

Frank M. Schuster

Between all fronts: The impact of World War I on Eastern-European Jewry

During World War I Eastern European Jewry found themselves on either side of the front, since their homeland had become a theatre of war. As Russian Army leaders regarded the Jews as traitors and spies, they made them scapegoats for their own military failures. The hope that the situation would improve under the Central Powers was only partially fulfilled. Although Jews were no longer charged en masse with espionage, the distrust continued as Jews were still associated with treason, epidemics and prostitution. The war confirmed the anti-Semitic stereotypes of many – with tragic consequences for the future.

Im Ersten Weltkrieg fand die jüdische Bevölkerung im östlichen Europa sich auf beiden Seiten der Front wieder, da ihre Heimat zum Kriegsschauplatz geworden war. Die russische Armeeführung sah in Juden Verräter und Spione und machte sie daher zu Sündenböcken für ihr eigenes militärisches Versagen. Die Hoffnung, dass sich die Situation unter den Mittelmächten bessern würde, erfüllte sich nur bedingt. Zwar wurde der Vorwurf der Spionage nicht mehr kollektiv erhoben, man misstraute der jüdischen Bevölkerung aber weiterhin und brachte sie mit Verrat, Seuchen und Prostitution in Verbindung, denn viele sahen ihre antisemitischen Vorstellungen bestätigt – mit tragischen Folgen für die Zukunft.

When in August 1914 war broke out, few could foresee that the conflict would turn into World War I., especially not those most concerned, the ordinary people. As the historian Zvi Y. Gitelman once put it:

“A Russian peasant was reported to have asked, “If our Tsar is at war with the German Kaiser, does this mean that we ordinary people will have to go fight?” The Jews similarly asked what could the fight between the “Fonye Ganev” and Kaiser Wilhelm have to do with them.”¹

They would find out very soon. With the start of hostilities, the area in which the mainly Yiddish-speaking Eastern-European Jewry lived was transformed into a zone of military operations,² and the Jews ended up between all fronts.

¹ Gitelman, Zvi Y.: A Century of Ambivalence. The Jews of Russia and the Soviet-Union 1881 to the Present. New York: 1988. p. 81. ‘Fonye Ganev’ was a unpleasant nickname used in Yiddish for the Russian Zar.

² On the east-European Jewry during World War I in general see my book: Schuster, Frank M.: Zwischen allen Fronten. Osteuropäische Juden während des Ersten Weltkrieges (1914-1919), (Lebenswelten osteuropäischer Juden, 9) Köln, Weimar, Wien 2004, in which I am dealing with all the topics I am focusing on here in length and in a broader context.

But in the beginning nobody knew what to expect.³ While the elder and more religious Jews on both sides of the front, thought that this war, as any war, would be a great catastrophe in general, and especially for the Jewish population, the younger ones saw it as a chance for liberation. At least some Austrian Jews thought of the war against Russia in terms of a holy war that would liberate their people from Tsarist oppression and declared their loyalty to their country.⁴ The Jews in Russia surprisingly did the same, hoping that by doing so, they were to gain more rights.⁵ Both groups were destined to be taken by surprise.

Instead of liberating Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Army was forced to withdraw when the Russian Army unexpectedly marched into Eastern-Galicia in mid-August 1914. Especially for the Jewish civilian population, this was a shock. The trust and hopes most of them had put into their protector, Emperor Franz Joseph as a symbol of the non-national Habsburg Monarchy, turned out to be in vain.⁶ More than half of the Jewish population of Galicia was forced to flee, was evacuated or deported by their own army.⁷

“So one could have been expelled from eastern-Galicia by the Russian occupation-force or effects of war, and a few days later been evacuated from ones place of refuge in one of the Galican towns by the Austro-Hungarian army. While fleeing from the immediate territory of war, one could just as well be arrested by one’s own army and as a suspect of espionage interned in the hinterland, and from there - after the suspicious facts turned out to be unfounded - deported as a ‚refugee‘ into a refugee-camp. One could be evacuated into the rear-territory during a ‚strategic evacuation‘ in the scope of a ‚scorched earth policy‘, leaving the advancing Russian Army without manpower, and from there as a sanitary threat for the army or because of the communities’ overburdening supply-problems in the rear-territory, deported into the hinterland, only to be denounced there as ‚refugee‘.”⁸

Thus ‚refugees‘ were suspected of being disloyal ‚elements‘, and therefore potential spies for the Russian enemies. As Jews did not remain in the territory of war to ‚defend‘ their fatherland they were seen as cowards, - both by the army and the non-Jewish society in general. But the orthodox, mainly Chasidic Jewry, were not the most mistrusted

³ Cf. for the following: Schuster: *Fronten 2004*, pp. 112–122.

