn, Lynn Historical Society.

"Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society Records, 1834-1846." MSS 34, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum. Accessed October 22, 2024. https://congregationallibrary.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/salem-female-anti-slavery-society-records-1834-1846/55715

?item=55815.

Schneer, Benjamin, Tobias Resch, Maggie Blackhawk, and Daniel Carpenter. "The Popular Origins of Legislative Jurisdictions: Petitions and Standing Committee Formation in Colonial Virginia and the Early US House." *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (July 2021): 1727–45. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1086/716285.

"Sixth Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society." May 1839. Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Pamphlet Collection, Cornell University Library Digital Collections. https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/may817907.

Squire, Peverill. "American State Legislatures in Historical Perspective." *Political Science & Politics* 52, no. 3 (July 2019): 417–421. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519000064.

Taylor, Alan. "'The Art of Hook & Snivey': Political Culture in Upstate New York during the 1790s." *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993): 1371–1396. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2080209.

"The Intermarriage Law." *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), March 10, 1843. America's Historical Newspapers.

"The Right of Petition." *National Aegis* (Worcester, MA), January 31, 1838. America's Historical Newspapers.

van Broeckhoven, Deborah Bingham. "Let Your Name be Enrolled: Method and Ideology in Women's Antislavery Petitioning." In *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, 179–199. Cornell University Press, 1994.

Wallis, John Joseph. "The Concept of Systematic Corruption in American History." In *Corruption and Reform: Lessons from America's Economic History*, edited by. Edward L. Glaeser and Claudia Goldin, 23–62. University of Chicago Press, 2006. https://www.nber.org/system/files/chapters/c9977/c9977.pdf.

Wiecek, William M. "Antislavery during and after the American Revolution." In *The Sources of Anti-Slavery Constitutionalism in America, 1760-1848*, 40–61. Cornell University Press, 1977. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g6m0.7.

Zaeske, Susan. *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Appendix A
Numerical Breakdown of Intermarriage Petitions Recorded by the Massachusetts House of Representatives, 1839-1843[91]

Gender of Signers	No Blank Space for Gender	Includes Blank Space, Identifies with Female Gendered Term	Includes Blank Space, Identifies with Male Gendered Term	Includes Blank Space, Identifies with "Inhabitants"	Includes Blank Space, Identifies with Variation of "Voters" or "Citizens"	Includes Blank Space, Uses Other Term or Leaves Blank
All Male	19	0	2	0	8	0
All Female	22	12	0	0	1	1
Male and Female, in Separate Columns	1	0	0	1	0	0
Male and Female, in Combined Columns	20	0	0	2	2	0

91 These numbers do not include handwritten petitions (as opposed to printed ones), since they, by their nature, did not use any pre-written templates.

"The Jews" and "The Media" as "The Enemy"

President Nixon's Private Vilification of Jews and Public Denunciation of Journalists

Emily Schrader

Dedicated to Max Frankel (1930-2025)—Holocaust refugee, giant of American journalism, and general mensch. When he read an early version of this essay in 2022, Max said he wished I had "zapped" William Safire for writing "some of Nixon's worst prose." His mind stayed razor-sharp, his humor undimmed, until the very end. Needless to say, Nixon never succeeded in silencing him. Thank you, Max, for a lifetime of wisdom and fearless truth-telling.

- *Emily Schrader, April 8, 2025*

Confronting devastating news leaks and political setbacks, President Richard Nixon launched into a private tirade. Sealed away from the public eye, the American leader raged against what he viewed as the source of not only his immediate issues but an overarching conspiracy that had set those problems in motion: "The Jews."

> *"The Jews are all over the government."*
> *"Most Jews are disloyal."*
> *"Generally speaking, you can't trust the bastards. They turn on you. Am I wrong or right?"*[1]

One of his closest advisors agreed without question. Adding to the President's accusations of disloyalty, his chief of staff alleged malicious intent by "the Jews" in question.

> *"Their whole orientation is against you… And they are smart. They have the ability to do what they want to do—which is to hurt us."*[2]

The dialogue took place within the Oval Office—the spatial

1 George Lardner and Michael Dobb, "New Tapes Reveal Depth of Nixon's Anti-Semitism," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 1999.

2 Lardner and Dobb, "New Tapes Reveal."

embodiment of American executive power—during the summer of 1971. These deeply antisemitic remarks were among the revelations of the very taping system that Nixon had installed in the White House. Beginning that year, it recorded private conversations between the President and his associates until the 1973 demise of his administration.

While the Watergate scandal drew the release of some recordings, these comments remained unpublished for over two decades. Kept in the National Archives, the tapes that did not directly deal with abuses of government power arrived piecemeal before the public after 1996. Their contents reveal tensions between Nixon's public persona as a "friend of Israel" and his private vitriol against "the Jews."[3] Immediately detectable is the clear antisemitism of these tapes; more latent is the connection between that antisemitism and the anti-media rhetoric woven throughout their recordings.

This paper investigates how, during the Nixon years, the myth of a Jewish quest for "total world domination" manifested within the United States news network as an imagined "Jewish media cabal."[4] Following *The New York Times's* publication of the Pentagon Papers, a classified history of the Vietnam War, a particularly adversarial relationship emerged between president and press. Within that oppositional dynamic, Nixon saw an opportunity to deflect blame from his own administration by painting "the media" as a scapegoat for the nation's problems. That scapegoat took the form of ancient antisemitic tropes, repurposed and reinvented to discredit the circle of elite Jewish intellectuals that Nixon viewed as both "the media" and "the enemy." Nixon merged two existing antagonistic relationships—one between presidency and press, and another between imagined "Jews" and the predominantly non-Jewish public—to mitigate his internal paranoia over what he viewed as excessively powerful forces seeking his demise. In the process, his administration exemplified a unique collision and evolution of anti-media and antisemitic rhetoric.

Nixon and "The Jews"

At first glance, the vehement antisemitism laced throughout the Nixon tapes seems at odds with the sociopolitical sentiments of the time. Many perceived the early 1970s as a period of diminishing antisemitism,

3 U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, "National Archives and Records Administration Announces Agreement to Accelerate Release of Nixon Tapes," press release nr96-61, April 12, 1996.

4 "Jews Have Too Much Power," Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era, Anti-Defamation League, 2020, accessed 8 March 2022.

and many saw in Nixon an advocate for Jewish communities. After the atrocities of World War II and the growth of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s, widespread calls for tolerance led many to characterize the period as one of "declining bigotry" in the United States.[5] Though antisemitic rhetoric persisted, the proportion of Americans who reported "hearing recent criticism" of Jews dropped from 64 percent in 1946 to 16 percent in 1951. Likewise, many believed that antisemitism had taken on a subtler "low-grade" form in United States politics.[6]

Within media circles, that apparent spirit of tolerance remained prominent during the Nixon years. In a March 2022 interview conducted for this paper, Max Frankel, the former executive editor of *The New York Times*, remarked on a "sense of comfort with which Jews performed in society" during the post-war period. Among contemporary Jewish journalists, "there was no longer any effort to hide a Jewish nature or background," Frankel said, because public antisemitism "was in retreat" following the Holocaust.[7] Prominent studies corroborated this post-1945 decline in publicly-expressed antisemitism. Consequently, the Anti-Defamation League concluded that, by the 1970s, "antisemitism indisputably was shifting to the margins of American society."[8]

About as far from the so-called "margins" of society as it got, Nixon outwardly presented as a "friend of the Jews" through his appointment of Jewish staff members and public support for Israel. At the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, he reportedly told advisors to "send [Israel] everything that can fly." Later in her autobiography, Israeli prime minister Golda Meir stated that "Israel never had a better friend in the White House."[9] Though support for Israel does not reflect or excuse antisemitism, Nixon's defenders frequently seized upon his decisiveness during the Yom Kippur War as evidence that his *actions* did not further hostility towards Jews.

The extent to which those actions reflected a sincere desire to protect Jews, however, has since been cast into doubt. In a 2007 letter

5 Leonard Dinnerstein, "The Tide Ebbs (1945-1969)," in *Antisemitism in America* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

6 "Antisemitism in American History," Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era, Anti-Defamation League, 2020, accessed 8 March 2022; Werner Bergmann and Rainer Erb, "Survey Findings on Antisemitism: A Four-National Comparison," trans. Frederick D. Weil (Louisiana State University, 1990), 3.

7 Max Frankel, interview by author, March 9, 2022.

8 Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 228.

9 Jennifer Grossman, "Garment's District," *The Washington Examiner*, March 10, 1997.

to *The New York Times,* former presidential counsel Leonard Garment asserted that Nixon should not be commended even for his defense of Israel. Garment's Jewish identity was frequently cited as evidence against this president's antisemitism, but he challenged Nixon's depiction a "friend of the Jews." Responding to a 1972 tape in which Nixon referred to him as a "house Jew," Garment wrote that "notwithstanding the miserable tapes, I believe that I can claim part of the credit for Mrs. Meir's assessment [of Nixon's friendship with Israel]."[10]

Though criticism of Nixon's antisemitism was not uncommon among other Jewish staff members, their remarks were confined to private conversations and retrospective impressions. Frankel said that his "only clear reference" from "anybody on the inside talking about Nixon displaying antisemitism inside" came through a private conversation with Henry Kissinger, who served as Nixon's National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State. As they walked back to the White House, Frankel said he remarked on the improbability of their circumstances: Two Jewish refugees from Germany entering the gates of American power. According to Frankel, Kissinger replied, "you'd be surprised about how much antisemitism there is in this building. And I mean, at the highest levels."[11] Though Kissinger voiced concerns to associates, he apparently refrained from direct confrontation, explaining that it was "almost suicidal" to question Nixon on his prejudices.[12]

As a result, the public was left with no basis upon which to question Nixon's supposedly "pro-Jewish" presidency. Dissonance between the public Nixon and the private Nixon would only be unveiled after his time in office. To assess whether antisemitic attitudes filtered through the White House gates, one must investigate not only the communities Nixon felt comfortable targeting in public, but also the tropes embedded within his rhetoric. For this analysis, no case is clearer than Nixon's famed animosity towards the press.

The Nixon Administration and "The Media"

While an adversarial relationship has always existed between American presidents and the press, the Nixon years marked an unprecedented amplification of anti-media rhetoric. The underlying

10 Leonard Garment, "A Nixon Ex-Aide Explains (1 Letter)," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2007.

11 Max Frankel, interview.

12 Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (HarperCollins 2007), 170.

message of Nixon's famous saying, "the press is the enemy," dates back to the Founding generation's leading figures. George Washington asserted that news columns were "diabolical" and motivated by a desire "to destroy the confidence" in public servants. Thomas Jefferson echoed that sentiment, writing that newspapers "present only the caricatures of disaffected minds."[13] In his 1999 autobiography, Frankel described a perpetual "symbiotic relationship" between government and press: "a precarious balance of collaborations and antagonisms."[14] For centuries, presidents publicly blamed journalists for what they viewed as willful distortions of the truth. But alongside their attacks came an acknowledgement that an independent—and even critical—press was necessary for the future of a democratic nation.

Nixon broke away from that convention. "Within months of his inaugural," Frankel wrote, "Nixon destroyed that balance." The former executive editor recalled that "bitter rifts in public opinion reappeared, and the president blamed the messengers."[15] Hostility to the "Fourth Estate" became a central feature of Nixon's administration, which characterized "the media" as dominated by a coastal elite inherently oriented against the greater good of the nation.[16] Prior to his presidency, American political discourse did not feature prominent references to "the media" that carried the vitriolic implications of what is now dubbed "the mainstream media."[17] Nixon strategically promoted the phrase to take from the press the "emotional upper hand" of First Amendment respectability. To use the words of his former speechwriter William Safire, Nixon imbued journalists with "a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation."[18] This newly populist anti-media tone veered uncomfortably close to established antisemitic tropes, like the alleged Jewish pursuit of "total world domination."

13 Valerie Strauss, "It's back in the age of 'alternative facts': 'Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong,'" *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2018; Richard Harris, "The Presidency and the Press," *The New Yorker*, September 24, 1973.

14 Max Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*, (Random House 1999), 315.

15 Frankel, *Times of My Life*, 315.

16 Stephen J. Whitfield, "Nixon and the Jews," *Patterns of Prejudice 44*, no. 5 (December 1, 2010): 437.

17 Michael Schudson, "The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2019.

18 William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (Doubleday & Co 1975).

But employing a trope—much less fusing two tropes—requires more than implication alone. As the journalist Cliff Rottman put it, there must be enough "truth to it at the edges that it gives it enough legitimacy that a rabid anti-Semite thinks he's muttering truths."[19] So what was the actual "Jewish media" presence during the Nixon years? The answer depends on who you ask—and how you measure influence. News outlets that Nixon derided as "totally dominated by the Jews" or "totally Jewish" included *Newsweek*, *The New York Times,* and *The Washington Post*.[20] While *The Times* was owned by the Jewish Sulzberger family, *Newsweek* and *The Post* were owned by Kay Graham, who was half Jewish but "considered herself Christian." Furthermore, 99 percent of American newspapers were owned by gentiles in 1972, making the notion of a "Jewish media stranglehold" seemed preposterous to some.[21] At the same time, there was a strikingly significant Jewish presence among writers and editors in prominent "mainstream" publications. In an article for *The Nation*, Rothman reported that he was told "off the record" that the number of Jews in the editorial room of one important newspaper hovered around 25 percent during that year.[22]

According to Frankel, the Sulzbergers made a conscious effort to downplay Jewish identity at *The Times* amidst the virulent antisemitism of the 1930s. They sought to avoid being "put down in American society as just a Jewish newspaper pushing Jewish causes." But, by Frankel's account, "that kind of hypersensitivity simply disappeared after the war."[23] In stark contrast to their predecessors, his generation of Jewish journalists embarked on an "unashamedly Jewish verbal invasion of American culture" during the Nixon years. In his autobiography, Frankel wrote that "it was especially satisfying to realize the wildest fantasy of the world's anti-Semites: Inspired by our heritage as keepers of the book, creators of the law, and storytellers supreme, Jews in America did finally achieve a disproportionate influence" in the media of communication.[24]

This deliberate effort by Jewish journalists—an effort to break free from the yokes of antisemitism and express cultural pride—became a double-edged sword. On one hand, it made way for unashamed Jewish names on bylines and mastheads. On the other, it lent ammunition to those

19 Cliff Rothman, "Jewish Media Stranglehold? Nixon thought so; Otis Chandler doesn't. Maybe it depends on where you stand," *The Nation*, June 20, 2002.

20 Whitfield, "Nixon and the Jews," 438.

21 Rothman, "Jewish Media Stranglehold?"

22 Rothman, "Jewish Media Stranglehold?"

23 Max Frankel, interview.

24 Max Frankel, *Times of My Life*, 400.

who sought political gain from targeting "the media" and "the Jews." Among the ranks of the latter was Vice President Spiro Agnew. "As you look around in the big news business, you see heavy concentrations of Jewish people," Agnew said in an interview promoting his 1976 novel, *The Canfield Decision*. "I'm saying it has to color to some extent their comprehension of what takes place."[25]

Agnew's comments echoed the sentiments he expressed while in the Nixon administration, which in turn paralleled historical charges of a Jewish media conspiracy. In a 1969 speech, Agnew berated the eastern "establishment" press. His infamous remarks contained no outright reference to Jews, but it was not difficult to draw connections between antisemitic caricatures and the "tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one" that he condemned.[26] By the Vice President's assessment, journalists held a "concentration of power over American public opinion unknown in history."[27] His vigorous assault on reporters unambiguously mirrored an understanding of the "crooked media" as a destructive force commandeered by a diabolical Jewish network. Such antisemitic media manipulation accusations had a long history. In 1903, czarist nationalists created *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forged "handbook" for Jewish rule in which the media played a disproportionately prominent role.[28] The document claimed to be the minutes of a meeting in which a sinister cabal of Jews plotted world domination. Step one of the "Jewish conspiracy," outlined in a section entitled "Control of the Press," was "disintegrating" Christian minds through absolute media control.[29] Just as Agnew asserted that "normality has become the nemesis of the evening news," *The Protocols* conveyed a clear message that a Jewish-controlled media was the nemesis of Christian society. "[Anti-media and antisemitic rhetoric] do go together," Frankel said. "It fundamentally arises out of a class consciousness and a class resentment of elites, and… by inheritance, that mixes with anti-Jewish attitudes."[30] Even if Agnew did not register the antisemitic overtones of his remarks, self-identifying antisemites caught on

25 "Ford Says Agnew is Wrong on Jews," *The New York Times*, June 26, 1976.

26 Spiro Agnew, "On the Media" (speech, Des Moines, Iowa, November 13, 1969), Emerson Kent.

27 Agnew, "On the Media."

28 Tara Burton, "The centuries-old history of Jewish "puppet master" conspiracy theories," *Vox*, November 2, 2018.

29 Arthur Goldwag, *The New Hate: A History of Fear and Loathing on the Populist Right* (Pantheon Books 2012).

30 Max Frankel, interview.

soon enough. His 1969 speech struck a chord. One network got mail that it characterized as 11 percent antisemitic, and *Washington Post* columnists asserted that Agnew's speech had the "unintentional effect" of creating "a renewed wave of public expression of antisemitism."[31]

It is hard to argue that these antisemitic parallels were merely "unintentional" after-effects of Nixonian anti-media rhetoric. In a 1976 essay entitled "Spiro Agnew and the Jews," Safire characterized hatred of "the media" as a convenient launchpad for the artful dissemination of antisemitic viewpoints. As Agnew became "embittered" against Jews, Safire wrote, "this new prejudice fitted neatly into an old and fruitful hatred—the media." In fact, by Safire's assessment, these two hatreds played off one another. Antisemitic tropes of global conspiracy gave a "fresh angle" to Agnew's "mouth-filling diatribes against the press." In turn, fixating on Jews "who [sat] astride most of the channels of communication" legitimized his irrational hatred of the group at large.[32]

Beneath the convergence of these two hatreds within Agnew's speech, there lies a clear intention to create that combination. The piece was crafted by Pat Buchanan, a widely known antisemite and former speechwriter for both Nixon and Agnew. Buchanan later remembered that, as Nixon read his proposed draft, he muttered, "this'll tear the scab off those bastards."[33] Even if the President had not approved the speech, and even without taped evidence of his own entrenched antisemitism, Nixon could hardly have been unaware of Buchanan's antisemitic tendencies. In a 1972 memo to the President, Buchanan suggested that he link a primary opponent with "New York Jewish money."[34] It is equally difficult to assert that Nixon did not intend the association between Agnew's anti-media messaging and antisemitic tropes. After all, connections between "the media" and a "Jewish media stranglehold" are evident in his own taped comments.[35]

The anti-media rhetoric of Nixon's associates reflects his strategy of covertly disseminating antisemitic beliefs without allowing the

31 "Say Agnew Speeches Caused New Wave of Public Expression of Anti-semitism," *Jewish Telegraph Agency Daily News Bulletin*, December 31, 1969.

32 William Safire, "Spiro Agnew and the Jews," *The New York Times*, May 24, 1976.

33 "Patrick Buchanan: Unrepentant Bigot," Anti-Defamation League, accessed March 9, 2022; Patrick Joseph Buchanan, *Nixon's White House Wars: The Battles that Made and Broke a President and Divided America Forever* (Crown Publishing Group 2017), 71.

34 "Auf Wiedersehen, Pat," *Slate*, September 16, 1999.

35 Whitfield, "Nixon and the Jews," 438.

repercussions to harm his reputation. "Nixon would give Agnew all the lines he wanted to say, but couldn't say because he was the president," Buchanan later commented to *Politico*.[36] Rather than revealing a *discrepancy* between the public and private Nixon, the tactic betrayed his ultimate *consistency* in paranoia and hatred.

The "Crooked Media" and the "Crooked Jews"

Nixon may have broadcasted the underlying antisemitism of his anti-media attacks through indirect channels. He revealed it explicitly, though, in private conversations. To both corroborate the existence of this conflation of hatreds and analyze the intent of Nixon and his associates, it is necessary to closely examine the White House tapes.

When Nixon singled out individual journalists in these recordings, he deliberately chose leaders of mainstream media institutions and presented them as diabolical figureheads of broader networks of power. In the wake of the Pentagon Papers, Nixon demanded that no staff members provide information to *The Times*. After issuing this order, he referred to Frankel—then the head of the Washington bureau—as "that damned Jew Frankel."[37] Frankel dismissed the comment as a vulgarity at the time and still stands by that response. "Would it surprise you if I said I considered it nothing personal? …Nothing that alarmed me, shocked me, surprised me, or long-bothered me," he said.[38] The broader effect of Nixon's comment, however, was more harmful. By reducing an individual journalist to just another "damned Jew," Nixon placed Jews within a collective scheme of media distortion.

This notion of an overpowering Jewish collective, allied with the media and in kinship with each other, permeates the White House tapes. Nixon evoked the same theme when discussing Defense Department analyst Daniel Ellsberg, the source of the Pentagon Papers leak. "Incidentally, I hope to God, he's not Jewish, is he?" Nixon remarked.[39] Though Ellsberg was not Jewish, the President projected a Jewish identity upon him to depict a monolithic Jewish elite plotting against him. On this point, a July 1971 conversation between Nixon, Haldeman, and Press Secretary Ron Ziegler is particularly revealing. "All of the Jewish families are close, but there's this strange malignancy now that seems to creep among them. I don't

36 Tim Alberta, "The Ideas Made It, But I Didn't," *Politico*, June 2017.

37 Irvin Molotsky, "In 1971 Tapes, Nixon Is Heard Blaming Jews for Communist Plots," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1999.

38 Max Frankel, interview.

39 Molotsky, "In 1971 Tapes."

know, the radicalism… They're all Jews. Everyone's a Jew. Gelb's a Jew. Halperin's a Jew… The Jews are born spies," Nixon stated.[40] By depicting a "strange malignancy" that "crept" among Jewish networks and "Jewish families," the President superimposed tropes of incestual Jewish bonds upon stereotypes of Jews as cunning masterminds of deceit. He conflated the "radical" anti-Vietnam War Movement of the 1960s with mainstream Jewish journalists like Leslie H. Gelb and government bureaucrats like Morton Halperin, linking them inextricably within an imagined Jewish opposition. The key connective tissue between all these statements is the condemnation of Nixon's enemies as disloyal "spies," a framework that conveniently played into both anti-media and anti-Jewish hatred.

The extent to which Nixon fused such disparate targets within one uniform opposition, however, has become the principal basis for downplaying revelations of his antisemitism post-presidency. Some claim that condemnations of antisemitism are myopic, given that Nixon seemed to spew unrelenting hatred towards marginalized groups of all stripes. Responding to this sentiment in a 2007 interview, Leonard Garment replied, "I mean I've said he was an equal opportunity hater."[41] It is true that Jews hardly dominated Nixon's off-the-record insults. In the same conversation in which he called Jews "born spies," the then president agreed with Haldeman that "Negroes" were "not intellectual enough" to be spies.[42] In other remarks, Nixon disparaged professional diplomats with anti-gay slurs.[43] Unlike his antisemitic beliefs, many of these prejudices had clear, tangible implications on public policy. "There are worse things about Nixon than his anti-Semitism," Frankel said.[44]

Yet, ignoring his antisemitic commentary neglects a crucial opportunity to explore the positionality of Jews within a confluence of hatreds. "There is an almost genetic anti-Semitism," Frankel claimed. "Those phony attributes come down through the ages and through the generations, and they may subtly affect actual thinking about real problems, in ways that the perpetrators themselves do not fully realize."[45] Analysis of antisemitic tropes as a persistent societal force—manifest in dialogue both

40 Richard Nixon, Bob Haldeman, and Ron Ziegler, private conversation, July 5, 1971, conversation 537-004, transcript.

41 Leonard Garment, interview by Timothy Naftali, April 6, 2007, transcript, Nixon Library Oral History Collection, 32.

42 Nixon, Haldeman, and Ziegler, private conversation.

43 Whitfield, "Nixon and the Jews," 441.

44 Max Frankel, interview.

45 Max Frankel, interview.

subtle and obvious, and complex enough to amplify other forms of vitriol—is crucial to understanding the interplay between tropes and rhetoric about various marginalized groups. For just this reason, investigating the ways in which Nixon's anti-media and antisemitic rhetoric fed on one another is absolutely vital.

Conclusion

Although it is impossible to draw a direct line from each Nixonian assault on the media to antisemitic beliefs, the latter had a significant influence on the Nixon administration as it crafted (and acted on) anti-media criticism. From the explicit public antisemitism of Buchanan as he wrote speeches to the indirect antisemitism of Agnew as he delivered speeches, and finally, to the privately-expressed beliefs of Nixon in the Oval Office, hostility towards Jews penetrated the inner corridors of American government from 1969 to 1974. Yet, the true novelty of these tactics was not that they reflected antisemitism, a phenomenon persistent across centuries. Instead, it laid in the fact that Nixon found a way to not only weaponize antisemitism against the press but also offload the backlash of negative coverage onto a "Jewish elite." The effects of this trope convergence continue to this day. "The continuity is there overtly between Agnew and Trump," Frankel commented. "They both discovered that there was political value in taking on the elite in a way that played to the biases of anti-Semites."[46]

The fact that the Nixon administration saw the press as "the enemy" is widely documented. Less explored is that they saw the press as "the enemy"—in some part—because they believed the press was controlled by Jews. Analyzing the divide between the public and private Nixon makes it possible to unearth the implicit message of many anti-press comments: when politicians rail against networks controlled by an "unelected elite," a Jewish caricature often comes to mind.

46 Max Frankel, interview.

Bibliography

Agnew, Spiro. "On the Media." Speech, Des Moines, Iowa, November 13, 1969. Emerson Kent. http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/on_the_media.htm.

Alberta, Tim. "The Ideas Made It, But I Didn't." *Politico*. June 2017. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/22/pat-buchanan-trump-president-history-profile-215042/.

"Antisemitism in American History." Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era. Anti-Defamation League. 2020. Accessed March 8, 2022. https://antisemitism.adl.org/antisemitism-in-american-history/.

"Auf Wiedersehen, Pat." *Slate*, September 16, 1999. https://slate.com/news-and-politics/1999/09/auf-wiedersehen-pat.html.

Bergmann, Werner and Rainer Erb. "Survey Findings on Antisemitism: A Four-National Comparison." Translated by Frederick D. Weil. Louisiana State University, 1990. https://www.lsu.edu/faculty/fweil/Weil90AntisemitismFourNation-BergmannErb.pdf.

Buchanan, Patrick Joseph. *Nixon's White House Wars: The Battles that Made and Broke a President and Divided America Forever*. Crown Publishing Group, 2017.

Burton, Tara. "The centuries-old history of Jewish 'puppet master' conspiracy theories." *Vox*, November 2, 2018. https://www.vox.com/2018/11/2/15946556/antisemitism-enlightenment-george-soros-conspiracy-theory-globalist.

Dallek, Robert. *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*. HarperCollins, 2007.

Dinnerstein, Leonard. *Antisemitism in America*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

"Ford Says Agnew is Wrong on Jews." *The New York Times*, June 26, 1976. https://www.nytimes.com/1976/06/26/archives/ford-says-agnew-is-wrong-on-jews-criticizes-comments-made-in-novel.html.

Frankel, Max. *The Times of My Life and My Life with the Times*. Random House, 1999.

———. Interview by author. March 9, 2022.

Garment, Leonard. Interview by Timothy Naftali. Nixon Library Oral History Collection. Transcript. April 6, 2007. https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/forresearchers/find/histories/garment-2007-04-06.pdf.

Garment, Leonard. "A Nixon Ex-Aide Explains (1 Letter)." *The New York Times*, July 20, 2007. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/20/opinion/l20nixon.html.

Grossman, Jennifer. "Garment's District." *The Washington Examiner*, March 10, 1997. https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/garments-district.

Harris, Richard. "The Presidency and the Press." *The New Yorker*, September 24, 1973. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1973/10/01/the-presidency-and-the-press.

"Jews Have Too Much Power." Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era. Anti-Defamation League. 2020. Accessed March 8, 2022. https://antisemitism.adl.org/power/.

Lardner, George Jr. and Michael Dobb. "New Tapes Reveal Depth of Nixon's Anti-Semitism." *The Washington Post*, October 6, 1999. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/oct99/nixon6.htm.

Molotsky, Irvin. "In 1971 Tapes, Nixon Is Heard Blaming Jews for Communist Plots." *The New York Times*, October 7, 1999. https://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/07/us/in-1971-tapes-nixon-is-heard-blaming-jews-for-communist-plots.html.

Nixon, Richard, Bob Haldeman and Ron Ziegler. Conversation 537-004. Transcript. July 5, 1971. https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/nixon-the-jews-are-born-spies.

"Patrick Buchanan: Unrepentant Bigot." Anti-Defamation League. Accessed March 8, 2022. https://www.adl.org/resources/profiles/patrick-buchanan-unrepentant-bigot.

Rothman, Cliff. "Jewish Media Stranglehold? Nixon thought so; Otis Chandler doesn't. Maybe it depends on where you stand," *The Nation*, June 20, 2002. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/jewish-media-stranglehold/.

Safire, William. *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House*. Doubleday & Co, 1975.

———. "Spiro Agnew and the Jews." *The New York Times*, May 24, 1976. https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/24/archives/spiro-agnew-and-the-jews-essay.html.

"Say Agnew Speeches Caused New Wave of Public Expression of Anti-semitism." *Jewish Telegraph Agency Daily News Bulletin*, December 31, 1969. https://www.jta.org/archive/say-agnew-speeches-caused-new-wave-of-public-expression-of-anti-semitism.

Schudson, Michael. "The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust." *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php.

Strauss, Valerie. "It's back in the age of 'alternative facts': 'Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.'" *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/07/26/its-back-in-the-age-of-alternative-facts-lies-my-teacher-told-me-everything-your-american-history-textbook-got-wrong/.

