The Yahudim and the Americans:  
The Leo Frank Affair as a Turning Point in Jewish-American History

Jason Schulman  
Columbia University

Historians have often described the Jewish-American past as exceptional, mostly because anti-Semitism has played a conspicuously less important role in America than in any other country in the Diaspora. As American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna concludes, if the United States “has not been utter heaven for Jews, it has been as far from hell as Jews in the Diaspora have ever known.”¹ If such a statement is true, then the Leo Frank affair becomes even more egregious in Jewish American history. For Jews who had come to see America as the land of unencumbered opportunity, the “Goldene Medina,” the false conviction and subsequent lynching of a prominent Jew in Atlanta in 1913 resembled contemporaneous anti-Semitic attacks in Europe. Looking back on this incident from a Jewish as well as an American perspective, and despite admirable attempts by previous historians to make sense of this muddled event, the Frank affair has not been given proper attention. Typically, historians seeking to stress the ease with which Jewish immigrants became “Americanized” have ignored or downplayed the Frank affair, while even those historians who acknowledge the severity of the anti-Semitic event have failed to grasp its widespread significance; for the latter group, the Leo Frank affair was an isolated southern incident.²

The Leo Frank affair is arguably the single-most loaded event in Jewish American history, touching on multiple issues that have defined the rise of Jews in America: “Americanization,” labor, upward mobility, gender, immigration, nativism, and anti-Semitism.³ The facts of the Leo Frank “affair,” the term employed by Albert Lindemann to describe Frank’s conviction, imprisonment, and lynching, are clear.⁴ In April 1913, Leo Frank, the superintendent of a pencil factory in Atlanta, was arrested for the murder of Mary Phagan, a child laborer in the factory. The court, mysteriously convinced by the testimony of black janitor Jim Conley, convicted Frank and sentenced him to death. After nearly two years, Georgia Governor Slaton commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. The people of Marietta, Georgia, Phagan’s hometown, could not handle such a decision. They broke into the jail, kidnapped Frank and lynched him on 17 April 1915.

Though the literature on the Frank affair is copious, the historiography of this watershed moment in Jewish American life still lacks what may be called a “co-religionist interpretation.”

³ For an excellent and concise work on the late nineteenth century, which deals with many of these issues without specific regard to Jews, see Nell Painter, Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).
Unfortunately, historians have focused solely on the events of the Frank affair themselves, on the
development of anti-Semitism in the South, or on the history of the American South. There has
not yet been a careful study on the effect of the Leo Frank case on the Eastern European Jewish
immigrants concentrated in New York. In order to fill that void, it is critical to define the Frank
affair as a turning point in Jewish American history. The Frank affair, which was the single-
greatest episode of anti-Semitism in America, presented a unique moment for solidarity, or
“ethnic cohesion,” between German and Russian Jews, whose relationship had previously been
markedly strained at best. By sheltering themselves from further anti-Semitism, Jews of
different ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds came together in response to Frank’s lynching.
Before a serious Zionist movement developed to bring them together, and before the era of a
unified response to the Holocaust, German and Russian Jews were united in their reaction to the
Frank affair. Simultaneously, as the Frank affair forced Jews inward, it also garnered them
outward acceptance in the American milieu. Put simply, the Frank affair was a opportune
moment for “Americanization.” Generally, the process by which immigrant groups, like Jews,
were transformed into Americans entailed two components. First, Jews had to
become American, through shared values, language, and concern about national affairs. Tantamount to
this transformation, Jews had to be accepted by Americans. In turn, these minority groups
actually influenced the very definition of “American.” Thus, in the context of the Frank affair,
by distinguishing themselves from blacks, Jews became “white.” By espousing the American
justice system (instead of the violent vigilante ethos of the South), Jews became “American.”
When they stood by Frank’s side they became Americans, while reaffirming themselves as Jews.
Thus, counter-intuitively, the Frank affair offered an opportunity for Americanization, and
simultaneously, ethnic cohesion.

