An Unlikely Triangle:
Philanthropists, Commissars, and American Statesmanship Meet in
Soviet Crimea, 1922–37*

Throughout the two turbulent decades between the Russian Civil War and outbreak of World War II, nations and peoples did their best to navigate the pervasive dangers of economic, political, and social upheaval. Among the more complex aspects of these years, the Western governments repeatedly debated policy toward Soviet Russia. Forced to traverse these tumultuous waters, American Jews sought to relieve the suffering of their impoverished and disenfranchised brethren in the Soviet Union through support of a large colonization movement to agricultural settlements in Crimea and southern Ukraine. This required great effort—the United States had cut diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia, most Americans harbored deep suspicions toward the Bolshevik regime, and Washington’s refusal to join the League of Nations disengaged the country from international affairs. Moreover, many of the pivotal American-Jewish patrons of the colonization project were ardent anticommunists in the Republican Party. Under normal conditions, such men would be disinclined to cooperate with the Soviets. Finally, tragedy hovered just above the Russian Jews who led the colonization program; most of them fell victim to Stalin’s purges in the late 1930s.

American-Jewish aid to hundreds of thousands of destitute Russian Jews living in the former Pale of Settlement (on the western and southern borders of the Soviet state)—whose civil rights were revoked by the Bolshevik Constitution of 1918—necessitated complex political arrangements during a period of evolving ties between the governments in Moscow and Washington. Over time,

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1. The 1918 constitution disenfranchised “exploiters,” a devastating ruling for Jews who were former property-owners who employed—and, by Marxist definition, exploited—others.
a triadic relationship emerged between seemingly irreconcilable parties—Soviet commissars, American statesmen, and American-Jewish philanthropists from the banking and legal professions. Existing scholarship touches upon the Jewish settlement in Soviet Russia, but uses little archival evidence and overlooks this diplomatic triangle. The present article explores what made the relationship possible, despite significant obstacles and risks.

The crisis of Soviet Jewry in the early 1920s required immediate and creative solutions. Tsarist Russia had physically confined most of Russia’s approximately three million Jews to the Pale of Settlement for over a century. Overcrowding, poverty, and friction between national groups (Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians) characterized life for most Jewish residents of the Pale. The suffering became especially acute during World War I, as this area largely became a battlefield. Although the Provisional Government formally abolished the Pale after the Revolution of February 1917, conditions deteriorated further, as civil war and banditry plagued the region until 1921. These years and new Bolshevik laws left the vast majority of Jews in the western parts of the former Pale unemployed, hungry, hopeless, and without a clear government policy in sight for reconstruction. To relieve their immediate distress, small, hardy groups of these Jews began spontaneous relocation to vacant farmlands in southern Ukraine and Crimea in 1923.

Going to the land offered hope, but required assistance from abroad. For those few households that could migrate to sparsely populated areas in the South without outside aid, resettlement alleviated the food crisis and promised relatively rapid restoration of civil rights. But neither the bulk of Jews in the overcrowded towns of Ukraine and Belorussia nor the young Soviet regime possessed the resources to enlarge the scope of this unorganized movement. Into this breach stepped a young but accomplished philanthropic organization—the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the JDC, or Joint)—
accompanied by more venerable European counterparts, most notably the Organization for Rehabilitation of Jews through Training (ORT Farband) and the Jewish Colonization Association (ICA).\textsuperscript{5} Large-scale colonization was a daunting undertaking under any circumstances; it required massive fundraising in America and supervision in Soviet Russia—a distant, chaotic country still bloodied from recent civil war. The absence of diplomatic relations, coupled with the residual anticommunist panic in the USA, only complicated the task for the Joint.

Archival material presented in this article reveals how the JDC managed these obstacles and in what ways philanthropic activity propelled it into diplomatic roles. It highlights the actions and attitudes in Washington (particularly in the State Department), New York (the home office of the JDC), and the Kremlin. This study also addresses a murkier side of the issue: despite an absence of diplomatic relations and lingering hostility with the Soviets, the U.S. State Department permitted huge, nonreturnable investments by the JDC in the colonies. Hence, one might ask how the JDC recompensed the State Department for acquiescence in such abnormal activity in Soviet Russia.

Support of colonization forced the JDC into a gray diplomatic area between two nations at once ideologically opposed and drawn together by economic interests. Despite its anger over the nationalization of Western property and the Soviet default on debts inherited from previous governments, Washington allowed Americans to do business in the USSR from the early 1920s.\textsuperscript{6} As a philanthropic organization, however, the JDC departed from the norms set by the State Department for private enterprise with the Soviets. The Joint, therefore, had to mobilize its domestic political assets to overcome opposition in Washington toward its activities in the USSR.

Finally, study of the colonization project prompts a reevaluation of American-Jewish politics in the interwar period. Specifically, it corrects a central shortcoming of Jewish historiography written after the creation of the State of Israel. Zionist work on behalf of settlement in Palestine, however important, did not monopolize organized political activity in American Jewry. On the contrary, the non-Zionist leaders of the JDC put colonization in the USSR at the forefront of American-Jewish political life and were highly visible in

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\textsuperscript{5} The Organization for Rehabilitation of Jews through Training was based in Berlin, the Jewish Colonization Association in Paris. Both operated in Russia for two decades before the 1917 revolutions. Their traditional roles included support of old Jewish agricultural colonies in southern Russia (established during the reign of Tsar Alexander I) and vocational training for Jews in the Pale. The home governments of these European-based philanthropies presented fewer obstacles to the support of Russian Jewry; Paris and Berlin restarted diplomatic relations with the Soviets before Washington.

Washington during the 1920s and 1930s. As a result, as this article illustrates, Zionism was but one avenue of political and social activism pursued by American Jews between the world wars.

Domestic and foreign pressures stimulated Jewish colonization in Crimea and southern Ukraine. Owing to the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924 in America (and similar legislation that restricted immigration to other Western countries), together with British restrictions on entry to Palestine and the high cost of resettlement there, mass emigration could not relieve social and economic distress in the traditional centers of Jewish life, as in earlier generations. Consequently, salvation for Russia’s Jews had to come from within.

The JDC, whose representatives had been in Russia from 1921 as officials of the American Relief Administration (ARA), recognized the potential of the spontaneous resettlement movement, which had begun in 1923, and seized the opportunity for large-scale agricultural colonization in the Soviet Union.7 Starting in 1924, the JDC’s settlement agency, the Joint Agricultural Corporation (Agro-Joint), entered into a series of contracts with the Kremlin that institutionalized and expanded colonization.8 The Agro-Joint created an infrastructure in Russia that employed, at its peak, three thousand workers in offices throughout Crimea and southern Ukraine. It supervised the construction and settlement of approximately two hundred new colonies, granted assistance to another thirty colonies established earlier in southern Ukraine, operated several tractor squads for the colonies, and provided technical guidance, modern implements, and low-interest loans to the settlers. Of equal importance, the Agro-Joint mediated between the colonies and government agencies, thereby insulating the settlers from the harsher sides of Soviet rule.

Colonization reached a remarkable scale, thanks in great part to the contribution of U.S.$16 million (approximately $200 million at present worth) by the JDC, which it collected through mass fundraising campaigns among America’s Jewish communities and direct appeals to wealthy individuals.9 The Agro-Joint rapidly erected state-of-the-art, mechanized, semicooperative farms. In some cases, the advanced machines and techniques it introduced in the colonies

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7. Led by government agencies, several major American philanthropies comprised the American Relief Administration. Herbert Hoover, future American president, headed the organization. It supplied famine relief and other humanitarian aid to the USSR and Eastern Europe after World War I.