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. "National Archives and Records Administration Announces Agreement to Accelerate Release of Nixon Tapes." Press Release nr96-61. April 12, 1996.

https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/1996/nr96-61.html.

Whitfield, Stephen J. "Nixon and the Jews." *Patterns of Prejudice 44*, no. 5 (December 1, 2010): 432-453. https://doi.org/10.1080/003132 2X.2010.527442.

Vanishing Bison

How Evolutionary Thought Paved the Path to Near Extinction

Diana Baszucki

In the late nineteenth century, the American bison was believed to be hurtling toward an inevitable extinction. Often referred to as buffalo, these animals once existed in such great numbers that, by an early traveler's account, they appeared to "[blacken] the plain as far as the eye could view." Yet, at its bottleneck in the 1880s, the bison population had dropped to a precarious few.[1] This incredible transformation of the American landscape seems almost inconceivable today. The bison now stands as the national mammal of the United States, revered as an icon of the West. However, during its dramatic population decline, the animal was viewed as a necessary sacrifice to make way for the progress of European civilization across the continent.

In analyzing the bison's near extinction, academics have suggested a multitude of factors, including advances in firearm technologies, the 1869 completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, and the growing demand for bison fur for use in clothing and other leather goods. Less discussed are the pervading ideas that made this destruction possible. A tapestry of nineteenth-century beliefs about race, evolution, and white civilization acted as a powerful catalyst for westward expansion and—alongside it—the near-elimination of the bison. An important strand of this ideological backdrop was social evolutionism, the idea that humanity progresses through distinct stages of increasing improvement and technological sophistication. Any interference in this process would constitute meddling with an evolution toward the greater good. Within this doctrine, the near extinction of the bison was seen as necessary for Euro-American society to expand across the continent, replacing "savagery" with "civilization." Furthermore, exterminating the bison was understood as an important

1 Roger Di Silvestro, *Return of the Bison: A Story of Survival, Restoration, and a Wilder World* (Mountaineers Books, 2023), 15.

way to reduce the populations of Native Americans, undermining hunter-gatherer lifestyles to make way for white agrarian settlers. Because this transformation was painted as natural and even inevitable, those who killed bison by the hundreds were not seen as selfish and overzealous, but rather as aiding in the progress of mankind. Wiping out the bison was believed to be a necessary step toward building a broad, moral nation of smallholder agriculturalists in the supposedly most improved state of humanity.

The Origins and Consequences of Westward Expansion

Propelled by federal policies, white Americans expanded across more and more of the North American continent throughout the nineteenth century. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848 both transferred large tracts of land to the United States, including the Great Plains region. Of course, this land was already inhabited by Native Americans, who had lived there for over ten thousand years. Nevertheless, the Homestead Act of 1862 sought to replace them with European Americans, guaranteeing 160 acres of public land to any settler who agreed to live on and cultivate the tract for at least five years.[2] This settlement and migration further accelerated with the 1869 completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, which connected the eastern and western halves of the continent.

The American West was a place where white settlements spread, forcing Native Americans off their traditional homelands and onto reservations. But in the American imagination, the West transcended this reality; it was a place where a simpler, less industrialized life among farms and livestock was still possible in contrast to the increasingly populated, urbanized East.[3] Life in the West represented freedom, self-sufficiency, and an idealized agrarian dream situated somewhere between the supposedly barbaric lifestyles of Native Americans and the hectic, polluted lives of city dwellers.[4] This frontier was a mythical symbol as much as it was a tangible location.

The expansion of settlers into the West was impossible without the violent removal of Native Americans, and powerful ideological frameworks developed to justify this violence. One of the most influential was Manifest Destiny. Coined by journalist John O'Sullivan in 1845, this concept declared that the United States was divinely ordained to expand

2 Jason E. Pierce, "The Politics of Whiteness and Western Expansion, 1848–80," in *Making the White Man's West* (University Press of Colorado, 2016), 139.

3 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Harvard University Press, 1950), 125.

4 Smith, *Virgin Land,* 187.

across the entire North American continent, "which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government."[5] Distinctly religious, Manifest Destiny was widely influential throughout the nineteenth century. The idea created a firm justification for expansion by suggesting that white American settlers had a unique claim to the land because of their religious, moral, and technological superiority. Through its lens, the displacement and murder of Indigenous populations became simply the completion of God's divine plan. Alongside other, more secular justifications, this creed had devastating impacts on Native communities. These ideas both encouraged direct acts of murder and legitimized the relocation of Native communities onto small reservations, often located thousands of miles from their traditional homelands.[6]

Amid this brutality against Indigenous peoples, Euro-American settlers fought a parallel crusade against the bison, who were deeply emmeshed in Native ways of life. For over ten thousand years, humans and buffalo had coexisted on the Great Plains. Though contact with European settlers had significantly reshaped the lives of Native Americans prior to the nineteenth century, many tribes continued to depend upon bison for shelter, clothing, and food.[7] Beyond providing these material gifts, the buffalo were also central to many Native spiritual and religious traditions. Many Great Plains groups had complex creation stories featuring the bison.[8] In the Lakota creation story, for instance, humans were born from a blood clot of a buffalo.[9] Bison were likewise vital to the Kiowa Sun Dance ceremonies, the group's most important dance and the only event where the many Kiowa bands gathered in one place.[10] As the bison provided for Native people both materially and spiritually, many Native American groups cared

5 Alice Beck Kehoe, "Manifest Destiny as the Order of Nature," in *Nature and Antiquities*, ed. Philip L. Kohl (University of Arizona Press, 2014), 190.

6 Joshua Schuster, *What Is Extinction? A Natural and Cultural History of Last Animals* (Fordham University Press, 2023), 52.

7 Schuster, *What Is Extinction?*, 53.

8 Ken Zontek, *Buffalo Nation: American Indian Efforts to Restore the Bison* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 4.

9 Zontek, *Buffalo Nation,* 3.

10 Benjamin R. Kracht, "Kiowa Religion in Historical Perspective," *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1997): 23-26. Bison hides were used to construct the arbor for the Kiowa Sun Dance. As buffalo populations began to vanish, this tradition became increasingly difficult to carry out. According to the scholar Benjamin Kracht, when the Kiowa were unable to perform the Sun Dance in 1890, the Ghost Dance became more popular amongst the group. This Ghost Dance appeared to be influenced by elements of Christianity with its similar songs and prayers, demonstrating how the decline of bison populations expedited Kiowa cultural change and assimilation.

in reciprocity for the bison's proliferation. For example, some communities practiced controlled burns of grasslands to preserve the bison's grazing areas from encroaching brush and trees.[11] Owing to the interconnected nature of their very lives, the buffalo's decline had catastrophic effects on Native people.

And those declines were immense. Bison once numbered between thirty to fifty million, populating North America's plains, woodlands, and mountains.[12] Their historic range covered much of the continent, centering in the Great Plains region while also stretching from Canada to Mexico and Nevada to Virginia. Early Euro-American travelers gazed in awe at the bison's abundance. "When they move in mass," one 1833 traveler recounted, "they form a dense and almost impenetrable column."[13] By the 1860s, however, the bison had become scarce across the Great Plains.[14] The 1870s marked an exceptionally deadly period for the animal, and by the 1880s, their numbers had dropped precipitously to fewer than a thousand.[15]

The causes of the bison's decline were numerous, interconnected, and contested. Some scholars, like David Smits, argue that the bison died off due to a strategic operation by the United States Army, which aimed to weaken Native American tribes by destroying their main food source.[16] Indeed, army generals escorted many high-profile figures on hunting parties and encouraged sport hunters to support the nation through their kills.[17] Other scholars, such as Geoff Cunfer, point to how new technologies made hunting more efficient. For example, the introduction of horses and subsequent advent of rifling allowed both Native peoples and Euro-American settlers to pursue bison with unprecedented efficiency.[18] Another historian, Dan Flores, proposes the unregulated fur industry as a leading cause of dwindling bison numbers. Under the capitalist market system, he claims, bison were "another common resource in the West, open to unregulated exploitation." Consequently, overhunting ensued for individual

11 Geoff Cunfer, "The Decline and Fall of the Bison Empire," in *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains* (Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 10.

12 Schuster, *What Is Extinction?,* 44; Silvestro, *Return of the Bison*, 14.

13 Silvestro, *Return of the Bison,* 15.

14 Cunfer, "The Decline and Fall," 24.

15 Cunfer, "The Decline and Fall," 46.

16 David D. Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1994): 316.

17 Smits, "The Frontier Army," 315.

18 Cunfer, "The Decline and Fall," 13.

financial gain.[19] Other scholars note the impact of the Transcontinental Railroad, whose 1869 completion seemed to seal the bison's fate. Joshua Schuster, for instance, argues that the railroad made the trade of bison robes more convenient than ever, encouraging overhunting.[20]

Each of these explanations point predominantly to material factors as the architects of the bison's decline. However, these factors did not act in isolation. They were both driven and justified by nineteenth-century America's ideological climate. As this paper will argue, the lionization of an agrarian lifestyle and the rise of social evolutionary theories played crucial roles in bringing the American bison to near-extinction.

The Agrarian Vision: Picturing Social Progress

In the increasingly urbanized United States of the nineteenth century, many Americans romanticized the West as an agrarian foil to their growing cities. This "civilized" version of agrarian life was upheld as counter to both the perceived backwards lifeways of Native Americans and the crowded industrialization of the eastern United States and Europe.[21] As evidenced by the period's paintings and writings, the notion that the West could still realize an agricultural arcadia was widespread. It was believed that its materialization, though, would necessitate the large-scale elimination of the buffalo. Later social evolutionary theories built upon this idea, highlighting differences in living styles as discrete benchmarks of social and moral progress. Thus, the vision of an agrarian hope domesticated the wild into a scene that did not include the bison.

Thomas Cole, one of the most significant American landscape painters of the nineteenth century, illustrated how ideas of social and moral progress intertwined with this rural romanticization. His works, specifically his *Course of Empire* series, illustrated the budding theory of social evolutionism that would eventually be solidified in American thought. Painted between 1833 and 1836, the *Course of Empire* depicted human progress as a transformation through distinct stages, shown through five scenes that followed the same landscape from the "savage" state through the collapse of civilization. In an 1833 letter to one of his patrons, Cole wrote that these paintings would show a cyclical pattern of history,

19 Dan Flores, "Reviewing an Iconic Story: Environmental History and the Demise of the Bison," in *Bison and People on the North American Great Plain* (Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 42.

20 Schuster, *What Is Extinction?,* 47.

21 Heike Paul, "Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West," in *The Myths That Made America*, (Transcript Verlag, 2014), 322.

where great nations "have risen from the savage state to that of power and glory, and then fallen, and become extinct."[22] He sought to trace the "natural changes of Landscape & those effected by man in his progress from Barbarism to Civilization, to Luxury, the Vicious state or state of destruction and to the state of Ruin & Desolation."[23] Thus, Cole imagined different states of social progress as stages of development, using language that would later be mirrored in writings on social evolutionism.

Figure 1: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Savage State*, 1834, oil on canvas, New-York Historical Society, New York.

The first painting in Cole's series, *The Savage State*, depicts the untamed wild and the humans living within it. This landscape is generally undeveloped, with wild deer prancing through the foreground alongside dense woodlands and shrubbery. The human figures reference Native Americans, alluded to by their tepee structures, canoes, bows, and arrows. They are all in motion, suggesting that the scene is not one of peace or rest. The sky is dark and stormy, casting a broad shadow on the land. Within Cole's portrayal, the undeveloped world is a dark, chaotic, and unpleasant place.

22 Louis Legrand Noble, *The Course of Empire, Voyage of Life, and Other Pictures of Thomas Cole* (New York: Cornish, Lamport & Co., 1853), 176.

23 Noble, *The Course of Empire*, 176.

Figure 2: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, 1834, oil on canvas, New-York Historical Society, New York.

In the second painting, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, the same location appears in a different stage of development—one more clearly altered by human hands. The landscape hosts a peaceful, civilized utopia. In this brighter, more romantic scene, light-skinned settlers have replaced the Native Americans of Cole's previous work. The overgrown areas of *The Savage State* have transformed into tilled fields and the teepees into stone dwellings. One of the scene's most significant elements is the introduction of sheep and cattle. The lively deer sprinting through *The Savage State* is nowhere to be found, swapped with animals central to the livelihoods of rural American settlers. A felled tree's stump in the foreground epitomizes how this painting's occupants have transformed their environment to suit them.

The Arcadian or Pastoral State foreshadows much of what later thinkers held as hallmarks of civilization: stone buildings, domesticated animals, and field agriculture utilizing animal labor. Cole did not portray these changes as an arbitrary stage of human development. Rather, he depicted the agrarian scene as an idealized, utopian vision of life. The people in the painting dance, play instruments, and draw, demonstrating their higher level of recreation and culture. The once turbulent sky of *The Savage State* fades into a temperate blue with few clouds. Wild animals

have given way to domestic herds.

Through these details, Cole showcased a story of social progress alongside environmental change, suggesting the superiority of agrarian life over the hunter-gatherer lifestyles of many Native Americans. In his portrayals, hunting—and critically, the wild animals being hunted—were intrinsically connected with the first "savage" stage of life and thus needed to be removed to make way for the second, more improved stage. The substitution of domestic herds for wild ones, like the bison of the Great Plains, were a necessary precursor for the betterment of human life.

The final three paintings in Cole's series—*The Consummation of Empire, Destruction,* and *Desolation*—showcase the quick rise and fall of empire. In *The Consummation of Empire*, Cole's pastoral scene shifts into one of decadence and luxury. Marble structures, towering columns, and robed figures recall ancient Rome. The next painting, *Destruction*, plunges the once lavish scene into chaos. Fires, fighting, and bloodshed erupt from every corner as the great power of the empire is transformed into a force for evil. Finally, in *Desolation*, the ruins of the city lie overtaken by vines and other wildlife. No human figures appear in the frame. Together, these paintings echo the over-urbanization that many believed was poisoning the American East during this time. Through their dramatic narrative, Cole revealed his distaste for this stage of human development, suggesting excess would ultimately lead to destruction.

Throughout the whole *Course of Empire*, Cole demonstrated his favoritism for an agrarian lifestyle among the grand changes of human progress. He suggested urbanism, opulence, and wealth inevitably led to chaos, but the "savage state" was too untamed. Conversely, he portrayed agrarian or pastoral life as modest, peaceful, and dignified. Cole's paintings showcased the common nineteenth-century American belief that the life of a small-scale agrarian producer was the best of all.[24] They also illustrated the idea that nature required some level of transformation to become the backdrop of this ideal. The elimination of wild animals like the bison did not represent a loss of nature but instead its conversion into a more improved state, one better fit for human habitation. Through his tilled hillsides and careful rendering of domesticated animals, Cole carried out the work of settlement all by himself, reflecting on a smaller scale the radical transformation that was sweeping across the continent.

Cole's paintings formed part of a broader agrarian vision that featured an emphasis on productivity. In the century and a half before his

24 Smith, *Virgin Land,* 123.

series, other thinkers upheld agrarianism as a means to increase the carrying capacity of land, making the conversion of wilderness an admirable means of strengthening a nation. For example, English political theorist John Locke conceptualized the wilderness was an unimproved waste of space that man came to own through his labor alone. In his treatise published in 1689, Locke wrote that "as much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property."[25] Across the Atlantic, Thomas Jefferson echoed this celebration of transforming wilderness into valuable farmland. Perhaps the most significant proponent of the agrarian ideal, he wrote and spoke widely about the morality inherent to the life of a yeoman farmer.[26] In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson asserted that farming as a labor was ordained with unique religious virtue. He famously claimed that those "who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God" and suggested it would be ideal if all citizens were employed in the "improvement" of the land.[27] As President, Jefferson's actions backed up his theory. It was he who completed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, buying some 828,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi from France. This deal "more than doubled the area awaiting settlement in the West," allowing more Americans to realize what Jefferson saw as a life of dignity, self-sufficiency, and moral superiority. [28]

Within this agrarian vision, destroying the bison was a patriotic and noble effort in the name of both morality and productivity. Indeed, many nineteenth-century ranchers and bison hunters viewed themselves as crusaders clearing the way for the proliferation of a civilized nation. Long before ascending to the presidency, Theodore Roosevelt described this quest in his 1885 memoir, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchmen*. He glorified the "hunters who thronged in to pursue the huge [bison] herd" as "rough forerunners of civilization."[29] Ranchers then marched their cattle into the West to take the bison's place. In their efforts, Roosevelt claimed, they "formed the vanguard of the white settlers."[30] In his view, these hunters and ranchers stood on the front lines against savagery, helping propel the

25 John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government,* ed. C. B. Macpherson (Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 28.

26 Lisi Krall, "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision and the Changing Nature of Property," *Journal of Economic Issues* 36, no. 1 (2002): 131.

27 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Prichard and Hall, 1785), 175.

28 Smith, *Virgin Land,* 128.

29 Theodore Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman, Hunting Trips on the Prairie and in the Mountains* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1885), 7.

30 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips*, 7.

American West toward civilization.

Roosevelt excused bison extinction as a necessary sacrifice in part because it would allow the productivity of the land to be increased. Thomas Jefferson foreshadowed this pragmatism almost a century earlier, writing that "where food is regularly supplied, a single farm will shew more of cattle, than a whole country of forests can of buffaloes."[31] Roosevelt similarly argued that the bison's "continued existence in any numbers was absolutely incompatible with anything but a very sparse settlement of the country."[32] Following this strand of thinking, Colonel Nelson A. Miles remarked in his 1896 *Personal Recollections* that the "same territory which a quarter of a century ago was supporting those vast herds of wild game, is now covered with domestic animals which afford the food supply for hundreds of millions of people in civilized countries."[33] The army officer suggested that the bison extinction was not merely beneficial for feeding just anyone; those who benefited from the land's transformation were civilized people. The campaign to wipe out the bison was therefore inextricable from the project of populating the continent with Euro-American settlers. In allowing agrarian families to proliferate across the continent, bison extinction was framed as an unfortunate, yet pivotal step towards the improvement of humankind.

Some hunters felt passing personal remorse at the bison's demise, but they dismissed those feelings as selfish. Roosevelt wrote that "the comparatively few of us who would have preferred the continuance of the old order of things, merely for the sake of our own selfish enjoyment, have no right to complain" because from "the standpoint of humanity at large, the extermination of the buffalo has been a blessing."[34] He shrugged off his personal sadness at seeing the bison vanish because he, too, believed the extinction served a greater purpose. Similarly, Colonel Miles explained that the buffalo extinction was not "cruelty and wasteful extravagance" because these animals, "like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress."[35] Although Miles recognized that the bison's demise could be seen as a heartless slaughter, he asserted that the ends of human progress justified any means and equated their passing with the removal of Native Americans.

In the writings of these men, a key idea emerged: "civilization"

31 Jefferson, *Notes*, 65.
32 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips*, 269.
33 Smits, "The Frontier Army," 333.
34 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips*, 270.
35 Smits, "The Frontier Army," 333.

itself was a noble, altruistic aim. This thought appeared again and again in stories about bison extinction, fitting into a larger, more complex tapestry of evolutionary theory. Collectively, this network came to justify the near death of the bison species and the cruelties waged against Native American communities. Both of these wars were seen as necessary steps to encourage humanity's progress.

Inevitable Obsolescence: Social Evolutionism Theory

The ideal of agrarian civilization permeated American thought from its very beginnings. In the nineteenth century, though, the burgeoning field of evolutionary theory granted this vision a new scientific and empirical legitimacy. Social evolutionism—the language and logic of evolution as applied to social concepts—was weaponized to further justify the bison's destruction. In the era's larger network of ideologies, social evolutionism and agrarian idealization worked together to justify the wars on the bison and Native Americans. These deaths, the ideas suggested, were merely a natural consequence of human progress.

While the concept of evolution had been around since the eighteenth century, British scientist and naturalist Charles Darwin was the first to propose a scientific theory to explain its mechanisms. In his seminal work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin proposed that species evolved through a process of natural selection. According to his theory, different genes proved favorable by allowing for longer survival and therefore greater reproductive potential.[36] This process of natural selection, later referred to as survival of the fittest, concerned itself primarily with the change of species as they adapted to their natural environment. Accordingly, some authors applied Darwin's theory directly to the bison, suggesting their own slowness or lack of intelligence caused their demise. In 1887, one author blamed "the phenomenal stupidity of the animals themselves, and their indifference to man" for their decline.[37] Yet, this focus on species was not the primary justification for bison extinction. Instead, evolutionary thought as applied to humans and human societies proved more important as a theoretical defense.

Known as social evolutionism or unilinear cultural evolution, this offshoot placed different human populations on different rungs of an evolutionary ladder. Just as evolution through genetics allowed only the

36 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859).

37 William T. Hornaday, *The Extermination of the American Bison with a Sketch of its Discovery and Life History* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 484.

"survival of the fittest," progression through these stages was unilinear, inexorable, and ultimately led to improvement.[38] Through the lens of social evolutionism, a life involving farming and domestication was not only a moral superior but also a logical, inevitable advancement over a life alongside wild nature. Bison were associated with the earlier, undeveloped stage. Consequently, their extinction was painted as a natural result of human progress as white settlers worked to erase Native Americans and their lifestyles from the land.

Ideas about unilinear social evolution thrived throughout the nineteenth century, first in Europe and later in the United States. Expanding upon previous theorists' work, Lewis Henry Morgan elaborated on the theory in his 1877 book, *Ancient Society*. An American anthropologist and social theorist, Morgan argued that all human populations evolved through the same distinct forms, moving from savagery to barbarism and, finally, to civilization. Some populations, however, advanced farther than others.[39] *Ancient Society* offered distinct benchmarks to differentiate the stages from one another. Hallmarks often involved food provisioning or production, with more advanced agricultural or ranching techniques placed above hunting and gathering. The first rung, savagery, was marked by gathering roots and plants, and at a slightly higher level, fishing and archery.[40] The next stage, barbarism, required irrigated horticulture and the use of brick or stone in architecture. The final stage, civilization, occurred once a population began using a phonetic alphabet and written language.[41] Final-stage societies also relied on domesticated animals for milk and meat. They likewise adopted field agriculture for crops.

Given these requirements, humans had to drastically alter the natural world to reach civilization. With this final stage, Morgan stated, "came the thought of reducing the forest, and bringing wide fields under cultivation."[42] In this framework, the evolution of humanity was marked by increasingly significant changes to the land and a continued taming of nature. In this regard, *Ancient Society* offered a more detailed examination of the ideas that Cole explored in his *Course of Empire*. Morgan had formalized the beliefs within Cole's paintings into an anthropological theory.

38 Caroline Winterer, "Dinosaurs, Deep Time, and the Challenge of Darwin," History 154: The History of Ideas in America (to 1900) (class lecture, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, November 28, 2022).

39 Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1877).

40 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 19.

41 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 11.

42 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 27.

Like Cole, Morgan's different stages of human development were unmistakably hierarchical, not simply divergent. He stated that "mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and worked their way up from savagery to civilization."[43] Morgan marked the distinction between these stages as predominantly technological, yet he also argued that there were social and cultural differences between those communities he viewed as more or less evolved. He stated that "the inferiority of savage man in the mental and moral scale, undeveloped, inexperienced, and held down by his low animal appetites and passions" was "substantially demonstrated" by archaeological remains.[44] Thus, he suggested that any markers of savage or barbarous states, such as hunting, foraging, or living in non-stone houses, also connoted moral backwardness. Morgan also considered differences in religion as markers of mental deficiency, declaring that "all primitive religions are grotesque and to some extent unintelligible."[45] To Morgan, these societies were still underdeveloped.

These ideas were used to justify violence against Native people, painting the attack as part of a "necessary sequence of progress" that should be left alone.[46] Here, Morgan linked his theories with Social Darwinism and other extinction narratives about Native people, asserting that the replacement of Indigenous inhabitants with white settlers was inevitable. In *Ancient Society,* Morgan explicitly discussed the real-time loss of Native American populations, stating that their arts, languages, and institutions were "perishing daily…declining under the influence of American civilization."[47] He declared that within a "few more years," the anthropological study of Native Americans would be rendered impossible. While these statements suggested a terrifying loss of an entire population's culture, Morgan did not use any language that would indicate remorse. Since the progression of culture towards a civilized state was viewed as scientifically natural, the loss of relics from previous stages was not something to mourn or prevent. These ideas had widespread consequences. According to scholar and author Patrick Brantlinger, "the idea that primitive races were doomed became a mantra for advocates of expansion and manifest destiny."[48] This theory of inevitable destruction supported its

43 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 3.
44 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 41.
45 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 5.
46 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 3.
47 Morgan, *Ancient Society*, viii.
48 Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 5.

realization.

These statements had implications not only for Native Americans but for all facets of their lifestyle. Specifically, because most Native communities in the Great Plains depended upon bison for their livelihoods, the "perishing" of Native people also represented the passing of an era where humans lived closely with bison. In Morgan's framework, civilized societies depended on domesticated animals, not wild ones, for sustenance, rendering the bison extraneous. A predominant aim of Native American policy at this time was to assimilate remaining Native communities into white, settler culture. Thus, even where Native people themselves were allowed to live on, their ability to practice their traditional ways of life—deeply interwoven with that of the buffalo—was attacked.[49]

In his writings, Theodore Roosevelt advanced the idea that humanity's progress towards farming and the consequent loss of hunting-based livelihoods were completely inexorable. Before his time as president, Roosevelt spent a short time ranching in the Dakota Badlands. There, he grew to identify strongly with Western ranchers, for whom the hunting of bison was a key facet of life.[50] When Roosevelt reflected on this experience in *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, though, he described the ranching lifestyle as, by its nature, "ephemeral." Though he regarded this existence as "the pleasantest and healthiest life in America," it could not last.[51] To refute the "sentimental nonsense" about white settlers "taking the Indians' land," Roosevelt noted that ranching, too, would "shortly pass away from the plains as completely as the red and white hunters who have vanished from before our herds."[52] He made sure not to express deep sentimentality about the loss of hunters, equating them to the "necessary" loss of Native American livelihoods. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle as a whole was, according to Roosevelt, impermanent. His conclusion—a vision of the West marked by tamed animals and farmers instead of ranchers and bison—was a concrete manifestation of Cole and Morgan's theories of social stages.[53]

Influential figures from other walks of life echoed this sentiment, particularly during the height of the bison decline. William Hornaday, a prominent zoologist, wrote in 1887 that the "disappearance of the buffalo from all the country east of the Mississippi was one of the inevitable results

49 José Hobday, "Forced Assimilation and the Native American Dance," *CrossCurrents* 26, no. 2 (1976): 190.

50 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips*, 36.

51 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips*, 25.

52 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips,* 23.

53 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips,* 26.

of the advance of civilization."[54] The same writer who would later become a key figure in bison preservation. An iconic figure of the American West, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody wrote in an 1894 article for the *Cosmopolitan* that the "destruction of the big game in the West…is simply a natural consequence of the advance of civilization. There is no longer any frontier."[55] These authors implied that the spread of white settlers across the West was intrinsically incompatible with the survival of the bison. Using Morgan's theory of unilinear cultural evolution, they exonerated any individuals who may have borne responsibility for the buffalo extinction.

When applied to the bison extinction, social evolutionist ideas suggested that the animal was a relic of a past stage of human evolution. Thus, the buffalo were doomed to destruction as more advanced populations spread across the continent. Rather than a tragedy or heartbreaking loss, these ideas framed the loss of America's great bison as a natural, explainable evolutionary process, one that it would be hopeless to interfere with.

For the Greater Good: Destroying the Bison to Destroy Native Americans

Social evolutionist theories portrayed bison extinction and Native American destruction as inevitable, but they did not paint these losses as mere parallel phenomena. Instead, these ideas characterized the bison extinction as an event that would improve American society in part *because* it would secure an advantage over Indigenous populations. As many Native communities depended upon the bison for their survival, the animal's destruction was partly understood as a strategy to weaken Native peoples, making them easier to overpower and force onto reservations.[56] The doctrine interpreted the annihilation of bison as a military benefit to the nation and helped guide United States Army policy.

In *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman,* Roosevelt wrote that the bison extinction was a crucial step towards moving Native Americans onto reservations:

> Above all, the extermination of the buffalo was the only way of solving the Indian question. As long as this large animal of the chase existed, the Indians simply could not be kept on reservations,

54 Hornaday, *The Extermination*, 484.

55 William Frederick Cody, "Famous Hunting Parties of the Plains," *The Cosmopolitan*, 1894.

56 Smits, "The Frontier Army," 314.

> and always had an ample supply of meat on hand to support them in the event of a war; and its disappearance was the only method of forcing them to at least partially abandon their savage mode of life.[57]

Roosevelt's description is striking in its candor. He plainly laid out an attack against the bison as a proxy war against Native Americans. In the same text, Roosevelt referred to the "savage mode of life" of Native Americans and suggested that because their communities and traditional lifeways did not resemble the image of white, civilized society, any violence used to extinguish them was justified. Given his upfront rationale, it seems that Roosevelt's interpretation was widely popular.

Although contested by some scholars, historian David Smits echoes the theory. He argues that the bison extinction was a strategic and purposeful move by the United States Army to weaken Native American populations, not merely a convenient coincidence. Social evolutionist ideas, he emphasizes, were widespread among hunters and generals. By asserting that human progress towards a more environmentally transformative lifestyle was both inevitable and beneficial, these theories made the bison's killers believe they were acting for the greater good. Smits points to many examples of army leaders, including famed General William Tecumseh Sherman, who suggested that killing the bison would make it easier to force Native populations onto reservations so that they could be "civilized."[58] Another lieutenant, General John M. Schofield, wrote in his memoir in 1897 that during his career, he had aimed to "kill off [the Indian's] food until there should no longer be an Indian frontier in our beautiful country."[59] Buoyed by the idea that "civilization" was the most moral and favorable life, the army and its supporters unabashedly pursued bison hunting as an intentional act of war.