The historiography of the Frank affair truly begins with Leonard Dinnerstein’s *The Leo
Frank Case*, which is widely regarded as the seminal work on the event itself. Beyond a
description of the events themselves, Dinnerstein presents a complex portrait of southern Jewish
in the 1910s. But despite the tremendous value of Dinnerstein’s well-researched work, his
overemphasis on anti-Semitism in the South creates the illusion that the Frank affair had little
effect on Jews in the North. With the exception of Louis Marshall and the American Jewish
Committee’s (AJC) involvement in the trial proceedings, Dinnerstein’s book leaves readers
thinking that the Leo Frank case occurred in a vacuum, during which time northern (especially
Yiddish-speaking, Eastern European) Jews lived undisturbed lives. In actuality, the Leo Frank
affair caused a fundamental change in national Jewish relations by smoothing the German-
Russian Jewish relationship.

The German Jews arrived in the United States *en masse* in the mid-nineteenth century. By
the time huge waves of Eastern European Jewish immigrants began arriving in 1881, the
German Jews were already widely accepted in mainstream American society. According to
Gerald Sorin, “The German Jews became relatively affluent and influential….They also became

---

5 The term “Americanization” is slightly problematic, as its definition is in constant flux and often seems impossible
to define. For our purposes, the best definition may be: “That particular variant of assimilation by which newcomers
or their descendants come to identify themselves as ‘American,’ however they understand that identity” (Russell
Kazal, “Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History,” *The
American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 [April 1995]: 440).


7 The following paragraph relies heavily on Naomi Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the
more acceptable to their fellow Americans." The reasons for such acceptance included visible hard work, which “real” Americans valued; vast efforts of philanthropy; and a reformed version of Judaism that blended nicely within America’s religious spectrum. Thus, because they arrived earlier and were better integrated into America society, German Jews generally looked down upon their Russian co-religionists. From the opposite perspective, the stereotypically more devout Eastern European Jews called the rich Germans “Uptown Jews” or yahudim. The lower class Jews of the Lower East Side, the “Downtown Jews,” blamed the yahudim for “many of the difficulties that the immigrants encountered, for their paternalistic attitude toward philanthropy, [and] for their use of shtadlones [intercession] instead of open protests.”

The Germans feared the new immigrants would ruin their hard-won place in American society. The Russians resented their rich, non-religious brethren. The relationship between the two groups was contemptuous, to say the least. However, the greatest positive connection between the two immigrant groups was philanthropy. Organizations like B’nai Brith, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Immigrants Aid Society (HIAS), the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and the Educational Alliance all sought to help the new immigrants in America. In this top-down schema, tsedoke [charity] formed the basis for religious group cohesion while simultaneously facilitating “Americanization”—defined as integration into greater American society though shared values, language, culture, and politics. In an effort to “Americanize” the new Eastern European immigrants (oftentimes called “greenhorns”) in an era of increasing nativism, Germans Jews provided newcomers relief, shelter, and employment, as well as help in the form of schools, charities, and hospitals.

Most histories of the period tend to treat the interaction between the two groups as the relationship between the established Jews and the ethnic immigrants. Historian Selma Berrol has critically argued against earlier historians like Oscar Handlin and Moses Rischin, who sought to “minimize the negatives and emphasize the charitable efforts of the German Jewish community and the eventual coming together of the different kinds of Jews living in a city that was full of promise for all of them.” While Berrol is correct that Handlin and Rischin as well as Irving Howe have downplayed German-Russian tensions, Rischin does acknowledge that established German Jews—Americanized, reformed, and socially accepted—were “faced with the prospect of a mass migration of co-religionists from Eastern Europe, whose coming seemed to threaten their hard-won respectability.” To the German Jews, Rischin continues, “immigrant dress, ceremonials, and rabbinical divorces were anathema. Yiddish theaters were barbarous; Yiddish

---

8 Sorin, Tradition, 31. Sorin notes that new discrimination against Jews was based on social acceptance, not class (i.e. the “Seligman Affair”).
9 Ibid., 31-60.
11 This disparaging moniker was used to describe a new immigrant in the late nineteenth century, whose social habits clashed with “real” American ones.
newspapers, collectively stigmatized as ‘socialistic,’ even worse.” Despite the limitations of Berrol’s critique, a well-articulated compromise regarding the relationship between the German and Russian Jews has been devised by historian Gerald Sorin, who claims that the two groups “entered into and sustained a relationship marked ultimately by cooperation.”