8. The Soviets provided free land, transportation, tax exemption, and fuel.

were still untested in America.\textsuperscript{10} In total, the Agro-Joint had settled or assisted approximately 200,000 Jewish farmers by the time it departed Soviet Russia in 1937. In addition, it provided professional training in the colonies and for tens of thousands who remained behind in the Jewish towns in Ukraine and Belorussia.

Soviet behavior toward the Agro-Joint reflected the impasse faced by Lenin and his successors in the 1920s. The national economic disaster, caused by years of war, convinced the Kremlin that Russia’s future depended upon trade with the West. As Bolsheviks, however, they needed ideologically acceptable terms and limits for cooperation with capitalists.\textsuperscript{11} Even if there was not universal fondness in the Kremlin for the bankers, businessmen, and lawyers who led the “bourgeois” Joint in New York,\textsuperscript{12} the Soviets had ample reason to welcome the Agro-Joint. First, it created inroads into American Jewry and opened the door to foreign aid. The same foreign aid promoted the productivization of Jews from the impoverished towns in the former Pale of Settlement—a traditional goal of Bolshevik ideology toward Russia’s Jews.\textsuperscript{13} Second, colonization addressed the severe economic distress and thereby helped to defuse growing anger against Moscow in the sensitive western borderlands. This was of particular value because much of the former Pale was situated near a proven enemy of the Soviet regime, Poland. Third, conscious of their technological inferiority, the Soviets greeted any opportunity to acquire Western machines and expertise.\textsuperscript{14} In the case of Jewish colonization, this equipment came essentially without cost. Finally, in a period marked by massive internal migrations of peasants and chronic land-tenure conflicts, Moscow welcomed any agent who promised a modicum of order in the countryside.\textsuperscript{15} Though the Soviets could not know

\textsuperscript{10} Russian report, 1 April 1926, collection AR 21/32, 4574a, p. 6, Archive of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter JDC), New York, NY. Agro-Joint pioneered a variety of agricultural operations, including tractor teams. It also supported smaller Jewish farms throughout the USSR.


\textsuperscript{12} Herbert Lehman to JDC, 19 June 1922, JDC 483.

\textsuperscript{13} Petr Smidovich to Stalin, 16 May 1925, \textit{fond} (f.) r-5546, \textit{opis} (op.) 55, \textit{delo} (d.) 856, \textit{list} (l.) 9, Gosudarstvennyi arkhivRossiiskoi Federatsii (the State Archive of the Russian Federation—hereafter GARF), Moscow.

\textsuperscript{14} James Rosenberg to Herbert Hoover, 7 September 1922, JDC 483; F. W. B. Coleman to the Secretary of State (hereafter the SOS), 23 April 1925, Record Group 59, Decimal file 1910–29 (Unless otherwise specified, all subsequent references come from record Group 59 and from the 1910–1929 set. The words “Decimal file” are omitted hereafter.), 961.61/135, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), College Park, MD; Yun; Joseph Rosen-Gaven agreement, 28 August 1923, Record Group (hereafter RG) 358/104, Joseph Rosen Papers, Archive of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (hereafter YIVO) New York, NY. The Soviets preferred American to European hardware. See C. White, \textit{British and American Commercial Relations with Soviet Russia, 1918–1924} (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), 197.

\textsuperscript{15} F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 8 June 1925, 861.52/51, NARA; F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 5 August 1925, 861.52/52, NARA. Judging by articles in \textit{Pravda}, official concern over
this in advance, the Agro-Joint eventually assumed surrogate administrative authorities for both the Jewish and the non-Jewish peasantry in its areas of operation.

The Agro-Joint maneuvered within a rapidly changing business environment in Russia. The “Red Scare” had mostly abated by the mid-1920s, and reputable American companies now did business with the Soviet Union, propelled by visions of Russia as an “economic vacuum.”16 Most important for Jewish colonization, manufacturers of agricultural implements eyed the Soviet steppes—still driven mostly by draft animals—as testing grounds. Therefore, many private companies sold machines and expertise to Russia, in increasing quantities, in the second half of the 1920s.17 American businessmen, hoping to ensure future profits in the USSR, tried (through the Department of Commerce) to convince their government to improve relations.18 The presence of respectable companies and their support for diplomatic recognition surely bolstered the confidence in colonization among the JDC’s leaders. Moreover, as a large importer of machinery, the Agro-Joint became a preferred customer for American firms in their race to sell tractors.19 This status further enhanced the Agro-Joint’s relative worth to the Soviets.20

Beyond the extraordinary importance of its tractors, the Soviets valued the Agro-Joint’s range of agricultural expertise. The persistent backwardness of Russian agriculture frustrated most other foreign businesses and organizations. Indeed, most of the American agricultural advisors recruited by the Soviets could not adapt their skills to the primitive and chaotic conditions in the Russian countryside, nor did they possess the requisite practical experience in large-scale application of modern techniques, particularly in mechanization—a serious handicap for the advancement of modernization among Soviet officials and

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19. Agro-Joint imported nearly one hundred of the one thousand tractors operating in Russia in 1924, and the second pair of wheat combines. By 1928, it marshaled more tractors in Crimea than the Soviets held in the important Riazan region.
20. Evelyn Morrissey to Paul Baerwald and Joseph Hyman, 29 November 1929, 540, JDC.
peasants. If the Agro-Joint was not the sole supplier of equipment and advisors, the combination of its nonprofit status and the unmatched totality of its service stood out. Furthermore, even if private companies sold individual pieces of the modern agricultural puzzle or created single model farms, only the Agro-Joint offered and applied integrated agricultural operations to an entire region. In sum, the JDC served both American and Soviet economic interests in this complex era.

Although the ambitions of JDC cannot be determined with certainty, it is clear that the campaign for colonization thrust the organization into unconventional diplomatic roles. In fact, it undertook such tasks before the creation of the Agro-Joint in 1924. Already familiar with Soviet officialdom from their service with the ARA in 1921 and 1922, JDC employees acted as intermediaries between highly ranked Bolsheviks and Herbert Hoover, the secretary of commerce, as early as 1923. Thereafter, leading JDC officers—most prominently Felix Warburg, a member of a major international banking family, and James Rosenberg, an accomplished corporate lawyer—became ardent spokesmen for recognition of the USSR.

Several factors convinced the decidedly noncommunist leaders of the JDC to sign long-term contracts with the Soviets beginning in 1924. Overall, a belief in the paramount importance of colonization brought the leaders of JDC to balance instinctive anticommunism with necessity, even if some doubted that the JDC could “[spend] another dollar in Russia” after 1923. Warburg, who was “born with the strongest fear and hatred of Russia [and] had the idea that Russia and a Cossack were like a devil,” at first opposed cooperation with the Soviets; indeed, his belligerence toward American communists remained unflinching during the 1920s. Despite the danger to their professional repu-

24. Warburg chaired the JDC in this period. Rosenberg served as executive director of the JDC and president of Agro-Joint. See Jacob Billikopf to Senator Pepper, 13 December 1926, p. 2, Box 234/4, Jacob Billikopf Papers (hereafter BP), AJA; James Becker’s “Russia, 1927”, pp. 34–35, JDC 457a; Felix Warburg to Bernhard Kahn, 15 August 1927, Box 234/1, WP, AJA; Joseph Rosen to Felix Warburg, 26 January 1928, JDC 509.
25. The JDC and the Kremlin concluded supplementary contracts in 1928 and 1933.
26. Herbert Lehman to James Rosenberg, 14 December 1924, JDC 52b.
tations, Joint leaders separated anticommunism at home from pragmatic appraisal of Soviet behavior toward colonization. One official confessed that his initial attitude toward the Soviets was “filled with prejudices such as I have been fed upon for nine years by a hostile press. These prejudices were in a degree strengthened by my contact with a certain type of American Communist who in the past few years has attempted to create so much mischief in the trade union movement.”