⁴ Cf. Rozenblit, Marsha L.: *Reconstructing a National Identity. The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I*. Oxford et al. 2001, pp. 39–58

⁵ Cf. Greenberg, Louis: *The Jews in Russia. The Struggle for Emancipation*. Vol. II. Ed. by Mark Wischnitzer. New Haven/CT 1951, pp. 94–95; Frumkin, Jakob G.: „Iz istorii russkogo evrejstvo“, in: *Kniga o russkom evrejstva. Ot 1860-ch godov do revoliucii 1917 g.* Ed. by Ja. G. Frumkin et al. New York 1960. pp. 27–117, here p. 85–87, English edition: Frumkin, Jakob G.: „Pages from the History of Russian Jewry“, in: *Russian Jewry 1860–1917*. Ed. by Jakob Frumkin et al. New York: 1966. pp. 18–84, here: pp. 56–58.

⁶ Cf. Schuster, Frank M.: „...wie ein Blitz aus heiterem Himmel“ *Der Erste Weltkrieg in Galizien und der Bukowina aus jüdischer Sicht*, in: *Transversal. Zeitschrift des Zentrums für jüdische Studien* 9 (2008), pp. 33–58, here pp. 39–41.

⁷ Cf. Kreppel, Jonas: *Juden und Judentum von heute*. Zürich et al. 1925, pp. 65–66. On the number of refugees and the problem of estimating it see: Mentzel, Walter: *Kriegsflüchtlinge in Cisleithanien im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Unpublished doctoral-dissertation. Vienna 1997, especially pp. 4–7 and Hoffmann-Holter, Beatrix: *«Abreisendmachung»*. *Jüdische Kriegsflüchtlinge in Wien 1914 bis 1923*. Köln, Weimar, Wien 1995, pp. 31–74, 143–159 and especially the table on p. 283.

⁸ Mentzel: *Kriegsflüchtlinge 1997*, p. 11. Cf. Mentzel, Walter: *Kriegserfahrungen von Flüchtlingen im Nordosten der Monarchie während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, in: Bachinger, Bernhard/Dornik, Wolfram (Ed.): *Jenseits des Schützengrabens. Der Erste Weltkrieg im Osten: Erfahrung, Wahrnehmung, Kontext*. Innsbruck 2013, pp. 359–390, here p. 391; Mentzel, Walter: *Kriegsflüchtlinge in Cisleithanien 1914–1918*, in: Heiss, Gernot/ Kolb, Oliver (Ed.): *Asylland wider Willen*. Wien 1995, pp. 17–44.

ethnicity in Galicia. The Ruthenians, the Ukrainian subjects of the Dual-Monarchy, were seen as Russophil Slavs by large parts of the Austrian army, blamed for their military failures, seen as scapegoats and hanged *en mass* as spies.⁹ Jews were not feared and suspected as much, at least not in the territory of war itself. In the hinterland however the situation was very different. The population in inner-Austria, especially in cities such as Vienna, Prague and, Budapest, where the people, who had lost nearly everything but their lives, often ended up, were far from welcoming, especially not to Jews. The bureaucracy, as well as people in general, became more and more afraid of epidemics being spread all over the country by these poor, lousy and dirty people, who came from the edge of the monarchy, the edge of civilisation.¹⁰ During the war the atmosphere in Austria-Hungary became more and more Antisemitic¹¹.

For those left behind in the Russian occupied eastern Galicia, the situation was no better, than the later famous Galician-born Austrian writer Manès Sperber remembers:

“The shtetl was cut off from the outside world. Mail was stopped to and from the unoccupied portion of the [Austrian, FMS] monarchy, and the shtetl seldom received a sign of life even from the neutral countries. So many families had depended on the few dollars that came letters from their relatives in America, who usually promised to set steamship tickets and looked forward to welcoming them in New York. But now no letters or the dollars arrived; poverty became an oppressive hardship, from which there was no escape.”¹²

It became even worse, when epidemics started to spread among the poor, hungry population that could no longer resist disease.¹³ Unsurprisingly, many Jews secretly hoped for the Austrians to come back, and in between tried to survive as best as they could. To the Russian army command, the fact that most of the Austrian Jews remained loyal to their *Kaiser*, was not seen as a result of the present situation, but justified by previous Antisemitic suspicions that seem to have been even stronger than the ones existing in some parts of the Austrian army and bureaucracy.

In 1912, a questionnaire was sent from the Ministry of War to 50 high-ranking generals. Regarding Jews in general and specifically those in the army, the questionnaire's responses indicated that Antisemitism was widespread amongst those

⁹ Cf. Holzer, Anton: *Das Lächeln der Henker. Der unbekannte Krieg gegen die Zivilbevölkerung 1914-1918*. Darmstadt 2008, pp. 44–85; Holzer, Anton: *Die andere Front. Fotografie und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Darmstadt 2012, pp. 228–261.

¹⁰ Cf. e. g. the reports of the Galician governor Statthalter Hermann von Korytowski: Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna (hereafter: ÖStA) Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (hereafter: AVA) Ministerium des Inneren (hereafter MdI) Präs. 19/3 Zl. 453/15 and ÖStA Kriegsüberwachungsamt (hereafter: KÜA) Zl. 7617, in detail: Schuster: *Fronten* 2004, pp. 122–160; 239–249. About the situation of the Jewish refugees in Austria after they left the theater of war see: Rozenblit: *Reconstructing* 2001; Mentel: *Kriegsflüchtlinge* 1997; Hoffmann-Holter: *Abreisendmachung* 1995; Rechter, David: *The Jews of Vienna and the First World War*. Oxford 2000.

