
BOOK REVIEWS

GIUSEPPE MOTTA, *LA COMUNITÀ INTERNAZIONALE E I RIFUGIATI EBRAICI*

FRA LE DUE GUERRE MONDIALI

[ENG. TRANS.: *THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND THE
JEWISH REFUGEES BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS*]

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Giuseppe Motta's book is a timely contribution to a current debate on the role and the responsibilities of the international community to deal with the effects of wartime and postwar mass violence, and the large-scale racial discrimination it often engenders. It is, in fact, the story of the foundation of today's international system of refugee protections and humanitarian relief, zooming in on the Jewish communities across Eastern Europe and the various actors involved in this process during the interwar period. The book is a continuation, in many respects, of a previous research endeavour of the author (*The Great War Against Eastern European Jewry, 1914-1920*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), that focuses on the brutal policies against Jews of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires during and after World War One.

Motta's study is a well-written book, rich in both archival documents (the League of Nations, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Foreign Relations of the United States), and secondary literature, which the author combines cleverly to put forward his argument. The book is divided into four parts. The first two explore the main historical and political context that underpins the displaced Jewish refugees throughout the interwar years. The first section covers the early 1920s' refugee and migrant crisis set in motion by the

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October Revolution, the Great War and the ensuing collapse of the empires that left millions of refugees, stateless and at risk: Russians (of different nationalities), Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Bulgarians and many more. Among all, Jews were, by far, the most vulnerable, as they did not have a kin state, and, moreover, were the most unwanted as antisemitism coupled with the widespread fear of communism gained new ground especially in the successor states of Eastern Europe.

The second part discusses how Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 unleashed a new wave of Jewish persecutions and subsequent dramatic refugeedom. The third section's aim is twofold. First, it zooms out and provides a larger framework of the Jewish emigration dynamics both before and after the Great War in terms of destinations (the United States, in particular, but also Canada, Argentina, Palestine), routes, attitudes towards migrants, and, as concerns the start of national immigration policies (quotas, visas, passports), with a focus on the global network of Jewish relief organisations. Second, it directs the reader to the debates and initiatives conducted by the International Labour Organisation that sought to reach an agreement on the legal definition of the migrant, but also to the organisation's efforts to assist refugees by negotiating with Jewish associations and governments to find employment opportunities.

The fourth part focuses on the entire interwar work of many law experts (some refugees themselves) endeavouring to introduce the novel legal concept of the *refugee*. Although the definition of the refugee would be agreed upon internationally only in 1951, the foundation was laid in the 1920s and the 1930s. This part also covers how international cooperation on humanitarian assistance was closely linked to the challenges faced by the Eastern European Jewry and the following mobilisation of numerous Jewish relief organisations. Such initiatives would further advocate for a transnational drive to ensure the protection of minorities in general and for the right and duty of humanitarian intervention against the abuse of power by the state.

This last part concludes with an exploration of key intellectuals (lawyers, judges, academics and human rights activists), many of whom were Eastern European Jews, some refugees, other exiles, and their pioneering contribution to the early legal debate concerning human rights violations and the need of defending individuals against the state. Some of them were active both before and after the Second World War. Figures such as André Mandelstam, Raphael Lemkin, Hersch Lauterpacht or Hannah Arendt, to cite only a few, were

illuminating examples of how their own vulnerable Jewish background could become an essential contribution to the global postwar discourse on universal human rights.

Motta develops his argument around the paradox that was the international system between the two world wars, caught between the ultimate failure to find a solution for the hundreds of thousands of Jewish (and other groups of) refugees and migrants due to nation-building xenophobic policies in successor states, and the growth of a transnational network of solidarity and relief. The book's strength lies in piecing together a balanced narrative of how all of these events unfolded, sustained by agents of change such as the newly established institutions (the League of Nations through the office of the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, Fridtjof Nansen and, from 1933 onwards, through another High Commissioner with diminished authority, James Grover McDonald), Jewish non-governmental organisations, research institutes, law experts and human rights pioneers.

Motta's book, as the history it recounts, can be read in more than one way. From a darker perspective, it is a story of how Jewish refugees abruptly tested the political will behind the international system set in place at the Paris peace conference. The obvious absence of political will of the 1920s to find legal solutions for the millions of victims of political violence in Eastern Europe, far from being discarded, was to be continued in the 1930s with devastating consequences for the Jewish community. This observation functions as a reminder of how critical the abstention of the international community was in the past and how we cannot afford to ignore such lessons in the future. An optimistic reader would also retain that, in spite of such consequential failures, the same interwar period would give rise to a new era of global – legal and humanitarian – engagement.