Among the key factors in the rapprochement, JDC leaders came to appreciate the Bolsheviks’ apparently aggressive stand against anti-Semitism, particularly amid surging fascism in Europe.

Fixation on the needs of Jewish colonization allowed Joint officers to praise the Soviet government’s fulfillment of contractual commitments, notwithstanding awareness of the regime’s repressive domestic behavior. They reasoned that, “[W]hatever may be the experience of the Russian people at the hands of their government, the Soviets would scrupulously keep its contracts with the citizens of other nations.” By the mid-1920s, therefore, most leaders of the Joint had concluded that the Bolshevik leadership behaved rationally—if not admirably—and was permanent; therefore, faute de mieux, they had to work with the Soviets.

Enthusiasm for renewal of diplomatic relations was not universal among America’s Jews. For their part, American Zionists mistrusted Russians—and, by inheritance, the Bolsheviks—whom they considered chronic anti-Semites. For this and other reasons, they thought it unwise for Jewish communal workers to publicly engage in the nationwide debate over recognition. In the view of most Zionists, partisanship on either side of this volatile issue could needlessly damage other, more important Jewish interests. Persistent hostility on the part of Western governments toward the Kremlin further fanned Zionist worries of possible repercussions from Jewish association with “the Bolsheviks.”

29. Jacob Billikopf to Matthew Woll, 18 November 1926, Box 225/8, WP, AJA; Felix Warburg to Bernhard Kahn, 10 April 1934, Box 303/1, WP, AJA.
30. David Brown, report on Russia, 1925, Box 221/15, WP, AJA; Ezekiel Grower, report, 1927, JDC 534; James Rosenberg, speech at the National Conference, 8–9 March 1930, p. 3, Box 254/4, WP, AJA.
31. Louis Marshall to James Rosenberg, 24 December 1928, Box 1/7, Manuscript Collection 359, Louis Marshall Papers (hereafter MP), AJA; Jacob Billikopf to Rabbi Hertz, 12 October 1927, Box 11/4, Manuscript Collection 13, BP, AJA.
32. Boris Bogen to Jacob Billikopf, 19 September 1924, Box 3/6, Manuscript Collection 3, Boris Bogen Papers (hereafter Bogen), AJA.
34. Many Zionists privately favored recognition. See Szajkowski, \textit{Mirage of American Jewish Aid}, 148; Rabbi A. H. Silver to Jacob Billikopf, 15 September 1927, Box 231/12, WP, AJA.
35. The reference is to Rabbi Stephen Wise (in Feingold, \textit{A Time for Searching}, 179). As director of several major Zionist organizations, Wise had national stature and was a pivotal figure in American Jewry throughout the period. See also N. I. Stone to Rabbi S. Wise, August
quently, the commitment of Warburg and Rosenberg to the cause of diplomatic recognition set the non-Zionist leaders of the JDC even further apart from their Zionist counterparts in the Diaspora.

In contrast to the slow thaw in anticommunist suspicions among most Americans during the mid-1920s, visits to Soviet Russia by JDC officers resulted in a rapid warming of attitudes. Beginning in 1925, delegations traveled from New York to meet Soviet statesmen and observe the colonies. Even in the waning years of Agro-Joint activity, such visits invariably energized JDC officials and encouraged positive assessments of Soviet leaders tied to the settlement project—particularly Petr Smidovich, chairman of the Soviet commission charged with oversight of the colonization program (Komzet), and Aleksei Rykov, chairman of the All-Union Council of Ministers. Such meetings convinced JDC officials that “[T]he [Soviet] government regards the solution of the Jewish economic question as one of its major tasks. Everything possible is being done to transform the Jew into a tiller of the soil or a hand artisan.”

These factors emboldened the Joint’s pursuit of a subsequent, albeit ultimately abortive, project in the mid-1930s: the rescue of Polish and German Jews from fascism through mass emigration to Jewish agricultural settlements in Russia.

As a focus of international attention, the Agro-Joint also became a target of criticism. The main assault came from Zionists in the Diaspora who argued that every dollar invested by American Jews in Crimean colonization was one less for Palestine. In addition, Zionists could not fathom why the JDC refused to tie specific political concessions from the Kremlin for Soviet Jewry—to greater religious freedom—to further investment in Russia. Others doubted the wisdom of transplanting Jews from traditional, insular communities into the unknown, purportedly unfriendly, Crimean and Ukrainian steppes.

1925, Box 222/8, WP, AJA. The ORT voiced similar sentiments. See Boris Bogen to Felix Warburg, 20 September 1924, Box 5/6, Bogen, AJA.

36. Joseph Hyman’s impressions, 28 December 1928, p. 1, JDC 530; James Becker’s “Russia 1927,” pp. 25–26, JDC 457a; James Becker to JDC, 20 May 1927, Box 233/10, WP, AJA; Felix Warburg to JDC, 20 May 1927, Box 233/10, WP, AJA; David Brown to Felix Warburg, 13 May 1925, Box 221/15, WP, AJA; Billikopf to Woll, 18 November 1926, WP, AJA; Jacob Billikopf to David Brown, 7, 11, 15 August 1926, Box 35/11, BP, AJA.

37. James Rosenberg to Lewis Strauss, 31 October 1933, Box 291/11, WP, AJA; Minutes, 15 June 1935, JDC 544. Agro-Joint organized a pilot project in 1935, which brought several dozen German-Jewish doctors to the USSR. Stalin’s growing xenophobia halted the experiment and led to a tragic fate for some of the doctors.


39. Zionists and anti-Bolshevik émigrés may have tried to discredit JDC operations from 1923 onward. See M. Moss to the SOS, 3 November 1923, 611.61244/9, NARA; William Coffin to the SOS, 27 December 1923, 611.61244/12, NARA; N. I. Stone to Lehman, 25 August 1925, Box 222/8, WP, AJA; Joseph Rosen to Herbert Lehman, 1 September 1925, Box 222/8, WP, AJA; Louis Marshall to James Rosenberg, 10 December 1928, JDC 530.

40. Arnold Margolin to James Rosenberg, 13 September 1926, JDC 526; Arnold Margolin to Felix Warburg, 7 September 1925, Box 222/6, WP, AJA.
same time, another front arose in Europe. Here, an ongoing publicity campaign waged by Ukrainian nationalist émigrés used Jewish colonization to attack the Soviet regime. These embittered expatriates denounced the JDC for alleged conspiracy with the hated Soviet state against the Ukrainian people.41

In response to such assaults, the JDC publicly downplayed its influence over governments while it cultivated the image of Jewish colonization in the press. The rebuttals of the Zionist publicity campaign stressed the humanitarian and productivist rationale of colonization, not the political leverage the JDC might exercise in Washington and Moscow.42 After all, the JDC asked, how could anyone expect a mere philanthropic organization such as the Agro-Joint to influence Soviet domestic policy when no government in the world—or even sister states in the United States—could apply enough pressure to deter Massachusetts from the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti?43 The JDC’s campaign relied on personal networks, especially in the press. Rosenberg and other Joint leaders regularly sought counsel and assistance from friends, business associates, and former clients connected to major newspapers.44 Hence, Rosenberg queried Simeon Strunsky of the *New York Times* following journalistic attacks from Zionists: “How far would you advise me to make any statements and particularly how far, if at all, would you advise me to make any controversial statements, or don’t you feel like giving any advice? I would be grateful to you for your slant.”45 Joint personnel also capitalized on Julius Rosenwald’s prominence in the business and public spheres to apply quiet pressure on the press at pivotal moments.46

Demands from Zionists and other critics never forced a substantive change in the JDC’s approach to colonization, despite the hypersensitive international environment of the late 1920s.47 Rather, the Joint improved tactics, simplified fundraising sources, sharpened publicity, and learned to avoid confrontation.