One Eastern European Jewish immigrant in New York who was personally fascinated and outraged by the Frank affair was Abraham Cahan. As Yiddish journalist, English fiction writer, and labor leader, Cahan was, in the words of Sorin, an “agent of acculturation,” whose life “was inextricably linked with the destinies of the more than two million Jews who landed in the United States between 1881 and 1924.” Born in Vilna, Lithuania, Cahan came to America in 1882, helped start the United Hebrew Trades in 1888, and founded (and continued to edit) the largest Yiddish newspaper in the world, the *Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts)* in 1897. Though he was a European-born Socialist, Cahan was so disturbed by the anti-Semitism of the affair that he made several trips to Atlanta in 1914 to interview Leo Frank. To a large degree, Cahan, who had escaped persecution in Vilna, felt threatened that a Jew was no longer safe in America either.

Thus, in a real sense, Cahan serves as a representative for the Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Jew of the early twentieth century vis-à-vis the Frank affair. Though he was not the “average” Eastern European Jew in New York, Cahan’s position at the head of the *Forward* (which had the largest circulation of any ethnic press) constantly forced him to present, and represent the *Yiddishe kultur* (Yiddish culture) of the Lower East Side. Because he held such a position, his decision to cover the Frank case so closely in the North’s Eastern European press illustrates how the Frank affair offered an occasion for both Americanization and ethnic cohesion. Though largely ignored by historians, the Frank affair, in which Abraham Cahan was so intimately involved, allows the perfect opportunity to investigate German-Russian relations and the “Americanization” of the new immigrant Jews.

Abraham Cahan and Leo Frank could not have come from more different worlds. Cahan embodied precisely that which German Jews despised: an urban, northern, Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking labor unionist and socialist. Leo Frank was a bourgeois industrialist and Reform German Jew living in the South (though both men were highly irreligious). Cahan was the founder of the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* and the United Hebrew Trades; Frank was the president of the Atlanta *B’nai Brith* chapter. Cahan had been educated in the Vilna Teachers Institute; Frank had attended Cornell. That Cahan would have been interested at all in the Frank case is astounding. Frank, after all, had purportedly maltreated underage laborers, but Cahan, the interminable labor leader, was unquestionably drawn to his case. Analyzing Cahan’s personal correspondence with Frank opens a window into the mind of a man who cared so much about his

---

20 For the most recent biography of Cahan, see Sanford Marovitz, *Abraham Cahan* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).
German co-religionist, which debunks the traditional historical interpretation of discordant German-Russian Jewish relations.

The correspondence between Frank and Cahan conveys a camaraderie that defies conventional thinking about how German and Russian Jews regarded one another. These epistolary sources are particularly useful for analysis because such personal conversations emit the true feelings of these co-religionists, without the often necessary self-censorship of a published work; they honestly convey uninhibited and uncensored affection. That Cahan and Frank exchanged letters and telegrams is significant in and of itself, since it is an example of harmonious German-Russian relations earlier than most historians’ analyses will acknowledge. But the most revealing aspect of this camaraderie can be found in the language of the letters themselves. In a 27 March 1914 letter, after calling him “Honorable Abraham Cahan,” Frank thanked Cahan for sending him copies of the Forward and explained, “The attention and sympathy of friends and well-wishers is the source of much inspiration to me.” Frank conveyed to Cahan that he was “in good spirits…willing to await the verdict of Truth!” Frank ended the letter like any true friend: “With warmest regards and every good wish, in which my dear wife joins me, I am, dear sir, yours cordially, Leo M. Frank.”

Frank and Cahan enjoyed a special relationship. Historian Jeffrey Melnick, paraphrasing and quoting Cahan’s autobiography, explains that, “Cahan grew quite fond of Frank in his many visits to the jail; upon their parting, Cahan wished he could kiss the younger man in ‘our old-fashioned manner’ but refrained because he knew that ‘American men don’t kiss like this.’” The Frank affair provided a unique moment for such genuine camaraderie. These two men, who were as different as any two Jews could be, put aside their German or Russian identities in favor of a Jewish one.