¹¹ In using this unfortunately still rather uncommon spelling, I follow Shlomo Bergmans suggestions, to make it clear, that Antisemitism is not anti-Semitism, because it is neither directed against all Semites, nor has it anything to do with Semitic languages, because Semitism is a linguistic term. Cf. Bergman, Shlomo: *Some Methodological Errors in the Study of Antisemitism*. In: *Jewish Social Studies* 5 (1943), pp. 43–60.

¹² Manès Sperber: *God's water carriers*. New York ; London: 1987, p. 80. For the original cf. Manès Sperber: *Die Wasserträger Gottes*. (All das Vergangene... 1). Frankfurt a. M. 1993. p. 132.

¹³ Cf. Baruch, Milcha: *Barucha Milcha galicyjskie wspomnienia wojenne 1914-1920*, in: *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 172–174 (4/94–2/95) pp. 123–133, here pp. 128–129; Baruch, Milcha: *Testament*. *Z Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*. Warszawa 2001, pp. 16–18.

who occupied key positions in the Russian army and that nearly all of them wanted to get rid of the Jews, at the very least in the army, if not in general.¹⁴

So it is hardly surprising that on July 26th/August 8th 1914¹⁵ – the same day N. M. Fridman, one of only three Jewish members of parliament, expressed his loyalty to Russia in a noted speech in the Duma¹⁶ – the 2000 Jewish inhabitants of a Shtetl near Lodz in central Poland were accused of espionage for the enemy, expelled by the local commander and not allowed to come back, despite a contrary order by the governor.¹⁷ This case, one out of hundreds that were still to come, suggested that not only Habsburg Jews but also Russian Jews were seen as an unreliable minority, that was viewed to be treacherously at the service of the Central Powers. Russia turned against its own subjects.¹⁸ And similar to the Austrian Army's behaviour, Jews were not the only ones to blame. After the outbreak of the war Germans, who had lived in Russia for centuries, and saw themselves mainly as Russians, were confronted with an atmosphere of general germanophobia. They were treated like enemies who could not be trusted. They were deported too and their land was confiscated. As in the case of the Jews, the accusation of espionage had no real basis. Scapegoats had to be found, especially when poor communication resulted in the Russian Army losing battles against the Germans, and later, the Austrians. As V. A. Obolenskij, a well informed Russian bureaucrat later wrote in his memories:

“No matter what, it was necessary to find people to blame. So they were found. The Jews were responsible: they were living in front-line areas and were engaging in espionage. This was the source of the order to remove the Jewish population from the front. The masses of the troops believed this libel on the Jews and sympathised with the order.”¹⁹

Limited evacuations of the Jewish population from areas of combat soon turned into large-scale deportations and hostage taking. These measures accelerated into plundering, executions and pogroms. The situation became even worse after the general offensive by Germany and Austria in spring 1915. In addition, there was Russia's failed copy of the ,Great Retreat of 1812,' during which they, not only had to withdraw from most of the occupied Austrian territory, but also left Poland, large areas of the Baltics, Byelorussia and later on Ukraine, to the Central Powers.

¹⁴ Cf. Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Voenno-Istoričeskij Archiv, Moskau f. 400 op. 19 d. 37, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People Jerusalem HM2 8279.6.

¹⁵ If two dates are given the first one refers to the Julian Calendar used in Russia until February 1918, and the second to the Georgian Calendar, used in the rest of Europe.

¹⁶ Cf. Frumkin: Istorii 1960, p. 85, Frumkin: Russian 1966. p. 58, Greenberg: Jews 1951. Vol. II, pp. 94–96.

¹⁷ Cf. Iz 'černoj knigi' russijskago evrejstva. Materialy dlja istorii vojny 1914–1914 g. Pod. red. A. Cernovskij, P. V. Viktorov. pp. 197–227, in: Evrejskaja Starina 10 (1918) pp. 195–296, here p. 232.

¹⁸ About Russia's politics against its own subjects see: Lohr, Eric: Nationalizing the Russian Empire. The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I. Cambridge/MA, London 2003; Graf, Daniel W.: The Reign of the Generals: Military Government in Western Russia 1914–1915. Unpubl. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Nebraska. Lincoln: 1972. and specially about the Jews: Lohr, Eric: The Russian Army and the Jews. Mass Deportation, Hostages, and Violence during World War I, in: The Russian Review 60 (2001) pp. 404–419, Goldin, Semion: Deportation of Jews by the Russian Military Command 1914–1915, in: Jews in Eastern Europe (Spring 2000), pp. 40–73; Schuster: Fronten 2004, pp. 161–233.

¹⁹ Obolinskij, V. A.: Moja žizn', moj sovremenniki. Paris 1988. p. 477. For the English translation see: Goldin: Deportation 2000, pp. 46–47.