41. These Ukrainian émigrés were part of a mass exodus of monarchists, nationalists, intellectuals, and others from Russia during the revolutions of 1917. See Margolin to Warburg, 7 September 1925, WP, AJA; Arnold Margolin to Alexander Jacovlevich Choulgine, 22 December 1928, pp. 1, 3, JDC 531; Szajkowski, *Mirage of American Jewish Aid*, 214, n. 8.

42. For example, Rosen reminded an audience that even in the weakest days of the regime, the ARA—wielding a mandate from the U.S. government—could not extract religious concessions from Moscow. See Joseph Hyman to Cyrus Adler, 16 September 1927, p. 3, JDC 474.

43. Billikopf to Hertz, 12 October 1927, BP, AJA.


45. James Rosenberg to Simeon Strunsky, 4 March 1930, JDC 531.

46. For example, see Julius Rosenwald to L. Stolz, 30 April 1929, JDC 531. Rosenwald was the president of Sears, Roebuck & Company, a renowned American-Jewish philanthropist, a fierce anti-Zionist, and an active member of the JDC.

47. For example, the total (сплошная) collectivization of Soviet agriculture in the winter of 1929–30 put great pressure on the Joint. The financial crisis in America also affected Agro-Joint—with purse strings pulled tight, public opinion had to be considered. See Paul Baerwald to Felix Warburg, 14 August 1930, Box 314/8, WP, AJA; Memo, Joseph Hyman, 27 March 1935, Box 314/8, WP, AJA.
with Soviet and American-Jewish audiences.\textsuperscript{48} Ironically, the conflict with Zionists in the Diaspora often occupied the JDC no less than concerns with criticism from Washington or Soviet policy, before and after diplomatic recognition.\textsuperscript{49} Overall, however, tensions with American Zionists eased as an infinitely larger enemy—embodied by Nazi Germany—grew on the horizon.

Soviet-Jewish colonization hinged upon the political acumen of JDC leaders. Heeding the advice of Louis Marshall—a key, non-Zionist member of the Joint and leader of American Jewry during the 1910s and 1920s—and other lawyers, the JDC minimized legal risks by straightforward presentation of its positions to Washington from 1920 onward.\textsuperscript{50} Hence, it periodically requested—though it never expected—approval for its operations in Russia.\textsuperscript{51} At best, the State Department restated its policy of noninterference with American business interests in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{52} The JDC fared better with Hoover; he publicly endorsed colonization as secretary of commerce and later, as a presidential candidate.\textsuperscript{53} No less important, the Joint avoided frontal conflict with Washington by skillful maneuvers, both before and after the renewal of diplomatic relations. For example, it substituted a joint stock society for mass fundraising campaigns in 1928 to circumvent State Department limitations on “the sale of securities to the public” for investment in the USSR.\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Louis Marshall to Lewis Strauss, 16 June 1926, JDC 509; Jacob Billikopf to James Rosenberg, 23 March 1928, Box 237/8, WP, AJA; Joseph Hyman to Herbert Seligman, 2 December 1936, JDC 52a. Changes in the JDC’s fundraising targets and tactics in 1929 allowed Zionists to campaign with less competition in the Diaspora.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} David Brown to David Bressler, 24 February 1930, Box 1/5, Manuscript Collection 18, David Brown Papers (hereafter DBP), AJA; David Brown to Jacob Billikopf, 26 March 1935, Box 1/8, Manuscript Collection 18, DBP, AJA; David Brown to Cyrus Adler, 26 May 1936, Box 1/4, Manuscript Collection 18, DBP, AJA; Cyrus Adler to Morris Rothenberg, 20 November 1935, Box 317/4, WP, AJA; Felix Warburg to Paul Baerwald, 4 February 1937, Box 343/1, WP, AJA; Mid-year report, June 1937, pp. 4, 6, Box 342/4, WP, AJA. Differences emerged in the approach to Agro-Joint between Zionists in the Diaspora and those in Mandatory Palestine. See Dekel-Chen, “Shopkeepers and Peddlers into Soviet Farmers,” 142–44.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Marshall was a prominent constitutional lawyer, a delegate of the World Jewish Congress to the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, and the president of the American Jewish Committee.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Szajkowski, \textit{Mirage of American Jewish Aid}, 30, 151. The JDC also detected and adapted to tensions between Russia and England in the late 1920s. See Jacob Billikopf to Rabbi Hertz, 14 February 1928, Box 11/4, BP, AJA.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Frank Kellogg to Louis Marshall, 3 November 1925, Box 223/12, WP, AJA; Frank Kellogg to Louis Marshall, 9 May 1928, 861.52/82, NARA.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} The securing of Hoover’s endorsement for colonization was sine qua non for large donors. See Julius Rosenwald to Jacob Billikopf, 21 September 1925, Box 218/9, WP, AJA; J. D. Rockefeller to James Rosenberg, 5 November 1928, JDC 529.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} The JDC created the American Society for Jewish Farm Settlements in Russia in 1928. For the official policy, see \textit{FRUS}, 1928, 3:825, and \textit{FRUS}, 1934 1:531. For similar cases, see Frank Sharp to Louis Marshall, 9 November 1928, Louis Marshall to Attorney General Ottinger, 12 November 1928, and Louis Marshall to James Rosenberg, 12 November 1928, all in Box 1/7, MP, AJA.
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Personal contacts the Joint had maintained since participation in the ARA, together with other business acquaintances, formed a deep network for the Joint in Washington. Familiarity with important government officials allowed the JDC a podium from which to simultaneously advance the causes of colonization and diplomatic recognition. Connections ran from the White House through Congress into government agencies, universities, and organized labor. For a long time, Hoover constituted the most important link. Professional contacts with him from at least 1918 on helped JDC officials cultivate the future president’s support until the early 1930s. Thereafter, Joint leaders reasoned that Hoover’s public endorsements might be counterproductive, “as he [was] not a political force of the first magnitude any more.”

Joint leaders used their extraordinary access to exert political pressure upon elected officials and government offices, particularly in the 1920s. As an important figure in the Republican Party, Marshall could certainly count on a hearing when he reminded the Secretary of State that “[M]any of [the Jewish colonists] have relatives in [America] who are greatly concerned in their future. All of them have the sympathy of the entire Jewish population of the U.S.” Marshall’s successors, however, failed to apply similar electoral weight to subsequent secretaries of state. Jacob Billikopf, a prominent JDC activist and Jewish communal leader, had more success lobbying George Wharton Pepper, a key U.S. senator on the Foreign Relations Committee, on behalf of colonization and recognition. After return from a visit in Soviet Russia, Billikopf wrote the senator:

We recognized the tsarist government when it held down by the mailed fist the Ukraine, Finland, Poland and other portions of the empire. There

55. Among the more notable of these was the connection with William Bullitt, the first American ambassador to the Soviet Union. See memo, Hyman, 27 March 1935, WP, AJA. For other examples, see the correspondence between Rosenberg, Hyman, and E. C. Ropes of the Department of Commerce in JDC 544; and Joseph Hyman to E. C. Ropes, May 1936, p. 2, Decimal file 1930–39, 861.48/2481 A, NARA. See also Billikopf to Woll, 18 November 1926, WP, AJA; S. C. Mitchell to the SOS, 17 December 1926, 861.00/11001, NARA. Rosen, Rosenberg, and Boris Bogen corresponded regularly with the director of ARA (Colonel William Haskell) after liquidation of the organization.