In another letter, dated 31 March 1914, Frank congratulated Cahan for his journalistic work. Frank wrote, “I get the ‘Forward’ which you send me, and I congratulate you on the literary value, and attention to truthful details.” Weeks later, Frank similarly thanked Cahan, “I appreciate the kind wishes you and your readers so thoughtfully sent me.” But perhaps the richest letter between the two men was Frank’s New Year’s letter, sent with the “assurance of my warm personal regards,” in which he thanked Cahan, “the publishers, staff and readers of the Jewish Daily Forward” because their support “of my cause has been inspiring.” Though both men were highly irreligious, Frank’s letter to Cahan on the Jewish New Year indicates that their relationship was based on common religion, not country of origin, class, or economic ideology. In his biography of Cahan, Sanford Marovitz’s similarly explains that, “Long a secular Jew, Cahan gave little attention to the Hebrew faith per se after immigrating.” Nevertheless, writes Marovitz, “Cahan and the Forward were outspoken in attempting to gain a legitimate trial for [Frank].” That Cahan and Frank were both Jewish was enough to forge a bond between these

21 Leo Frank, Atlanta, Georgia, to Abraham Cahan, New York, 27 March 1914, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, RG 1139, New York City.
22 Leo Frank, Atlanta, Georgia, to Abraham Cahan, New York, 27 March 1914, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, RG 1139, New York City.
23 Cahan, in his autobiography, quoted in Jeffrey Melnick, Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 36.
24 Leo Frank to Abraham Cahan, 31 March 1914, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, RG 1139. In the various secondary literature, there is no indication that Frank could read Yiddish. It is theoretically possible, given that Frank was raised in the North, but unlikely. Regardless, there were Eastern European Jews in Atlanta who could translate the Yiddish newspapers Cahan sent.
25 Leo Frank to Abraham Cahan, 18 April 1914, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, RG 1139.
26 Leo Frank to Abraham Cahan, 11 September 1914, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, RG 1139.
27 Marovitz, Cahan, 30-1.
two radically different men in a moment of extraordinary difficulty for American Jews. Frank’s experience in Atlanta served to unite German and Russian Jews in ethnic cohesion.

The period of smooth relations that began in 1915 did not die with Leo Frank. Cahan’s interest in the Frank case, which seems to have bordered on obsession, lasted even after Frank was killed. In a series of letters from 1930, Cahan corresponded with Henry Alexander, who had served as one of Frank’s lawyers. From Alexander’s responses, it is possible to deduce that Cahan had asked the lawyer questions about the case, including questions about Governor Slaton’s statements, the parasol and ball of cord found in the elevator shaft, Conley’s testimony, Jews in Atlanta, and the status of Mrs. Frank.28 Cahán’s interest in the case fifteen years after Frank’s lynching reveals the degree to which the Frank affair had affected the relationship between German and Russian Jews—at the very least in Cahan’s own mind. According to Gerald Sorin, the events in Atlanta so greatly affected Cahan that he devoted almost the entire last volume of his autobiography to the Frank affair.29 In fact, after finishing the fifth volume of his autobiography, _Bleter fun Mayn Lebn_ (“Leaves of My Life”), Cahan sent a copy to Alexander.30 The Cahan-Alexander letters reveal how greatly the Frank case influenced Abraham Cahan, but the potential problem with these letters is apparent if one understands Cahan’s personality. Cahan was calculating, almost to a fault. There is no way to know, given his personality, whether he was truly still interested in the case in 1930, or if he simply needed to make his autobiography more factually correct, for Cahan always viewed himself as a great American realist writer. Although the answer is unknown, the fact remains that Cahan sent Alexander a copy of his autobiography. Regardless of his later intentions, in 1915 Cahan was obsessed with the case, seemingly revising the way in which historians have described the antagonistic relationship between German and Russian Jews in the early twentieth century.