Conservation: A Change of Heart?

Remarkably, in the early twentieth century, bison populations began to rebound. Just as ideas had legitimized the buffalo's near extinction, theories promoting new, conservationist ways of understanding nature came to justify the species's protection. Once the United States realized the aims of Manifest Destiny, the bison no longer posed any real threat to

57 Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips*, 25.
58 Smits, "The Frontier Army," 317.
59 Smits, "The Frontier Army," 316.

the nation's survival. White Americans had increasingly forced Indigenous peoples onto reservations, and the image of the crusading cowboy—paving the way for civilization to advance across the West—began to fade from view. The bison, therefore, transformed from an obstacle standing in the way of civilization to a nostalgic image of westward expansion itself.

This claim is not to suggest that there were no seeds of genuine environmentalism within the bison conservation movement. Theodore Roosevelt himself played a crucial role in creating government-protected lands for bison, earning his eventual reputation as a father of modern environmentalism. In 1904, during his fourth annual message to Congress, then President Roosevelt emphasized the "importance of authorizing the President to set aside certain portions of the reserves or other public lands as game refuges for the preservation of bison…once so abundant in our woods and mountains and on our great plains, and now tending toward extinction."[60] William Hornaday, the zoologist who wrote *The Extermination of the American Bison,* was also a pivotal figure in the movement to protect the species. He penned countless letters to wealthy Americans urging them to contribute financially to a bison preserve in Montana. In one such letter, he wrote that "it was the business interests of the country, represented by men who wished to procure buffalo hides to sell at $2.50 each, that practically exterminated the American Bison millions," demonstrating his criticism of economic incentives and unrestrained resource exploitation.[61] By 1914, the work of Roosevelt, Hornaday, and others had helped push the government towards creating bison preserves in Wyoming, Oklahoma, Montana, South Dakota, and Nebraska.[62] By 1916, it was generally believed that the threat of buffalo extinction had largely passed. One of the main preservationist organizations, the American Bison Society, declared that "not only is the American bison no longer in danger of extinction but it is firmly established in all parts of the country."[63] These bison conservation efforts laid the legislative groundwork for future environmental preservation efforts.

While the great success of bison preservation should not be diminished, it is also crucial to explore the continuities between these efforts and earlier conquest-related ideas about the bison. Many of those involved in the movement to protect the buffalo still maintained that the

60 Silvestro, *Return of the Bison*, 94.

61 Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 166.

62 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison,* 165.

63 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison,* 186.

species's near extinction was necessary for settling the West. In his 1901 essay "Our National Parks," environmentalist John Muir supposed that "we need not go mourning the buffaloes, [as] in the nature of things they had to give place to better cattle."[64] Not all bison preservationists, Muir demonstrated, looked back on the depopulation with horror. The closing of the frontier and the United States's general victory in the Indian Wars meant that the bison no longer posed an existential threat to American settlement. Thus, the animal morphed into a nostalgic symbol in need of preservation without challenging the original impetus for the species's destruction.

The timing of the frontier's closure bears further elaboration. It was not a coincidence that this transition occurred just as the bison extinction shifted from an advantageous inevitability to a preventable tragedy. As Frederick Jackson Turner explained in his quintessential 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," the frontier defined much of American culture.[65] Its closure, he argued, meant the conclusion of an entire chapter of American history. At the turn of the century, Americans grappled with this monumental finale, fearing its implications for the nation at large.[66] In his book *The Returns of the Bison,* historian Andrew Isenberg connects this moment with conservationism. He suggests that at "very time when some Americans believed that the disappearance of frontier conditions threatened American culture," they turned to protect both the buffalo and the cowboy, another icon of the old West.[67] Roosevelt, who agreed to become honorary president of the American Bison Society in 1905, similarly revered the buffalo for the memories attached to it. In a 1908 letter to the organization, he wrote that bison must be preserved because they "most deeply imprest [sic] the imagination of all the old hunters and early settlers."[68] As the United States continued to develop into the twentieth century, the iconic image of the rugged cowboy, rancher, and hunter became an endangered species in and of itself. Perhaps bison conservationists hoped that, by protecting the animal from extinction, they could preserve the revered vision of these patriotic men. In saving the bison, they may have sought to enshrine the memory of those who blazed their way through these herds to make way for civilization.

64 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 166.

65 Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1893, 197-227.

66 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison,* 168.

67 Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison,* 169.

68 American Bison Society, *Annual Report of the American Bison Society*, vol. 1905–1907 (The Society, 1908), 9.

Conclusion

The near extinction of the American bison was a product of not only material and technological factors but also ideological ones. When applied to the bison, the powerful concepts that built social evolutionism painted their destruction as both natural and necessary for expansion, deeply influencing how army generals, hunters, and everyday citizens understood the animal's disappearance.

The story of the bison demonstrates first and foremost that ideas and theories about the environment play pivotal roles in shaping human action. Without the creed of social evolutionism—without the network of agrarianism, civilization, and patriotism—bison hunters may have felt a more significant pang of guilt while gazing at the beasts they killed. If lawmakers believed they were witnessing a tragedy rather than a triumph, they may have swiftly regulated the fur industry or sport hunting. Ultimately, the bison's near extinction reveals that the material conditions of an environment cannot be transformed without some kind of ideological endorsement.

Beyond showing how a distinct environmental narrative can drive change, the history of the American buffalo also shows the manipulation of environmental ideas to fit the needs of a nation. Conceptions of the environment are not born in a vacuum; they are often created in the context of nation-states and cannot be separated from the goals of those nations. In the story of the bison, we see how social evolutionist ideas became powerful foot soldiers for westward expansion. Hunters and ranchers became patriotic heroes, fighting against alleged savagery to carry the state forward.

The case of the bison illustrates the pervasive influence of ideology on resource exploitation, conservation, and environmental policy—or the lack thereof. At a time when conservation is rapidly becoming a necessity for the survival of our species, it is imperative to critically examine the ideas that govern our environmental perceptions and their potential implications for both national interests and ecological sustainability. It is only through this awareness that we can strive for more conscientious and equitable environmental stewardship. Only then can we secure a path that transcends narrow political agendas. Only then can we foster genuine conservation efforts for the benefit of present and future generations—both human and nonhuman alike.

Bibliography

American Bison Society. *Annual Report of the American Bison Society*. Vol. 1905-1907. The Society, 1908. https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/54021.

The American Buffalo: A Film by Ken Burns. Created by Ken Burns. Aired on October 16, 2023, and October 17, 2023, on PBS. https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-american-buffalo/.

Beer, Gillian. "Darwin and the Uses of Extinction." *Victorian Studies* 51, no. 2 (2009): 321-31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20537407.

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930*. Cornell University Press, 2003.

Cole, Thomas. *The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State.* 1834. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, New York. https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/objects/56323/the-course-of-empire-the-arcadian-or-pastoral-state

Cole, Thomas. *The Course of Empire: The Savage State.* 1834. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, New York. https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/objects/54879/the-course-of-empire-the-savage-state.

Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Cunfer, Geoff. "The Decline and Fall of the Bison Empire." In *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains: A Deep Environmental History*. Texas A&M University Press, 2016.

Dali, Salvador. *The Persistence of Memory*. 1931. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York. http://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018.

Darwin, Charles. *On The Origin of Species*. London: P. F. Collier, 1859.

Dolan, Kathryn Cornell. *Cattle Country: Livestock in the Cultural Imagination*. University of Nebraska Press, 2021.

Flores, Dan. "Reviewing an Iconic Story: Environmental History and the Demise of the Bison." In *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains: A Deep Environmental History*. Texas A&M University Press, 2016.

Hawkins, Mike. *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hobday, José. "Forced Assimilation and the Native American Dance." *CrossCurrents* 26, no. 2 (1976): 189–94. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24458222.

Hofstadter, Richard, and Stephen Jay Gould. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Beacon Press, 1992.

Hornaday, William T. *The Extermination of the American Bison*. The Report of the National Museum. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887. https://repository.si.edu/handle/10088/29938.

Isenberg, Andrew. "Social and Environmental Causes and Consequences of the Destruction of the Bison." *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, no. 70 (1996): 15–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20874341.

———. *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511549861.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. New York: Prichard and Hall, 1785. https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/jefferson/jefferson.html.

Kehoe, Alice Beck. "Manifest Destiny as the Order of Nature." In *Nature and Antiquities*, edited by Philip L. Kohl, Irina Podgorny, and Stefanie Gänger. University of Arizona Press, 2014. https://doi.

org/10.2307/j.ctt183gz2c.13.

Kracht, Benjamin R. "Kiowa Religion in Historical Perspective." *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1997): 15–33. https://doi.org/10.2307/1185586.

Krall, Lisi. "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision and the Changing Nature of Property." *Journal of Economic Issues* 36, no. 1 (2002): 131–50. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4227751.

Locke, John. *Second Treatise on Government*, edited by C. B Macpherson. Hackett Publishing Company, 1980. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm.

Morgan, Lewis Henry. *Ancient Society*. New York: Herny Holt & Co, 1877.

Noble, Louis Legrand. *The Course of Empire, Voyage of Life, and Other Pictures of Thomas Cole*. New York: Cornish, Lamport & Co., 1853. http://archive.org/details/courseofempirevo00nobl.

Paul, Heike. "Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West." In *The Myths That Made America*. Transcript Verlag, 2014. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxsdq.10.

Pfluger, Carl. "The Views and Visions of Thomas Cole." *The Hudson Review* 47, no. 4 (1995): 629–35. https://doi.org/10.2307/3851729.

Pierce, Jason E. "The Politics of Whiteness and Western Expansion, 1848–80." In *Making the White Man's West*. University Press of Colorado, 2016. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19jcg63.11.

Roosevelt, Theodore. *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman, Hunting Trips on the Prairie and in the Mountains*. New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1885. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00147373m.

Schuster, Joshua. *What Is Extinction?* Fordham University Press, 2023.

Silvestro, Roger Di. *Return of the Bison: A Story of Survival, Restoration,*

and a Wilder World. Mountaineers Books, 2023.

Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land*. Harvard University Press, 1950. https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674939554.

Smits, David D. "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1994): 313–38. https://doi.org/10.2307/971110.

Turner, Frederick J. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1893, 197–227. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081899332.

Winterer, Caroline. "Dinosaurs, Deep Time, and the Challenge of Darwin." History 154: The History of Ideas in America (to 1900). Class lecture at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, November 28, 2022.

Zontek, Ken. *Buffalo Nation: American Indian Efforts to Restore the Bison*. University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

Press and Perception

The Role of Newspapers in Shaping Edmund Burke's Legacy

John Rigsby Shelburne

In late eighteenth-century Britain, the French Revolution ignited widespread enthusiasm among radicals and reformers. The movement, they believed, marked the dawn of a new age of liberty and equality. Inspired by the upheaval across the English Channel, British citizens formed political societies, drafted pamphlets, and debated how France's revolutionary ideals could inspire changes to their own constitutional monarchy. Groups like the Revolution Society—originally established to commemorate the centennial of Great Britain's 1688 Glorious Revolution—became ardent supporters of the French cause.[1] Members raised toasts to liberty, corresponded with the French National Assembly, and called for radical reforms within Britain itself.[2]

To much of the British public and segments of the Whig Party, developments in France seemed like the continuation of a centuries-long struggle to secure liberty against tyranny. For many of these "radical Whigs," the hope was that France's revolutionary energy might serve as a model for renewing and deepening Britain's own democratic traditions. This excitement, however, also sowed divisions within Britain, as skeptics began to voice concerns about the potential excesses of radical change.[3]

Among these observers was Edmund Burke, a prominent member of Britain's House of Commons and a leading figure in the Whig Party. Burke had built his career on championing liberty and reform, but with a notable qualification: he favored continuity over abrupt or sweeping change. The seasoned statesman viewed reform as a gradual and moderate process, which refined existing institutions rather than dismantling them entirely.

1 Richard Bourke, *Empire & Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 680.

2 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 680.

3 Mark Philp, *Radical Conduct: Politics, Sociability and Equality in London 1789-1815*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

As seen in his defense of the American colonies' traditional liberties, Burke prioritized constitutional stability. Similarly, he viewed Britain's own Glorious Revolution as a restoration of historical balance rather than a radical transformation of the existing political order.[4]

In the 1780s, Burke solidified his reputation as a defender of the people's rights against Crown and executive overreach. In Parliament, he led efforts to prosecute Warren Hastings, the former governor of Britain's Indian possessions. Reviewing Hastings's tenure, Burke accused the man of gross negligence, corruption, abuse of power, and egregious violations of the rights of Britain's Indian subjects. Given his long-standing advocacy for liberty and good governance, many of Burke's contemporaries expected him to embrace the French Revolution with the same enthusiasm he had shown for the American cause.[5] However, as events in France unfolded, it became clear that Burke's opinion of their revolution was far less positive.

Burke's skepticism grew as he observed the National Assembly's radical restructuring of French society and governance as well as the violent actions of revolutionary mobs. For the British statesmen, these actions did not seek the preservation of liberties long established, such as in the American case. Rather, France's developments reflected a dangerous attempt to rebuild society from scratch, uprooting the traditions and institutions that had sustained that country for centuries.[6] By 1790, Burke had begun drafting what would become his definitive response to that revolution. News of his work spread widely, heightening anticipation among the public, the press, and even the French National Assembly. Just days before Burke published his letter, the *Derby Mercury* reported, "so anxious are the French for the appearance of Mr. Burke's pamphlet, that a translation is already agreed for, the moment it comes out."[7]

When Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in early November 1790, it caused an immediate sensation.[8] Selling tens of thousands of copies at an unusually high price, the work became one of

4 Ian Harris, *"Edmund Burke,"* The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified May 24, 2020.

5 F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke: Volume II: 1784-1797* (Oxford University Press, 2006). 248.

6 Drew Maciag, *Edmund Burke in America: The Contested Career of the Father of Modern Conservatism* (Cornell University Press, 2013), 18.

7 *Derby Mercury*, October 28, 1790, Newspapers.com.

8 Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)," in *Edmund Burke: Essential Works and Speeches*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 2nd ed., The Library of Conservative Thought, (Taylor and Francis, 2007) [hereafter *Essential Works and Speeches*].

the most discussed political texts of its time.[9] Yet, Burke's *Reflections* were polarizing. While his pamphlet resonated with those who feared the French Revolution's radicalism, much of the Whig Party and the British public viewed it as a shocking betrayal of Burke's principles. Critics denounced him as a traitor to liberty, a Tory sympathizer, and even a madman.[10] The sectarian media landscape amplified this backlash, with newspapers publishing scathing critiques and rebuttals that often reduced his arguments to caricatures. In December 1790, the *Derby Mercury* reported that "Mr. Burke has already provoked at least a half dozen antagonists"[11] Compounding this antagonism, many readers encountered *Reflections* only through newspaper excerpts. This truncated exposure further distorted Burke's ideas and fostered a simplified narrative of betrayal.

Though Burke himself was a Whig, the British newspapers that addressed him most frequently—and often most vehemently—were Whig-aligned outlets.[12] By concentrating on these newspapers, this paper challenges a historiography that has long prioritized elite pamphlet debates. Notable works include Richard Bourke's analysis of Burke's evolving ideas, F.P. Lock's extended study of Burke's life and writings, Gregory Claeys's essay on radical engagement with Burke's work, and Drew Maciag's examination of Burke's influence on American political thought.[13] While Bourke and Lock, in particular, have fruitfully examined the Revolution Controversy to understand the intellectual currents surrounding Burke, few scholars have fully acknowledged the crucial role played by the press in reaching a wider, more socially diverse readership.

This paper shifts the focus to the role of newspapers in shaping the public's reaction to Burke's work. In highlighting the press's influence, it demonstrates how publications like the *Derby Mercury* and the *Public Advertiser* made Burke's complex arguments more accessible at the cost of filtering them through factional narratives. This perspective not only re-

9 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*. 780.

10 *Derby Mercury*, December 2, 1790, Newspapers.com.

11 *Derby Mercury*, December 2, 1790.

12 Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 333.

13 Richard Bourke examines Burke's intellectual development and the broader evolution of his political thought, arguing that his *Reflections* should be understood within his larger philosophical trajectory. See Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 342. Gregory Claeys explores how *Reflections* was received within British political discourse, particularly among radicals and Whig commentators. See Gregory Claeys, "The French Revolution Debate and British Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 59–80. Drew Maciag analyzes how Burke's ideas were interpreted and adapted in the United States over time. See Maciag, *Edmund Burke in America*.

veals the press's influence in shaping public discourse but also shows how these publications widened the public sphere and helped to reshape political identities during a transformative era in British political life.

Newspaper coverage of *Reflections* fundamentally shaped the public's understanding of Burke's thought. In this context, "the public" refers to the politically engaged readership that consumed and debated ideas through newspapers, pamphlets, and political societies—a readership far from homogenous. Rather, it encompassed intellectuals, politicians, reformers, and activists, each interpreting Burke's critique through their own ideological commitments.

By tracing how the popular media translated and simplified Burke's positions, this paper illuminates the ideological branding that defined Britain's political landscape as the 1790s approached. It proceeds by first examining Burke's stances during the American and French Revolutions before offering an analysis of select public reactions in Whig-aligned newspapers. Finally, it ends with a discussion of Burke's portrayal of Marie Antoinette, which received justified criticism in the press. The analysis centers on the immediate reception of *Reflections*, examining how newspapers framed Burke's arguments in the months following its publication. Through this exploration, the paper implicates how eighteenth-century debates on liberty, rights, and reform gained new potency—and distortions—when refracted through the press. Ultimately, it not only offers a new perspective on Burke's contested legacy but also deepens our understanding of the relationship between print culture, public opinion, and political thought in an era marked by revolutionary upheaval.

Burke's Stance on Revolutions: Misunderstood and Misrepresented

In his assessments of the American and French Revolutions, Burke saw distinct types of liberty at stake, revealing his understanding of the concept to be contextual rather than universal. During the American Revolution, Burke characterized the colonies as striving to protect liberties deeply embedded in their historical relationship with Britain. In his 1775 speech "On Conciliation with the Colonies," he argued that Americans were "therefore not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas, and on English principles."[14] For Burke, the colonies sought not to dismantle the British constitutional framework but to ensure their place within it, preserving inherited rights against encroachments from

14 Edmund Burke, "Speech on Conciliation (1775)" in *Essential Works and Speeches,* 189.

the Crown. He saw this struggle as grounded in tradition, stating that, "their love of liberty, as with you, [is] fixed and attached on this specific point of taxing," a reference to the British principle of barring taxation without consent.[15] In this way, the American Revolution exemplified what Burke considered legitimate resistance: it was specific, rooted in historical precedent, and aimed at maintaining established liberties rather than pursuing abstract ideals. These requirements reflected Burke's broader belief that liberty had to exist within a legal and cultural order. The American colonists' fight was not for an unbounded freedom, but for the reinforcement of a system that they believed to justly limit and define their rights.[16]

By contrast, Burke's critique of the French Revolution revealed his skepticism toward liberty detached from practical considerations and historical context. In *Reflections*, he condemned the pursuit of "liberty in the abstract" as dangerous and destabilizing. "Is it because liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty?" he asked.[17] This metaphor underscored Burke's belief that liberty without the constraints of social order and tradition could become destructive, like an escaped madman causing chaos. He questioned whether the French Revolution's proclamations of rights truly led to freedom, boldly stating that "their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal."[18] For Burke, France's radical pursuit of freedom exemplified the perils of unmoored ideals, leading not to liberty but to violence and tyranny. This sharp distinction between liberty grounded in specific legal and cultural traditions versus liberty pursued as an abstract ideal exemplified Burke's enduring commitment to the practical and the tangible in politics, which he viewed as essential to the long-term stability of societies.

Burke consistently championed gradual reform as the only sustainable path to political change, a principle evident in both his earlier speeches and *Reflections*. In a 1780 speech, he articulated his vision of

15 Burke, "Speech on Conciliation (1775)," 190.

16 While Burke initially opposed American independence, he later supported the colonial resistance as a "necessity." He understood the movement as a justified defense of inherited British liberties as opposed to a revolutionary rupture. See Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 698.

17 Burke, "Revolution in France," 515.

18 Burke, "Revolution in France," 554.

reform. "It is the interest of the people that it should be temperate, Burke clarified. "Whenever we improve, it is right to leave room for a further improvement."[19] This philosophy prioritized incremental change that accounted for the complexities of governance and the imperfections of human institutions. Conversely, Burke warned against "hot reformations," which he described as "crude, harsh, so indigested, [and] mixed with so much imprudence... that the very people who are most eager for it are among the first to grow disgusted."[20] Burke's preference for measured change reflected his belief that sustainable reform required caution, deliberation, and respect for existing social frameworks. By urging temperance and incrementalism, the statesman highlighted not just the practical benefits of gradual reform but also its moral dimensions. To Burke, reform that respected the existing order upheld the dignity of those who lived within it and avoided the alienation of groups who were critical to social cohesion.

In *Reflections*, Burke maintained this position and criticized the French Revolution's sweeping overhaul of society. He argued that reform should be grounded in the careful restoration of existing foundations rather than an aim to start from scratch. "Your constitution," he wrote, "it is true, whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and dilapidation; but you possessed in some parts the walls, and, in all, the foundations, of a noble and venerable castle." "You might have repaired those walls," he chastised.[21] By emphasizing the importance of continuity, Burke underscored that legitimate reform did not require perfection, but rather the measured improvement of time-honored structures. This principle, evident in his earlier support for the American colonies, remained central in his critique of the French Revolution. France's radical attempt to reconstruct society, in Burke's view, disregarded the wisdom of incremental change and threatened to unravel the fabric of civil order. His emphasis on cautious, historically minded reform reflected his awareness of human limitations. According to Burke, societies—being inherently imperfect—could not be rebuilt overnight without risking even deeper flaws.

At the heart of Burke's philosophy was the idea that legitimate governance rested on historical rights, not abstract theories. During the American Revolution, Burke asserted that the colonies' claims were valid because they were rooted in the established principles of English law and

19 Edmund Burke, "Speech on Economical Reform (1780)," in *Essential Works and Speeches,* 345.

20 Burke, "Speech on Economical Reform (1780)," 345.

21 Burke, "Revolution in France," 530.

tradition. He contended that the colonists had inherited the fundamental political principles of Britain, particularly the belief that "in all monarchies the people must in effect themselves, mediately or immediately, possess the power of granting their own money, or no shadow of liberty could subsist."[22] In Burke's eyes, the colonists had absorbed those principles "as with their life-blood," making their resistance not a rejection of British rule but a demand for the liberties that had long been recognized as fundamental.[23] In his 1777 letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol, Burke wrote, "we have made war on our colonies, not by arms only, but by laws... Every step we have taken in this business has been made by trampling on some maxim of justice or some capital principle of wise government."[24] His critique highlighted the British government's failure to respect the historical agreements that underpinned its authority, leading to a legitimate colonial resistance. Tellingly, Burke did not locate the legitimacy of these liberties in their abstract correctness. Rather, he grounded their authority in their established, recognized presence within a legal tradition—a tradition that created a shared moral and political framework.[25]

Burke extended this argument in his *Reflections*, contrasting the French Revolution's abstract declarations of rights with the historically anchored liberties of Great Britain. "By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways, as there are floating fancies or fashions," he warned, "the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer."[26] From Burke's vantage, dismantling established institutions in favor of ever-shifting ideals would produce a rootless, unstable society—one where each generation was cut adrift from the legacy that legitimized its governance. He believed that rights derived their force from historical context, anchoring liberties in specific traditions rather than abstract principles. The French Revolution's pursuit of reimagined rights, stripped of their historical grounding, was thus doomed to failure. Without a stable link to the past, rights became precarious experiments rather than enduring foundations of

22 Burke, "Speech on Conciliation (1775)," 190.

23 Burke, "Speech on Conciliation (1775)," 190.

24 Edmund Burke, "Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol (1777)," in *Essential Works and Speeches,* 231.

25 David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 241.

26 Burke, "Revolution in France," 565.

political life.

Burke's consistent principles of inherited liberty, gradual reform, and historical rights were not immediately evident to many of his contemporaries. The reception of *Reflections* in print reveals a widespread misinterpretation of Burke's understanding of liberty, as critics, particularly within the Whig Party, framed this work as a betrayal of his earlier principles.[27] The following section examines the public reaction to *Reflections*, focusing on how newspapers and political commentators distorted Burke's arguments. Through their misreading, they reduced his nuanced philosophy to a piece of alleged hypocrisy.

Reactions to *Reflections*: Newspapers and Whig Intellectuals

In late eighteenth-century Britain, newspapers operated as both political mouthpieces and cultural arbiters. These publications were essential to the nation's political discourse, offering a platform for both elite and popular opinions to converge. Rising literacy rates magnified this role. By the 1790s, a significant portion of the British population could access newspapers, as within urban areas, approximately sixty percent of men and forty percent of women could read.[28]

Given the importance of newspapers, the print reception of Burke's *Reflections* became a proxy war for larger ideological conflicts between radicals and conservatives. Within days of the piece's publication, public condemnation of Burke had grown fierce and unrelenting. As the *Public Advertiser* observed on November 16, 1790, "the attacks on Mr. Burke's pamphlet are now commenced from all quarters; and those who are incapable of argument, make use of declamation, or rather scurrility. He is by one of these enraged patriots charged with *baseness* and *folly*, for deserting his principles."[29] Such pointed denunciations underscored the ferocity of this debate, demonstrating how quickly the press could transform a carefully reasoned critique into a symbol of alleged inconsistency. Within weeks, British newspapers had already created a narrative around the pamphlet, depicting Burke's *Reflections* as a betrayal of his earlier principles and a retreat from Whig values. This narrative was not universal, but rather ideologically dependent: Whig-aligned, radical newspapers framed Burke as a traitor to progress while conservative papers

27 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 740.

28 Devon Lemire, "A Historiographical Survey of Literacy in Britain between 1780 and 1830," *Constellations* 4, no. 1 (January 29, 2013): 249.

29 *Public Advertiser*, November 16, 1790, Newspapers.com.

praised his defense of tradition.[30]

Among these all-important newspapers, the *Derby Mercury* and the *Public Advertiser* emerge as prime sources for study. In surveying the range of English eighteenth-century publications, these two stand out for their extensive commentary on Burke's claims as well as the counterarguments of his critics. They featured the most sustained and substantial engagement with *Reflections* in addition to the immediate responses it provoked, providing a richer array of examples than other contemporaneous publications.

Significantly, both papers carried a radical Whig orientation, which influenced how they presented and interpreted political issues. The *Derby Mercury*, described as "Whiggish," circulated widely beyond its namesake city and reflected the sensibilities of a Foxite stronghold—one associated with the party's more radical factions.[31] Priced at six pence in 1800, this weekly publication offered a substantial four-page, five-column spread that catered to readers interested in agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, literature, and the Church of England—interests that intertwined with political discussion. Meanwhile, the *Public Advertiser*, published by Henry Woodfall, held a well-known radical Whig outlook, having previously printed the incendiary *Junius* letters that openly criticized the monarchy.[32] Though the *Public Advertiser* ceased publication in 1793, it remained influential during Burke's most contentious period. Taken together, the *Derby Mercury* and the *Public Advertiser* provide an invaluable window into the radical, Whig-aligned press of the early 1790s and the ideological debates through which the public judged Burke's *Reflections*.

A notable example of the radical nature of these newspapers appeared in the *Public Advertiser* on November 5, 1790. The article pointedly remarked on Burke's past as a fervent supporter of the people's authority, highlighting what it saw as a stark contrast between his previous advocacy for the American colonies and his critique of the French Revolution. France's National Assembly, the newspaper reported, had "continued their laudable and remitted exertions in the cause of reformed legislation, under the sanction of the People (for whose dignity and majesty we remember to have heard Mr. Burke, not long ago, a zealous

30 Lock, *Edmund Burke,* 342.

31 Simon Harratt and Stephen Farrell, "Derby," in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820-1832*, ed. D. R. Fisher (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

32 William Rae, "Woodfall, Henry Sampson," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 62 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1899).

advocate).”[33] Here, the *Public Advertiser* framed Burke’s opposition to the French Revolution as a hypocritical reversal. The newspaper assumed that his earlier defense of American colonial rights should have naturally extended to the current movement’s goals. By focusing solely on Burke’s support for the “dignity of the people” in the American context, the article oversimplified his actual argument, which was rooted not in abstract ideals but in a defense of specific, historically grounded rights. In doing so, the *Public Advertiser* dismissed Burke’s distinction between preserving inherited liberties and endorsing revolutionary upheaval, instead projecting a narrative of inconsistency. It confused Burke’s defense of the constitutional rights of English people, which had been built up over hundreds of years, with the newly proclaimed rights of the National Assembly, which lacked any basis in historical precedent or legal tradition.

Aided by responses from prominent Whig intellectuals, this misrepresentation continued to gain traction. On November 25, 1790, Dr. Richard Price—a key Whig figure and one of the principal addressees of *Reflections*—published an essay that likewise framed Burke’s critique as an ideological betrayal. Price criticized Burke’s views on monarchical authority, accusing him of hypocrisy by pointing out his seemingly selective stance on holding kings accountable. Published in the *Public Advertiser*, Price’s response stated that Burke “asserts that our Kings do not derive their right to the Crown from the choice of their people, and that they are not responsible to them. And yet, with wonderful inconsistency he intimates that a wicked King may be punished, provided it is done with dignity.”[34] By emphasizing this apparent contradiction, Price suggested that Burke’s critique of the French Revolution disagreed with his own stated principles, implying the author was more concerned with preserving power than supporting justice. This response reflected a common Whig sentiment: that Burke’s opposition to France’s developments revealed his own latent conservatism, which betrayed the values of liberty and reform associated with the Whig Party.