56. Warburg to Kahn, 15 August 1927, WP, AJA; American Jewish Yearbook 40 (1938): 31; Herbert Hoover to Frank Kellogg, 10 September 1925, 861.52/60, NARA; M. Curti, American Philanthropy Abroad (New Brunswick, NJ, 1963), 282. For example, Lewis Strauss, a central figure in the JDC in the first half of the 1920s, was Hoover’s private secretary in 1918–19.

57. J. Fainberg to Evelyn Morrissey, 28 June 1936, p. 7, JDC 537.


is hesitation [in Washington] to recognize the Soviet Union unless it dissolved itself into its constituent parts, which could then be recognized separately. Would it not be an equivalent condition if the Soviet government refused to recognize the United States unless it divided itself into its separate states?  

Although less renowned than Marshall in American Jewry in the 1920s, Lewis Strauss also enjoyed remarkable access in the State Department. Finally, the colonization campaign benefited from the help of Herbert Lehman, a former official in the ARA, chairman of the JDC Reconstruction Committee in the mid-1920s, and future governor of New York.

The Agro-Joint's political network in the early Soviet administration capitalized on the diversity of personnel, flexibility, and decentralization inherent in the New Economic Policy (NEP). The Agro-Joint's director in Russia, Dr. Joseph Rosen, was actually a former employee in the tsarist provincial administration. He fled to America in the early 1900s to avoid arrest as a member of a revolutionary organization, and became active in American-Jewish life. He returned to the Soviet Union in 1921 as an expert agronomist with the JDC delegation to the ARA. While in America and upon return to Russia, he cultivated connections with former comrades from the revolutionary movement, acquaintances, and family members among medium-level Soviet administrators in the Russian Academy of Agricultural Science, the State Bank, the commissariats of Finance and Health, and the Foreign Exchange Department. As a result, Rosen often discussed or even set the basic outline of agreements with these contacts before formal negotiations commenced between the Agro-Joint and Moscow. During this time, he also forged new relations with important

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60. Jacob Billikopf to Senator Pepper, 26 November 1926, p. 3, Box 23/4, BP, AJA. See more correspondence in this file. Billikopf was Marshall’s son-in-law and a resident of Pepper’s state, Pennsylvania.

61. 861.52/60, NARA. According to this file, Strauss arranged loans from an American bank (where Felix Warburg also had close connections) to several foreign countries and cities through the State Department. He chaired the JDC’s Russian Committee in the early 1920s and was a trustee of Agro-Joint. He remained closely connected to this work at least until 1933. See Rosenberg to Strauss, 31 October 1933, WP, AJA. Strauss later chaired the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and was nominated by President Eisenhower to chair the Commerce Department.

62. Other Agro-Joint officers also had important contacts in the Soviet administration. See M. Vol’f to Iaroslavskii, December 1924, f. 151, op. 1, d. 43, l. 26, Russian State Archive of Social-Political History in Moscow (RGASPI). For Rosen's contacts, see James Rosenberg to JDC, 28 April 1926, Box 228/5, WP, AJA; B. Smolar, interview M. Altshuler and Y. Bauer, 27 December 1966, p. 20, no. 4/47, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Oral History Division, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (hereafter ICJ); Joseph Rosen to James Rosenberg and Paul Baerwald, 11 December 1937, p. 1, JDC 52a; W. Bein, interview Y. Bauer, 14 February 1967, p. 13, no. 30, World War II, part 2, Oral History Collection, New York Times Oral History Program, ICJ; and H. Kallen, Frontiers of Hope (New York, 1929), 416.

63. Rosen-Gaven agreement, 28 August 1928, YIVO; M. Vol’f to Iaroslavskii, December 1924, ll. 26–31, RGASPI; Minutes of the Committee of Seven, 17 June 1924, p. 2, JDC 508;
Soviet officials, most notably the chairman of the Ukrainian Council of Ministers (1919–23), Khristian Rakovskii. In addition to their value during negotiations, Rosen’s connections to pivotal members of the political and financial establishments—some of them “very good friends and greatly interested in our work, some [were] real good Jews and would not mislead us under any circumstances”—helped soothe anxieties in New York about the Soviets (see Figure 1).

Jewish colonization grew amid a postwar crisis that readied the Kremlin for unconventional and ideologically distasteful remedies. At home, Moscow adopted temporary, stopgap measures (indigenization [korenizatsiia] and the NEP) to defuse the situation and imported huge quantities of Western machinery to regenerate Russia’s ruined industries. In this environment, reports of the spontaneous migration of Jews to vacant agricultural tracts at the southern edge of the former Pale presented an exceptional opportunity to solve Russia’s traditional “Jewish question.”

The Agro-Joint’s style of aid to the colonies was uniquely suited to the wider needs of the Soviet state during the 1920s. Many of the economic leaders in the Kremlin already preached the utility of Western models, particularly Taylorism and Fordism, for rapid recovery. The Soviets could assemble the agrotechnical puzzle piecemeal from different Western sources: equipment from philanthropies or manufacturers; technical training from hired experts; and individual model farms erected by generous American communists. These, however, were not enough. Instead, Russia needed a complete package that included tractors, training, irrigation, fertilizers, diversification of crops, and cultured seeds. The state’s failure to reverse poor nationwide agricultural performance, the inadequacies of other philanthropies, and persistent alienation between peasants and state agronomists enhanced the Agro-Joint’s appeal and status.

Beyond agricultural aid, the Soviets eyed other rewards from the JDC. Indeed, the Kremlin prioritized the international prestige accrued from cooperation with a respected American philanthropy. This should not be discounted. Even if the Treaty of Rapallo (1922) restarted diplomatic relations with Western Europe, American—not European—business and popular cultures

Joseph Rosen to Felix Warburg, 28 February 1928, JDC 539; Minutes of the special committee, 2 February 1937, p. 1, JDC 545.
64. Joseph Rosen to Felix Warburg, 28 February 1928, JDC 539.
fascinated Soviet society in the 1920s: even in a small Jewish colony, the youth idolized Douglas Fairbanks. Consequently, the Soviets tried to improve their image in America through support of Jewish emancipation and productiviza-

Figure 1: Portrait of Dr. Joseph Rosen, date unknown. Courtesy of the American Jewish JDC Archives, Jerusalem, file 3, new box 67.