Abraham Cahan was not the only Eastern European Jewish newspaper editor who became involved in the Frank affair. Herman Bernstein, editor of the Yiddish daily _Der Tog_ ( _The Day_ ), also became a fierce advocate for Frank’s innocence. Like Cahan, his close relationship with Frank is surprising according to the traditional understanding of contentious German-Russian relations. The similarity of their experiences only further supports the contention that the Frank affair created an opportunity for smoother German-Russian relations among Jews in America. After such a revision to the traditional history, Bernstein’s actions seem to make more sense. “It occurred to me,” Bernstein wrote to Georgia Governor Slaton in late 1914, “that you may feel like saying a few words about the general feeling of anti-Semitism in Georgia [where] anti-Jewish feeling has grown to dangerous proportions and have blinded the unthinking masses.”31 Bernstein’s emphasis was on Jewish solidarity in opposition to “the unthinking masses.” Also like Cahan, Bernstein sent Frank copies of his newspaper.32 In some instances Bernstein went further than Cahan. In 1915 (either just before the lynching or just after Frank’s death), Bernstein started a “Leo Frank Fund.”33 Thus, Bernstein and Cahan were both personally connected with the Frank affair, and each man’s intimate relationship with Frank

---

28 Henry Alexander to Abraham Cahan, 8 October 1930, YIVO, RG 1139.
30 Henry Alexander to Abraham Cahan, 5 November 1931, YIVO, RG 1139.
31 Herman Bernstein, New York, to Governor John Slaton, Georgia, 29 November 1914, YIVO, RG 713, Box 9, Folder 300.
32 Leo Frank to Herman Bernstein, 16 January 1915, YIVO, RG 713, Box 9, Folder 300.
33 Herman Bernstein (letter received with acknowledgment of a check made out to the “Leo Frank Fund” by the Robinowitz Brothers in Texas on 7 September 1915), YIVO, RG 713, Box 9, Folder 300.
seemingly dispels the conventional wisdom that German and Russian Jews were not ethnically cohesive.

Using this new interpretation, three eras of German-Russian relations can be defined. First, from the period of great migration in 1881 until the 1903 pogroms in Eastern Europe, the relationship was certainly tenuous, if not hostile. During the period, Sorin writes:

Germans believed that the ‘contemptible’ Russians were the reason for the new anti-Semitism; the Russians in turn thought the ‘arrogant’ Germans were deceiving themselves about their acceptance in the host society and about the positive qualities of rapid assimilation.34

Germans were against further immigration, prompted mostly by concerns over nativist American views about the new immigrants. Sorin believes that the German Jews of the era “were apparently too insecure to feel comfortable with the poverty, the Yiddish, the Orthodoxy, and the socialism of the new arrivals from Eastern Europe.”35 Following the pogroms of Eastern Europe, tensions between the two groups in America cooled, and the establishment of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in 1906 marked a tremendous step toward reconciliation between the two groups. Whereas previous differences over culture, language, and religiosity, as well as economic antagonisms had separated the two groups, the common enemy of anti-Semitism in the Old World was enough to unite them. This proved even more effective when anti-Semitism occurred in America. Finally, 1915 marked the start of the third period, in which German and Russian Jews were united against anti-Semitism in the American South.

Despite the Frank affair’s special position as a moment of ethnic cohesion, it simultaneously offered a true opportunity for Jewish “Americanization.” In no area was this shift more pronounced than in the ethnic and national press. The process of Americanization during the Frank affair hinged on three factors. First, as historians Jeffrey Melnick and Eric Goldstein argue, the Jews had to become “white.” This marked a shift from the Jewish position during the Atlanta race riots of 1906, in which the Forward called local racial disturbances “Negro pogroms.”36 Goldstein points out how Jews sought to define themselves against blacks in 1915 (the same year in which D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation premiered):

During the Frank trial…the editors of Northern Jewish papers who covered the Frank Case…liberally reprinted anti-Conley editorials from the [non-Jewish] daily papers that used statements such as ‘black human animal,’ ‘depraved negro,’ ‘treacherous negro’ and ‘negro dope fiend.’37

34 Sorin, Tradition, 103.
37 Goldstein, Whiteness, 66. Similarly, “During Frank’s 1913 trial, some non-Jewish Atlantans promoted a boycott of Jewish shops by distributing small cards that read: ‘Now is the time to show your true colors; to show your true American blood.’ As southern Jews watched the trial and lynching of Frank unfold, they became more convinced than ever that the key to social acceptance lay in demonstrating their ‘true colors’ as whites” (Goldstein, Whiteness, 62).
Second, because a shared value system was crucial to their assimilation, the Jews’ Americanization was facilitated by their calls for “justice.” In a letter to the editor, Der Tog reader Morris Blauk wrote:

It seems to me that if the New York World found it necessary to appeal to the Governor for the criminal Falk Brandt for a pardon it is only proper for you to appeal for our innocent brother as Justice has committed a crime against him because of technicalities.  