Further reinforcing this perception, an article published on November 26, 1790, in the *Public Advertiser* accused Burke of abandoning Whig principles for personal gain. It described Burke as “offering to the world a Jesuitical recantation of all his former pretensions” and suggested that “policy, pecuniary wants, or other motives may have dictated [his]

33 *Public Advertiser*, November 5, 1790, Newspapers.com.
34 *Public Advertiser*, November 25, 1790, Newspapers.com.

former conduct."[35] This accusation painted Burke as a self-serving opportunist who changed his stance not out of principle but out of a desire for financial or political gain. Its reference to a "Jesuitical recantation" implied that Burke's stance on the French Revolution was not only inconsistent but also insincere—a manipulative shift that betrayed the very ideals he once championed. Such language not only reflected the intensely ideological press environment but also the way in which eighteenth-century newspapers weaponized personal attacks to delegitimize political opponents.

On December 2, 1790, the *Derby Mercury* published one of the most pointed critiques of Burke, capturing the mood of readers who felt disillusioned by his perceived shift in principle. In a particularly scathing section, the article repeated accusations of Burke being a renegade. "Some call him *turn-coat*," it noted, and "others say, that the asserter of American rebels, is the sworn advocate of despotism, and is carrying on an offensive war with the *Rights of Men.*"[36] This description revealed the intensity of the backlash Burke faced and underscored the public's perception that he had abandoned his earlier ideals. Burke's support for the American colonies had, to many, signaled an endorsement of popular sovereignty, yet his opposition to the French Revolution now positioned him, in their eyes, as "the sworn advocate of despotism."[37] This shift in public perception highlighted a significant misreading of Burke's philosophy. The statesman's defense of the American cause was based on his belief in defending inherited rights, yet his critics in the *Derby Mercury* interpreted his stance as a reversal in values. This perception was itself a product of the ideological media environment, where newspapers selectively amplified critiques that aligned with their political agendas.

Near the end of that month, the *Public Advertiser* published another fierce criticism, this time attacking Burke's personal credibility alongside his political stance. The December 27th article took a more mocking tone, targeting not just Burke's arguments but also his character and age. The author sarcastically speculated on the statesman's motivations, remarking "I cannot conceive why that 'sublime and beautiful' Orator should have written against the *Rights of Men*, in such a manner… unless the sad effects of 'creeping age and time' have put the enjoyment of those rights almost out of his power."[38] The "sublime and beautiful" quote came from Burke's

35 *Public Advertiser*, November 26, 1790, Newspapers.com.
36 *Derby Mercury*, December 2, 1790.
37 *Derby Mercury*, December 2, 1790.
38 *Public Advertiser*, December 27, 1790, Newspapers.com.

earlier work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke, the author suggested, had abandoned that piece's claims, shifting from a supporter of liberty to a reactionary conservative.

The *Public Advertiser* further intensified its critique by suggesting that Burke's position aligned more closely with monastic detachment than active political engagement. The article stated, "he may now probably wish that himself was either a Monk or Friar, as the exercise of the *Rights of Men* is never required of them."[39] This biting remark implied that Burke's opposition to revolutionary ideals was less a matter of principle and more a symptom of his supposed alienation from modern political life. It also subtly associated him with Catholicism, casting him as someone more aligned with monastic withdrawal than the progressive ideals celebrated by the revolutionaries. By likening him to a "Monk or Friar," the article evoked anti-Catholic sentiments prevalent in Britain, reinforced the view of Burke as an outsider in both religion and ideology, and echoed the *ad-hominem* attacks found in the November 26th article. The focus on Burke's age and supposed conservatism served to discredit his arguments by framing them as the product of personal decline rather than philosophical consistency. By painting the statesman as a relic from the past, the *Public Advertiser* reflected how public discourse often reduced complex ideas to simplistic, and even personal, narratives.

Burke's Defense of Marie Antoinette

Much of the criticism levied against Burke in response to his *Reflections* stemmed from misinterpretations of his arguments. However, there were instances where his detractors identified real tensions within his rhetoric. One of the most contentious aspects of *Reflections* was Burke's florid defense of Marie Antoinette, particularly within his depiction of her plight during the events of October 6, 1789. That day, an angry mob forcibly moved the French king and queen to Paris. In one of the most quoted passages from his pamphlet, Burke wrote that he "thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened [Marie Antoinette] with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever."[40] Steeped in nostalgia and reverence for the monarchy, Burke's imagery struck many of his contemporaries as wildly out of touch with the realities of France's *Ancien*

39 *Public Advertiser*, December 27, 1790.
40 Burke, "Revolution in France," 550.

Régime. For radicals who celebrated the French Revolution as a necessary dismantling of tyranny, Burke's idealized depiction of the Queen seemed to ignore the structural corruption and oppression that had defined France's monarchy.

In the press, Burke's opponents seized upon this portrayal of Marie Antoinette to illustrate what they deemed a glaring lapse in the statesman's judgment. While earlier attacks may have oversimplified Burke's broader philosophy, in this instance, his poetic admiration of the Queen provided a more concrete target. On November 16th, the *Public Advertiser* questioned whether "her beauty [was] any defence for her crimes?"[41] Such critiques went beyond baseless personal insults, instead challenging the logical consistency of Burke's stance. If he had once championed liberty and reason, how could he now appear to value regal glamor over principle?

Other commentators likewise connected Burke's praise of the Queen to deeper ideological contradictions. On November 25th, the *Public Advertiser* mocked the statesman for being "frantic with zeal for hereditary claims."[42] For Burke, the paper suggested, sentimentality toward a single royal figure appeared to overshadow the monarchy's long record of abuse. On November 12th, the same publication condemned him as "an enemy to the interest of the country" for defending a fallen tyrant.[43] This essay framed Burke's comments as betraying not just the French Revolution's principles, but the very Whig values that he had ostensibly embraced. On November 11th, the *Derby Mercury* recognized Burke's defense of Marie Antoinette as "the single passage" critics (and friends for that matter) found most damning.[44] From their perspective, the passage was a literary indulgence that offered clear evidence of Burke's willingness to excuse historical injustices in favor of nostalgic idealization.

These essays reveal how the public—intellectuals, reformers, and everyday readers alike—grappled with Burke's emotional rhetoric with his *Reflections*. Unlike purely *ad hominem* attacks, these arguments took seriously the dissonance between Burke's earlier denunciations of moral corruption and his current yearning for a bygone era of monarchical splendor. This tension mattered, especially for those who had previously found in Burke a voice of principled resistance to tyrannical power. Now, in light of his portrayal of Marie Antoinette, many questioned whether the statesman had strayed from the moral compass that they believed he had

41 *Public Advertiser*, November 16, 1790.
42 *Public Advertiser*, November 25, 1790.
43 *Public Advertiser*, November 12, 1790, Newspapers.com.
44 *Derby Mercury*, November 11, 1790, Newspapers.com.

held. After all, if Burke was such a committed Whig—one who stood for the power of Parliament and decried the court culture surrounding Britain's constitutionally-bound king—why was he lamenting the fate of a foreign and absolutist queen?

In highlighting this moment, the press did more than sensationalize a passage; it helped delineate the boundaries of acceptable political discourse. Burke's romantic invocation of chivalry, rather than passing unnoticed, became a focal point for critics. These opponents interpreted his nostalgia as a revealing lapse of judgment—one that privileged sentimental aesthetics over the reality of the popular struggle against a tyrannical monarchy. The Marie Antoinette passage became a pillar around which critics recast Burke's identity. No longer the eloquent champion of measured reform, Burke became a figure seemingly torn between his admiration for aristocratic refinement and a world increasingly intolerant of hereditary privilege. By focusing on this passage, newspapers demonstrated their capacity to sharpen public scrutiny, ensuring that even a statesman of Burke's stature could not escape the critical gaze of a readership alert to the moral implications of political language.

Reflections on the 1790s and Beyond

The intense public reaction to *Reflections* reveals as much about the political climate of the 1790s as it does about Burke himself. The widespread critiques and misrepresentations of this work underscore how revolutionary discourse, in its fervor, often demanded clear binaries. Clear juxtapositions of liberty versus tyranny, progress versus reaction, left little room for the kinds of nuanced arguments that Burke sought to present.

As public commentary on *Reflections* intensified, these reactions not only reshaped Burke's public image but also demonstrated how much the debate over the French Revolution had split the Whig party. A report in the *Derby Mercury* on May 12, 1791, vividly captured one of the most consequential moments in Burke's political life: his dramatic and very public break with Charles Fox, the leading Whig statesman. According to the paper, "Mr. Fox rose extremely affected; he shed many tears, and with difficulty proceeded… He replied to many parts of Mr. Burke's speech… Mr. Burke again spoke, and declared that he should from that time excommunicate himself from the party for ever."[45] This fracture followed months of intense press scrutiny and backlash against *Reflections.* The tearful and widely publicized parting from Fox—a radical, but one of the

45 *Derby Mercury*, May 12, 1791, Newspapers.com.

most prominent figures in the Whig leadership—signaled Burke's departure from the main currents of Whig opinion. This account not only influenced how his contemporaries viewed him but also the image that he would leave to posterity.

Ultimately, the backlash against *Reflections* marked a turning point in Burke's career and legacy. The publication of such an incendiary pamphlet alienated him from many of his former Whig allies, recasting his reputation as a conservative defender of the status quo in the eyes of radicals and reformers. Simultaneously, the work positioned Burke as a key figure in the emerging ideological divide between those who sought change through revolution and those who advocated reform grounded in tradition. As F.P. Lock notes, *Reflections* would ultimately define Burke's intellectual legacy, transforming him from a party politician into a philosopher-statesman revered by later conservatives for his warnings about the dangers of unchecked radicalism.[46] Drew Maciag similarly observes that the same critiques that painted Burke as reactionary in his own time later contributed to his enduring influence on political thought, particularly in the United States. Across the Atlantic, Burke's ideas resonated with advocates of incremental change and constitutional governance.[47] In this way, the public reaction to *Reflections* does not merely clarify the contentious political climate of the 1790s; it also underscores the enduring complexity and adaptability of Burke's ideas in shaping modern conservatism and liberalism.

Conclusion

The immediate public response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* offers a compelling case study of how complex political ideas are received and reshaped within a highly contentious political environment. While Burke's pamphlet has endured as a cornerstone of political philosophy, its initial reception was shaped by widespread misinterpretations and simplifications that distorted its core arguments. Critics, particularly within the Whig Party and radical press, framed Burke's critique as a betrayal of his earlier defense of the American colonies. In the process, they conflated his consistent emphasis on historical continuity with reactionary conservatism.

By examining this reaction, this paper has illuminated not only the public's misunderstandings but also the broader dynamics of

46 Lock, *Edmund Burke,* 317.

47 Maciag, *Edmund Burke in America*. 23.

revolutionary discourse in eighteenth-century Britain. The sectarian press played a crucial role in framing Burke as inconsistent, highlighting the supposed contradictions between his support for the American colonies and his critique of the French Revolution. Newspapers such as the *Public Advertiser* and the *Derby Mercury* amplified this narrative, accusing Burke of hypocrisy, opportunism, and even madness. These critiques often relied on selective readings of *Reflections*, which many members of the public encountered only through excerpts published in newspapers. This mediated reception stripped Burke's arguments of their nuance, reducing his critique of abstract revolutionary ideals and unmoored declarations of rights to a blanket rejection of liberty and progress. The rhetoric of his detractors thus shaped a public perception of Burke that cast him as a relic of the past.

At the same time, the public backlash against Burke reveals the challenges of engaging with revolutionary ideas in an era of rapid political and social change. For radicals inspired by the French Revolution, Burke's emotional defense of monarchy and critique of abstract rights seemed like an affront to the ideals of liberty and equality that they sought to champion. With its nostalgic appeal to the "age of chivalry," Burke's infamous depiction of Marie Antoinette became a focal point for criticism. The passage was emblematic of what many saw as his selective outrage and disregard for the general systemic injustices that had fueled revolutionary fervor. Critics rightly pointed out the dissonance between Burke's romanticization of the French monarchy and his earlier scathing critiques of George III during the American crisis. This inconsistency allowed detractors to question not only Burke's rhetoric but also the coherence of his political philosophy.

The public's reaction to *Reflections* was not solely a matter of misunderstanding or deliberate distortion. As this paper has shown, Burke's own rhetorical strategies—his use of vivid imagery, emotional appeals, and moral absolutism—invited strong responses that often overshadowed the subtleties of his arguments. When Burke sought to dramatize the dangers of revolutionary excess, his language sometimes alienated readers who might otherwise have been sympathetic to his warnings. The backlash to *Reflections* thus highlights the difficulty of communicating complex ideas in a contentious political environment. In this space, emotional and ideological stakes often take precedence over careful analysis.

The significance of the public reaction to *Reflections* extends beyond the context of the French Revolution. Likewise, it offers insights into the ways in which political discourse operates in moments of upheaval, when

competing visions of progress and legitimacy clash in the public sphere. The tendency of Burke's critics to reduce his arguments to caricatures underscores the broader challenges of engaging with complexity in public debate. By exploring the misinterpretations, valid critiques, and rhetorical tensions surrounding *Reflections*, this paper has sought to understand the enduring lessons of Burke's reception.

In the end, the controversy over *Reflections* reveals not just the ideological divisions within Burke's time but also the enduring struggle to balance liberty and order, reform and tradition, idealism and pragmatism. The public's reaction to Burke highlights the importance of historical context in interpreting political ideas and the difficulties of preserving nuance in moments of rapid change. By examining this moment, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which public opinion can shape—and sometimes distort—the legacy of political thought.

Bibliography

Bernstein, Samuel. "English Reactions to the French Revolution." *Science & Society* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1945): 147–71, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40399694.

Bindman, David, Aileen Dawson, and Mark Jones. *The Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution*. British Museum Publications, 1989.

Bourke, Richard. *Empire & Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873456.

Bromwich, David. *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674416130.

Burke, Edmund. "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies, March 22, 1775." In *The Founders' Constitution*. University of Chicago Press. Volume 1, chapter 1, document 2. https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch1s2.html.

———. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In *Select Works of Edmund Burke: A New Imprint of the Payne Edition*. Liberty Fund, 1999.

———. *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*. Edited by John Nimmo. Vol. 2. London, W.C.: J.C. Nimmo and Bain, 1887.

Claeys, Gregory. "The French Revolution Debate and British Political Thought." *History of Political Thought* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 59–80. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26213839.

———. *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics*. British History in Perspective. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Crossley, Ceri, and Ian Small, eds. *The French Revolution and British Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

Derby Mercury, December 2, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/394427964/?terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A41446%3A1296373724.

Derby Mercury, May 12, 1791. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/394401697/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A41446%3A1296373724.

Derby Mercury, November 11, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/394426152/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A41446%3A1296373724.

Derby Mercury, October 28, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/394425528/?terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A272763%3A1164312781.

Dickinson, H. T., ed. *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815*. Problems in Focus Series. Macmillan Education, 1989.

Dozier, Robert R. *For King, Constitution, and Country: The English Loyalists and the French Revolution*. University Press of Kentucky, 1983.

Gottschalk, Louis. "Reflections on Burke's 'Reflections on the French Revolution.'" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 100, no. 5 (October 15, 1956): 417–29. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3143674.

Hampsher-Monk, Iain, ed. *The Impact of the French Revolution: Texts from Britain in the 1790s*. Cambridge Readings in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Harrat, Simon, and Stephen Farrell. "Derby." *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820-1832*. Edited by D. R. Fisher. Cambridge University Press, 2009. https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/constituencies/derby#footnote26_ar1w1c1.

Harris, Ian. “Edmund Burke.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Last modified May 24, 2020. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/burke/.

Johnson, Nancy E., and Paul Keen, eds. *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Kates, Gary, ed. *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*. 2nd ed. Rewriting Histories. Routledge, 2006.

Lemire, Devon. “A Historiographical Survey of Literacy in Britain between 1780 and 1830.” *Constellations* 4, no. 1 (January 29, 2013): 248-261. https://doi.org/10.29173/cons18862.

Lock, F. P. *Edmund Burke, Volume II: 1784-1797*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Maciag, Drew. *Edmund Burke in America: The Contested Career of the Father of Modern Conservatism*. Cornell University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801467875.

Macleod, Emma Vincent. “British Attitudes to the French Revolution.” *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (September 2007): 689–709. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20175117.

Philp, Mark. *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Public Advertiser, December 27, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/34448218/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A475938%3A356037914.

Public Advertiser, November 5, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/34419680/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A475938%3A356037914

Public Advertiser, November 12, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/34419895/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpi-

bIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A475938%3A356037914.

Public Advertiser, November 16, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/34419995/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A475938%3A356037914.

Public Advertiser, November 25, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/34420217/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A475938%3A356037914.

Public Advertiser, November 26, 1790. https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/34420226/?match=1&terms=Burke&pqsid=TtIHpibIKlK5J40z3ATBeA%3A475938%3A356037914.

Rae, William. *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900*. Vol. 62, n.d.

Spinner, Jeff. "Constructing Communities: Edmund Burke on Revolution." *Polity* 23, no. 3 (1991): 395–421. https://doi.org/10.2307/3235133.

Stanlis, Peter ed. *Edmund Burke: Essential Works and Speeches*. 2nd ed. The Library of Conservative Thought. Taylor and Francis, 2007.

Taylor, Ben James. "Reflections on the Revolution in England: Edmund Burke's Uses of 1688." *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 91–120. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26227266.

Thomis, Malcolm I., and Michael T. Davis, eds. *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775-1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis*. St. Martin's Press, 2000.

From Restitution to Recognition

The Federation of Expellees and the Transformation of the German *Vertreibung* Discourse, 1990-2000

Zelig Dov

On September 13, 1988, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl sent a greeting to the Federation of Expellees, or BdV, to be read aloud at the organization's Homeland Day celebration.[1] Homeland Day commemorates those Germans who were expelled from Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. After the country lost a quarter of its prewar territory in 1945, millions of Germans were forcibly moved within its new borders in a series of expulsions referred to collectively as *Flucht und Vertreibung*.[2] The Federation of Expellees, in turn, is a victim association that works in the interest of this displaced group. Since its 1957 inception, the BdV has claimed to represent over two million Germans, and by the 1990s, it held the ability to swing an election by two to three percent of the vote.[3] Consequently, Kohl maintained close ties with the organization despite its controversial status. "I would like to express my thanks once again for the valuable and irreplaceable contribution that the expellees have made to the construction of our free democracy," wrote the Chancellor. "Homeland Day raises our awareness of the fact that our fatherland is divided and the

1 BdV, the German abbreviation for the Federation of Expellees, expands to *Bund der Vertriebenen*.

2 Translated from German, *Flucht und Vertreibung* means "flight and expulsion."

3 "Was ist der BdV?" [What is the BdV?], bund-der-vertriebenen.de, February 29, 2000, https://web.archive.org/web/20000229125615/http://www.bund-der-vertriebenen.de/; Piotr Cywiński, "Kampania Niemiecka" [German Campaign], *Wprost*, August 23, 1998, https://www.wprost.pl/tygodnik/6433/kampania-niemiecka.html.

German question is open."[4]

This division would not remain for much longer. Just one year after Kohl's remarks, the fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in a new postwar order. As the Iron Curtain collapsed, a wave of revolutions swept across Central and Eastern Europe. Germany reunified in 1990. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. New lines of dialogue began to open between East and West. As the leader of a new, reunified Germany, Kohl now faced the monumental task of defining how the young state would position itself relative to its eastern neighbors.[5] Addressing the BdV once more, the Chancellor highlighted this turning point in his 1993 Homeland Day greeting. "Now, a few years before the turn of the millennium, we have the historic opportunity to create the conditions for lasting peaceful coexistence in a free and united Europe," Kohl's subsequent message read. "In this great task, German expellees have an important role and a special responsibility."[6]

Kohl's comments marked the beginnings of a fundamental reappraisal of the *Vertreibung* in Germany's culture of remembrance. The *Vertreibung* had involved the forced population transfer of fourteen million Germans, mostly from Poland and Czechoslovakia. Beginning when millions of civilians fled the Red Army's 1945 advance, it encompassed a series of expulsions extending beyond this initial flight. The Polish and Czechoslovak governments, then exiled in London, had prepared plans with Great Britain and the United States to remove German minorities from their respective countries at the close of the Second World War. Additionally, the Soviet Union intended to annex territory from eastern Poland and wanted to move the displaced Polish population into eastern Germany. Nazi genocidal policies had further set the stage for the *Vertreibung*, particularly the murder

4 Helmut Kohl, "Zum tag der heimat 1988 - grusswort des bundeskanzlers" [On Homeland Day 1988 - Greetings from the Federal Chancellor], *Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, no. 111-88, September 13, 1988, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/zum-tag-der-heimat-1988-grusswort-des-bundeskanzlers-807500.

5 Karl Schlögel, "Europa ist nicht nur ein Wort: Zur Debatte um ein Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen" [Europe Is Not Just a Word: On the Debate About a Center Against Expulsions], *Zeitschrift* Für *Geschichtswissenschaft* 51, no. 1 (2003): 8.

6 Helmut Kohl, "Grusswort des bundeskanzlers an die teilnehmer des 'tags der heimat' in berlin am 5. september 1993" [Greetings from the Federal Chancellor to the Participants of the "Day of the Homeland" in Berlin on 5 September 1993], *Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, no. 74-93, September 5, 1993, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/grusswort-des-bundeskanzlers-an-die-teilnehmer-des-tags-der-heimat-in-berlin-am-5-september-1993-800334.

and forced deportation of millions of Polish civilians during the German occupation. At the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945, the Allies moved Germany's eastern border west to the Oder and Neisse rivers and sanctioned the forced population transfer of Germans living beyond that line. By 1950, eight million expellees had settled in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), otherwise known as West Germany. Another four million resided in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany. In total, the *Vetreibung* relocated one-fifth of Germany's population, and an estimated 500,000 lives were lost during the expulsions. The integration of the expellees represented a colossal effort for Germany's war-torn economy, with millions of refugees distributed and housed across the divided country.

The Federation of Expellees was founded in 1957 in West Germany to give the displaced Germans national representation. Its goals included restitution payments, the rejection of Germany's postwar border with Poland, and the right to return to the homeland. During the 1970s, the BdV suffered a significant defeat. Chancellor Willy Brandt's "Neue Ostpolitik" ("New Eastern Policy") normalized relations with the country's eastern neighbors, rejecting expellee demands regarding both the German-Polish border and restitution payments. By the late seventies, claims of expellee victimhood appeared revisionist considering Brandt's East-West détente and Germany's growing culture of remembrance, which reckoned with the legacy of Nazi crimes against humanity. German victimhood relativized atrocities committed by the Nazis, especially because many expellees had been members of the party itself. In this context, the *Vertreibung* became a divisive topic in German politics, and the BdV's revanchist agenda led to its political marginalization.[7]

This paper explores the evolution of BdV policy throughout the 1990s. From this study, it argues that the Federation of Expellees instigated a new discourse that transformed the *Vertreibung* from a dispute about restitution payments and borders into a question of historical memory. After German reunification, the BdV was both too powerful for German politicians to ignore completely, yet too controversial to accept wholeheartedly. The country's 1991-1997 treaties with Poland and the Czech Republic brought new attention to the *Vertreibung* as the BdV voiced its revanchist demands. The same negotiations, however, revealed an expellee organization with waning political influence.

7 For a discussion of the *Vertreibung* and the BdV, see Mathias Beer, *Flucht und Vertreibung der Deutschen* [Flight and Expulsion of the Germans] (Beck, 2011) and Andreas Kossert, *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* [Cold Homeland: The History of the German Expellees After 1945] (Siedler, 2008).

Memorialization represented a path to new relevance for the expellees. This approach turned live legal demands, which the federal government could not back, into claims about national remembrance, situating the *Vertreibung* in a twentieth-century history of forced migration and ethnic cleansing. Though the *Vertreibung* remained divisive, the BdV found increasing political support through its memorialization plans, which sought political recognition instead of restitution. The initiative culminated in 2000, when BdV President Erika Steinbach founded the Center Against Expulsions to lobby for an expellee memorial in Berlin. The historicization of the *Vertreibung* gave the Federation of Expellees new political initiative and fueled a growing national discourse about how to remember the expulsion of the Germans.

New Treaties, Old Demands: The Question of Restitution

The fall of the Iron Curtain fundamentally rearranged Europe's political landscape. A 1994 motion from the Bundestag, Germany's Parliament, noted that due to the country's "unification and the changes in East Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, new opportunities [had] opened up." The federal government's cultural policy aims shifted accordingly. "Reconciliation, understanding, and cooperation," the motion stated, "are seen and perceived as new tasks."[8] Between 1990 and 1997, Germany outlined the terms for this new international cooperation in a series of bilateral treaties with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and subsequently, the Czech Republic. Seeking clarity on a number of open questions, these agreements represented the first comprehensive statements on relations between a unified Germany and her eastern neighbors.[9] The Poles and Czechs wanted to ensure German support for their accession to NATO and, after its 1993 founding, the European Union. Germany backed each country on both accounts. The point of contention was the *Vertreibung* and the Federation of Expellees, which used the treaty negotiations to lobby for its own interests. Through these efforts, the BdV dragged the expulsion of the Germans onto the international stage.

During the 1990 German-Polish treaty discussions, the crucial matter was settling the border question between these two countries. The dispute concerned how to interpret the Allies' 1945 Potsdam Agreement, which moved the German-Polish border west to the Oder-Neisse line and

8 German Bundestag, Drucksache [Printed Paper] 14/9033, June 22, 1994.

9 Ann L. Phillips, "The Politics of Reconciliation Revisited: Germany and East-Central Europe," *World Affairs* 163, no. 4 (2001): 171.

sanctioned the expulsion of Germans from the territory east of that new border. In the intervening period, Poland had signed treaties with the GDR and the FRG that independently recognized the Oder-Neisse as the German-Polish border.[10] Negotiations about the terms of German reunification, however, raised the border question anew.[11] The German legal position held that, since their country was not a party to the Potsdam Agreement, sovereignty over Germany's eastern territories could only be transferred to Poland through a new treaty involving the reunified nation.[12] Though the German government never challenged the border's location itself, Berlin's position did not offer much consolation for Poland, which viewed the Potsdam Agreement as final and had no desire to reopen discussions about its western border. The question was finally put to rest on November 14, 1990. Both countries signed a treaty that reaffirmed and officially recognized the postwar Oder-Neisse line as the border between their two states.

Even though the actual border was never in question, the Federation of Expellees used the boundary's confirmation to reopen claims about expellee victimhood. When the Bundestag ratified this treaty in 1991, a small, BdV-aligned minority dissented. Comprising thirteen out of the more than six hundred total representatives, these members cited "the legitimate concerns of the German expellees and the Germans living beyond the Oder and Neisse, for which no satisfactory solutions have yet been found."[13] The BdV itself also opposed the border recognition treaty, which it identified as a "serious injustice."[14] The Federation of Expellees held that the *Vertreibung* was illegal under international law and refused to accept the postwar border without a settlement addressing the suffering of the German expellees. In stark contrast to these demands, the German public

10 The Poland-GDR treaties occurred in 1950 and 1989. The Poland-FRG treaty came about in 1970.

11 Phillips, "Politics of Reconciliation Revisited," 174-175.

12 Wladyslaw Czaplinski, "The New Polish-German Treaties and the Changing Political Structure of Europe," *The American Journal of International Law* 86, no. 1 (1992): 164.

13 Erika Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory] (Universitas, 2011), 155.

14 Simon Lange, "Der Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht und Vertreibung in Deutschland seit 1989/90. Vertriebenenverbände, Öffentlichkeit und die Suche nach einer, 'normalen' Identität für die 'Berliner Republik'" [The Memory Discourse on Flight and Expulsion in Germany Since 1989/90: Expellee Associations, the Public and the Search for a 'Normal' Identity for the 'Berlin Republic'] (PhD diss., Heidelberg University, 2015), 50.

overwhelmingly welcomed the border treaty, which marked a new chapter in German-Polish relations.[15]

The Federation of Expellees raised another round of objections in 1991, when Germany and Poland signed the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation. This agreement, which included language on NATO, European economic cooperation, and the rights of ethnic minorities, was heralded as a great success across political camps.[16] To the BdV, however, the German federal government had been the "victim of reconciliation euphoria" and concluded the negotiations "too hastily."[17] The organization was incensed by the treaty's inadequate provisions for the protection of minorities. Contrary to the BdV's perspective, the agreement did not regard ethnic groups as a legal entity. The treaty also meant that the German minority living in Poland would be recognized as Polish and not German citizens. Furthermore, it did not condemn the *Vertreibung* nor include language about the expellees' right to return to the homeland (*Recht auf die Heimat*).[18] Over the course of the negotiations, it had become increasingly clear that the BdV was isolated in its "politically absurd" demands, which, in the words of German newspaper *Die Zeit*, "posed a threat to the foreign policy credibility of a united Germany."[19]

In the years following the German-Polish treaties, discussions about the *Vertreibung* tentatively opened the opportunity for reconciliation between the two countries. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Władysław Bartoszewski led the way in 1995 when he addressed a joint session of the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, an appointed legislative body. In an unprecedented gesture, the Auschwitz survivor and member of the Polish resistance against the Nazis "lament[ed] the individual fate and suffering of innocent Germans who were affected by the consequences of the war and lost their homeland." "The evil done to us, even the greatest," he remarked, "is not and must not be a justification for the evil we ourselves have done to others."[20] Chancellor Kohl addressed the Bundestag a few weeks later to commend "the noble words of the Polish Foreign Minister Bartoszewski"

15 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 51.

16 Czaplinski, "New Polish-German Treaties," 67-68.

17 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 57.

18 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 57.

19 Werner A. Perger, "Bremser von rechts" [Brakeman from the Right], *Die Zeit*, May 24, 1991, https://www.zeit.de/1991/22/bremser-von-rechts.