68. V. Fink, Evrei na zemle (Jews on the land) (Moscow, 1929), 43. See also B. Edelhertz, The Russian Paradox: A First-Hand Study of Life under the Soviets (New York, 1930), 111.
The Agro-Joint, in turn, manipulated this sensitivity, even after Moscow redirected its attention inward during the “Great Turn” (velikii perelom) in late 1929.\footnote{69 } The Soviet press nudged the Kremlin’s initial interest in the technical aspects of the Agro-Joint’s aid toward a quasidiplomatic approach to the organization. Newspapers and propaganda materials from Moscow and Simferopol lauded the Agro-Joint’s value—particularly its tractors—from 1923 at least until total collectivization in the winter of 1929–30.\footnote{70 } Such publicity did not just boost the Agro-Joint’s status as a purveyor of useful matériel; it also fostered an image of the JDC as a legitimate ambassadorial conduit to Washington, in lieu of better alternatives for the Soviets.\footnote{71 } Hence, Soviet readers learned from official newspapers that the JDC had the necessary political clout to solicit public endorsements for its operations in Russia from such American luminaries as Hoover and John D. Rockefeller. Such news probably encouraged a belief that the Joint could hasten diplomatic recognition by the American government.\footnote{72 } The JDC did nothing to discourage such perceptions.

The Agro-Joint was an extraordinary, but not exclusive, example of unofficial channels from Moscow to Washington. The Kremlin employed similar tactics in early 1926 through James Goodrich, the former governor of Indiana and a participant in the ARA.\footnote{73 } Two months after prospects with Goodrich faded, the Soviet ambassador in Paris—Rosen’s friend and former chairman of the Ukrainian Council of Ministers, Khristian Rakovskii—approached Rosenberg, accompanied by the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Maxim Litvinov.\footnote{74 } Litvinov made a detailed proposal—very similar to that given Goodrich—for repayment of Soviet debts in exchange for diplomatic recognition. Upon return to America, Rosenberg met with Hoover, who referred him to the State Department. A lack of responsiveness to Litvinov’s proposal in the State Department frustrated Rosenberg, but he pushed no further.\footnote{75 }
Soviet efforts to communicate with Washington through the Agro-Joint did not cease. In 1926 and again in 1927, the Soviets proposed terms for recognition to visitors from the Joint. In the first occasion, Jacob Bilikopf corresponded on the matter at length with Senator Pepper. In the second episode, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers (Rykov) made an unsolicited speech about Soviet willingness to settle the U.S. debts. Rykov did not even suggest a partial settlement [because] the amount involved is not large from Russia's point of view. Rykov did not understand why [America] would refuse recognition under these circumstances. Of course, [the Soviets] could not in principle recognize the old Czarist debts, and besides that would involve huge settlements with France, England and other countries.

Warburg reported this to the U.S. embassy in Berlin while in transit back to New York. The cold reception in the State Department—similar to that given Rosenberg a year earlier—did not surprise him.

The perception of the JDC as a legitimate diplomatic partner stirred the Kremlin’s interest in the philanthropy’s actions in America. Whether from political naiveté or as a result of the ideological prisms through which Soviet observers judged events, reports sent to Moscow and the subsequent assessments often overestimated the strength of the JDC in American Jewry. Dispatches to Moscow similarly underestimated the appeal of Zionism in the Diaspora, thereby inflating expectations of the Joint. As a captive of its own misinterpretations, the Kremlin did not want to antagonize the Joint by any maltreatment of the Jewish colonists. Thus, the attention heaped upon the JDC as a valued (perhaps overvalued) political asset to the Kremlin afforded added protection for the Agro-Joint’s colonists.

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77. James Becker’s “Russia 1927,” pp. 6–7, JDC 457a. It is possible that the Soviets saw JDC officials more as sounding boards for proposals than as conduits to the State Department.
78. Jacob Bilikopf to Senator Pepper, 19 October 1926, Box 23/4, BP, AJA.
79. Memo, James Becker, 20 May 1927, Box 242/7, WP, AJA. Aleksei Rykov, the chairman of the All-Union Council of Ministers, told a delegation from the JDC that the Soviets were prepared to repay the Kerensky debts, but not the tsarist ones.
80. Jacob G. Schurman to the SOS, 6 June 1927, 861.00/11083, NARA.
81. Robert Kelley to Robert Olds, 20 June 1927, 861.00/11083, NARA; Warburg to Kahn, 15 August 1927, WP, AJA.
82. This was most marked at the 1925 National Conference of the United Jewish Campaign in Philadelphia. See study of the Jewish National Conference, September 1925, f. r-9408, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 1–32, GARF; M. Katz’s report, 15 September 1926, ll. 115–19, RGASPI; Z. Ostrovskii, “Druz’ia i nedrugi evreiskogo pereselenchesta v SSSR” (Friends and foes of Jewish resettlement in the USSR), in Evreiskii krest’yanin 2 (Moscow, 1926), 118–20. See also Report on Land Allotments, May–September 1925, f. r-5546, op. 55, d. 856, ll. 12–22, 28, 30–31, GARF; Agro-Joint meeting, January 1926, p. 32, RG 358/150, YIVO; Komzet meeting, 25 May 1926, f. r-7541, op. 1, d. 100, l. 5, GARF.
Just as the State Department tracked American businesses in Russia, it scrutinized events connected to Soviet Jewry and colonization. Washington's interest began in late 1923, when it monitored the Politburo's rejection of a proposal to create a Jewish republic in Belorussia. Subsequent talk in Moscow about the establishment of a Jewish homeland along the Black Sea littoral drew greater attention—and some skepticism—from the American legation in Riga. This consulate systematically tracked colonization and reviewed the coverage in the Soviet press and other sources for much of the ensuing fourteen years. Even before the creation of the Agro-Joint, the State Department observed developments in the JDC's Russian operations and the tumultuous experiences of Joseph Rosen. By the mid-1930s, an array of American agencies were actively gathering information on the colonies.

What drove curiosity about a philanthropy that—according to State Department regulations—operated "at its own risk" in Russia? The answer lay in the unique quality of information that the Agro-Joint could relay. It thereby followed a pattern set by the ARA in the early 1920s: the provision of commercial intelligence on the Soviet Union to the U.S. government and private firms. The State Department and its legations, in fact, rarely missed an opportunity to debrief Rosen and other Joint officials following visits to the Soviet Union. Evidently, reports from the Agro-Joint became a cornerstone in American evaluations of rural conditions.