Lastly, the mere fact that Jewish dailies—German, but especially Russian—were reporting on the same events as the non-Jewish American dailies was a sign of and vehicle for acculturation. Those who wanted to be “American” had to care about national issues. This type of Americanization—here defined as the process by which Jews sought to integrate into American society and influence American society to accept them—was achieved through small acts by individuals. Even something as seemingly insignificant as reading a specific newspaper was part of the transformation. The Frank affair was not only a Jewish issue, but the “American Beilis.” Thus, the proper way to assess such a moment of shifting allegiance and identity is to examine the reaction of the Yiddish press (like Cahan’s Forward) to the Frank affair.

The American press at the time—in Atlanta, around the nation, and distinctly the “yellow” journalism—could not report on anything, it seemed, but the Frank affair. Each new turn of events led to new articles and fierce editorials. Surprisingly, Frank had overwhelming support in the American press, even from, according to historian Eugene Levy, “such solidly WASP papers as the Chicago Tribune, Washington Post and Baltimore Sun.” Editorials from around the nation opined about the degree of anti-Semitism in the South, Frank’s innocence, and the odd maltreatment of a white (though Jewish) man in favor of a black man. The New York Tribune wrote that “the red band of anarchy is dangling from Frank’s nose.”

In his article, Levy compares the reactions of the black press to the Frank affair with the German Jewish press. He finds that “the bulk of discussion in [German] Jewish papers revolved around the extent and significance of anti-Semitism during the trial and its aftermath.” An editorial from the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent supports his contention, as it stated, “Frank is clearly the victim of the most malicious form of anti-Semitism.” That newspaper went on to call Frank’s lynching “Georgia’s Lasting Disgrace.” In a 1915 editorial, the Boston Jewish Advocate wrote, “What should make for thought is that there has happened in Georgia what could not happen in darkest Russia.” In an article entitled “The Shame of It,” the newspaper declared: “Lynching is neither a crime nor an outrage in the South…Why was the community of Atlanta so incensed against the Jew Frank that it could even forget its anti-negro attitude?”

---

38 Morris Blauk (letter to the editor Der Tog on 7 December 1914), YIVO, RG 713, Box 9, Folder 300.
39 Letter to the editor of Der Tog, 26 January 1915, YIVO, RG 713, Box 9, Folder 300. It referred to Menahem Mendel Beilis, who was accused of blood libel and ritual murder in Russia in 1913.
43 Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, 20 August 1915, Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
44 Boston Jewish Advocate, 20 August 1915, Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
45 Boston Jewish Advocate, 20 August 1915, Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
Furthermore, in an editorial called “Back to First Causes,” the Advocate wrote, “Southern Jewry is the type that should please the ardent assimilationist and the dispersionist.” Through editor Jonah Wise, the American Israelite, according to Levy:

Damned men like Hugh Dorsey and Tom Watson for deliberately contriving Frank’s murder, so as to ‘protect themselves against the truth that must have come out at some time their guilty knowledge.’

The reason for such vitriolic language, Levy claims, is that the German Jewish newspapers were guided by the major “American” dailies. The German Jewish newspapers had little direct access to the events and were left dependent on such dailies for stories. Furthermore, Jewish editors, cognizant of rising anti-Semitism in America, “chose not to emphasize that the American elite, at least as reflected by the majority newspaper, overwhelmingly supported Frank.” Levy notes that instead “they dwelt on the apparent rise of anti-Semitism, so familiar from the European model.”