20 Władysław Bartoszewski, "Rede vor dem Parlament" [Speech to Parliament], (speech to the German Parliament, Bonn, April 28, 1995), *Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, no. 35-95.

as the most recent step in developing "the good relationship that links us with Poland."[21] Kohl then acknowledged the Nazi "war of aggression in the East, first against Poland and then against the Soviet Union…[as] the primary cause of" the expulsion of the Germans.[22] While still in their infancy, discussions about the *Vertreibung* were part of the improving relations between Germany and Poland.

Negotiations with Czechoslovakia—and subsequently the Czech Republic after the country's 1992 split—proved much more difficult due to greater resistance from the Federation of Expellees. During German talks with Poland, the BdV represented a voice of dissent but had no significant group of politicians willing to back its claims. The situation differed for the German-Czech negotiations owing to the particular interest of the Christian Social Union (CSU). The conservative CSU is the sister party of the larger Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Operating in Bavaria alone, this group dominates the state's politics. Between twenty-five and thirty percent of Bavarians have roots among the Sudeten Germans, almost all of whom were expelled from Czech Sudetenland after the war.[23] Together, they form an essential CSU voting block with a central stake in expellee affairs. For decades, the CSU had maintained close ties with the Sudeten German wing of the BdV, called a Landsmannschaft. Many prominent politicians within the party came from Sudeten German ranks.[24] Thus, expellee claims for reparations and the right to return to the homeland always found strong support from the Christian Social Union.

The expellees' CSU backing meant that their political claims played an integral role in Germany's 1992 Neighborhood Treaty with Czechoslovakia. During the preceding negotiations, the greatest point of contention proved to be the Beneš decrees—a series of Czechoslovak laws from the immediate postwar period that sanctioned the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans. Together, the BdV and the CSU demanded that the Czechoslovaks repeal the Beneš decrees and acknowledge the expulsion of the Germans as unjust. Prague, however, feared that even publicly apologizing for the *Vertreibung* would legitimate German compensation claims and remained uncompromising on the issue. Additionally, the

21 Bundestag plenary transcript, 13th electoral term, 41st plenary sitting, June 1, 1995, 3184.

22 Bundestag plenary transcript, 13th electoral term, 41st plenary sitting, June 1, 1995, 3182.

23 Phillips, "Politics of Reconciliation Revisited," 180.

24 Vladimír Handl, "The Czech-German Declaration on Reconciliation," *Perspectives*, no. 9 (Winter 1997/1998): 55, 60.

Czechoslovaks were incensed that many Sudeten Germans did not recognize their own guilt for the expulsion of 300,000 Czechs from the Sudetenland following the 1938 Munich Agreement, which ceded the region to the German Reich.[25] Although the CSU did not play a leading role in these negotiations, the party's incessant rhetoric led the Czechoslovaks to suspend talks multiple times.[26] Treaty negotiations only concluded at the end of 1991, when both sides agreed to remove the Beneš decrees as well as property and compensation issues from discussion. Neither the German expellees nor the Czechoslovak victims of the Nazis were recognized. Nor would these groups receive reparations. The resulting treaty outlined the basis for relations between the two states while leaving the most controversial questions unanswered.

Czechoslovakia's 1992 dissolution gave the CSU and the BdV another opportunity to raise claims for compensation, as suddenly, the German-Czechoslovak Neighborhood Treaty became invalid. As Germany attempted to negotiate a second agreement with the newly formed Czech Republic, expellee demands again led to gridlock. Both Prague and Bonn were in a bind. The Czechs wanted to establish friendly relations with the Germans to gain support for their accession to the European Union. On the other hand, Czech President Vaclav Havel was not willing to consider BdV claims regarding compensation or the repeal of the Beneš decrees. His positions were popular among Czech citizens. A 1993 poll revealed that only fifteen percent of Czechs thought property should be restored to Sudeten Germans who had committed no crimes.[27] For his part, German Chancellor Kohl wanted to close the Sudeten German question with a bilateral agreement. After the 1994 federal elections, the electoral strength of the CSU had increased while that of Kohl's CDU had declined. The chancellor was holding onto power by the thinnest of margins, so he was willing to sacrifice relations with Prague to gain domestic support from the CSU and the expellees.[28] The controversial BdV restitution claims were not high on Kohl's agenda, but he did legitimate the organization's demands by putting them back on the negotiation table.[29]

The 1997 German-Czech Declaration on Mutual Relations took

25 Phillips, "Politics of Reconciliation Revisited," 181.

26 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 58-59.

27 Phillips, "Politics of Reconciliation Revisited," 181.

28 Phillips, "Politics of Reconciliation Revisited," 181; Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 69.

29 Handl, "Czech-German Declaration," 55.

years to complete and was neither a breakthrough nor an official treaty. Instead, the agreement was a small step towards improved relations after years of BdV-CSU pressure and an equally tenacious resistance from Prague. Neither side made major concessions, and it was ultimately Kohl who softened his stance to resolve the difficult negotiations.[30] The Chancellor even delayed informing the Sudeten Germans about the agreement to ensure they could not influence its delicate outcome. The resulting two-page document expressed mutual regret for the suffering inflicted by both countries during and after the Second World War, although most of the blame was justifiably carried by the Germans. The Czechs conceded that the *Vertreibung* was an "injustice" while the Germans acknowledged "that the National Socialist policy of violence towards the Czech people helped to prepare the ground" for the expulsions. For the BdV, the agreement's acknowledgement that "injustice inflicted in the past belongs in the past" was particularly difficult to swallow.[31] Yet, even this declaration did not close the question of property claims and restitution payments. Both countries merely agreed to respect the different legal positions of the other side. When Czech President Havel addressed the Bundestag a couple months later, he cautioned the Germans against using terms of "poetic nebulousness" to make claims about the *Vertreibung* lest they endanger German-Czech "neighborly coexistence."[32] Despite the recently signed agreement, fundamental tensions about the *Vertreibung* still remained.

Through the controversial legal claims pursued by the BdV, Germany's treaty negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic brought the *Vertreibung* to center stage. The demands made by the Federation of Expellees had created waves. Simultaneously, though, they highlighted an organization that had strayed far from the political mainstream. "Negation and rejection…won't get you anywhere," commented the German newspaper *SZ*, which argued that the expellees had fallen into "political insignificance."[33] Claims for restitution payments and the right

30 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 72-73.

31 The Czech Republic and Germany, "German-Czech Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development" (January 21, 1997), 1. https://mzv.gov.cz/file/198499/CzechGermanDeclaration.pdf.

32 Václav Havel, "Ansprache des Staatspräsidenten der Tschechischen Republik Václav Havel" [Address by the President of the Czech Republic Václav Havel], *Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, no. 35-97 (speech to the German Parliament, Bonn, April 29, 1997).

33 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 20, 1997, quoted in Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 75.

to return to the homeland had left the BdV politically isolated. Kohl's support increasingly seemed like an empty rhetorical device designed to win expellee votes.[34] The Federation of Expellees found itself in a state of paralysis. Every major BdV demand had been rejected during the German-Czech and German-Polish negotiations, leaving the organization stranded.

Forced Migration as Ethnic Cleansing: Reframing the *Vertreibung*

After the German-Czech Declaration, the expellees sought a new source of political momentum. While relations with Germany's eastern neighbors had been the first major battleground on which the *Vertreibung* rose to prominence following reunification, the expulsion of the Germans was not only a topic of bilateral relations. New academic research and the Yugoslav Wars generated increased interest in the *Vertreibung*, and the BdV used this growing visibility to reinvent its public image.

European integration paved the way for previously unthinkable cooperation on the subject of the *Vertreibung* between German and Eastern European scholars. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, researchers suddenly gained access to archives in Poland and the Czech Republic that had gone untouched in the postwar period. Until that point, the *Vertreibung* was solely a topic of West German research. Academics had relied heavily on personal accounts and expellee data collected upon arrival in Germany to piece together what had happened during the expulsions. In the East, academics had ignored the *Vertreibung* due to historical narratives of wartime innocence enforced by the Eastern Bloc governments. Now freed from party-political and system-based constraints, scholars built a growing body of literature on forced migration in Central and Eastern European academia.[35] Research was published on the expellees' integration in the GDR, a topic previously unacknowledged in East German academic circles and severely underrepresented in West German scholarship.[36] Studies reexamined the causes of the *Vertreibung* using the newly expanded source base.[37] Many of those sources were systematically collected and

34 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 77.

35 Beer, *Flucht und Vertreibung* [Flight and Expulsion], 28-31.

36 For a detailed bibliography on the subject, see Michael Schwartz, *Vertriebene und "Umsiedlerpolitik": Integrationskonflikte in den deutschen Nachkriegs-Gesellschaften und die Assimilationsstrategien in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1961* [Expellees and "Resettlement Policy": Integration Conflicts in German Postwar Societies and Assimilation Strategies in the Soviet Occupation Zone/GDR 1945-1961] (Oldenbourg, 2004), 1211-1240.

37 For a selection of titles, see Beer, *Flucht und Vertreibung* [Flight and Expulsion], 178.

published.[38] Numerous conferences were held to discuss the expulsions, especially between German and Polish scholars.[39] Fueled by the chance for collaboration, a complex and growing body of scholarship on the *Vertreibung* emerged in the years after German reunification.

This new academic work advanced a changing interpretation of the *Vertreibung* that emphasized the expulsion of the Germans as just one event in a long history of European forced migrations. Traditionally, German scholarship had studied the *Vertreibung* as a series of crimes committed against German civilians by the Red Army, the Czechs, and the Poles.[40] This research focused primarily on how the expulsions were carried out, and increasingly, it sought to understand why the Allies planned and sanctioned the displacement of these Germans. In contrast, the new European line of interpretation studied the *Vertreibung* to understand the phenomenon of forced migration as a whole.[41] Scholars placed the *Vertreibung* in a history of expulsions which began in the nineteenth century and were motivated by the idea of an ethnically homogenous modern nation-state.[42] Through this lens, forced migration was seen not just as a human rights abuse suffered by the Germans, but instead a larger phenomenon that defined twentieth-

38 Most notably, a German-Polish commission of scholars worked to publish documents from the Polish archives. See Włodzimierz Borodziej and Hans Lemberg, eds., *"Unsere Heimat ist uns ein fremdes Land geworden..." Die Deutschen* östlich *von Oder und Neiße 1945-1950: Dokumente aus polnischen Archiven* [Our Homeland Has Become a Foreign Country to Us..." The Germans East of the Oder and Neisse 1945-1950: Documents from Polish Archives], 4 vols (Herder Institut, 2000).

39 Norman M. Naimark, "Historical Memory and the Debate about the Vertreibung Museum," in *Austria's International Position after the End of the Cold War*, ed. Günter Bischof and Ferdinand Karlhofer (The University of New Orleans Press, 2013), 231.

40 Eva Hahn and Hans Henning Hahn, "'The Holocaustizing of the Transfer-Discourse' - Historical Revisionism or Old Wine in New Bottles?," in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Central European University Press, 2022), 47. The Hahns are critical of the European approach to the *Vertreibung,* which they believe equates the expulsion of the Germans with the Holocaust and, instead of representing a new historical discourse, revitalizes old revisionist narratives about German victimhood.

41 For one of the earliest works that advanced this European interpretation, see Götz Aly, "Jahrhundert der Vertreibung: Vaclav Havel, der Bürgerkrieg in Bosnien und die Sudetendeutschen" [The Century of Expulsion: Vaclav Havel, the Civil War in Bosnia and the Sudeten Germans], *Die Wochenpost* [*The Weekly Post*], April 29, 1993.

42 Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2001). Naimark's study was a pioneering work that established language to describe ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century.

century Europe.[43]

A crucial impetus for this European line of interpretation was the Yugoslav Wars. Throughout the 1990s, daily news coverage of this conflict brought the new concept of ethnic cleansing to the attention of the international community. The term "ethnic cleansing" developed as a euphemism. Serbian military officials employed the phrase to describe the genocide and forced migrations that they had carried out during the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Croatia.[44] Due to these origins, ethnic cleansing has no legal standing as a crime. Still, the expression quickly entered the international lexicon as a description for the mass expulsion and killing of an ethnic group with the goal of making an area ethnically homogenous. In 1999, NATO's air campaign in the Balkans set a new precedent when it targeted Slobodan Milošević's Yugoslavian forces to halt the expulsion of more than 900,000 Kosovar Albanians. Beyond outlawing forced population transfers, the international community now had the task of intervening to prevent ethnic cleansings.[45] As NATO's campaign unfolded, the Yugoslav Wars remained a constant in the German news cycle, bringing the subject of forced population transfer to the national stage.[46] These broadcasts popularized a new language to talk about forced migration using the concept of ethnic cleansing. Simultaneously, they emphasized the responsibility to combat expulsions worldwide.

A Path Out of Stagnation: The Influence of Erika Steinbach

This growing public awareness gave Erika Steinbach, CDU member of the Bundestag and new president of the BdV, an opportunity. With the nation's attention turned to forced migrations, she sought to revitalize her association's image by describing the German expellees as the victims of ethnic cleansing. Steinbach was elected as the head of the Federation of Expellees in 1998 during a moment of BdV crisis. The organization had

43 Alfred M. de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950* (St. Martin's Press, 1994). Zayas's work represents a controversial study that exaggerates the suffering of the Germans to argue that the *Vertreibung* should be placed alongside other egregious human rights abuses from the twentieth century.

44 Drazen Petrovic, "Ethnic Cleansing - An Attempt at Methodology," *European Journal of International Law* 5, no. 3 (1994): 342–59.

45 Howard Adelman, *No Return, No Refuge: Rites and Rights in Minority Repatriation* (Columbia University Press, 2011), vii; Stefan Troebst, "The Discourse on Forced Migration and European Culture of Remembrance," *The Hungarian Historical Review* 1, no. 3/4 (2012): 399.

46 Naimark, "Historical Memory," 231.

failed to implement its demands for restitution payments and the right to return to the homeland in each of Germany's Polish and Czech treaties, ending with the 1997 German-Czech Declaration. The BdV's claims fell increasingly outside the mainstream due to the organization's aging expellee constituents and its revisionist interpretations of the *Vertreibung*, which often emphasized German victims over the victims of the Nazis.[47]

Steinbach recognized both her association's growing isolation and the opportunity provided by the Yugoslav Wars to bring new attention to the expellees.[48] In her speeches and press releases, the BdV president drew comparisons between ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and the expulsion of the Germans to describe forced migration as a universal injustice. Steinbach argued that the 1999 "division of Kosovo into ethnically pure areas…[was] fatally reminiscent of the justification used to expel millions of Germans from their homeland in the East at the end of the Second World War."[49] She co-opted the discourse on ethnic cleansing in the Balkans for the BdV's benefit. Through her rhetoric, Steinbach placed the German expellees on the same level of importance as contemporary victims of ethnic cleansing.

Steinbach quickly developed a reputation as an unwavering political leader who represented a generational change for the Federation of Expellees. She was the first woman to head the BdV and the association's first president with no memory of the *Vertreibung*. Owing to her personal history, Steinbach also had a complicated relationship to the expellee identity. Born in 1943 on a Luftwaffe air base in Rahmel, a Polish town occupied by the Germans, her father was a sergeant and her mother a conscripted student, or Luftwaffenhelferin, serving on the military base.[50] In January 1945, Steinbach, her three-month-old sister, and her mother joined the wave of Germans fleeing the advancing Red Army. Following their escape, the family became refugees in West Germany. Yet, as the child of two members of the Luftwaffe sent to Poland, Steinbach was not an expellee—she had not lost her homeland. The BdV president herself disagreed. Despite her family history, Steinbach emphasized that, having been driven from her home, she was a victim of the *Vertreibung* like anyone else.

47 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 77.

48 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 90-91, 145.

49 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Keine Teilung des Kosovo in ethnisch-reine Gebiete. Millionen Deutsche wurden seinerzeit mit der gleichen Begründung vertrieben" [No Division of Kosovo into Ethnically Pure Areas. Millions of Germans Were Expelled at the Time on the Same Grounds], media release, June 21, 1999.

50 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 29-34.

Steinbach's unofficial status as an expellee hurt her credibility, but the resulting controversy also brought the BdV wanted media attention. The Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* first brought the topic to public attention in 2000 by publishing an exposé on Steinbach's family background.[51] The piece caused a stir in Poland, where Steinbach was seen as an illegitimate representative of her own organization. However, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* argued that the exposé had "[missed] the point." "People," *Der Speigel* wrote, "would rather listen to someone who has almost been uprooted than an old displaced person, no matter how authentic, and that's to [the expellees'] advantage. After all, the whole displaced community benefits from the attention given to the front woman on the identity borderline."[52] The controversy over Steinbach's expellee status exemplified her strategy as the head of the BdV: she used conflict and media attention to bring new eyes to the Federation of Expellees.

Steinbach's political career began in Frankfurt's Jewish organizations, where she started to develop her outspoken approach as well as her self-described uncompromising stance on human rights.[53] Before her first foray into politics, she spent decades as a successful concert violinist. Then, in the 1970s, Steinbach joined the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) in Frankfurt as well as the German-Israeli Society. Until 1997, she campaigned for Jewish victims of the Nazis. That year, she was kicked out of WIZO for questioning the German moniker "The Day of Liberation" (*Tag der Befreiung*), used to describe the date of the end of the war in Europe. Then serving as BdV vice president, Steinbach claimed the term failed to account for the expulsion of the Germans and the millions of other refugees after the war's end.[54] Steinbach had also served on the Frankfurt am Main city council from 1977 until 1990, when she was elected to the Bundestag as a CDU representative for the state of Hessen. In her new office, Steinbach "came into contact with [the] incomprehensible individual fates" of her constituents who were expelled from the East. By her own account, she was appalled by the coldness with which German society received their stories of suffering. Steinbach thus framed her 1994 decision to join the BdV as the result of long-standing concerns for human

51 "Die Politik der Vertriebenen" [The Politics of the Expellees], *TAZ*, September 2, 2000, https://taz.de/!1214535/.

52 "Grenzfall" [Borderline Case], *Der Spiegel*, June 18, 2000, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/grenzfall-a-00e55396-0002-0001-0000-000016694635.

53 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 17-18.

54 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 129-131.

rights and the "inviolable…dignity of every human being."[55] Throughout her presidency, she returned to the language of human rights time and time again to emphasize the victimhood of the German expellees.

Under Steinbach, the Federation of Expellees gained increasing public visibility through her combative rhetoric and uncompromising political claims. The CDU politician was already considered a hardliner before taking office. She had voted against the confirmation of both the German-Polish Border Treaty in 1991 and the German-Czech Declaration in 1997. Her first actions as BdV president only served to confirm this reputation. In 1998, Steinbach announced that the Federation of Expellees would demand the right to return to the homeland as well as compensation from Poland and the Czech Republic as a condition for both countries' accession to the European Union. In public appearances, she repeatedly called upon Poland and the Czech Republic to "atone for the injustice" of the *Vertreibung*.[56] "We are not sitting here with a helmet on our head and a Kalashnikov under our arm, ready to reconquer the eastern territories," declared Steinbach, in an attempt to calm Polish journalists at a BdV press conference.[57] Her statement was not well received. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described her as a "hardliner" who had become one of the "most hated women in the republic."[58] The Polish weekly magazine *Wprost* was baffled that Steinbach could claim to "play the role of a bridge" in German-Polish relations while demanding the return of expellee property and restitution payments.[59]

55 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 17. Steinbach recounted one story in particular that was like "shock therapy" to her. At an event in Frankfurt, an eighty-year-old woman approached Steinbach and told her about an encounter she had with a young journalist. For the first time in her life, the woman had decided to reveal what happened to her during the *Vertreibung*. She had been raped repeatedly over several days by soldiers from the Red Army, all four of her children had died, and her husband was killed in the war. In response, the journalist flippantly told the woman that these experiences had not harmed her because she had still lived to be eighty years old. Steinbach described this experience as her reason for joining the BdV.

56 Uwe Rada and Robin Alexander, "Fundamentalistin Für Europa" [Fundamentalist for Europe], *TAZ*, September 7, 1998, https://taz.de/Archiv-Suche/!1326533&s=&SuchRahmen=Print/.

57 Cornelia Fuchs, "Steinbach: Polen ist nicht EU-reif" [Steinbach: Poland is Not Ready for the EU], *TAZ*, July 8, 1998, https://taz.de/Vertriebene-nicht-auf-dem-Sprung/!1336174&s=&SuchRahmen=Print/.

58 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 22, 1998, quoted in Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 79.

59 Piotr Cywiński, "Kampania Niemiecka" [German Campaign], *Wprost*, August 23, 1998, https://www.wprost.pl/tygodnik/6433/kampania-niemiecka.html.

The Federation of Expellees found new political footing through Steinbach's public persona, which quickly became the face of the organization. The BdV president's visibility only increased in 2000 when she was elected to the CDU's party leadership. Even the newspaper *TAZ*, a consistent critic of the BdV, described Steinbach as "a political beacon" for the expellees.[60] Her strong rhetoric and unwavering convictions ensured that the BdV remained in German headlines, even if it was generally not for positive reasons. Despite Steinbach's often critical reception in the German press, her confrontational style led the Federation of Expellees out of political stagnation and back onto the national stage.[61]

The Turn to Recognition: An Expellee Memorial in Berlin

On March 22, 1999, Erika Steinbach announced the project that would define her tenure as BdV president and win new support for her organization: a central memorial in Berlin to commemorate the German expellees.[62] Fifty years after the *Vertreibung*, these expulsions were slowly leaving living memory. If the BdV did not take action to preserve the history of these forced transfers, the association feared that "an elementary part of the fate of all Germany" would be permanently erased from the national consciousness.[63]

The growing national discussion about the *Vertreibung* had created conditions that made the memorial announcement possible. New scholarly work and the Yugoslav Wars brought increased interest to the topic of forced migration and placed the *Vertreibung* in a larger history of ethnic cleansing. Steinbach's controversial public persona also meant that the Federation of Expellees held the nation's attention. Still, while her demands for reparations made headlines, they were also unsuccessful. A Berlin memorial represented a new initiative to keep the BdV relevant by transforming its legal demands into claims about recognition. The expellees sought political momentum by carving out their own place in Germany's culture of remembrance.

Steinbach's plan for a central site of remembrance was especially

60 Rada and Alexander, "Fundamentalistin für Europa" [Fundamentalist for Europe].

61 Lange, "Erinnerungsdiskurs um Flucht" [Memory Discourse on Flight], 79-80.

62 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Wir brauchen in Berlin ein Zentrum der 15 Millionen" [We Need a Center for the 15 Million in Berlin], media release, March 22, 1999.

63 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 96.

controversial given the parallel 1999 announcement of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. When the BdV made its memorial project public in March, the Bundestag was in the final stage of deliberations about how to honor the victims of the Nazi regime. A Berlin Holocaust Memorial had been a topic of public discussion for over a decade. The project was one of the final decisions made by the Bundestag before relocating from Bonn to that city. This site of remembrance was "the first joint memorial project of the reunified Germany"—a powerful gesture that placed the memory of the country's crimes against humanity at the center of its new capital.[64] For many observers, it was impossible to dismiss the many similarities between Steinbach's project and the Holocaust Memorial as a pure coincidence. Both would function as memorial, archival, and documentary sites at the center of Berlin.[65] Both intended to recognize a historical injustice as a defining moment in German history, one that must not be forgotten. Most of all, Steinbach's timing indicated that she held no qualms about equating the expulsion of the Germans with the Holocaust. She was even willing to ride the coattails of Holocaust Memorial plans for the benefit of the expellees. Considering these circumstances, critics accused the BdV president of co-opting a discourse on the Holocaust for her own use.[66]

For her part, Steinbach vehemently denied that her plans had any relation to the 1999 Bundestag decision. In 2004, the Federation of Expellees even sued journalist Gabriele Lesser for writing an article that connected Holocaust Memorial plans with Steinbach's demands for an expellee memorial.[67] The BdV then issued a press release stating that the planned center would "not be built within sight of the Holocaust

64 Wolfgang Thierse, "Eröffnungsrede" (speech at the opening of the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe," Berlin, May 10, 2005), https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/praesidium/reden/2005/007-244962.

65 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Wir brauchen… ein Zentrum" [We Need a Center]; James E. Young, "Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine," *The Public Historian* 24, no. 4 (2002): 65–80, https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2002.24.4.65.

66 Hahn and Hahn, "Holocaustizing of the Transfer-Discourse," 41; Markus Meckel, "Symbole und Netzwerke" [Symbols and Networks], January 6, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20090106041639/http://www.dialogonline.org/Meckel-D.htm.

67 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Schriftliche Urteilsgründe bestätigen die Rechtsauffassung des Bundes der Vertriebenen" [Written Reasons for the Judgment Confirm the Legal Opinion of the Federation of Expellees], media release, August 2, 2004.

Memorial."[68] Still, the line connecting the Holocaust Memorial with Steinbach's announcement was unavoidable whether the BdV president was inspired by the Bundestag decision or not.

The Federation of Expellees did have another pressing reason to pursue an independent memorial initiative: the new federal government planned to cut BdV funding. After sixteen years in power, Helmut Kohl's coalition between the CDU/CSU and the FDP, or Free Democratic Party, was replaced. In the 1998 elections, Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder's red-green government took over the reins. Ever since Willy Brandt's "New Eastern Policy" in the seventies, the BdV had maintained a tense relationship with the Social Democrats (SPD), who soundly rejected the political positions held by the expellees.[69] As recently as 1995, the SPD had put forward an unsuccessful resolution to exclude the BdV from receiving federal funds on the grounds that the organization "represent[ed] right-wing extremist tendencies" and did not recognize "contractually secured borders in Europe."[70] The Federation of Expellees and the new ruling coalition did not have much common ground to stand on.

In 1999, the Schröder government confirmed the BdV's worst fears. The new coalition revealed plans to cut and restructure federal funding for cultural institutions that dealt with the *Vertreibung* and German heritage in Eastern Europe. The BdV called the proposal "cultural policy with a butcher's knife."[71] The plans would reduce funding to institutions supported by the BdV and greatly increase government oversight by concentrating existing projects under the umbrella of a central foundation. For Erika Steinbach, the government's proposal called for "the destruction of the cultural work carried out by the expellee associations."[72] Despite BdV protests, the federal government enacted the plan in 2000. As the

68 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "ZENTRUM GEGEN VERTREIBUNGEN wird nicht in Sichtweite des Holocaust-Mahnmals errichtet" [CENTER AGAINST EXPULSIONS Will Not Be Built Within Sight of the Holocaust Memorial], media release, June 2, 2005.

69 See Kossert, *Kalte Heimat* [Cold Homeland].

70 German Bundestag, Drucksache [Printed Paper] 13/3195, December 4, 1995.

71 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Kulturpolitik mit dem Schlachtermesser" [Cultural Policy with a Butcher's Knife], media release, June 23, 1999.

72 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "BdV-Präsidentin Steinbach, MdB: Naumanns fehlerhaftes Kulturkonzept untragbar" [Bdv President Steinbach, Mdb: Naumann's Flawed Cultural Concept Unacceptable], media release, July 30, 1999; Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Landsmannschaften protestieren gegen Naumanns Kulturkonzeption" [Landsmannschaften Protest Against Naumann's Cultural Concept], media release, September 29, 1999.

Schröder government wrested resources and political control from the BdV, the organization had good reason to engage in its own memorialization initiative that would assert the expellees' place in Germany's collective memory.

Building Momentum: A BdV Campaign for National Recognition

Steinbach's 1999 announcement kicked off a BdV campaign for a central expellee memorial in Berlin. As a member of the CDU, Steinbach had the Union's support from the outset, but she would also need backing from within the skeptical Schröder government if she wanted to make the memorial a federal project. The BdV president therefore sought out allies from across the political aisle who would give her memorial a more acceptable face while putting political pressure on the ruling Social Democrats. On May 29, 1999, the Federation of Expellees held an event in the Berlin Cathedral to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Federal Republic and gather potential supporters for the BdV memorial. Unsurprisingly, members of Steinbach's CDU pledged their support, including President of the Bundesrat Roland Koch and Berlin Mayor Eberhard Diepgen.[73] The memorial's most important new backer was instead Otto Schily, the SPD federal minister of the interior.

Steinbach seemingly targeted Schily as the most likely member of the Schröder cabinet to support an expellee memorial. The SPD politician had a reputation for breaking with party lines. He even left the Green Party (Die Grünen) that he had co-founded to join the SPD in 1989. Schily was likewise known for supporting policies closer to the CDU/CSU, such as combating immigration and restricting data protection.[74] At the Berlin Cathedral event, Schily became the first SPD politician to pledge their

73 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "'Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen' stößt auf gute politische Resonanz" ['Center Against Expulsions' Is Receiving Good Political Response], media release, August 24, 1999.

74 For more information on Schily's political positions throughout his career, see Severin Weiland, "NS-Vergangenheit: Schily hält Aufarbeitung für unnötig" [Nazi Past: Schily Considers Reappraisal Unnecessary], *Der Spiegel*, April 29, 2005, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ns-vergangenheit-schily-haelt-aufarbeitung-fuer-unnoetig-a-354023.html; Sascha Lobo, "Die Heuchelei der SPD" [The Hypocrisy of the SPD], *Der Spiegel*, July 30, 2013, https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/kolumne-von-sascha-lobo-die-heuchelei-der-spd-a-913803.html; "Otto Schily sieht Probleme mit Zuwanderern und fordert Pegida-Dialog" [Otto Schily Sees Problems with Immigrants and Calls for Pegida Dialog], *Der Spiegel*, January 24, 2015, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/otto-schily-sieht-probleme-mit-zuwanderern-und-fordert-pegida-dialog-a-1014737.html.

support to the BdV initiative. He delivered a speech that denounced his party's past silence on the *Vertreibung,* calling on the Social Democrats to "have the courage to speak freely and face the truth."[75] In Schily, the Federation of Expellees found a strong supporter amid the otherwise skeptical federal cabinet.