84. The Jewish sections of the Communist Party (Evsektsiia) raised this proposal; the Politburo rejected it in December. See F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 13 October 1923, 861.4016/301, NARA; F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 22 December 1923, 861.4016/305, NARA.
85. The consulate in Riga sent Washington a popular pamphlet (A. Bragin and M. Kol’stov, Sud’ba evreiskikh mass v Sovetskom Soiuze [The fate of the Jewish masses in the Soviet Union] [Moscow, 1924]) that outlined the rationale for, scope of, and sources for a Jewish homeland. See J. C. White to the SOS, 2 October 1924, 861.4016/311, NARA. Skepticism about the colonization persisted in Riga. See F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 23 July 1926, 861.52/64, NARA; F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 15 April 1929, 861.4016/327, NARA; Joseph Davies to the SOS, 17 March 1938, pp. 60–62, Decimal file 1930–39, 861.00/11774, NARA.
86. Report from Riga, 5 September 1924, 861.4016/309, NARA; Coleman to the SOS, 8 June 1925, NARA; Coleman to the SOS, 5 August 1925, NARA; report of the legation in Riga, 26 March 1926, 861.52/47, NARA; Louis Sussdorf, Jr., to the SOS, 1 October 1928, 861.4016/322, NARA; H. H. Carlson to the SOS, October 1928, 861.52/92, NARA.
87. Coleman to the SOS, 29 February 1924, NARA; Moss to the SOS, 3 November 1923, NARA; Coffin to the SOS, 27 December 1923, NARA.
88. The SOS to chargé d'affaires in Moscow, 22 May 1936, Decimal file 1930–39, 861.48/2481A, NARA. See also E. C. Ropes-JDC correspondence, September 1935–May 1936, JDC 544; A. Stern to Joseph Hyman, 20 August 1927, JDC 509.
89. Kellogg to Marshall, 9 May 1928, NARA. For the official policy, see White, British and American Commercial Relations with Soviet Russia, 194.
90. White, British and American Commercial Relations with Soviet Russia, 179.
91. Chernow, The Warbungs, 205, also noticed this phenomenon.
92. There is great similarity to the impact of Agro-Joint's data on Soviet assessments of rural conditions in Crimea and southern Ukraine. See Dekel-Chen, "Shopkeepers and Peddlers into Soviet Farmers," 200–203, 263. This also applied to Birobidzhan. See Paul Dutko to State Department, 22 January 1929, 861.52/96, NARA.
Several factors made the Agro-Joint’s information invaluable and pushed the State Department to nurture relations with the philanthropy. First, because the Soviet population remained predominantly rural (and a source of chronic vulnerability for Moscow) until the 1950s, the countryside continued to be a crucial intelligence target for American statesmen. Second, most reports collected by consulates in Riga, Berlin, and Kharbin until the mid-1920s came from heavily biased sources—anti-Soviet émigrés or foreign nationals.\(^93\) True, reports from American travelers and businessmen in the USSR generally increased from the mid-1920s.\(^94\) But these were often untrained eyes that focused on urban, industrial society. By contrast, the Agro-Joint’s director supplied data on rural Russia unavailable elsewhere.\(^95\) From the perspective of an American diplomat in Riga, Rosen’s large circle of contacts in the Soviet hierarchy, together with his personal and professional background, made him a “keen observer with unusual facilities for making observations” on rural Russia and complex events in Moscow.\(^96\) Third, the relative value of information from the Agro-Joint peaked in the early 1920s and again around 1936–38. During these intervals, pressures within the USSR restricted the flow of Western visitors, a severe liability for American intelligence gathering in the age before overflights.\(^97\) Finally, the Agro-Joint proved more durable than similar Western philanthropies in the USSR.\(^98\)

If the Agro-Joint provided irreplaceable data, why did the State Department resist attempts by Rosenberg and Warburg to mediate between Moscow and Washington? After all, these proposals were, in retrospect, analogous to the terms of diplomatic recognition accepted by President Roosevelt in 1933. In part, professional diplomats probably did not approve of unsolicited intervention by amateurs, whatever their intentions. Perhaps more problematic for the JDC’s initiatives, the main American policy-makers on Russia in the 1920s, Secretary of State Frank Kellogg and Under-Secretary of State for East European Affairs Robert Kelley, opposed the renewal of diplomatic relations. In light

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\(^93\) For example, consulates debated the integrity of reports by German Mennonite refugees from southern Ukraine. See F. W. B. Coleman to State Department, 13 November 1929, Living Conditions/109, 861.5017, NARA; F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 19 December 1929, Living Conditions/115, 861.5017, NARA. Responsibility for gathering of information on Russia fell upon the consulates in Riga, Berlin, and Kharbin.

\(^94\) The NARA holds a wealth of consular debriefings of American travelers to Russia during this period.

\(^95\) D. C. Poole to the SOS, 25–26 September 1928, 861.6131/124–125, NARA; Dutko to State Department, 22 January 1929, NARA. Rosen corrected the State Department’s data on German colonists in the Kherson area. Compare Poole to the SOS, 26 September 1928, 125, NARA with M. Buchsweiler, Ha-germanim ba-etnim b’Ukraine likrat milhemet ba-olam ba-shneyab (The ethnic Germans in Ukraine before World War II) (Tel Aviv, 1980), 338.

\(^96\) F. W. B. Coleman to State Department, 10 July 1931, p. 2, Living conditions/294, Decimal file 1930–39, 861.5017, NARA; F. W. B. Coleman to the SOS, 1 June 1931, 861.61/283; Szajkowski, Mirage of American Jewish Aid, 91–92.

\(^97\) Filene, Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 96.

\(^98\) A. W. Kliefoth to State Department, 8 August 1928, Living conditions/2, 861.5017, NARA.
of this unyielding opposition, their disregard of Rosenberg and avoidance of Warburg seem like natural manifestations of ideological dispositions. Such a rejection of an otherwise valued organization as an intermediary to the Kremlin helps to reveal the depth of the anti-Bolshevik culture in the State Department during the Coolidge and Hoover administrations. Only the arrival of the “new” men in Washington—primarily F. D. Roosevelt and William Bullitt—fundamentally altered the foreign-policy orientation in Washington. By then, however, the Joint’s attention had turned elsewhere.

Beyond bureaucratic obstacles and anti-Bolshevik prejudices, some implications of Jewish resettlement sincerely disturbed State Department officials. Many diplomats mistrusted the Soviet policy on colonization; some suspected wholesale victimization of the colonists, while others raised the possibility that this affirmative action on behalf of Jews would increase local animosity toward the colonists. Furthermore, the consul in Riga thought that the Agro-Joint gravitated toward political, not just philanthropic, roles. He informed the State Department that “[I]t can safely be surmised that [Rosen] reports to his principals on political and social conditions in Soviet Russia as well as on the activities of Agro-Joint.” These assessments, whatever their validity, fueled apprehension in the State Department about the quasi-ambassadorial roles that JDC officials tried to fill.

American recognition of the USSR and Soviet entrance into the League of Nations in 1934 suggested a change of policy in Moscow toward the Agro-Joint. If the Soviets had heretofore hoped that the JDC could promote diplomatic recognition, this was no longer relevant. Furthermore, the pressures of rapid industrialization and collectivization as well as Stalin’s growing xenophobia surely influenced the Kremlin’s orientation toward Western organizations. Even more ominous for the JDC, Soviet dependence on American machinery and expertise fell precipitously in the mid-1930s.

Renewed tensions between Moscow and Washington in the mid-1930s also made the JDC’s job more difficult. Even so, these did not immediately result in less tolerance toward the Agro-Joint or the colonists, nor did they eliminate the value the Soviets attached to the organization in the short term. Rather, the

99. Kelley to Olds, 20 June 1927, NARA; Schurman to the SOS, 6 June 1927, NARA; Rosenberg to Sulzberger, 17 January 1962, JDC 52b; LeFeber, American Age, 381.
100. Coleman to State Department, 13 November 1929, NARA; Arnold Margolin to Robert Kelley, 29 January 1930, 861.00/11416, NARA. Reservations about local anti-Semitism also convinced the Politburo to overturn plans for a Jewish republic in Crimea. See A. P. Smirnov to A. D. Tsjurupa, G. L. Piatakov, and V. V. Kuibyshev, 13 February 1924, f. f-445, op. 1, d. 19, l. 25, RGASPI.
101. Coleman to State Department, 10 July 1931, p. 2, NARA.
103. Memo, Joseph Hyman, 27 March 1935, Box 314/5, WP, AJA; Minutes, 15 June 1935, p. 4, JDC 544.
purges that swept Russia from 1935 to 1938 proved the most destructive event for colonization, as they tore down Rosen's personal network of contacts within the regime that had buoyed the Agro-Joint since 1924. Their replacements in the nation's administrative centers were political, not professional men, less prone to appreciate the Agro-Joint's value.