To justify for instance the mass deportations of Jews from the province of Courland to the outside world, the order from April 25th/May 8th 1915 was declared a reaction to a case of supposed Jewish treason in the village of Kuzhi, reported in an army newspaper and later reprinted in all the Russian Empire official papers. The report read:

The Jews of the village of Kuzhi hid German soldiers in their cellars, who had entered the village [...] At night, they led the German soldiers from the cellars, and the entire Russian military unit with Colonel Vasilov at the top was massacred by the Germans treacherously. With those Jews of the village, who were directly involved in treason, was dealt according to martial law hesitation, the rest were sentenced to banishment.²⁰

The whole story was a fabrication, as the two Duma members, the Jewish MP for the neighbouring province of Kowno, N. M. Fridman and A. F. Kerenskij, the later Russian Prime minister, found out during a field trip and presented in front of parliament:

“In the village of Kuzhi there are merely three houses owned by Jews; in the whole village there exist absolutely no basements, neither Jewish nor Christian; in the list of officers of the north-western troops as well as the relevant casualty lists is a Colonel Vasilov not to be found; not a single Jew in the village of Kuzhi was either hung(hanged), nor put in front of a firing squad, or put on trial for treason at all. [...] The Jews fled from the village of Kuzhi because of German artillery fire along with the Russian military unit; they were protected all the way by the commanding officer and even the troops rendered them any assistance, thanking them this way for services rendered to the military unit during their stay in the village.”²¹

By the time this came to be known to the public at the beginning of May 1915, the deportation of about 190 000 Jews, however, was already completed.²²

Although the situation of Germans and Jews seems comparable, the methods used against the Russian Jewry were different from the ones used against others, as Eric Lohr pointed out:

“First, mass deportation orders covering large territories well behind the front were only attempted for a brief period, then abandoned in favor of deporting only from areas where the army was present. Thus, the troops played a larger direct role in implementing the deportations and expulsion of Jews than for other groups. A second and related feature is that the deportations were far less organized, and much more often accompanied by violence, looting, and popular participation than was the case for other groups. Railroad transport was provided far less often, and areas were more often cleared of Jews through direct expulsion order, terror-induced, mass refugee movements. Under a condition of a wave of

²⁰ Published in: Gessen”, Ju. V. (Ed.): Dokumenty presledovanii evreev, in: Archiv Russkoi Revolucii 9 (1928) pp. 245–284, here p. 255. (dok. 18.).

²¹ Quoted in: Vinaver, M. M.: Doklad” po evrejskomu voprosy Zentral’nago Komiteta Partii Narodnoj Cvobody na Konferenzii gelegatov” partii, sostojavšejsja 6-8 Ijunja 1915 g., in: Cernovskii, A. und Viktorov, P. V. (Ed.): Iz ,chernoi knigi russiiskago evreistva. Materialy dlja istorii vojny 1914–1914 g., pp. 197–227, in: Evrejskaja Starina 10 (1918) pp. 195–296, here pp. 222–224. Cf. Frumkin: Istorii 1960, p. 91 f Frumkin: History 1966, pp. 65–69.

²² Vgl. Goldin: Deportation. S. 54.

pogroms and local orders to Jewish communities to leave regions under army control, the difference between Jewish deportees, expellees and refugees became less distinct than for other groups.”²³

The methods used and tested against Jews and Germans were used later on other ethnic non-Russian subjects of the Tzar, as the problems of conducting a successful war were increasing. The consequence was that from 1915 onwards millions of people were on the move.²⁴ But whereas the Russian, and even the German, attitude towards these groups derives mainly from the concrete situation of war, and is as such quite similar to the Austrian attitude towards the Rutheniens, the motivation for making the Jews ‘inner enemies’ goes far beyond the immediate context of the war against each other.²⁵ The basis of the attitude towards the east-European Jewry – so it seems – has been deep-rooted Antisemitism from all combatants.²⁶ Neither the Russian generals and officers, nor many of their counterparts within the Central Powers, were able or willing to see in the Jewry they confronted, anything but an Antisemitic image. Instead of seeing the poverty, epidemics and Jewish struggle for survival mainly as a consequence of war and their own policy towards Jewry, many people in the Russian, Austrian and German army and administration, as well as other groups within the non-Jewish population, found their Antisemitic prejudices of the parasitic, infected, contaminating Jew continually infiltrating the invading forces confirmed.

The Russian Army not only blamed Jews for being spies and spreading diseases like cholera or typhoid fever, some generals went so far as to assume that Jewish prostitutes infected Russian soldiers deliberately with venereal diseases. Prostitution and especially syphilis were serious problems for the army particularly during the retreat when discipline decreased. The commander in chief of Russia’s southwestern front, N. N. Ivanov, who had total control over a territory reaching from eastern-Galicia in the west and in the east beyond Kiev, put prostitutes under military-control and severe punishment, trying to keep the situation under control, but in vain. And once again it was easy for General Ivanov to find somebody to blame: It seems he really believed that German-Jewish organizations invested huge sums of money to pay prostitutes to infect Russian officers and soldiers.²⁷ This had the same logic as the reproach that all Jews were spies. Maybe a few Jews really were on the German payroll, and no doubt some Jewish women and girls worked as prostitutes, but surely not *en mass*.²⁸ And the reason for Jewish prostitution was definitely not the distraction of the Russian army nor the girls’ low

²³ Lohr: Nationalizing 2003, p. 138.