After Schily, the expellee memorial's second crucial SPD backer was Peter Glotz. Born in 1939 Czechoslovakia to a German father and a Czech mother, Glotz was expelled from the country in September 1945. As a member of the Bundestag in the early seventies, he had supported Willy Brandt's "New Eastern Policy." Glotz also served as the SPD's federal director from 1981 to 1987, and he had never worked with the Federation of Expellees before.[76] In fact, he had been against the restitution claims levied by the BdV.[77] However, in the years before retiring from the Bundestag in 1996, Glotz began to support positions more in line with the expellees. He even came out against NATO's planned eastward expansion encompassing Poland and the Czech Republic.[78] As a retired politician by 1999, Glotz was not standing for reelection and could support Steinbach without suffering major political repercussions. He never abandoned his SPD convictions, but, as an expellee himself, he believed that forced migration was a "plague of the European past" that needed to be acknowledged as "always wrong."[79] Given his decades-long SPD membership, Glotz's support gave Steinbach's memorial new legitimacy. The BdV's memorialization initiative had

75 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 93. Schily stated: "In the past, the political left has at times overlooked the crimes of expulsion and the suffering inflicted on the millions of people who were expelled, either out of a lack of interest or out of fear of being accused of being revanchists. Or out of the false belief that by keeping quiet and repressing the issue, they would be better placed to find a way to reconciliation with our neighbors in the East. This behavior was an expression of cowardice and timidity. We now know that we can only find the basis for a good and peaceful coexistence if we have the courage to speak clearly and face the truth."

76 Peter Glotz, "Ethnische Säuberungen sind immer Unrecht: Das geplante Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen weist über deutsches Leid hinaus" [Ethnic Cleansing Is Always Wrong: The Planned Center Against Expulsions Points Beyond German Suffering], *Rheinischer Merkur*, July 4, 2002, reproduced in Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung*, 177-179.

77 Peter Glotz, "Wo ist das Recht der Vertriebenen?" [Where Is the Right of the Expellees?] (speech at the BdV Tag der Heimat, Berlin, September 1, 2001) reproduced in Steinbach, *Die Machter der Erinnerung*, 180-186.

78 Peter Glotz, "Saftige Dummheit" [Juicy Stupidity], *Der Spiegel*, September 17, 1995, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/saftige-dummheit-a-772df7d0-0002-0001-0000-000009221584.

79 Glotz, "Wo ist das Recht" [Where is the Right].

opened the door for new allies who would have otherwise rejected political cooperation with the expellees.

The BdV took a significant step towards realizing its Berlin memorial plans in 2000. That year, the organization established a Center Against Expulsions, with Steinbach and Glotz as the two chairs. Rather than a physical museum, the Center Against Expulsions was a lobbying mechanism for the expellees to win public support for their remembrance initiative. It sought to force the federal government to fund an expellee memorial, ideally under the aegis of the BdV itself. Tellingly, the center's offices were not established in Berlin—the foundation's planned location—but across the country in Wiesbaden, a city in the state that Steinbach represented in the German parliament. To drum up support, Steinbach and Glotz held a series of panel discussions and charity events across the country where the foundation's presidents discussed their memorialization plans with supportive academics and politicians.[80] These events increased the center's visibility and grew its number of pledged supporters. In total, over 400 towns and communities became sponsors, as well as the states of Hessen, Bavaria, Lower Saxony, and Baden-Württemberg.[81] Unsurprisingly, this aid came from the parts of the country where the Federation of Expellees was most strongly entrenched.

Growing political support for the Center Against Expulsions, especially from Schily and Glotz, put pressure on Schröder to take a public stance on the BdV foundation. The Chancellor received Schily and Steinbach at a meeting in the Bundestag and, according to a BdV press release, "was open to the idea of setting up a Center Against Expulsions."[82] Both parties agreed that talks would continue. That summer, however, the federal government clarified that "talks [with the BdV] were for information purposes only," and there were no plans to support the expellee initiative with federal funding.[83] Still, the fact that Schröder had even entertained plans for a Center Against Expulsions demonstrated how far the BdV had

80 "ZgV - Zentrum Gegen Vertreibung: Chronik" [ZgV - Center Against Expulsion: Chronicle], Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen, accessed November 2, 2024, https://www.z-g-v.de/zgv/unsere-stiftung/chronik; Kurt Heißig, "Podiumsdiskussion in München: Enttabuisierung auf Samtpfoten" [Panel Discussion in Munich: Removing Taboos on Velvet Paws], *Preußische Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 3, 2001, https://www.webarchiv-server.de/pin/archiv01/0501ob15.htm.

81 Steinbach, *Die Macht der Erinnerung* [The Power of Memory], 99.

82 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Bundeskanzler Schröder steht Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen aufgeschlossen gegenüber" [Chancellor Schröder Is Open to the Center Against Expulsions], media release, January 31.

83 German Bundestag, Drucksache [Printed Paper] 14/3922, July 21, 2000.

come in revitalizing its public image and finding new political backing. The Chancellor himself applauded the Federation of Expellees for having "broken free from its isolation," now "conducting open and unbiased discussions with the government"[84] The BdV had forced Schröder's hand. He would meet with the expellees but would not take the political risk of supporting their memorial initiative.

A Subject of European Importance?

The BdV took a calculated approach to the Center Against Expulsions, which it framed as a human rights initiative, in order to place the German expellees alongside other victims of forced migration and even genocide. The proposed center aimed to erect a museum in Berlin where German "citizens could obtain information about the suffering of the German expellees as well as other ethnic groups displaced in Europe."[85] The organization's official website claims that the initiative "was born out of the Federation of Expellees' realization that it is necessary not to dwell on one's own suffering and personal traumatic memories but to create an instrument that helps to fundamentally outlaw expulsion and genocide as a means of politics."[86] This statement was far from the truth. The Center Against Expulsions was fundamentally a BdV initiative to memorialize the "suffering and personal traumatic memories" of the German expellees. Yet, by promising a broad approach to forced migration, the BdV demanded the *Vertreibung* receive recognition as a topic of European or even international importance within the German national consciousness.

The Federation of Expellees' goal to equate the *Vertreibung* with other historical traumas became even clearer after the organization released its concept for the center in the summer of 2000. The short, eight-page proposal outlined plans for a museum that would be funded with 160 million DM raised by the German federal states, or Bundesländer. It called upon the federal government to provide the foundation with a "prestigious building in a central location" in Berlin. Originally, Steinbach

84 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Bundeskanzler Schröder steht Zentrum" [Chancellor Schröder Is Open].

85 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Bundeskanzler Schröder steht Zentrum" [Chancellor Schröder Is Open].

86 "Willkommen" [Welcome], Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen, accessed December 7, 2024, https://www.z-g-v.de/.

even suggested the Berlin Palace.[87] "This place is intended as a reminder to outlaw expulsions worldwide and to raise awareness among the international community," read the opening lines of the paper. "In the 20th century, between eighty and one hundred million people were expelled from their homes, deported or forcibly resettled." Forced migrations were "human rights violations against innocent people of various ethnic backgrounds," yet these tragedies were "barely present in the general consciousness" of the German nation.[88]

Despite this language framing forced migration as a "European tragedy," the proposed museum focused almost entirely on the *Vertreibung*.[89] The center would house a permanent exhibit about the German expellees and their integration into both East and West Germany. It would hold conferences on forced migration. Furthermore, the museum would include a library and archive, special exhibits, and a memorial in the form of a "requiem rotunda."[90] While the proposal promised a center that presented "European history…in constructive dialogue with neighboring peoples," it never elaborated on what this dialogue would look like.[91] The provided exhibit plans then claimed to have drawn inspiration from the National Immigration Museum on Ellis Island and, more controversially, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Though couched within a framework of broader European history, the Center Against Expulsions was a project to define the *Vertreibung* as an event that fundamentally shaped postwar Germany,

Conclusion: Steinbach's New Federation of Expellees

During her first two years as BdV president, Erika Steinbach transformed the Federation of Expellees and with it, the German *Vertreibung* discourse as a whole. The media attention she garnered propelled her association out of political stagnation and onto the national stage. Amid this change, the BdV remained a divisive organization and the *Vertreibung* a controversial topic. But Steinbach recontextualized

87 "Vertriebene wollen ins Stadtschloß" [Expellees Want to Go to the City Palace], *TAZ*, March 22, 1999, https://taz.de/Archiv-Suche/!1296502&s=&SuchRahmen=Print/.

88 "Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen: Stiftung der deutschen Heimatvertriebenen Berlin" [Center Against Expulsions: Foundation of the German Expellees Berlin], *Deutscher Ostdienst*, June 16, 2000.

89 "Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen" [Center Against Expulsions].

90 "Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen" [Center Against Expulsions].

91 "Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen" [Center Against Expulsions].

both, using the language of human rights and ethnic cleansing to place the expulsion of the Germans in a history of European forced migration. The expellees used this broad rhetoric to legitimize their lobbying for a Center Against Expulsions, which would acknowledge the *Vertreibung* in the heart of Germany's capital. The memorial project brought the BdV support from politicians across the aisle—even from those who had otherwise rejected their claims for compensation payments. To Steinbach, the BdV stood for the "renunciation of revenge and… [the] rejection of any attempt at extremist influence."[92] Given her many divisive claims, her statement was received skeptically by the BdV's many critics, but it still represented a Federation of Expellees that had repositioned itself in German politics.

As the expellees' memorialization initiative grew, Steinbach's BdV pivoted away from levying controversial calls for restitution against Poland and the Czech Republic. In July 2003, the Bundestag voted to support the eastern expansion of the European Union. During the accession discussions, Steinbach unsuccessfully raised the BdV's longstanding demand that the Czechs abolish the Beneš decrees as a condition for membership.[93] It was the last time she made such an argument. While the memorialization initiative had brought the expellees new political momentum, the restitution demands continued to lead only to political isolation. After Poland and the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004, the BdV abandoned its legal claims against Germany's eastern neighbors. Steinbach finally closed the door on the reparation demands that the Federation of Expellees had raised against Poland and the Czech Republic.

The BdV's new emphasis on historical memory initiated a broader transformation in the German discourse on the *Vertreibung*. Chancellor Schröder continued to reject the Center Against Expulsions until he left office in 2005. Poland and the Czech Republic also wanted nothing to do with Steinbach, who remained a controversial figure in both countries. But the BdV received support from the federal government in 2005, when Steinbach's party leader, Angela Merkel, became chancellor. Through lobbying, the Federation of Expellees secured language in the CDU/CSU's coalition agreement with the SPD acknowledging a museum "to

92 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "Ein wichtiger Tag für Deutschland" [An Important Day for a], media release, September 4, 2000.

93 Bund der Vertriebenen [Federation of Expellees], "BdV-Präsidentin Erika Steinbach MdB in einer persönlichen Erklärung zur Erweiterung der EU" [Bdv President Erika Steinbach Mdb in a Personal Statement on EU Enlargement], media release, July 3, 2003.

remember the injustice of expulsions and to outlaw expulsion forever."[94] In 2008, the coalition passed a law creating the Documentation Center for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation (*das Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung*). There would be a museum in Berlin for the German expellees.[95] After years of planning, the institution opened its doors in June 2021.

The BdV thus redefined the *Vertreibung* in the German national consciousness. The Center Against Expulsions was not an endpoint but instead a new beginning. Beyond the federal museum in Berlin, the expellees are now honored in Germany during a yearly day of remembrance first celebrated in 2015.[96] Even after Steinbach retired as its president in 2014, the BdV remained a polarizing organization. Yet, through her combative rhetoric and divisive claims, Steinbach brought new relevance to her association and the topic of the *Vertreibung* as a whole. The Federation of Expellees turned an active legal discourse into a question of German and European memory. Through its efforts in the 1990s, the BdV created a national consciousness about the *Vertreibung* that became larger than the organization itself.

94 "Gemeinsam für Deutschland: Mit Mut un Menschlichkeit" [Together for Germany: With Courage and Humanity], coalition agreement of the CDU, CSU, and SPD, Berlin, November 11, 2005, 132.

95 German Bundestag, Drucksache [Printed Paper] 16/10571, October 14, 2008.

96 Mathias Beer, "In Search of a Usable Memory: The Politics of History and the Day of Commemoration for German Forced Migrants after the Second World War," in *Authenticity and Victimhood after the Second World War: Narratives from Europe and East Asia*, ed. Randall Hansen et al., German and European Studies (University of Toronto Press, 2021), 221-245.

Selected Bibliography

Adelman, Howard. *No Return, No Refuge: Rites and Rights in Minority Repatriation*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

Beer, Mathias. *Flucht und Vertreibung der Deutschen*. Beck, 2011.

———. "In Search of a Usable Memory: The Politics of History and the Day of Commemoration for German Forced Migrants after the Second World War." In *Authenticity and Victimhood after the Second World War: Narratives from Europe and East Asia*, edited by Randall Hansen, Achim Saupe, Andreas Wirsching, and Daqing Yang. German and European Studies. University of Toronto Press, 2021.

———, ed. *Umsiedlung, Flucht und Vertreibung der Deutschen als internationales Problem: zur Geschichte eines europäischen Irrwegs*. Haus der Heimat, 2002.

Borodziej, Włodzimierz, and Hans Lemberg, eds. *"Unsere Heimat ist uns ein fremdes Land geworden..." Die Deutschen* östlich *von Oder und Neiße 1945-1950: Dokumente aus polnischen Archiven*. 4 vols. Herder Institut, 2000.

Czaplinski, Wladyslaw. "The New Polish-German Treaties and the Changing Political Structure of Europe." *The American Journal of International Law* 86, no. 1 (1992): 163–73. https://doi.org/10.2307/2203147.

de Zayas, Alfred M. *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950*. St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Hahn, Eva and Hans Henning Hahn. "'The Holocaustizing of the Transfer-Discourse'- Historical Revisionism or Old Wine in New Bottles?" In *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, edited by Michal Kopeček. Central European University Press, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155211423.

———. *Die Vertreibung im deutschen Erinnern: Legenden, Mythos,*

Geschichte. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657770441.

Handl, Vladimír. "The Czech-German Declaration on Reconciliation." *Perspectives*, no. 9 (Winter 1997/1998): 53–65. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23615990.

Kossert, Andreas. *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der Deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945*. Siedler, 2008.

Lutomski, Pawel. "The Debate about a Center against Expulsions: An Unexpected Crisis in German-Polish Relations?" *German Studies Review* 27, no. 3 (2004): 449–68. https://doi.org/10.2307/4140977.

Madajczyk, Piotr. "The Centre against Expulsions vs. Polish-German Relations." *The Polish Foreign Affairs Digest* 4, no. 2 (11) (2004): 43–78.

Moeller, Robert G. "Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post—Cold War History of World War II's Legacies." *History and Memory* 17, no. 1–2 (2005): 145. https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2005.17.1-2.145.

Naimark, Norman M. *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

———. "Historical Memory and the Debate about the Vertreibung Museum." In *Austria's International Position after the End of the Cold War*, edited by Günter Bischof and Ferdinand Karlhofer. The University of New Orleans Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1n2txd9.

Perron, Catherine. "A Visible Sign with a 'Quiet Gesture'? The Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation in Berlin." *Studia Universitatis Hereditati* 11, no. 2 (2024): 67–90. https://doi.org/10.26493/2350-5443.11(2)67-90.

Petrovic, Drazen. "Ethnic Cleansing - An Attempt at Methodology." *European Journal of International Law* 5, no. 3 (1994): 342–59. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.ejil.a035875.

Phillips, Ann L. "The Politics of Reconciliation Revisited: Germany and East-Central Europe." *World Affairs* 163, no. 4 (2001): 171–91. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672615.

Schlögel, Karl. "Europa ist nicht nur ein Wort: Zur Debatte um ein Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen." *Zeitschrift* Für *Geschichtswissenschaft*, Flucht und Vertreibung in europäischer Perspektive, 51, no. 1 (2003): 5–12.

Schwartz, Michael. *Vertriebene und "Umsiedlerpolitik": Integrationskonflikte in den deutschen Nachkriegs-Gesellschaften und die Assimilationsstrategien in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1961*. Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486596298.

Steinbach, Erika. *Die Macht der Erinnerung*. Universitas, 2011.

Troebst, Stefan. "The Discourse on Forced Migration and European Culture of Remembrance." *The Hungarian Historical Review* 1, no. 3/4 (2012): 397–414. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42568610.

———, ed. *Vertreibungsdiskurs und europäische Erinnerungskultur: deutsch-polnische Initiativen zur Institutionalisierung: eine Dokumentation*. Fibre, 2006.

Young, James E. "Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine." *The Public Historian* 24, no. 4 (2002): 65–80. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2002.24.4.65.

"Arma Crucemque Cano"

An Examination into How Early Christian Leaders Invoked Vergil's *Aeneid* and "Eclogue IV"

Katharine Sorensen

"For he was acquainted, as I believe, with that blessed mystery which gave to our Lord the name of Saviour: but, that he might avoid the severity of cruel men, he drew the thoughts of his hearers to objects with which they were familiar."[1]

Thus speaks Constantine I (272 – 337 CE), the first Christian emperor of Rome, during his famous "Oratio ad Sanctorum Coetum," or "Speech to the Assembly of Saints." Delivered around 324 CE, this oration presented evidence for the "truth" of Christianity. To bolster his claim, Constantine pointed to a remarkable source: the ancient Roman poet Vergil.[2] This famed author, the emperor asserted, had predicted the coming of Christ.[3] Considering that Vergil is primarily known as the author of the Latin epic the *Aeneid,* Constantine's declaration might seem dubious. Even more conspicuously, Vergil died in 19 BCE, almost two decades before the birth of Christ.

Yet Constantine was by no means alone in his attempt to incorporate Vergil into his religious ideology. Rather, throughout Christian history, various leaders have held the poet in high esteem—a phenomenon that is both significant and well-documented. One such Church tradition, although

1 "Oration of Constantine to the Assembly of Saints (Eusebius)" in Stephen Barber, "Can the Christian Interpretation of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue Be Revived," *Oxford University Department of Continuing Education* (Autumn 2014). The titular quotation translates to "I sing of arms and the cross." Written by John of Garland, a thirteenth-century Christian university teacher, it appears in Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Virgil," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature, Volume I: 800-1558* (Oxford Academic, March 24, 2016), 169.

2 Spellings of the Roman poet's name differ across sources, with notable variants including "Virgil" and "Vergil." This paper uses the latter spelling, taken from the abbreviation of his full name, Publius Vergilius Maro.

3 Barber, "Christian Interpretation," 14.

highly improbable, maintains that the Apostle Paul once made a pilgrimage to Vergil's tomb. There, he allegedly expressed his deep regret at having never met the author in the flesh, as elements of Vergil's poems aligned with the Gospel he was preaching.[4] Similarly, if we consider the writings of early Latin church fathers such as Lactantius (250-325 CE), Saint Jerome (c. 347-407 CE), and Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), we discover that nearly every important leader in this period quoted Vergil freely and extensively. Centuries later, allegations of this poet's Christian character had extended beyond Church intellectuals to popular Christian culture. For instance, Vergil was cast as a prophet of Christ in an eleventh-century Christmas play. Furthermore, the stalls of a twelfth-century Spanish church depict Vergil among figures from the Old Testament.[5]

To better understand which of Vergil's characteristics rendered him peculiarly attractive to these early Christian thinkers, it is important to consider the place of his work in the Roman Empire's the literary canon. Vergil's corpus contained three major poetic works: ten poems collectively known as the *Eclogues*, a four-book didactic poem entitled the *Georgics*, and the twelve-book epic poem*, Aeneid*.[6] Each was an essential component in the training of an educated person in Rome. Throughout the first centuries of the Church, believers had struggled to cope with and integrate other aspects of Graeco-Roman culture, such as the presence of pagan festivals, theater performances, and military service. The issue of how to address Rome's literary legacy was much more fundamental.[7] Christians had to contend with the pervasive nature of Vergil's influence. Faced with the challenge of having their children instructed in his texts, these believers responded in different ways.

This paper considers just one component of this broader phenomenon. It examines how early Christian figures referenced Vergil's "Eclogue IV" and *Aeneid* to ground their religion in a prestigious classical past and facilitate the transition from paganism to Christianity as Rome's primary faith. Specifically, this essay analyzes the use of Vergil's

4 Charles N. Smiley, "Vergil: His Philosophic Background and His Relation to Christianity," *The Classical Journal* 26, no. 9 (1931): 660-75.

5 Ella Bourne, "The Messianic Prophecy in Vergil's Fourth Eclogue," *The Classics Journal* 11, no. 7 (1916): 390-400. The church in question is located in Zamora, Spain.

6 Ziolkowski, "Virgil," 165; Vergil's *Aeneid* is henceforth abbreviated as *Aen.* for block quote references.

7 Karl Olav Sandnes, *The Gospel "According to Homer and Virgil": Cento and Canon* (Brill, 2011), 2.

words in centos—poems composed of recognizable shorter sequences from pre-existing poems. Then, it evaluates how Christian leaders such as Constantine and Saint Augustine engaged with Vergil's work to "Christianize" a classical legacy with which these believers had contended for a considerable time.

The Pervasiveness of Vergil in Late Antiquity

In late antiquity, Vergil was as critical to the education and arts of Latin speakers as Homer had been for those of the Greeks.[8] Appearing in official ideology and popular culture, this all-encompassing influence set his reception apart from all others.[9] For Romans who did receive access to an elite education, Vergil figured directly into their schooling. Writings from Saint Augustine's fourth-century contemporaries, including Bishop Donatus and Servius Grammaticus, reveal how Roman students were taught to analyze the poet's literary choices, appreciate his style, and understand his engagement with the traditions and history of Rome.[10] In his *Institutio Oratoria,* first-century rhetorician Quintilian commented that the life of a Roman student was entrenched in both Homer and Vergil. "It is therefore an admirable practice, which now prevails, to begin by reading Homer and Virgil," he wrote.[11] In his fifth-century apologetic treatise, *Civitas Dei* [City of God], Augustine recalled his own extensive memorization of Vergil as a student. He noted how Roman students "read him in their early years…. [and] that when their tender minds have been soaked in the great poet, surpassing all in fame, it may not be easy for him to vanish from their memory."[12]

Yet, Vergil's works were not only consumed directly as models of style and wisdom. His impact was likewise ubiquitous in the commentaries of early Christian thinkers such as Constantine and Saint Jerome. Like Augustine, these leaders influenced culture for those who might not have found the *Eclogues* or *Aeneid* directly approachable. On a material level, verses and characters from Vergil's writings could be found across the empire in graffiti, mosaics, and sarcophagi, ranging from Somerset to

8 Gilian Clark, "Augustine's Vergil," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 77.

9 Richard Tarrant, "Aspects of Vergil's Reception in Antiquity" in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 48.

10 Clark, "Augustine's Vergil," 78.

11 Quintilian, *Instituio Oratoria,* 1.8.5, in Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 6.

12 Augustine, *Civitas Dei,* 1.3, in Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 6.

Halicarnassus.[13] This poet was a pervasive figure, even to Christian figures living centuries after his death. Engaging with his texts afforded these Christians credibility and rendered their work more accessible.

The Use of Vergil in Centos

One of the most interesting ways in which early Christians incorporated Vergil's work into their texts and ideologies was through centos—literary works, particularly poems, that were constructed by stitching-together lines from classical texts. By definition, this genre prevented authors from employing sources beyond the classical works behind their paraphrases.[14] In his book *The Gospel According to Homer and Vergil,* theology Professor Karl Sandnes invokes the slogan "if you can't beat them, join them" to characterize how fourth and fifth-century Christians used centos to engage with the Roman Empire's classical texts.[15] Through centos, Sandnes explained, educated Christians rewrote Biblical texts in hexameter, imitating the style of Homer and Vergil as well as adopting their lines.[16] Such centos produced what we might refer to as "biblical epics," allowing their authors to "Christianize" the classical tradition."[17]

To better understand why early Christians sought to imitate the classical legacy within their texts, we must first recognize that numerous educated believers felt a sense of embarrassment over the Gospels. As many of their learned contemporaries found the Gospels' literary style to be crude, Christians of the same intellectual background initially experienced little pride in their own religious works.[18] During late antiquity, literary style and sophistication served as critical components of social and cultural standing. Given this importance, Christian detractors used the crude style of Christian literature to argue that this new religion could only attract simpletons, who should, in turn, be afforded an inferior social status.[19] Furthermore, prominent intellectuals found the Apostles' absence of education to be problematic. Not only were these Christians "unlearned and ignorant men" (Acts 4:13) who were "rude in speech" (2 Corinthians 11:6) and lacked rhetorical training, but as "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19), they

13 Tarrant, "Vergil's Reception," 43.
14 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 1.
15 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 1.
16 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 1.
17 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 1.
18 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 24.
19 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 70.

held a low position in the social hierarchy.[20]

Acutely aware of such criticisms, several educated Christians attempted to use the apparent rudimentary nature of the Gospels and the Apostles' lack of education to emphasize the revelatory nature of their religion. In his first Epistle to Paulinus of Nola, Saint Jerome argued that, while one might be surprised to discover that Paul and Peter were unlearned men [*litteras non didicerint*], their uneducated background rendered their message more profound. Given their humble beginnings, their lessons must have been inspired by a divine intervention through the Holy Spirit.[21] Jerome therefore urged Paulinus to not "be offended by the simplicity, and apparent vileness, of the words in the Holy Scriptures," as those very features established that divine inspiration laid behind the texts.[22] Meanwhile, in Book 3 of Confessions, Augustine qualified his initial disappointment after reading the Scriptures. Though he first characterized these texts as "lowly to the beginner," further engagement revealed them to be "of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries." In other words, the simple nature of the Gospels rendered theological reasoning necessary, which then became a source of pride.[23]

Among educated Christians, the Biblical texts were met with a nuanced reception—one that exhibited both embarrassment and joy. These competing feelings of unease and pride become the backdrop against which we must analyze the attempts by early Christian writers to rewrite Biblical stories using Vergil's classical works. In drawing on his writings, these thinkers sought to root their narratives in the words of the ultimate classical authority.

Arguably one of the earliest and most widely known centos is *Cento Vergilianus de Laudibus Christi,* or "A Vergilian Cento Concerning the Glory of Christ." Written by Faltonia Betitia Proba, an aristocratic Christian Roman woman, this poem appeared around 362 CE.[24] It featured two sections: the first recounted the Old Testament, primarily Genesis and Exodus, while the second focused on the Gospels, especially that of Matthew. To narrate the Biblical text, Proba employed verses from Vergil's *Georgics, Eclogues,* and *Aeneid* "changed for the better with sacred

20 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 67.

21 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 66.

22 St. Jerome, Epistle 53.10, in Daniel Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls and Eclogue 4,* (Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques, 2013), 112.

23 Augustine, *Confessions,* Book 3, in Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 81.

24 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 242.

meaning [*mutatum in melius diuino agnoscere sensu*]."[25] For example, the *comites* [companions] of Aeneas now referred to the disciples while his *socii* (associates/allies) described Jesus's followers.

Proba most likely composed her cento for the Christian instruction of her children. Before the 694-line text, she included a fifteen-line dedication that called for her audience to "reread this poem, keep it safe through time, And hand it down to the younger Arcadius."[26] As previously discussed, Christian intellectuals struggled to determine how best to engage with Vergil's works while they remained the foundation of an elite Roman education. With Proba's cento, we see an effort to create a pedagogical tool through which children learned the Bible via Vergil's words, thus allowing readers to immerse themselves in prestigious classical texts without jeopardizing Christian ideas.

The *Aeneid*

Christian Motifs in the Aeneid

Before analyzing how specific Christian thinkers incorporated the *Aeneid* into their writing, it is worth identifying the general Christian themes that appear in Vergil's epic, which facilitated the text's incorporation into Christian ideology. For instance, the reconceptualization of Aeneas as a pilgrim allowed Christians to discover parallels between his heroic journey and the overarching Christian narrative.[27] Christians of antiquity recognized that Aeneas experienced life as a stranger and traveler, just as their forefathers had. He lacked a lasting city, yet sought one to come as he fled from a "City of Destruction to a Promised Land."[28] In a 1928 article, Classics Professor Frank Miller identifies similar motifs between the wanderings of the Trojans and those of the Hebrews. According to Miller, both narratives feature: 1) a chosen people, 2) a divinely appointed deliverer who embodies *pietas* [loyalty] to God's will and experiences great personal sacrifice to realize this will, 3) a long and arduous journey, 4) a promised land, 5) God's assurance that this people will become a powerful nation driven by an exceptional mission, 6) a nation through which all other nations should be blessed, and 7) a period of intense fighting following their

25 Proba, *Cento Vergilianus de Laudibus Christi,* in Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 147.

26 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 143; Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, Dedication, lines 1.13-15, in Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 148.

27 Valentine, "The Medieval Church," 65.

28 Valentine, "The Medieval Church," 66.

entrance into the promised land.[29] When we consider the popularity and symbolism of Exodus, it becomes easy to understand how Christians would be struck by the significant similarities between the Biblical narrative, the *Aeneid*, and their corresponding heroes: Aeneas and Moses.

As made evident by centos such as Proba's, even Vergil's words could be incorporated verbatim into a Christian narrative. Aeneas, like a Christian, was said to be pursuing a predetermined destiny ["*data fata secutus* - I am following ordained fate"]. He was struggling along an appointed way ["*Inde datum molitur iter* - From there he laboured on the way that was granted them"]. According to his father Anchises, Aeneas was "disciplined" by his experiences ["*nate, Iliacis exercite fatis* - Son, having been trained by the fate of Troy"], just as Hebrew 5.8 notes that **"**Though he [Jesus] were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered."[30] Or, consider the parallels between *Aeneid* 5.815, "*unum pro multis dabitur caput"* [one life shall be given for many], and Mark 10:45 and Matthew 20:28, which state "even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Christian motifs in the *Aeneid* were so powerful that prominent thinkers would continue to reference them far beyond late antiquity. More than a thousand years after both Vergil and Christ, Saint Bernard of Cluny, a twelfth-century Benedictine Monk, invoked the "*imperium sine fine"* [an empire without end] in *Aeneid* Book 1 to describe Christianity's "*urbs sine tempore"* [a city without time].[31] Thus, regardless of whether one considered Vergil's text to be religiously didactic by itself, when reading the *Aeneid,* Christians could consistently identify passages that spoke to the same ideals and experiences as presented in the Bible.