No less than the upheavals in the USSR, events in Germany and Poland redirected the JDC's energies. Faced with the threat to German and Polish Jewries in the mid-1930s, the Joint sought a solution that could capitalize on its proven capacity for colonization. It hoped to convince Washington that organized evacuation to the Soviet Far East—made more palatable by diplomatic recognition—could best solve the plight of its endangered European brethren. Rosen tried—but ultimately failed—to stir support in Washington for a major resettlement of German Jews in the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan with hints that the project would reverse the recent decline of American exports to Russia. Simultaneously, the JDC tried to pressure the Soviet government to allow large-scale immigration from Germany through the mobilization of personal contacts among statesmen in Britain, France, and America.

Special relations between the JDC and State Department survived diplomatic recognition, notwithstanding the latter's decreased interest in the fate of the colonists. As was surely evident in Washington after 1933, the Agro-Joint still supplied unique data on the Soviet countryside; the persistent blindness of American statesmen to rural conditions only reinforced the organization's value. Whether as a quid pro quo for continued reports or simply an act of goodwill, the State Department allowed the JDC to transmit secure messages to its Moscow office through American consulates during the negotiations with the Soviet government on the liquidation of Agro-Joint operations. Without

104. For example, Rykov's power quickly decreased after December 1930.
106. This is the impression gathered from JDC archives before and after the election of Hitler.
107. Rosenberg to Strauss, 31 October 1933, WP, AJA; James Rosenberg to J. G. McDonald, 19 April 1934, Box 305/5, WP, AJA.
109. Indeed, Rosen provided lucid assessments even after the end of formal Agro-Joint activity. See Alexander Kirk to the SOS, 12 October 1938, Decimal file 1930–39, 861.48/2486, pp. 1–4, NARA. For unique information on Germany received by the JDC via colleagues from Great Britain, see Neville Laski to Cyrus Adler, 12 November 1934, Box 296/5, WP, AJA.
110. Davies to the SOS, 17 March 1938, NARA. For a rare exception, see Louis G. Michael's observations, April 1939, Decimal file 1930–39, NARA.
111. See correspondence, September–October 1938, Decimal file 1930–39, 861.48/2484–2486, NARA. After leaving the USSR in 1937, Agro-Joint turned to similar—but much smaller—projects to relocate German-Jewish refugees in Latin America and the Philippines.
this arrangement, the final agreement between the Joint and the Kremlin — put into effect in late 1937 — might have turned out far worse for the colonists.

What made this unlikely diplomatic triangle possible? Russia's political and economic vulnerability played a vital part. Warburg correctly surmised in 1928 that the Agro-Joint gave the Soviets “something which they [could not] get anywhere in the world.” With this in mind, he pushed forward at critical junctures “while the psychological conditions in Russia are such that we can receive the most favorable treatment.”

Confident in their status, leaders of the Joint relayed the Kremlin’s overtures to Washington before the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. Even if the State Department disagreed, the Soviets considered JDC officials to be conduits to the highest levels of American government. If the Soviets elevated the JDC to an unofficial liaison, the latter willingly accepted; they firmly believed that improved relations between Moscow and Washington benefited colonization.

Similar to the case in Moscow, the Joint’s special position in Washington derived from specific weaknesses, even if sharp disagreements existed in the State Department regarding the organization. On the one hand, those officials familiar with the deficiencies of America’s intelligence-gathering capabilities welcomed the Agro-Joint’s unique reports, whatever their misgivings about Jewish colonization in the USSR. On the other hand, higher-ranking officials dismissed any attempts at unofficial mediation with the Soviets. If Washington slowly acquiesced to the JDC’s investments in the Soviet infrastructure in return for continued reports, the culture of anti-Bolshevism in the State Department—at least until 1933—could not countenance the next step: transformation of philanthropists into informal diplomats.

The political leverage accumulated by the JDC in the 1920s and early 1930s contrasted with its powerlessness on the issue of Jewish refugees from Germany and Poland in the late 1930s. Just as the Joint could not reverse growing Soviet xenophobia, it (and other Jewish organizations) could not substantively change British policy in Palestine or squeeze concrete results from international forums. At most, colonization in Crimea and southern Ukraine, together with failed attempts to resettle Jews from Germany, produced a fleeting global urgency on the refugee issue and a conception of the USSR as a land of refuge.

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112. Felix Warburg to Julius Rosenwald, 9 August 1928, p. 4, Box 244/4, WP, AJA.
113. M. Kaufman, An Ambiguous Partnership: Non-Zionists and Zionists in America, 1939–1948 (Jerusalem, 1991), 41. Conferences convened by President Roosevelt in July 1938 (Evian) and October 1939 (National Committee on Refugees) yielded few substantive results for Jewish refugees from Germany and Poland.
114. This reached as far as Mussolini. See William Phillips to the SOS, 5 January 1939, Decimal file 1930–39, 840.48 Refugees/1306, NARA. See also Rosenberg to McDonald, 19 April 1934, Box 305/3 WP, AJA.
Notwithstanding the JDC’s imperfections, its efforts bore great benefits. Moscow’s perceptions of the JDC, both real and imagined, and the economic vitality of the colonies granted the colonists a degree of immunity from the economic stresses and political purges that was unknown to indigenous peasants. In fact, Agro-Joint colonies perpetuated Jewish life better than most other communities in the USSR and achieved prosperity unequalled in neighboring collective farms (kolkhozes), even after the organization’s departure. Members who left the colonies also benefited from the restoration of civil rights, with which they could quickly ascend the new urban professional and academic ladders. When the Agro-Joint departed the USSR in 1937, it left behind eighty-six demographically stable, prosperous, and ethnically and culturally uniform colonies in Crimea and nearly double that number in southern Ukraine. Without the German invasion in 1941, the colonies might have prospered indefinitely.

The effects of colonization on Soviet Jewry in the interwar era exceeded the proportionally small numbers of settlers—no more than 9 percent of Soviet Jewry at the time. First, a massive propaganda campaign launched by the state to popularize the colonization project among the Russian-language public forged an image of a “new” Soviet-Jewish agriculturalist. Heretofore, the representations of Jews in official literature had usually been far less flattering. While most Jews did not fit the new model, it changed how non-Jews viewed their Jewish countrymen and legitimized a form of Jewish national identity in an era of growing assimilative pressures from above. Second, colonization helped relieve socioeconomic pressures in the traditional Jewish population centers; it thereby facilitated—albeit indirectly—the recovery of those who remained behind. Finally, colonization kept the JDC in Soviet Russia for at least ten years longer than the organization had envisioned when it finished work with the ARA in 1922. Considering the vocational training and political protection the Joint provided Soviet Jewry, this factor alone made colonization worthwhile.

Over the past six decades, an array of voices in Russia has periodically accused American Jewry (led by the JDC) of conspiring with the Soviet regime or the American government to “steal” Crimea.\(^\text{115}\) Most tragically, the regime used the renewed interest of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in a compact Jewish territory in Crimea to destroy this group of outstanding Soviet Jews from 1948 to 1952. Amid the general “anticosmopolitan” campaign, the party included this interest in Jewish autonomy as grounds for the arrest and execution of most of the committee’s leadership.\(^\text{116}\)


\(^{116}\) S. Redlich, *Propaganda and Nationalism in Wartime Russia: The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR, 1941–48* (Boulder, 1982), 54–55; Y. Keren, *Yehadut Krim me-kadmutab*
As discussed above, however, even if the JDC tried to fill unconventional diplomatic roles to advance the colonization project, it had no sanction from any quarter, nor did Washington ever take it seriously in this capacity. In the final analysis, the exigencies of the era forced the Joint to tread its way cautiously between the interests of wary governments. It did so for one reason alone: to ease the suffering of desperate brethren.