²⁴ Cf. Gatrell, Peter: A Whole Empire Walking : Refugees in Russia during World War I. Bloomington/IN 1999.

²⁵ The consequences of the First World War for the Russian Jews and their perception by the Russian society have so far not been studied in detail, but currently Anastasia Surkov works on a research project at the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung (Center for Research on Antisemitism) in Berlin, entitled: Die Radikalisierung des Antisemitismus in Russland und der Sowjetunion während des Ersten Weltkrieges und der ersten Jahre der Zwischenkriegszeit. Very interesting results are to be expected to come out of this project.

²⁶ Sarah Panter has recently compered the Jewish war experience of German, Austrian, British, and American Jewry, but had to leave the Russian Jews out: Panter, Sarah: Jüdische Erfahrungen und Loyalitätskonflikte im Ersten Weltkrieg (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz 235), Göttingen 2014.

²⁷ Cf. Hirschfeld, Magnus/ Gaspar, Andreas (Eds.): Sittengeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs. 2. Ed. Hanau [1964] pp. 192–193; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research New York (hereafter YIVO) RG 348, Lucian Wolf/David Mowshowitch Collection, Folder 64, Jewish Conjoint Committee London Report No. IX. Sept. 16th 1916–Feb. 6th 1917, p. 7029; Bernstein, Laurie: Sonia’s Daughters. Prostitutes and their Regulations in Imperial Russia. Berkeley/CA et al. 1995, p. 294.

morals. The main reason was simply poverty, and prostitution was one of the ways to ensure their survival and to keep the family alive during a war.²⁹ When the German army conquered Poland this was one of the first things the soldiers noticed, as for instance Dr. Theodor Rosenthal, a Jewish doctor, who as part of the German army in 1915 came to Warsaw:

“If one arrived at the train-station in Warsaw a lot of Polish Jewish woman attracted your attention, often with babies in their arms, begging for bread and who for bread offered all kind of things, themselves, too.”³⁰

But although the Austrian and German armies perceived themselves to be liberators, the situation did not improve.³¹ True, Jews were no longer in immediate danger of expulsion or deportation; neither did they need to fear for their lives.

But when eastern-Galicia was re-conquered, the Jewish population was still seen as an unreliable element and was suspected of espionage, this time for the Russians. The picture given in Austrian reports about the Jewish behaviour during the Russian occupation is an ambivalent one:

“The Jewry was devoted with heart and soul to Austria and hated the Russian rule. Despite this every now and then cases of Slavic submissiveness to the Russians occurred. The poor devils tried to soften the Russians by showing excessive loyalty. Thereby Jewish businesspeople did dubious business with Russian officials. Many Jews from the intelligentsia also worked for the ochrana. The flagrant contradictions and differences of the Jewish psyche emerged here, too.”³²

Such stereotypic views can be found in many other reports as well. But it was not only Austrian high-ranking military or government officials who did not trust the Jewish population. Consisting mainly of ethnic Poles, who for the first time for centuries saw a real chance for the rebirth of an independent Poland, the new Austrian administration in Galicia itself, did so too.³³ The mood was turning more and more nationalistic and the tension between Poles and Jews was growing rapidly. An official from Dolina even openly said to Jewish refugees after they returned to their hometown: ‘Why did you come back? We do not need you here. We were happy to get rid of you.’ The re-conquest of Galicia was not quite the liberation many Jews had hoped for.

²⁸ General Max Hoffmann, the German General-Chief of Staff at the eastern Front, admitted that the German Army tried to use Russian Jews for spying, but were not very successful. Cf. Hoffmann, Max: Die Aufzeichnungen des Generalmajors Max Hoffmann. Ed. by Karl Friedrich Nowak. 2 Vols. Berlin 1929, here Vol. 2, p. 24. And General P. G. Kurlov confessed that despite the general accusations of Jews of espionage, according to the Russian counterintelligence there was no proof the Jews were spying more often for the Central Powers than other ethnic groups. Cf. Kamaroff-Kurloff, P. G.: Das Ende des russischen Kaisertums. Persönliche Erinnerungen des Chefs der Russischen Geheimpolizei. Berlin 1930, p. 316.

²⁹ Cf. e. g. Kraus, Dorothy: My Mother was the Most Beautiful! Souvenirs of a Child of Wyssoka-Litovsk, Poland. In: YIVO RG 116 Poland I Territorial Collection Box 19 Folder 1, p. 25–26.

³⁰ Leo Baeck Institute New York (hereafter LBI) ME 908: Dr. Theodor Rosenthal: Erinnerungen, p. 40.

³¹ See on the Jews under the reign of the Central Powers in general: Schuster: Fronten 2004, pp. 235–418.