Early Christians and the Aeneid

To better understand the extent to which the *Aeneid* appeared in early Christian ideology, let us now analyze how Augustine and Proba incorporated lines from Vergil's epic into their own work. Written shortly after the Sack of Rome in 410 CE, Augustine's *Civitas Dei* referenced the *Aeneid* in its description of its heavenly city:

> For the king and founder of this city…has revealed in the scripture of his people a statement of divine law, in which it is said, "God resists the proud, but gives favour to the humble." (James 4:6) This belongs

29 Frank J Miller, "Vergil's Motivation of the 'Aeneid,'" *The Classical Journal* 24, no. 1 (October 1928): 29.

30 Vergil, *Aeneid,* 1.382, 6.477, 3.182*,* in Valentine, "The Medieval Church," 66.

31 Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.279, in Valentine, "The Medieval Church," 66.

> to God, but the swollen spirit of a proud soul lays claim to it, and loves to have said in its praise, *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* [to spare the subject and fight down the proud (*Aen.* 6.853)].[32]

In this passage, Augustine explained a critical message of Christian scripture by directly engaging with a line of Vergil's epic. The quoted phrase came from Anchises, the father of Aeneas, who presented it as Rome's mission statement. Yet, Augustine chose not to specify the speaker, broader work, or author. Rather, the line was so familiar that he felt it unnecessary to include Vergil by name.[33] Beyond providing additional evidence of Vergil's pervasiveness, its inclusion allowed Augustine's readers to comprehend a Christian notion through the familiar words of this ancient author.

In another sermon from the same period, Augustine confronted the question of whether Vergil intended to include Christian motifs. He imagined asking Vergil, "why did you make Jupiter say *imperium sine fine dedi* ["Empire without end I gave," (*Aen.* 1.279)]?" In the imaginary dialogue, Vergil responded, "I know, but what was I to do, selling words to the Romans, unless I flattered them by promising something false?"[34] According to the sermon, Vergil was forced to adapt his text to render it acceptable to his non-Christian audience. Thus, Augustine reconciled the prominent role played by the pagan gods in the *Aeneid* with his "Christianization" of Vergil. Their inclusion, Augustine suggested, was expected from an author writing during Emperor Augustus's reign. Saint Augustine may not have endorsed Vergil's existence as a messianic prophet—a characterization embraced by Emperor Constantine. Nevertheless, his deliberate efforts to render Vergil compatible with Christian ideals highlights the value he placed on drawing parallels between Scripture and the poet's words.

As for Proba, her Vergilian cento centered around the idea of a *nova progenies* [a new race/progeny,] a phrase that epitomizes a novel origin and hope. In the *Aeneid,* this *nova progenies* took the form of Aeneas's descendants, who would eventually establish Rome. In the Old Testament portion of her cento, however, Proba offered Noah's family, rescued from the flood, as the beginning of this new lineage.[35] When she then recounted the Gospels, Proba transformed Aeneas into the Messiah, who ensured an

32 Augustine, *Civitas Dei,* preface, in Clark, "Augustine's Vergil," 84.
33 Clark, "Augustine's Vergil," 84.
34 Clark, "Augustine's Vergil," 85.
35 Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 154.

everlasting kingdom for his followers.

Karl Sandnes provides an enlightening analysis of how Proba described the coming of Christ, using lines from the *Aeneid* as follows:

A man was coming to mankind and earth	*Aen.* 7.69; 2.556
A man magnificent from heavenly seed	*Aen.* 7.282
Whose might would take possession of world [*occupet orbem*]	*Aen.* 7.258
And now the promised day arrived, the day when first	
He showed his holy face, the found of a godly race [*diviniae stirpis origo*]	*Aen.* 8.591; 12.166
Sent for dominion [*imperium*], and virtue came in person	*Aen.* 6.812; 5.344
Mixed with God: His cherished Father's image [*genitoris imago*] came upon him[36]	*Aen.* 7.661; 2.560

As made evident by this example, countless lines describing Aeneas's *fatum* [destiny] and the imperial project of his Roman descendants could likewise be applied to Christ. Although Aeneas was half-mortal, his divine mission and heroic character traits were well suited to describing Christ's message.[37]

Proba further recasted the words of Vergil to describe several of the Bible's most iconic lines, characters, and stories. Consider the baptism of Jesus. During this episode, John the Baptist famously cries, "Behold, the Lamb of God."[38] In Proba's cento, the story was recorded as follows:

Enters now John the Baptist [*vates* - prophet] by a chilly stream [*flumen*], saying: "The time has come. God behold! God in whom there lies our greatest faith in deed and word" [*Tempus iat: deus ecce, deus cui maxima rerum verborumque fides*][39]	*Aen.* 6.46
When the prophet spoke, He received him	*Aen.* 2.790
as he came to dip him in the wholesome stream [*fluvio mersare salibri*]	*Aen.* 9.817
and brought him out from a gentle wave [*ac mollibus extulit undis*][40]	

Proba extended the same treatment to Jesus's crucifixion, the Sermon on the Mount, and many other Biblical stories. In each case, she carefully recorded each episode through Vergil's words alone. When we recall that

36 Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, lines 344-349, in Sandnes, *The Gospel*, 156.

37 According to Graeco-Roman tradition, Aeneas was the son of Anchises—a mortal man—and Aphrodite or Venus—the goddess of love.

38 John 1:29 (KJV).

39 Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, lines 390-391, in Sandnes, *The Gospel*, 160.

40 Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, lines 395-396, in Sandnes, *The Gospel,* 161.

Proba intended for her cento to serve as a pedagogical text for her children, we see the value that she placed on Vergil. As aristocratic Roman woman, she desired for her children to become exposed to his texts.

Both Augustine and Proba—two highly educated individuals who were thoroughly instructed in Vergil—struggled to reject the poet's works on the mere fact of his paganism. While Augustine engaged with Vergil by explaining Christian ideals through the lens of the *Aeneid,* Proba used this Latin epic to recount famous Biblical narratives. Through these methods, these early Christians found ways to ground Christian understandings and texts in the ancient author's work.

"Eclogue IV"

Christian Motifs in "Eclogue IV"

The *Aeneid* undoubtedly made its way into Christian ideology and texts. It was Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue,* however, that arguably prompted many early Church leaders to claim that he prophetically foretold the birth of Christ. Dated to 40 BCE through its mention of Gaius Asinius Pollio's consulship, "Eclogue IV" described the upcoming birth of a *puer* [boy] born to a *Virgo* [Virgin] who ushered in a Golden Age of peace and prosperity. Even in Vergil's day, there appeared to be confusion surrounding the boy's identity. Various guesses were proposed, ranging from allegorical references, such as the recently signed Treaty of Brundisium, to specific human children, such as the expected child of Emperor Augustus and Scribonia.[41] Yet, to many Christian thinkers, "Eclogue IV" became the so-called "Messianic Eclogue," which unequivocally anticipated the birth of Christ.[42] Even the most skeptical would notice the extent to which the poem could refer to the Saviour's coming. As recorded in the Eclogue:

Now the Virgin returns	*iam redit et Virgo*
now a new generation descends from heaven on high…	*iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.*
under whom the iron brood	*quo ferrea primum*
shall at last cease and a golden race spring up throughout the world!	*desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo.*[43]

41 Bourne, "The Messianic Prophecy," 390.
42 Ziolkowski, "Virgil," 178.
43 Vergil, *Eclogues,* 4.6-9.

He shall have the gift of divine life… and shall rule the world to which his father's prowess brought peace	*Ille deum vitam accipiet…* *pacatumque reget patriis virtutibus orbem.*[44]
Dear offspring of the gods… See how all things rejoice in the age that is at hand!	*Ille deum vitam accipiet…* *Aspice, venturo laetantur ut omnia saeclo.*[45]

To many Christians, "Eclogue IV's" gradually developing Golden Age served as an apt analogue for Jesus's teaching about the kingdom of God. The *puer*, somehow linked to a Virgin, was Christ himself. As described in the *Eclogue*, this boy will renew the world, erase our sins, and create universal and everlasting peace. Beyond the description of a Golden Age, the uncanny similarity between lines 18-24 of "Eclogue IV" and the prophecy narrated in Isaiah 11:6 furthered cemented the notion that Vergil was indeed communicating the coming of Christ.

Isaiah 11:6	"Eclogue IV," Lines 18-24	In Translation
The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.	*At tibi prima, puer, nullo munuscula cultu errantis hederas passim cum baccare tellus mixtaque ridenti colocasia fundet acantho...nec magnos metuent armenta leones...occidet et serpens.*[46]	But for you, child, the earth untilled will pour forth its first pretty gifts . . .the cattle will not fear huge lions... The serpent too will perish.

Taken together, the boy, Virgin, the ensuing Golden Age, and the parallels with the prophecies of Isaiah appeared to render "Eclogue IV" a Christian quasi-prophecy. As we will now examine, while some Christian leaders pointed to this text as proof of Vergil's intrinsic Christianity, others used its parallels to reflect upon Christian ideals and values.

Christian Thinkers and "Eclogue IV"

44 Vergil, *Eclogues,* 4.15-17.
45 Vergil, *Eclogues,* 4.49-52.
46 Vergil, *Eclogues,* 4.18-24.

Arguably, one of the most ardent proponents of "Eclogue IV's" prophetic nature was Constantine I. As recorded at the end of Greek historian Eusebius' *Vita Constantini,* this emperor incorporated the piece into his "Oratio ad Sanctorum Coetum."[47] Constantine was not the first person to identity a Christian prophecy in "Eclogue IV"—Lactantius, an early Church father and an advisor to the emperor, had commented on the text in his *Divinae Institutiones*. Constantine's commentary was particularly notable, however, for adopting a literal interpretation of the poem: the emperor claimed that Vergil was a Christian prophet who intentionally preserved the coming of Christ in his text.[48] Constantine's analysis is easy to follow: the *Virgo* (line 6) is the Virgin Mary, the *puer* is Christ, the *magnos leones* ("great lions," line 22) are Christ's persecutors, the *Cumaei carminis* ("Cumaean song," line 4) is a prophet, and the *serpens* (line 24) is the serpent who deceived Adam and Eve. According to this emperor, Vergil was "irresistibly impelled to bear his testimony… [for] Who, then, is the virgin who was to come? Is it not she who was filled with the child of the Holy Spirit?"[49]

Constantine also offered an explanation for the myriad pagan references throughout "Eclogue IV," such as the reign of Saturn and Apollo and the mention of Pan. Although "those who search deeply for the import of the words, are able to discern the Divinity of Christ," the emperor qualified, "lest any of the powerful in the imperial city might be able to accuse the poet of writing anything contrary to the laws of the country, and subverting the religious sentiments which had prevailed from ancient times, he intentionally obscures the truth."[50] Under Constantine's interpretation, Vergil acted admirably. Within the freedom that his poetic license afforded, the classical author masked truths concerning the Incarnation and Redemption of Christ under a veil of polytheism.[51] Through Constantine's *Oratio,* we see the first Christian emperor "welcoming into the Church the great imperial poet of the first of his pagan forebears."[52] With his inclusion of Vergil, Constantine implicitly recognized the role of classical culture

47 Some scholars have argued that Eusebius embellished Constantine's speech in his *Vita Constantini*. For the purposes of this paper, though, we attribute Constantine's words to himself.

48 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 93.

49 Constantine, "Oratio ad Sanctorum Coetu," in Barber, "Christian Interpretation," 14.

50 Barber, "Christian Interpretation," 14.

51 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 99.

52 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls*, 106.

within his new empire while simultaneously masking his newly Christian regime in the prestige of Rome's most prominent literary and cultural figure.

Turning finally to Saint Augustine, that writer first referenced "Eclogue IV" in his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans.[53] In that piece, Augustine noted the existence of "prophets who were not His, in whom some things are also found which they heard and sung about Christ." In particular, he described "a certain poet, the most noble in the Roman language [who] said those things about the renewal of the age which seem to agree and fit well with the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ."[54] According to Augustine, Vergil borrowed from the Cumaean Sibyl—the very prophetess he mentioned at the beginning of "Eclogue IV"—to narrate the coming of Christ. Although he believed that the Bible held the only legitimate Christian prophecies, this theologian appeared to acknowledge the existence of non-Christian oracles who foretold Christian truths. These prophets included the Sibyl, whose words Vergil then recounted.[55]

When considering why Augustine was so struck by "Eclogue IV," it is important to note that, outside of this commentary, he referenced Vergil and the Sibyl in three texts, all directed at individuals outside the church. Nectarius, addressed in Epistle 104, was a pagan from Calama. Volusianius, addressed in Epistle 137, was similarly pagan, though he had Christians within his family. Finally, Marcianus, addressed in Epistle 258, had adopted Christianity but refused baptism.[56] Even Augustine's *Civitas Dei* was written primarily to defend the Church against its detractors. Referencing "Eclogue IV" could be compelling when addressing an educated pagan. As a popular text of late antiquity, it offered common ground through which Augustine could both engage with ancestral traditions and position them to the benefit of this new faith.[57]

By incorporating classical culture into his epistles, Augustine sought to show these traditionally educated Romans how components of their literary canon coincided with Christianity.[58] However, since their traditional education already offered a non-Christian interpretation of "Eclogue IV," Augustine was forced to recognize that reading. Otherwise, he could not

53 The full title of this work was *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* [An Unfinished Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans.]

54 Augustine, *Epistle to the Romans,* in Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 113.

55 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 113.

56 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 120.

57 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 121.

58 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls*, 122.

plausibly prove that he could engage with the classics as rigorously as his pagan counterparts. Thus, Augustine's approach differed critically from that of Constantine in that he distanced Vergil from Christ. Unlike the Chirstian emperor, he avoided claiming that this poet was conscious of the prophetic nature of "Eclogue IV." Instead, he used Vergil's text to explain Christian ideals.[59] For instance, Augustine invoked lines 13-14 to explain that Christ absolves humanity of our sins. A portion of his readers would have more easily grasped this idea through Vergil's words: "*si qua manent sceleris vestigia nostri, inrita perpetua solvent formidine terras"* [if any tracks remain of our old wickedness, once done away, shall free the earth from never-ceasing fear.][60] Through Vergil, Augustine could present a narrative within which the Church could claim "Eclogue IV's" mystifying Christian references without jeopardizing established Christian beliefs.

Criticisms and Reflections

Before concluding this paper, it is imperative to discuss the ways in which many early Christian thinkers overlooked key disparities to fit Vergil's work within their narrative. Concerning "Eclogue IV," its similarities with both the Gospels and Isaiah's prophecy is arguably due to a familiar mythological motif: "the miraculous birth of the culture hero."[61] If you consider the twenty-two traits of a mythological hero as offered up by Lord Raglan, the *puer* of "Eclogue IV," Isaiah's child, and Jesus all meet similar criteria. These requirements include unusual circumstances of conception, alleged existence as the son of a god, and the creation of a future kingdom.[62] Stephen Barber also notes that representations of a goddess mother—virgin or not—date to well before Christianity. The relationship between Horus and Isis mirrors this hero-goddess pairing, and they possessed a significant Roman cult following. Northrop Frye, a literary critic, aptly remarks that "the interpretation of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue as Messianic. . .assumed that Virgil was 'unconsciously' prophesying the Messiah. . .[but] it is simpler merely to say that Virgil and Isaiah use the same type of imagery dealing with the myth of the hero's birth."[63]

Nevertheless, though these disparities are worth noting, early Christian thinkers and leaders were clearly successful in linking Vergil to

59 Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 122.

60 Vergil, *Eclogues* 4.13-14, in Hadas, *Christians, Sibyls,* 124.

61 Barber, "Christian Interpretation," 13.

62 Lord Raglan presented these traits in his 1936 book, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, quoted in Barber, "Christian Interpretation," 13.

63 Barber, "Christian Interpretation," 13.

their faith. Beyond the time frame discussed in this paper, the medieval period featured countless examples that pointed to the Church's exceptional affection and veneration for Vergil. In a thirteenth-century sermon concerning the birth of Christ, Pope Innocent III specifically quoted "Eclogue IV." Vergil also appeared as a prophet well into the Renaissance, as seen in paintings in a sixteenth-century Italian church in Rimini.[64] Drawing parallels between the Crusades and the actions of Aeneas, thirteenth-century university teacher John of Garland explicitly modified the Aeneid's opening lines. "*Arma virumque cano,"* or "I sing of arms and a man," became *arma crucemque cano, or "*I sing of arms and the cross."[65] Following the early Christians, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321 CE) was arguably the most influential thinker to call attention to the prophetic nature of Vergil's poems. Dante featured Vergil prominently in his *Commedia,* a description of the Christian afterlife as told through the author's own fictional travels. In the opening book of this work, he referenced the Roman as the "glory and light of other poets."[66] Though previously relegated to hell for living "in days of false and lying gods," Dante's Vergil was released to serve as the author's guide.[67] A quote by Statius —another Latin poet whom *Commedia* includes—nicely captures Dante's understanding of Vergil: "one who goes by night and carries the light behind him and does not benefit from it himself, but shows the way to those who come after him."[68] The *Commedia's* Vergil was a giver of light, someone guiding Dante who, unlike himself, could hope to discover fulfillment through Christ. Its description is a helpful analogy that we can apply to the writings of early Christian leaders explored within this essay. For them, Vergil's work held a pervasive and timeless power, enriching and shedding "light" on particular elements of Christianity.

During late antiquity, Christians found themselves at a cultural crossroads. With regard to their education, language, and the government they had followed for centuries, they were Romans and heirs to the Roman pagan tradition. Thus, pagan and Christian forces existed as opposing cultures alongside one another, often within the same people. As Vergil served as the educational foundation and embodiment of Rome's classical

64 Bourne, "The Messianic Prophecy," 396.

65 Ziolkowski, "Virgil," 169.

66 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, i.72

67 Dante, *Inferno*, i.82.

68 Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio,* xxii.67-68 in John Marenbon, "Virtuous Pagans, Hopeless Desire and Unjust Justice," in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy: Volume 1*, ed. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Open Book Publishers, 2015), 88.

tradition, many Christian thinkers embraced his work. While some, like Proba, created ambitious Vergilian centos for pedagogical purposes, others, like Constantine, cited Vergil as a true Christian prophet. Others still, such as Augustine, referenced Vergil's work as a means to better understand Christian ideals. All, however, recognized the poet's unique value and influence. They invoked his work to recast a prominent classical legacy through a Christian lens and, in turn, provided prestige to a young, developing Christian tradition.

Bibliography

Barber, Stephen. "Can the Christian Interpretation of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue Be Revived." *Oxford University Department of Continuing Education*, (Autumn 2014). www.academia.edu/36438467/Can_the_Christian_interpretation_of_Virgils_fourth_eclogue_be_revived.

Bourne, Ella. "The Messianic Prophecy in Vergil's Fourth Eclogue." *The Classical Journal* 11, no. 7 (1916): 390–400. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3287925.

Cases, Laurent. "Lactantius, Diocletian, Constantine and Political Innovations in the Divine Institutes." *Interface: Journal of European Languages and Literatures*, no. 21 (Summer 2023): 69-88. https://doi.org/10.6667/interface.21.2023.210.

Clark, Gilian. "Augustine's Vergil." *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Eliot, T. S. "Vergil and the Christian World." *The Sewanee Review* 61, no. 1 (1953): 1–14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27538181.

Hadas, Daniel. (2013). *Christians, Sibyls and Eclogue 4.* Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques, no. 37 (2013): 51-129. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.RA.4.2017053.

Jones, Christopher P. *Between Pagan and Christian*. Harvard University Press, 2014.

Marenbon, John. "Virtuous Pagans, Hopeless Desire and Unjust Justice." In *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy: Volume 1*, edited by George Corbett and Heather Webb, 1st ed., Open Book Publishers, 2015. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17w8gx0.11.

Miller, Frank J. "Vergil's Motivation of the 'Aeneid.'" *The Classical Journal* 24, no. 1 (1928): 28–44. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3289751.

Tarrant, Richard. "Aspects of Vergil's Reception in Antiquity." *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press; 2019.

Sandnes, Karl Olav. *The Gospel "According to Homer and Virgil": Cento and Canon*. Brill, 2011.

Smiley, Charles N. "Vergil. His Philosophic Background and His Relation to Christianity." *The Classical Journal* 26, no. 9 (1931): 660–75. http://www.jstor.org/stable/329055.

Valentine, T. W. "The Medieval Church and Vergil." *The Classical Weekly* 25, no. 9 (1931): 65–67. https://doi.org/10.2307/4389659.

Ziolkowski, Jan M. "Virgil." In *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature: Volume 1: 800–1558,* edited by Rita Copeland. Oxford Academic, March 24, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199587230.003.0009.

Closing the Last Safe Haven

The Shanghai Jewish Community's Responses to European Jewish Immigration in World War II

Christina Cheng

Though scarcely known as such today, colonial Shanghai served as an important safe haven for thousands of European Jews before and during the Second World War. As a matter of fact, the city took in so many Jewish immigrants that they constituted one fifth of its foreign population in 1940.[1] Beginning in 1937, Central European Jewish refugees began flowing into Shanghai by the thousands. Primarily from Germany, Austria, and Poland, these immigrants fled Nazi persecution and found refuge in the city's foreign enclaves.

Shanghai's fluid political dynamics facilitated this remarkable immigration. Frederic Wakeman, a renowned scholar of Chinese history, described the city's foreign concessions as some "of the most intricate and complicated urban societies in the world."[2] Ceded in the Treaty of Nanking, these districts operated as extraterritorial enclaves protected by Western powers amidst a sea of sovereign Chinese land. At its height, Shanghai was home to people of over fifty different nationalities, including Britons, Americans, Germans, Russians, Japanese, and local Chinese residents.[3] It was into this dynamic yet isolated environment that Central European Jews entered.

Much has been written of the decisions made by the United Kingdom, United States, and many South American countries to turn away Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler's persecution. A commonly referenced example is the story of the *MS St. Louis*, a ship which departed Hamburg

1 Maisie J. Meyer, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Whangpoo: A Century of Sephardi Jewish Life in Shanghai* (University Press of America, 2003), 210-211.

2 Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence, and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City* (De Gruyter, 2012), 5.

3 Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 12.

in 1939 with several hundred Jewish immigrants. After being denied entry upon their arrival in the United States, many of these refugees were forced back to occupied Europe and then murdered in the Holocaust.[4]

By contrast, little has been said of the thousands of European Jews who took the arduous journey via land or ship to the International Settlement, one of Shanghai's foreign concessions. The International Settlement served as one of the few sanctuaries they had in the world. Owing to its complex political dynamic and power-sharing arrangements, the concession required no passports or visas to enter. The exact number of Central European Jews who took advantage of this policy and found refuge in the International Settlement is unknown. Estimates, however, range from 17,000 to as many as 20,000.[5]

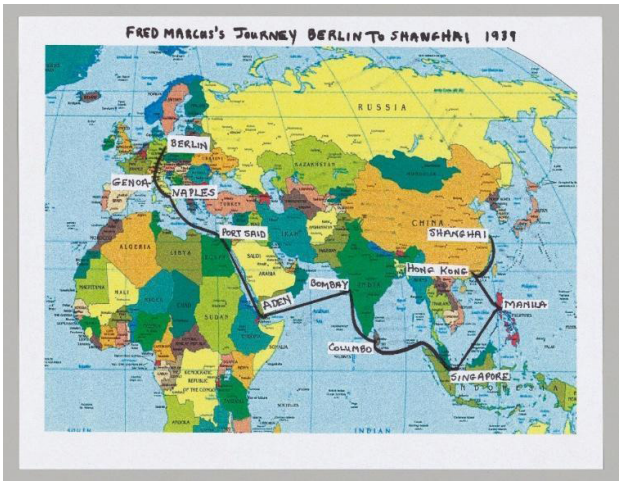


Figure 1: The sea journey of Fred Marcus, a German Jewish refugee, from Berlin to Shanghai. Map of Fred Marcus's journey from Berlin to Shanghai, after 1986, Fred Marcus Papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

For the few who know this story, that summary is the extent of their knowledge. In a small tale of hope amid a sea of tragedy, Shanghai opened its doors to European Jews when the rest of the world emphatically closed them. The full account, however, is much more complex. After two years of unrestricted immigration from 1937 to 1939, Shanghai's municipal authorities decided to curb further immigration in the fall of 1939. In one fell swoop, the city ceased to be a visa-free safe haven. As a result of these restrictions, Shanghai joined the rest of the world in shutting its doors to European Jewish refugees.

What is notable about this decision is the role played by Shanghai's

4 "The United States and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed April 2, 2025.

5 David Kranzler puts the number at "over 17,000." Eber cites the number at around 20,000. See David Kranzler, "Restrictions against German-Jewish Refugee Immigration to Shanghai in 1939," *Jewish Social Studies* 36, no. 1 (Jan 1974): 40; Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 1, 79.

two existing Jewish communities: the Baghdadi Sephardic Jews and the Russian Ashkenazi Jews. These groups backed restrictions against their co-religionists—against people who were seeking asylum from persecution for their shared faith. After taking the lead in supporting and assimilating thousands of these refugees over two years, these Jewish communities—especially the Sephardic Jews—turned against them by supporting immigration restrictions. Why this change?

Drawing on the personal papers of Shanghai Jews made available by the Hoover Archives, this paper argues that, while the city's Sephardic and Russian Jewish communities empathized with the plight of European Jewish refugees, a disconnect remained. At the heart of their relationship, there was a divide based on class, nationality, and religious practice. With no enduring bond between these three Jewish populations, the Sephardic and Russian Jews did not maintain a constant support for their co-religionists. Instead, in their treatment of Central European Jews, these groups abided by the desires of the foreign concessions' influential powers in order to remain in their good graces and maintain positionality. At first, the dominant foreign powers expected Sephardic and Russian Jews to take the lead in the care and assimilation of their co-religionists. These communities acted accordingly. But, as the influx of refugees grew overwhelming and Japanese occupation became an encroaching influence, those powers turned against the Jewish refugees. The Sephardic and Russian Jews followed suit.

Background

The complex response of the Baghdadi Sephardic and Russian Ashkenazi Jews can only be understood in the context of the intricate historical and political dynamics of colonial Shanghai, the city in which these communities lived.

Shanghai was and is defined by its colonial past, so much so that it was known as the "Paris of the East." After defeating the Qing Dynasty in the First Opium War (1839-1842), the British forced the Chinese government to open five treaty ports to facilitate international trade. One of these concessions was Shanghai, then just a small fishing village and junk port.[6] Over the course of a century, foreigners streamed into the area, mostly to take advantage of business opportunities. They lived in foreign enclaves—districts which sat on the banks of the Huangpu River that were surrounded by Chinese land but protected by extraterritoriality. A

6 Irene Eber, *Voices from Shanghai* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

few decades after their founding, the foreign enclaves coalesced into two sections: the French Concession, governed by the French Consul General, and the International Settlement, dominated by the British and administered by the Shanghai Municipal Council, a group of British, American, Chinese, and Japanese representatives. The city's Jewish communities lived within the International Settlement.

Following the Japanese invasion of Shanghai in August 1937, millions of Chinese residents suffered under the subsequent occupation.[7] The foreign concessions, however, were left largely unharmed owing to their extraterritorial protections. Historian Bernard Wasserstein described the concessions as a "solitary island in the sea of Japanese occupation."[8] During this period, Britons, Frenchmen, Americans, Italians, Germans, Russians, and Japanese people lived in relative comfort. They were surrounded by war, but not at war.[9]

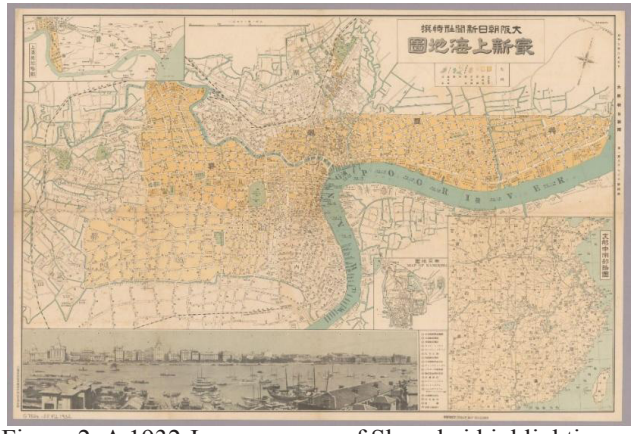


Figure 2: A 1932 Japanese map of Shanghai highlighting the city's unique spatial dynamics. The French Concession is in yellow, and the International Settlement is in orange. The remaining areas show local Chinese territory. In its bottom left corner, the map includes a depiction of the Bund, the waterfront on the Huangpu River within the International Settlement. Saishin Shanhai chizu [Newest Map of Shanghai], Ōsaka Asahi Shinbunsha [Osaka Morning Sun Newspaper], May 5, 1932.