Cahan and the Forward echoed, both in content and tone, the German-Jewish and non-Jewish American newspapers. It is surprising that Cahan acted in this way if one accepts the traditional interpretation that Russian Jews were at odds with German Jews. With regard to the press, there is some truth to that interpretation, though, but only earlier in the twentieth century. According to historian Ronald Sanders:

The Forward at first gave more attention to the trial of Mendel Beilis going on at the time in Russia than it gave to the Frank case in Georgia; Beilis, a simple workingman, a victim of Tsarist persecution and of the oldest anti-Semitic weapon in the history of Europe—the ritual-murder charge—was a far more appropriate martyr from the Forward’s point of view than a German-Jewish bourgeois who seemed at first to have been legitimately found guilty by an American court. But Cahan soon became persuaded, as many liberal Northerners did, that Frank was innocent.

After Cahan’s change of heart, the Forward filled its pages with news of the Frank affair. The Forward ran articles entitled “Dead Bodies Found Hanging From Tree: 100 Bullets Shot into Frank,” and “Frank Has Been Brought to Eternal Rest.” That same day, an article on the front page read: “The Governor of Georgia admits that in his state they hate Jews.”

46 Boston Jewish Advocate, 20 August 1915, Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
47 Cincinnati American Israelite, 19 August 1915, quoted in Levy, “White,” 219. Dorsey was the prosecuting attorney in the Frank case. Watson was a populist and Congressman from Georgia who sensationalized the Frank affair in his publication The Jeffersonian.
51 Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts), 17 August 1915, 1. Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library. My thanks to Rivka Schiller at YIVO for helping me translate the Yiddish. All translations are our own.
52 Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts), 17 August 1915, 1. Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
In an editorial, which Pollock believes Cahan himself wrote, the *Forward* was explicit about the brutality of the Frank affair. In Cahan’s signature literary style, the poetic piece began, “Frank is dead. The tragedy has ended in blood and death.” In a nod to the American justice system, and a condemnation of the Southern vigilante ethos, Cahan believed that Georgia had “locked all the doors of justice and allowed only one way out—the electric chair.” Like his non-Jewish editorial colleagues, Frank stressed “barbaric racial hatred; fanatic, glowing hatred of all things ‘foreign.’” In this invocation, Cahan was comparing the North, in which Jews were welcomed as “Americans,” with the backwards South in which they were still “foreign.” The South, then, was not “real” America, because “in no other country in the world could such a thing happen this way…It was not that long ago in the same ‘South,’ at the same place, where they hanged two niggers.” Cahan called Frank’s murder “a completely anarchistic conspiracy,” a complete aberration from true America. Pollock continues, “Editorials in every language, overwhelmingly in Frank’s favor, had flooded the nation. The Jewish press, understandably, was most concerned with the case.”

Historians have identified the *Forward* as one of the most effective agents for the immigrants’ acculturation. In particular, it helped introduce the Jewish immigrants to America. By integrating Anglicized Yiddish or English words into its pages, especially in articles concerning US History and Geography, its readers took their first steps towards Americanization. However, historians have failed to notice that the *Forward* helped its readers Americanize by encouraging them to read about and discuss national events—like the Frank affair. By covering the same news as the English press, the *Forward* garnered the “greenhorns” acceptance as Americans. The *Forward* did, indeed, devote “page upon page to the case.” Cahan, seeing how much attention the Frank affair was receiving in the mainstream press, took advantage of the moment and devised a plan to “Americanize” his *Forward* readers by simply mimicking the American press. Despite Cahan’s efforts, if the *Forward* readers did not buy the newspaper, all his efforts would have been in vain; but the Yiddish-speaking immigrants could not be satiated by news of the Frank affair. On 19 August 1915, just two days after Frank’s murder, the *Forward* announced its new circulation: 200,267—almost a 50% increase from the pre-Frank affair figure. Pollock correctly points out that this “act of regional insanity contributed to the growth of the *Forward.*” The Frank affair lent Cahan a teaching opportunity of sorts. By dwelling on the case, he forced new Eastern European immigrants to focus on the same issues as native-born Americans (and German Jews). Furthermore, that the circulation of the *Forward* increased with its coverage of the Frank affair only made Cahan more content, since Americanization was his ultimate goal.

Throughout 1915, political cartoons about the Frank affair appeared in several editions of Herman Bernstein’s newspaper *Der Tog.* A cartoon in the 18 August 1915 edition showed two enormous hands hanging Frank by a rope as blood drips from his mouth. The caption read: “The *khurbon* of Georgia.” The language is telling, as the *Forward* frequently referred to Frank as a “*khurbon,*” as well. The Yiddish, depending on its context, means “scapegoat” or “sacrifice.”