³² ÖStA Haus-, Hof, und Staatsarchiv PA I 831 Liasse Krieg 3d. Zl 398/15 pp. 7–8. Similar statements can be found in other reports e. g. a report of the Galician governor Statthalter Hermann von Korytowski. ÖStA AVA Mdl Präs. 22. Zl. 4703/15 p. 7, or a report by General von Riml. ÖStA AVA Mdl Präs. 19/3. Zl. 17256/15, p. 17. Cf. Schuster: Fronten. pp. 242–249; Schuster: Blitz (2008), pp. 46–51.

³³ Cf. Central Zionist Archives Jerusalem, Z3 155, where a lot of material on the Antisemitic attitude of the Galician bureaucracy. The following quotation is taken from appendix D, p. 2.

The situation for the Jewry in the newly conquered former Russian territories of Poland was slightly different, but again, was not easy. The economic measures of the new occupiers led in the end to a total collapse of the economy, of local commerce, trade and craft, in which most Jewish families earned a living, and which therefore hit them very hard. Chane Kahan, a 13 year old girl from Siedlce, described in autumn 1915 this situation vividly in her diary:

“The Germans take everything they can lay their hands on. Prices are sky high and there’s no work. People are starving. You cannot earn anything, or do business with the Germans. They don’t need merchants or artisans. They take the raw materials and manufacture things in Germany. A pound of dark bread costs ten kopecks. In Warsaw bread is 25 kopecks a pound. You have to stand in line for hours to get it. No kerosene at all. Since candles are used instead of lamps, the prices of candles trebled. A poor quality of sugar costs 60 kopecks per pound. There is almost no meat or fat. The outlook for the future is grim. It won’t get better, but worse. Everything is restricted, prohibited, forbidden. Not at all what we expected!”³⁴

For their survival Jews were entirely dependent on welfare organizations or were forced to rely on smuggling and black markets. The luckiest were those who lived in the countryside and had a garden or a little piece of land where they could grow something. But Jews only in Galicia were allowed to be landowners and in Russia they seldom were tenants. Mostly they lived in towns, and could not leave them officially, because for travelling one needed permission. One, who managed to get permission to visit his parents, who were tenants living in a village nearby was Hirsz Abramowicz, a leading Vilna Journalist and intellectual. He wrote:

“I was once returning with my small children from a visit to my parents, who had given me some food. In Kaplica, near Vilna, a pood of potatoes, twelve pounds of peas, and twenty-five eggs were found in my wagon. The junior officer who carried out the inspection scolded me for this <crime>: <This is forbidden by law.> I pointed out that I was not transporting the food to sell it. The children were afraid and cried, but that had no effect. Having confiscated the contraband, the officer issued me a receipt for what he had taken. Later on I stood trial in Vilna. I was ordered to pay a penalty of one hundred marks. The confiscated food was never returned to me”³⁵

In view of such a treatment, it is no surprise that the Jewish population of Vilna and elsewhere in towns and cities was nearly starving, and that diseases like typhoid fever or cholera continued to spread more frequently amongst Jewry, than amongst other ethnic groups. The measures immediately taken by the Central Powers, like forced disinfection, never produced the intended results, of controlling the epidemics. According to Abraham

³⁴ Kahan, Anne: “The diary of Anne Kahan. Siedlce, Poland, 1914-1916”, in: YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science 18 (1983) pp.141–371, here p. 312.

³⁵ Abramowicz, Hirsz: The Germans in World War I, in: Abramowicz, Hirsz: Profiles of a Lost World. Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II. Detroit/MI: 1999, p. 182–208, here p. 195, annotation *. This article first was published in Yiddish under the title: Di daytshn oyf di erter”, in: Pinkes far di geshikhte fun Vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsye. Ed. by Zalmen Reisen. Vilne: 1922.

Virshubsky, one of Vilna's leading Jewish physicians, who was engaged in the Jewish community's welfare and relief work during the war, impoverishment and malnutrition and deriving from this, hygienic problems, were not the main reasons for this. Instead, the strong German focus on hygienic measures led to the neglect of the supply of provisions, so that the situation increased more and more.³⁶ All this, the army and administration officials neither saw nor wanted to see. For a lot of them the reason was once again not the war-situation or the total exploitation of the occupied territories, but the Jewish stubborn unwillingness to obey the simplest rules of cleanliness. As for example Wolfgang von Kries, the head of the administration in the German-occupied part of Poland, wrote in one of his official reports in April 1916 about the spreading of typhoid fever:

“The disease infected more than 90% of the Jewish population. The term used for typhoid fever in this country: ‘Jewish fever’ characterizes this observation sufficiently. The unspeakable dirt in the narrow and dark flats, the heaps of junk and rags, all kinds of vermin and the disgusting personal dirtiness, are a frightening effective basis for the spreading of this epidemic especially among the poor Jewish social class.”³⁷

One and a half years later he still complained that Jews do not like to keep themselves or their flat clean and even on rabbis, lice had been found.³⁸ This supposed general uncleanness was seen as a moral corruption also,³⁹ based on Antisemitic stereotypes once more.