On the eve of World War II, the Baghdadi Sephardic Jews and the Russian Ashkenazi Jews lived amongst this diverse crop of foreign residents as two disparate Jewish communities. In the mid to late nineteenth century, the wealthy Baghdadi Sephardic Jews

7 This invasion heralded the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

8 Bernard Wasserstein, *Secret War in Shanghai* (Profile Books, 1998), 18.

9 See Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, Chapter 1; Lena Scheen, "History of Shanghai," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, ed. David Ludden (Oxford University Press, 2022); Christian Henriot, "Introduction," in *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai Under Japanese Occupation*, ed. Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert Bickers, "Settlers and Diplomats: The End of British Hegemony in the International Settlement, 1937-1945," in *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai Under Japanese Occupation*, ed. Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

came to Shanghai via Iraq and Bombay, pursuing opportunities in banking, finance and trade. Their most prominent families, such as the Sassoons, Kadoories and Hardoons, held coveted British citizenship. The Russian Ashkenazi Jews, on the other hand, came to Shanghai via Manchuria in the 1920s, seeking safety from the Bolshevik Revolution and antisemitic pogroms. After arriving in Shanghai, they were stateless and often lower or middle class. While there were approximately 20,000 Central European Jewish refugees living in wartime Shanghai, the Sephardic Jewish population never exceeded 1,000. The stateless Russian Ashkenazi population hovered between 7,000 and 8,000.[10]

The vast majority of local support for the destitute Central European Jews came from Shanghai's resident Jewish communities. As European Jews began to arrive at the concessions in 1937, the Baghdadi and Russian Jews united to aid their co-religionists. These pre-war communities provided shelter, healthcare, food, and jobs in addition to assimilating the refugees into life in the foreign concessions. As advertised, Shanghai functioned as a visa-free safe haven for Jews. By fall of 1939, however, the Central European Jewish population reached the twenty thousands, outnumbering the Sephardic Jews by a ratio of twenty-five to one. At that moment, the Shanghai Municipal Council implemented restrictions to curb further immigration.[11] From then on, immigrants were required to obtain either an entry permit or be in possession of four hundred dollars to be allowed entry into Shanghai.[12] The leaders of the Jewish communities, particularly the Sephardic Jews, came to endorse these restrictions after their initially warm welcome to the refugees. Through these limits, Shanghai joined the rest of the world in excluding European Jewish refugees after two years of facilitating unrestricted immigration.

Prior Disunity

Even before the arrival of the Central European refugees, Shanghai's Baghdadi Sephardic and Russian Ashkenazi Jews were far from united. In the foreign concessions, status was defined by class and nationality. Sephardic Jews sat at the top of the social hierarchy owing to their enormous wealth and prestigious British citizenship. Lower class and stateless, the Russian Jews sat at the bottom. Rena Krasno, a young stateless Russian Jew who grew up in Shanghai, described the concessions as a

10 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 200.

11 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 210-211.

12 Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 98-99. Adults had to be in possession of four hundred dollars while children needed one hundred dollars.

"multifaceted city with clearly defined social stratifications." The "nationals of the Great Powers," such as the British, enjoyed a privileged status while the Russian Jews were the lowest of foreigners. They existed only above the Chinese, who "in their own homeland, moved down to the lowest stratum of the social structure."[13] Within this hierarchy, the Sephardic Jews were so distant from Russian Jews that to Krasno, they "could have been living on another planet."[14] Krasno imagined a similar disconnect in the eyes of Sephardic Jews. "When rag-tag Russian Jewish refugees began to arrive," she wrote, "the Sephardis regarded them with surprise, amusement, and perhaps disdain."[15] This division is further supported by the oral history of Matook Raymond Nissim, a British Sephardic Jew. While the piece mentions Nissim's life at the British school, synagogue, and parties with the foreign elite, it makes no mention of any interactions with Russian Jews.[16]

The benefits of British citizenship motivated the Sephardic Jews to accentuate this difference by leaning into their nationality. By virtue of their citizenship, they enjoyed the British government's extraterritorial protection for their personal safety, trade, and business. Furthermore, their British passports gave them the freedom to move across the British Empire.[17] This emphasis on a British identity can be seen in Israel's Messenger, a Zionist newspaper written and published by a Sephardic Jew. On May 12, 1937, the paper dedicated its entire issue to the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.[18] Two prominent Sephardic Jewish companies, E. D. Sassoon & Co. and Edward Ezra & Co., took out half-page advertisements to congratulate the royal couple, writing "God Save the King."[19] By embracing a wealthy British identity, members of the Sephardic Jewish community actively sought the top of Shanghai's international hierarchy. By contrast, the Russian Jews were stateless refugees seeking sanctuary from religious and political persecution.

13 Experience of an "Old China Hand" Born in Shanghai, May 1995, Rena Krasno Papers, box 2, folder 14, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA (hereafter cited as "Old China Hand," Rena Krasno Papers).

14 Rena Krasno, *Strangers Always: A Jewish family in Wartime Shanghai* (Pacific View Press, 1992), 67.

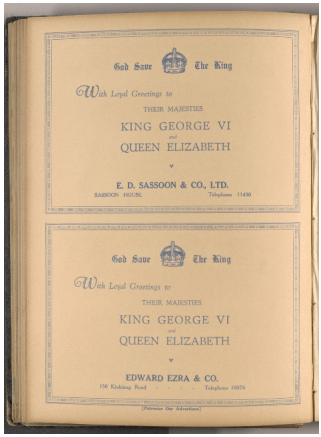
15 Krasno, *Strangers Always,* 67.

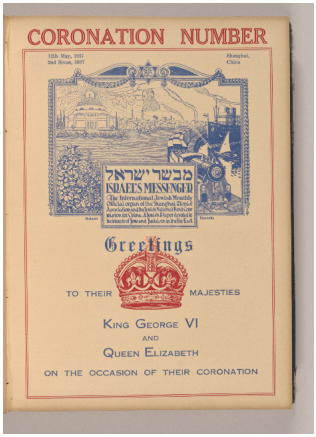
16 Matook Rahamim Nissim: An Oral History, 2000, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA (hereafter cited as Matook Rahamim Nissim, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers).

17 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 157.

18 *Israel's Messenger*, May 12, 1937, in Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

19 *Israel's Messenger*, May 12, 1937.





Figures 3.1-3.3: Selections from the May 12, 1937, issue of *Israel's Messenger*, which celebrated the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. The first image shows the half-page advertisements purchased by E. D. Sassoon & Co. and Edward Ezra & Co. *Israel's Messenger*, May 12, 1937, in Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

The Sephardic and Russian Jewish communities also differed in their practice of Judaism, further exacerbating this divide. Nissim and his family, for example, conducted Friday night Shabbat dinners and Passover Seders. They likewise celebrated Purim, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur.[20] Krasno, in contrast, wrote that she knew "very little about the Jewish religion," and observed differences in the Sephardic and Ashkenazi services.[21]

Compounding these differences in nationality, class, and religious practice, Shanghai's concessions featured little antisemitism that could have united these disparate communities by singling out their shared Jewish identity.[22] When asked if he ever felt vulnerable for being Jewish, Nissim replied, "[n]o, not at any time that I know, and I never knew of anybody who felt vulnerable because of religion."[23] Not only did Nissim not feel targeted for being Jewish, but he saw Judaism as a religious practice rather than an ethnic marker. Being Jewish was just one facet of his identity.

In the foreign concessions, a prevailing social hierarchy fostered perceptions of identity that were not conducive to the unity of Shanghai's

20 Matook Rahamim Nissim, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers.

21 Krasno, *Strangers Always,* 64.

22 The only constituency with virulent antisemitic beliefs were the White Russians, who emigrated to Shanghai with the Russian Jews and accused them of being Bolsheviks. This group was not influential within Shanghai's foreign community. See Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 203.

23 Matook Rahamim Nissim, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers.

Jewish communities. The Baghdadi Sephardi Jews were wealthy and British, whereas the Russian Ashkenazi Jews were poor and stateless. Even their shared Jewish identity—an aspect minimized by the concessions' relative lack of antisemitism—had to contend with differences in religious practice. Central Europe's Jewish refugees, who notably differed in class from the Sephardic Jews and in nationality from the Russian Jews, entered into this disunified environment. These differences would eventually motivate the pre-war Jewish communities to support restrictions against their co-religionists. Their response to the initial arrival of refugees, however, was strong and united.

1937: The Initial Response

As the exodus of Central European Jews began in response to Nazi persecution, leaders within the Sephardic and Russian Jewish communities temporarily united to provide support for the incoming refugees. Together, these pre-war residents helped the new arrivals settle into the foreign concessions. Through community organizations like the Ashkenazi Jewish Communal Association, the Russian Jews mobilized to collect and disburse clothing, organize free kitchens, and find jobs for the refugees.[24] Prominent Sephardic Jews Sir Victor Sassoon and Horace Kadoorie founded the International Committee for European Immigrants and the Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees, respectively. The community's leaders also donated some of their personal fortunes and raised money from both Russian and Sephardic Jews to support the new immigrants. Victor Sassoon opened the doors of his hotel along the Huangpu River as the central receiving point for new refugees, and the Sephardic synagogue functioned as a temporary shelter.[25]

Local institutions and publications rallied to unite Sephardic and Russian Jews around the refugee cause. Reporting on the arrival of early Austrian and German Jews, a 1938 article in *Israel's Messenger* maintained a largely sympathetic tone. The piece provided a detailed description of their inhumane treatment within German concentration camps and noted how their German passports singled them out for being Jewish. Recognizing the significance of its city as a Jewish safe haven, the article noted "that almost all the great world ports aside from those in the Far East are barred to [Jewish refugees,] and therefore Shanghai has become

24 "Old China Hand," Rena Krasno Papers.

25 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 209; Matook Rahamim Nissim, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers.

a sort of Mecca simply by process of elimination." Furthermore, the text promoted the benefits that refugees had historically brought to the foreign community, pointing out that "the city has been richer for these people once they have been assimilated and found their place in this international community."[26]

The Fault Lines Form

Nevertheless, even during this initial period of strong and unified support, the Sephardic and Russian Jewish communities were unable to form enduring bonds with the Central European refugees. Beneath this strong initial response laid signs of uneasiness and apprehension. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in a letter to the editor featured in the *News Weekly to the Jewish Community of Shanghai*. In this piece written in early 1939, a local Jewish resident wrote that he had watched "with growing concern, that the [Jewish Recreation Club] [was] gradually but surely, falling under the influence of the newcomers in our community." In response, the *News Weekly's* editors revoked his subscription, calling him a "hypocrite – to his Race and the Club" before adding that "[o]thers, like him [could] claim their money back if they [shared] his attitude."[27] Here we have a local Jewish resident expressing his resentment towards an attempt by Jewish refugees to assimilate into a Jewish organization. The writer goes so far as to accuse the immigrants of overtaking the association at the expense of longtime Jewish residents. Faced with this concern, the editor of the newspaper, presumably a prominent Jewish resident, labeled the view as hypocrisy to Jews and the organization. The fact that the editor made his intolerance of such views so clear—addressing others who might also hold this hypocritical attitude, publishing the original letter, and adding his response—suggests that this sentiment was not an insignificant opinion. Instead, it was a stance that the newspaper tried to actively combat.

Similarly, while the 1938 article in *Israel's Messenger* had an encouraging tone, signs of hesitation and disconnect were simultaneously visible. The piece quoted a member of the refugee committee as having "stressed the point" that "these people were not being encouraged to come to Shanghai" and that the influx of them presented a "very serious

26 *Israel's Messenger*, December 16, 1938, in Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

27 News Weekly to the Jewish Community of Shanghai, February 15, 1939, Rena Krasno Papers, Box 2, Folder 23, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA (hereafter cited as News Weekly, Rena Krasno Papers).

problem" and "tremendous burden."[28] From the early years of the refugee influx, leaders of the Shanghai Jewish community made it clear that these immigrants were not wanted. Rather, they acknowledged that the arrival of Central European refugees was a problem that had to be dealt with. The article also expressed concern about the refugees' ability to assimilate into the foreign community given that they were unskilled and could not speak English.[29] The newspaper looked down on lower class Austrian immigrants. By the article's account, the fact that they "[were] not endowed with professional skill or [did] not even have knowledge of some useful trade [complicated] matters to a very great extent."[30]

Differences in class and nationality heightened these underlying tensions, demonstrating how these features continued to define identity in the foreign concessions. For the Russian Jews, their similarities in class with the Central European Jews created competition for jobs while their differences in nationality brought out historic prejudices. According to Alfred Zunterstein, an Austrian refugee, "the ability of the newcomers to compete with the working whites in Shanghai made for some hostility, even from Jewish quarters." Consequently, he said, "[t]he relations with the Russian Jewish younger people cooled off."[31] Ernest Heppner, a German Jewish refugee, characterized the relationship between the Central European and Russian Jews as "by and large…one of convenience and business."[32] The Russian Jews resented the Central European Jews for their belief that they were superior to Eastern European Jews. Thus, "there was little love lost" between them in spite of "their common bond of Judaism."[33] Compounding the effects of class and nationality, differences in culture and language meant that the Russian Jews (who spoke Yiddish) "paid scant attention" to the German and Austrian refugees (who did not).[34] By contrast, the Russian Jews welcomed Polish refugees, who shared a common culture and language, "with open arms."[35] In the foreign concessions, class and

28 *Israel's Messenger,* December 16, 1938.

29 *Israel's Messenger,* December 16, 1938.

30 *Israel's Messenger,* December 16, 1938.

31 Alfred Zunterstein, "Document 47," in *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai 1933-1947: A Selection of Documents*, ed. Irene Eber (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, & Co. KG, 2018), 210.

32 Ernest G. Heppner, "The Relations Between the Western European Refugees and the Shanghai Resident Jews: A Personal Memoir," in *The Jews of China,* ed. Jonathan Goldstein and Frank Joseph Shulman (M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 59.

33 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 59.

34 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 59.

35 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 59.

ethnic tensions superseded a shared religious background, and even that overlap was tenuous; while the Russian and Sephardic Jews followed an Orthodox or Conservative tradition, many of the Central European refugees were more liberal. Consequently, tensions arose when the immigrants sought to hold services that challenged existing conventions.[36] Given this internal divergence, Judaism alone could not hold these communities together.

Among Sephardic Jews, differences in class posed the biggest obstacle to their ability to meaningfully relate to the new immigrants. This subset of the pre-war community featured enormously wealthy members of the foreign elite. The Central European Jews, on the other hand, were destitute refugees. In Heppner's view, Sephardic Jews were embarrassed by the poverty of their co-religionists and feared a "loss of face" by association. The Jewish refugees were working menial jobs to support themselves. In the concessions, though, the expectation was that "the white man was respected for his power or wealth" while "manual labor on his part was unheard of." Such drudgery was left to the Chinese, or "coolies," as Shanghai's foreigners derogatorily called them.[37]

Motivations for Initial Support

Given these tensions festering among the Jewish communities, why did the Sephardic and Russian Jews initially come to the aid of the Central European refugees? A significant motivator for this response was pressure from the influential foreign powers of the concessions, particularly the Japanese and British.

Initially, the Japanese had a positive view of the influx of Central European refugees. Many of the first arrivals were successful professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and businessmen. These individuals settled in Hongkew, the Japanese section of the International Settlement, and impressed their fellow residents as "industrious, productive, and cooperative."[38] The Japanese appreciated, for instance, their efforts to repair buildings that had been bombed out in the Battle of Shanghai. Once repaired, these structures hosted the homes and small businesses of the

36 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 59; Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 211.

37 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 59; Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 61; Krasno, *Strangers Always*, 109-111.

38 Marcia R. Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 106.

refugees.[39]

Nevertheless, the Japanese and the British believed it was the responsibility of the Sephardic and Russian communities to assist the new arrivals. By the assessment of these foreign powers, the pre-war Jewish residents—particularly the wealthy Sephardic Jewish businessmen—ought to raise money for, organize, and administer aid to the thousands of refugees owing to their shared religion.[40] Both the Shanghai Municipal Council, the administering body of the International Settlement, and its British, American, and Japanese representatives, made it clear that they would not contribute a "penny" to supporting the influx from Central Europe.[41] Given this dynamic, Michael Speelman, a leader of the Jewish refugee effort and the president of Horace Kadoorie's refugee organization, "feared loss of respect and prestige in the non-Jewish business community if they were unable to take care of their destitute coreligionists."[42]

1939: The Tides Change

With no strong bonds or feelings of solidarity between the new and old communities, the Sephardic and Russian Jews followed the region's leading foreign powers by withdrawing support for the refugees. As the number of Jewish arrivals rose, the political tides of the foreign concessions turned against unrestricted immigration. The existing Jewish communities lacked strong relationships with the Central European Jews, which were necessary to reinforce their dedication to the refugees. Consequently, their support waned, and the immigration restrictions of fall 1939 followed. Paul Komor, the leader of the International Committee for Granting Relief to European Refugees, made explicit the connection between this lack of empathy and the diminishing concern for the immigrants' plight. "Local Jewry," he wrote "will only realize the actual situation when they get to feel, on their own persons and those of their families, the things which the Emigrants arriving here have experienced. But then, here as elsewhere, it will be too late."[43]

As refugees continued to flow into the city, on October 22, 1939, the Shanghai Municipal Council introduced a permit system, ending the period of unrestricted, visa-free immigration that had served as a short

39 Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 106.

40 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 211; Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 2.

41 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 208.

42 Eber, *Voices from Shanghai*, 12.

43 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 66; Kranzler, "German-Jewish Refugee Immigration," 41.

window of opportunity for European Jews.[44] Under this permit system, refugees needed to have an entry permit or be in possession of four hundred dollars to enter Shanghai. On May 24, 1940, though, these rules were revised to require both for entry, as too many refugees were arriving with the necessary funds.[45]

The Pre-War Jewish Communities Follow

As noted by David Kranzler and other scholars, the leaders of the pre-war Jewish communities had some say in implementing these restrictions. In particular, the Sephardic Jews had influence within the Shanghai Municipal Council as British citizens.[46] Considering their potential sway, Kranzler writes that the support of the Sephardic Jews was a "definite factor" in the Shanghai Municipal Council's decision to move forward with restrictions.[47]

Local Jewish advocacy for restrictions can be explicitly seen in a front-page article in the *New Weekly of the Jewish Community of Shanghai*. Entitled the "Plight of Jewish Refugees in Minds of Local Jewry," this article was published several months before any immigration restrictions went into effect. The piece publicly advocated for a quota and permit based system of immigration for Jewish refugees. In particular, it endorsed a policy in which any immigrant had to produce an affidavit signed by a Shanghai resident assuring that "he [would] not become a public charge."[48] If an immigrant was unable to produce an affidavit, they would only be allowed entry for one year. If they did not subsequently become "self-supporting," they would be deported "to some other port" and "perhaps be absorbed by the community there."[49]

The author's stated rationale was the uncontrollable influx of refugees into the foreign concessions, which they characterized as a "crisis… threatening [the community]" that required "drastic action." According to the article, the biggest questions on the minds of the Jewish community were: "[w]hat shall we do with our refugees, and what will become with the refugees." Notably, in referring to the Central European immigrants as "our" refugees, the author viewed them as the responsibility of the Jewish community. At the same time, though, the writer defined the

44 Eber, *Voices from Shanghai*, 13.
45 Eber, *Voices from Shanghai*, 13.
46 Kranzler, "German-Jewish Refugee Immigration."
47 Kranzler, "German-Jewish Refugee Immigration," 47.
48 News Weekly, Rena Krasno Papers.
49 News Weekly, Rena Krasno Papers.

refugees by their impoverished, stateless status, characterizing them as a group that needed to be dealt with by the pre-war populations. The author also expressed frustration that German and Austrian Jews saw Shanghai as "a land flowing into milk and honey… due to the glowing accounts they [received] from friends and relatives already here." Influenced by these stories, "they [became] hopeful that once here their troubles [would] cease to exist." While expressing frustration with this inaccurate portrayal of wartime Shanghai, the writer also took pity on the refugees' plight, saying in a condescending tone that "[i]t [was] not that those here [wished] to mislead their friends, but that they [felt] loth to impart any news which [would] tend to add to the depression already heaped upon those in Europe."[50]

From this multifaceted article, we can see the disconnect in experience that drove Shanghai's Jewish communities to support the authorities of the foreign concessions in turning against the refugees. The influx of Central European Jews reached its peak in the twenty thousands. While there was certainly sympathy among the local Jewish communities, it often took a pitying and patronizing tone. Such an attitude did not sustain any connections as the politics of the foreign concessions, on many fronts, turned against mass Jewish immigration. In December 1938, the British consul-general claimed that "a large influx of Jewish refugees would have most upsetting results here." "We certainly do not want anti-Semitic problems added to our Shanghai problems," he added.[51] The British and Americans were also concerned about the potential of the large population of Jewish refugees to shape local politics. In the run-up to the 1940 municipal election, the Japanese tried to woo Jewish refugees into voting for their candidates by promising entry permits for their family members still in Europe. If successful, these efforts would upset the British and American balance of power on the Shanghai Municipal Council.[52] The Japanese were likewise growing agitated as the number of Jews in their area of Hongkew was getting out of control. Exacerbating these shifts in attitude by the foreign powers, the concessions experienced worsening food and fuel shortages as Japanese occupation of the surrounding Chinese territory continued. The conflict fueled the growth of another dominant class of wartime refugees: tens of thousands of Chinese individuals who also found safety in the foreign concessions. The International Settlement,

50 News Weekly, Rena Krasno Papers.
51 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 202.
52 Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 154.

in short, seemed utterly overwhelmed.

The Failure of the Sephardic and Russian Jews

Citing this complicated environment and the tremendous set of pressures faced by Shanghai's Jewish population, scholars have argued that these communities had no option but to accede to the prevailing sentiments. In this view, the city's Jews had been working diligently to support their co-religionists but simply had to give up and conform to the demands of the Japanese and the Shanghai Municipal Council. For example, Maisie J. Meyer argues that the failure of the Jewish communities must be understood in the context of the "deteriorating political and economic situation in Shanghai." "Shanghai Jewry," she claims "had dissipated its resources… and were not professionally-trained social workers".[53] Irene Eber similarly points out how Jewish leaders were being actively wooed by the municipal council and summoned to meetings with Japanese officials in the lead up to the 1939 restrictions.[54]

Such analyses, however, minimize the influence of the Jewish communities, especially the British Sephardic Jews, within the foreign concessions. Some have argued that the Sephardic Jews were an isolated, inconspicuous group that were forced to become highly visible after the arrival of the European Jewish refugees.[55] Yet, it cannot escape us that the Sephardic Jews consciously tried to identify with Britons, who were the most influential group within Shanghai's political ecosystem. Furthermore, the Sephardic Jews were extremely wealthy, owned much of the prime real estate along the Huangpu River, and were intricately involved with the international trade networks that sustained the foreign concessions. The Sassoon House, the prized skyscraper of Sir Victor Sassoon, still sits along the Bund, Shanghai's prime tourist destination.

Though they lived in East Asia, the foreigners of Shanghai likewise still had knowledge of global events, including the unfolding European atrocities that were pushing many Jews to the city. Colonial Shanghai was an outpost of the British Empire and the wider Western world. Thus, its residents were very much attuned to the events of World War II. Weekly editions of the *North-China Herald*, for example, had sections dedicated to the Pacific War as well as news from the European

53 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 216.
54 Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 95.
55 Meyer, *Babylon to the Whangpoo*, 201.

front that came via foreign telegrams.[56] Many members of Shanghai's Jewish communities were ardent Zionists, especially the Ashkenazi Jews who had fled antisemitic violence in Russia. Rena Krasno's father, David Rabinovich, for example, was a leader in the Russian Jewish community who had inadvertently settled in Shanghai on the way to Palestine. Through publications such as *Israel's Messenger,* these Shanghai residents tracked the Zionism movement and antisemitism globally.[57] The newspaper featured pamphlets pushing back against the "false and grotesque charges being made against Jews" in Great Britain, deconstructing antisemitism in the Elders of Zion, and explaining how "Bolshevism [was] not Jewish."[58] The publication also wrote heavily on Nazi antisemitism. One edition of *Israel's Messenger,* for instance*,* featured a full-page article on "Terror In Vienna" in May 1938. The piece described how "[a] disaster rivaling in its completeness of if not its magnitude the catastrophe that [had] struck German Jewry five years ago [had befallen] Austrian Jewry."[59] Given these connections, the local Jewish communities of Shanghai had an extensive exposure to information about the ongoing war and the experience of Judaism in Hitler's Europe.

In light of this knowledge and influence, the city's Sephardic and Russian Jews had the potential to put their support behind Central Europe's refugees. However, owing to their inability to form meaningful bonds with their European co-religionists, these older Jewish communities endorsed restrictions as the powers of the concessions desired. From the onset of this mass immigration, Michael Speelman, the leader of the largest refugee organization, stated that he was at least in part motivated to help the immigrants because he wanted to save the reputation of the Jewish community. In the face of expectations from concession leaders, Shanghai's Jewish population could not be seen as neglecting their helpless co-

56 The North-China Herald, July to September 1941, China Newspaper Collection, Box 172, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA; The North-China Herald, November to December 1941, China Newspaper Collection, Box 364, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

57 Heppner, "Western European Refugees," 63.

58 *Israel's Messenger*, September 14, 1937, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA; *Israel's Messenger*, January 14, 1938, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA; *Israel's Messenger*, February 18, 1938, Matook Raymond Nissim Papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

59 *Israel's Messenger*, May 13, 1938, Matook Raymond Nissim papers, Box 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

religionists.[60] As the concession elites became concerned with the influx of Jewish refugees, so did the Sephardic and Russian Jews; as the pressures of concession politics became too great, Shanghai's Jewish communities made the decision to endorse, and perhaps even propose, restrictions on Jewish immigration. In deciding to preserve the status quo, they affirmed their elite positionality and their locus in the hierarchy of the foreign concessions. As Marcia Ristiano wrote:

It appeared that they too, were committed to preserving the calm and stability conducive to a flourishing community and favorable business atmosphere… [t]he Jewish leaders, police officials, and Western consular representatives agreed that a delicate system of relationships had to be protected in order to maintain the stability required by the established commercial and trade interests… the refugee question had to be handled skillfully, with the interests of all parties being considered."[61]

Conclusion

As fault lines formed and municipal authorities turned against the rising population of Jewish refugees, the Sephardic and Russian Jews faced a choice: to follow the foreign powers and endorse restrictions or to continue their support for their co-religionists. Given their overwhelming differences in class, ethnicity, culture, and religious practice—differences which created both sympathy and pity toward the refugees—they lent themselves to the former.

Thus, Shanghai's period as a safe haven for European Jews came to an end with the support of the Jews of Shanghai. This result should not come as a complete surprise. The Sephardic and Russian Jews immigrated to Shanghai's foreign concessions for a reason: they sought the privileges that such a life offered. Life in the Western world's colonial outpost was so opulent that even the poorest Russian Jews looked down on the local Chinese population, who served as their rickshaw drivers and who they derogatorily called "coolies."[62] It is no shock, then, that in an environment that fostered such attitudes and lifestyles, the Sephardic and Russian Jews turned on the destitute, poor Central European refugees in order to preserve the livelihoods they had cultivated and remain in the good graces of the concessions' leaders.

All that being said, a broader perspective must be taken. Regardless

60 Eber, *Voices from Shanghai*, 12.
61 Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 113.
62 Krasno, *Strangers Always*, 109-111.

of the implementation of restrictions or the motivations of Shanghai's Jewish communities, it must not be forgotten that the city's Sephardic and Russian Jews singlehandedly supported a refugee population at least double their size. They took in thousands and protected those thousands from genocide in Europe. Many refugees were able to build successful small businesses and foster a vibrant artistic culture in Shanghai.[63] The same cannot be said of the United States and Great Britain, sovereign nations with far greater power, who turned away almost all Jews who came begging for help and safety. The United States, a population of over one hundred million, set a quota of 27,000 Jews per year.[64] Between 1937 and 1939, the Jews of Shanghai supported a comparable number of around 20,000 Jewish refugees, but in the foreign concessions whose population was no more than a few hundred thousand people. In understanding the wartime responses of Shanghai's Jewish communities, both their heroism and their failures must be remembered.

63 Eber, *Wartime Shanghai.*

64 Daniel A. Gross, "The U.S. Government Turned Away Thousands of Jewish Refugees, Fearing That They Were Nazi Spies," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 18, 2015.

Bibliography

Bickers, Robert. "Settlers and Diplomats: The End of British Hegemony in the International Settlement, 1937-1945." In *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai Under Japanese Occupation*, edited by Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

China Newspaper Collection. Boxes 172 and 364. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

Eber, Irene, *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

———. *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence, and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City*. De Gruyter, 2012.

Goldstein, Jonathan, and Frank Joseph Shulman. *The Jews of China*. M.E. Sharpe, 1999.

Gross, Daniel A. "The U.S. Government Turned Away Thousands of Jewish Refugees, Fearing That They Were Nazi Spies." *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 18, 2015. "https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/us-government-turned-away-thousands-jewish-refugees-fearing-they-were-nazi-spies-180957324/.

Henriot, Christian. "Introduction." In *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai Under Japanese Occupation*, edited by Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Heppner, Ernest G. "The Relations Between the Western European Refugees and the Shanghai Resident Jews: A Personal Memoir." In *The Jews of China,* edited by Jonathan Goldstein and Frank Joseph Shulman. M.E. Sharpe, 1999.

Kranzler, David. "Restrictions against German-Jewish Refugee Immigration to Shanghai in 1939." *Jewish Social Studies* 36, no. 1 (January 1974): 40–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4466801.

Krasno, Rena. *Strangers Always: A Jewish family in Wartime Shanghai*. Pacific View Press, 1992.

———. Rena Krasno Papers. Box 2. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

Marcus, Fred. Map of Fred Marcus's Journey from Berlin to Shanghai, after 1986, Fred Marcus Papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

Meyer, Maisie J. *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Whangpoo: A Century of Sephardi Jewish Life in Shanghai*. University Press of America, 2003.

Nissim, Matook Raymond. Matook Raymond Nissim Papers. Boxes 1 and 2. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford, CA.

Ristaino, Marcia R. *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai*. Stanford University Press, 2001.

Scheen, Lena. "History of Shanghai." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, edited by David Ludden. Oxford University Press, 2022.

"The United States and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 2, 2025. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-united-states-and-the-refugee-crisis-1938-41.

Zunterstein, Alfred. "Document 47." In *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai 1933-1947: A Selection of Documents*, edited by Irene Eber. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, & Co. KG, 2018.