---

53 Abraham Cahan, (editorial in *Jewish Daily Forward* on 18 August 1915). My thanks for this translation are owed to Eddie Portnoy.
55 Pollock, “Clarinetist,” 366. Pollock astutely observes that, “The *Forward*, one of whose guiding principles was the Americanization of foreign-born Jewry, found itself in the unenviable—though not untenable—position of reporting a national disgrace to its new readers” (Pollock, “Clarinetist,” 368).
57 *Der Tog,* 8 August 1915, 4, Dorot Jewish Division, NYPL.
Both usages are appropriate in Frank’s context. Frank, like most victims of anti-Semitism, was blamed for being a Jew, the “scapegoat” blamed for society’s problems. But the latter interpretation of “sacrifice” is also meaningful, since it conveys the fact that religion and anti-Semitism played a tremendous role in Frank’s demise. This was not a southern incident involving a German; it was a Jewish incident. Earlier, in a cartoon from 22 July 1915, shortly after Frank’s sentence was commuted, the Day made clear the connection between Frank and the Americanization of the Jews. The title of the cartoon read: “The Victory of an Open Opinion.”

In the cartoon, Governor Slaton was shown cutting the rope from which Frank would have hanged. As he does so, Frank cowers in the corner, consoled by Uncle Sam, who tenderly places his hands on Frank’s shoulders. The message was that Frank was saved by American “Opinion.” But the implication for such a cartoon printed in a Yiddish daily is profound. Bernstein illustrated that Jews had become so close to native-born, “real” Americans that they could literally embrace Uncle Sam, the patriarch of America. To stand for justice was to be American. To protect the innocent—even a Jew—was characteristic of America. It seemed to Bernstein that in times of trouble the government and the public would stand behind the Jews. Finally, that this cartoon appeared in a Russian Jewish paper indicates that it was not only German Jews who could make this leap. The Frank affair, then, provided a unique opportunity for Americanization alongside Jewish ethnic cohesion.

The idea that anti-Semitism binds Jews together, masks differences between Jews of different denominations or nationalities, and eases intra-Jewish tensions is not a new one. Historian Samuel G. Freedmen has remarked that invoking “the memory of anti-Semitism serves as a balm for intra-Jewish tension.” In that respect, the Frank affair was just one example in which a tragic, anti-Semitic “pogrom” induced Jewish cohesion, in this case between German and Russian Jews. That the victim was a German Jew made little difference. The response of the Eastern European Jews demonstrated the connection they felt toward their western counterparts. But even this response was not one-sided. The fact that men like Cahan and Bernstein responded so viscerally was taken by German Jews as a sign of solidarity and mutuality. Likewise, their response was seen by both Jews and non-Jewish Americans as a sign of increased Americanization. Rather than subscribe to the traditional interpretation that seeks to emphasize German-Russian Jewish tensions in the early twentieth century, it may be time to consider that in the 1910s, anti-Semitism in the South may actually have helped Jews as an ethnic people in America.

---

58 Der Tog, 22 July 1915, Dorot Jewish Division, NYPL.
59 Samuel Freedman, quoted in Melnick, Relations, 4.
Cartoon showing Leo Frank being hanged (Der Tog, 8 August 1915).

Cartoon showing Governor Slaton commuting Frank’s sentence. (Der Tog, 22 July 1915).
Bibliography

Archives


*Herman Bernstein Papers*, New York: YIVO, RG 713, Box 9, Folder 300.

*Leo Frank Papers*, New York: Center for Jewish History/AJHS, P-408.

*Lucy Dawidowicz Papers*, New York: Center for Jewish History/AJHS, P-675, Box 40, Folder 8.

Newspapers

*Der Tog*, December 1914- August 1915

*Forward*, August 1915

*Jewish Advocate*, August 1915

*Jewish Exponent*, July- August 1915

*American Hebrew*, May- September 1913

Secondary Sources


(---). “Germans Versus Russian: An Update.” *American Jewish History* 73, no. 2 (December 1983): 142-156.