Cafes and Teahouses were opened, where many Jewish girls came in contact with soldiers. Not knowing much about Jews, many soldiers thought that there were fewer moral restrictions in Judaism than in their own religion and culture, and therefore expected to find Jewish girls more open. But although the German administration and large parts of the Jewish community suspected these places to be centres of illegal prostitution, most of them were harmless.⁴⁰

The decision to become a prostitute was not an easy one, especially not for Chassidic Jewish women. Expected to become housewives and mothers, handed over from their father's to their husband's family, women could play an important role, but mainly behind the scene. Often they were married to religious husbands, who devoted their lives to the study of the Torah, so they had to keep the family alive. As long as their behaviour remained in the scope of tradition, they were even admired, but if they went beyond, they not only lost reputation but mostly the support of the Jewish community. The community often closed its eyes to what happened during the war and pretended that such things like

³⁶ Virshubsky, Abraham: *Das folksgesunt an der teritsinischer lebensshteyger in Vilne beys der deytsher okupatsye*, in: *Pinkes far di geshikhte fun Vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsye*. Ed. by Zalmen Reisen. Vilne: 1922. pp. 81–108, here p. 82.

³⁷ Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych w Warszawie (hereafter AGAD), Niemeckie władze okupacyjne na terenie byłego Królestwa Polskiego (hereafter NwotbKP), Cesarsko-Niemeckie General Gubernatorstwo w Warszawie (hereafter GGW), Szef Administracji przy Generalnym Gubernatorze Warszawskim (hereafter VCh). Sygn. 5, pp. 15–16.

³⁸ Cf. AGAD NwotbKP GGW VCh Sygn. 10, p. 32.

³⁹ Cf. APL Kaiserlich Deutsches Kreisamt Lukow 60.

⁴⁰ Cf. YIVO RG 116, Box 19 Folder 1, Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi (hereafter APŁ) Łódzka Gmina Wyznaniowa Żydowska (hereafter ŁGWŻ) 18.

prostitution did not exist in the Jewish world. In Lodz for instance the German police faced the problem that many women worked as prostitutes, 35% of these were Jewish. To get these girls off the street, they turn in January 1916 to the community council and suggest the establishment of a house where the people can find refuge and work, as for example in Kały. But it took months until the council reacted to the letters, and later found excuses, for why not much had been done, so that it took much longer to organize a refuge for Jewish women from Lodz. Judging from this correspondence the community council was unwilling for a long time to accept that the problem existed at all.⁴¹ And when they wanted to act, it was sometimes already too late, because the connected problems had become too large to handle. That Jews lived all over the world and had contact with friends and relatives in different countries made it easier for some Jews to work in this field. In a time of great social change in eastern-Europe, Jewish girls dreamed of freedom and independence in the new world, which made it easier to find girls and press them to work or prostitution after they had sent them abroad. No doubt, it existed during World War I. Smuggling and prostitution were connected matters here, too, sometimes organized by criminal elements.⁴² But as for how far the slave trade of Jewish girls, or 'Mädchenhandel' as it was called at the time, really played an important role during World War I. is hard to say: Firstly, trawling was very much restricted and the bureaucracy's attempt to keep everything under strict control and fight any kind of illegal prostitution surely did not make it easier. Secondly, Jewish prejudices here fit exactly into the pictures the occupiers had. As historian Desanka Schwara pointed out, talking about the Jewish communities' attitude:

"It becomes clear, that for the different groups of society "Mädchenhandel" served as pattern of exploitation and for otherwise unexplainable incidences; may it be the disappearance of young women, a job offer, a strange encounter, or an incident, did not fit into the usual course of the day."⁴³

Such incidences, when reported to the police, matched German or Austrian expectations, more or less. What this meant can easily be shown by looking at one of the numerous police or court files, for instance the one of Moses Becher from the Austrian occupied town of Zamość.⁴⁴

The investigation concerning the 27-year-old newspaper seller started when a policeman overheard a Polish woman talking about „the well-known spy Becher“. He was immediately arrested at October 18th 1916. On closer examination it became evident that the allegation was based only speculation the woman had overheard four years earlier. Another Pole had seen Becher the day before the Russians left town, demanding money

⁴¹ Cf. APŁ ŁGWŻ 45.

⁴² On the connection between smuggling and prostitution, and on how it was in some cases organized by criminal bands, see the illuminating novel by Ozer Varshavski: "Shmuglers", in: Unter Okupatsye. Ed. by Shmuel Roshanski. Buenos Aires 1969. pp. 21–315.

⁴³ Schwara, Desanka: »Ojfn weg schtejt a bojm«. Jüdische Kindheit und Jugend in Galizien, Kongreßpolen, Litauen und Rußland 1881-1939. (Lebenswelten osteuropäischer Juden 5). Köln, Weimar, Wien 1999, p. 350.

⁴⁴ Cf. AGAD K. u. k. Militärgeneralgouvernement in Polen, Lublin (hereafter MGG) 203 NA Präs. Zl. 13931/16; MGG 363 NA Präs Zl. 4080/17; 4551/17; NA Präs Zl. 5113/17. All the following quotations are from this files and in my own translation. Another illuminative file, this time from the German administration, is e. g. the case of Selig Glitzenstein from Lodz. Cf. APŁ Gericht des Kaiserlich-Deutschen Militär-Gouvernements in Lodz 1265.

from a Russian Police officer, with whom he was supposedly friends. And as the informer knew the rumour about Becher too, he simply assumed it was for spying. And the mayor, too, thought he was a spy because 'he was dubiously hanging around in town and in restaurants, to listen to conversations', and commonly known as 'agent in dirty money- and sexual-affairs between officers and the local population.' That he was a dubious character was also confirmed by Jewish witnesses who thought he was engaged in slave trade but not in espionage. In fact none of the accusations could be proved true, but instead of releasing Becher, he was sent to an internment camp in inner Austria, where he remained at least until the beginning of 1917, maybe even longer. The reason for this measure was that he was seen as a 'strategic risk', as an investigator wrote: „Becher has, like many others, too, served Russian Officers (,money, girls'), but he alone is suspected as a spy“.

As we see the Central Powers, too, suspected the Jews of espionage, only they did not *in corpore* blame them and commonly make them responsible for their failures. And once again there is a close link between epidemics, prostitution and espionage in the eyes of all the occupiers. The basis of this view of the Eastern-European Jewry are the well-known Antisemitic stereotypes of the Jew as a traitor and destructive element who wants to destroy the people they are living with and the states they are living in to reach world domination.

Surely not all of the non-Jewish soldiers and officers, who were confronted with the Eastern-European Jewry in its actual surroundings for the first time, thought of the Jewish world they saw, in Antisemitic terms.⁴⁵ Some of them even felt pity for these poor people. But very many of those who experienced the war in the east, found their beliefs and prejudices confirmed, overlooking or ignoring the fact that their encounter with the Jewish world took place in an exceptional situation of crisis.⁴⁶ This led to an increase and then an eruption of Antisemitism among Poles, Russians Ukrainians, Austrians and Germans after the official end of World War I. What happened in the years 1918 to 1921 made the years of 1914-1918 look like the good old days for most Jews.⁴⁷ And in the long run it had catastrophic consequences for the Eastern-European Jewry, because the picture all sides had of each other, when they encountered each other again in 1939, was the one formed in 1914-1921. When in 1939 German and Soviet troops marched into Poland, many Jews were more afraid of Russians and Poles than of Germans (and Austrians), because of what they remembered from a quarter of a century earlier. And the Germans, too, knew what to expect, the Antisemitic picture of the dangerous Jew had proven right already in 1914/1915. And this time, they knew - the Jews must not get any chance to weaken the German army. This was made totally clear by the Nazi propaganda in the most notorious Antisemitic film *Der Ewige Jude* ('The Internal Jew') of 1940, where the following

⁴⁵ See on the following in detail: Schuster: *Fronten*, 2004 pp.455-489.

⁴⁶ On the image some German occupiers had of the local population in eastern Europe, in this case the Baltics especially see: Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge/MA 2000.

⁴⁷ On the Jewish relationships with this nationalities in eastern-Europe see e. g. Golczewski, Frank: *Polnisch-jüdische Beziehungen 1881-1922. Eine Studie zum Antisemitismus in Osteuropa*. Wiesbaden 1981; Vetter, Matthias: *Antisemiten und Bolschewiki. Zum Verhältnis von Sowjetsystem und Judenfeindschaft 1917-1939*. Berlin 1995; Budnitskii, Oleg: *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the Whites, 1917-1920 (Jewish Culture and Contexts)*. Philadelphia/PA 2012; Henry Abramson: *A Prayer for the Government. Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times 1917-1920*. Cambridge/MA 1999 and additionally: Liulevicius: *War Land* 2000, pp. 227-246.

commentary is given to pictures of Jews squeezed together in the new established ghettos:

“We no longer, as in 1914, only see the grotesque and strange of these dubious figures, we recognize that here lies the focus of the plague which threatens the health of the Aryan peoples.”⁴⁸

While the east-European Jews in World War I were still seen as human beings, although dangerous and plague-spreading ones, during World War II, they were seen as the plague itself by the Germans, which led tragically to their destruction.

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Author Dr. Frank M. Schuster, born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1971, teaches Eastern-European History, Literature and Cultural Studies at the universities of Gießen and Heidelberg in Germany, and also at the University of Lodz, Poland. His research interests include the First World War, regional and local history, multi-culturalism and memory in Central and Eastern Europe, and cross-subject links between History, Literature, and Media Studies, particularly between Film and Photography. Publication: „Was hat der Krieg zwischen Zar und Kaiser mit uns zu tun?“ *Osteuropäische Juden während des Ersten Weltkriegs. In: Besetzt, interniert, deportiert. Der Erste Weltkrieg und die deutsche, jüdische, polnische und ukrainische Zivilbevölkerung im östlichen Europa. Edited by Alfred Eisfeld, Guido Hausmann, Dietmar Nautatz. Essen: 2013.*

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hornshøj-Møller, Stig: „Der Ewige Jude“. Quellenkritische Analyse eines Antisemitischen Propagandafilms, Göttingen 1995, Hornshøj-Møller 1995, pp 43–44, cf. 192–193.