

Let My Peoples Go: The American Jewish Committee and the Baghdad and Leningrad Show
Trials, 1969-70

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In January 1969, the Ba'athist regime of Iraq announced it had found fourteen men, nine of whom were Jewish, guilty of treason. Their alleged crime was to have planned and implemented a number of acts of terror while in the pay of the State of Israel, to whom they had been sending Iraqi state secrets. The men had been arrested and tried in secret; the trial was only announced on Baghdad radio shortly after the verdict- death by hanging- had been carried out. Once the hangings were completed, the bodies of the fourteen men were taken to the Iraqi capital's central Tahrir Square, where a large crowd-- by some estimates upwards of half a million people- assembled to see the bodies. The January executions were the largest and most egregious of a number of show trials directed against the Jewish community which had been conducted by the Ba'athist regime since its accession to power in July 1968. The months following the Ba'athist coup represented a new nadir for the few thousand Jews who had remained in Iraq after the mass emigration of 1948-1951. The community now faced discrimination, poverty, harassment, and isolation, as well as legal restrictions on emigration. Even after the January hangings had taken place, the government continued to arbitrarily arrest, charge, imprison and execute Iraqi Jews.¹

In December 1970, the Soviet government conducted a show trial of its own. The accused were a group of refuseniks- Soviet citizens, mostly Jews, who had been refused permission by the government to emigrate. They had been arrested in June 1970 for allegedly trying to steal an aircraft and escape from the USSR by flying it to the West. Eleven were arrested at Leningrad's Smolny airport, nine of whom were Soviet Jews; further arrests were made in other locations, bringing the total number of people arrested for the plot to thirty-four. Six months after their

¹ Itamar Levin, *Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001, 71-75. . Harold Troper, *The Ransomed of God: The Secret Rescue of the Jews of Syria*. First edition, Raincoast Books/Malcolm Lester Books, 1999, 23.

arrest, the trial began at the Leningrad City Court. Unlike the Baghdad show trial, the Leningrad show trial was covered in the media; the regime permitted TASS, the Soviet state wire service, and *Pravda*, the state newspaper, to attend the proceedings. The verdicts in the trial of the eleven key prisoners were announced on 25th December 1970. The plot's ringleaders, Mark Dymshits and Eduard Kuznetsov, were sentenced to death by firing squad. The others were given sentences of between four and fifteen years' imprisonment.²

Across the Atlantic, the leadership of the American Jewish Committee heard news of both trials at its headquarters in New York City. The organization, founded in 1906, had a long history of advocacy for Jewish communities both within and outside the United States. The AJC was led by affluent and well-established American Jews. It had long followed an elite-driven approach to advocacy, preferring private negotiation with world leaders above public protest. The AJC maintained close relationships with the US government, cultivated over decades of engagement on domestic and international issues. Maintaining these relationships was key to the organization's strategy for quiet, diplomatic advocacy. It used these close ties to elite politics to advocate for its political ideals. These ideals were liberal- for example, the AJC had campaigned for African-American civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s- even sending a delegation to the Selma to Montgomery march.³ However, the AJC's leaders favored moderate activism over more radical approaches, such as nonviolent direct action to oppose segregation, which caused the organization's leaders concern that such action might result in violence and negative publicity which would harm the cause of civil rights and reflect poorly on Jewish Americans.⁴ Thus, on

² Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010, 201-213.

³ Michael E Staub. *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

the eve of the show trials, the AJC was an organization at the heart of the American Jewish establishment, keen to maintain its strong links to the US government, to other Western governments, and to the UN. It was also an organization inclined toward quiet, backroom diplomacy over public protest.⁵

This paper seeks to compare the American Jewish Committee's reaction to the Leningrad and Baghdad show trials. In doing so, it will consider two core research questions: firstly, on an empirical level, how did the organization's response to the two trials differ? Secondly, what do those different responses reveal about the nature of American Jewish internationalism and transnational advocacy in the crucial period between the end of World War II and the rise of the 1970s human rights movement? By examining the organization's archival material on the two trials, both internal documentation and external communications efforts, this paper explores how the American Jewish leadership viewed the trials in the context of their organization's wider work both in Iraq and the Soviet Union and more generally. A close examination of the AJC's decision-making process in turn speaks to a number of broader research questions: How did Jewish American politics produce a systematic understanding of international crises in the 1960s? How did non-governmental organizations in this period come to develop new political advocacy strategies? What does the American Jewish response to human rights crises in the Middle East and Europe reveal about the still poorly understood story of later Cold War Jewish migration?

⁵ See Marianne R. Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong: The American Jewish Committee, 1945-2006*. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2007; Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906-1966*. The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972; Michael N. Barnett, *The Star and the Stripes: A History of the Foreign Policies of American Jews*. Princeton University Press, 2016. James Loeffler. *Rooted Cosmopolitans: Jews and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Two major waves of Jewish migration took place in the decades between the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991: the first, from the Middle East and North Africa, saw some 800,000 Jews leave their countries of origin; the second, from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, resulted in the migration of around 750,000 Soviet Jews.⁶ These waves were roughly equal in size; both groups went predominantly to Israel, though minorities (substantial in the Soviet case) settled in other countries such as France, Canada and the USA. Both left behind lands with centuries of Jewish history due in large part to antisemitic prejudices in those lands, and both experienced legal or practical barriers to emigration. Both waves have sparked debates- among policy makers, historians, and the migrants and their descendants- concerning whether the migrants could or should be described as ‘refugees’.

Yet, despite all these similarities, the migration of Soviet Jews prompted a much greater contemporary international political reaction. The international Soviet Jewry movement campaigned for almost thirty years across dozens of countries; its protests attracted hundreds of thousands of attendees, its activists met world leaders and successfully campaigned for new legislation designed to promote emigration. The cause of Middle Eastern and North African Jews, on the other hand, attracted significantly less attention. There was no ‘MENA Jewry movement’; no protests with hundreds of thousands of participants; no photo opportunities with global leaders; no Jackson-Vanik amendment for these emigrants. In examining one key organization’s response to two show trials, one in the USSR and one in the Middle East, this paper seeks to answer why these two Jewish communities received such disparate international

⁶ Michael R. Fischbach, *Jewish Property Claims against Arab Countries*, Columbia University Press, 2008, 3; Pauline Peretz. *Let My People Go: The Transnational Politics of Soviet Jewish Emigration During the Cold War*. New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, 2015, 344.

attention. The two trials- Baghdad in 1969 and Leningrad in 1970- took place within under two years of each other. Both saw totalitarian, anti-Zionist governments prosecute groups of their own citizens against a backdrop of aggressive antisemitic discrimination. That the events were similar in so many ways allows for a suggestive comparative approach to the AJC's response to these two waves of migration. Did Jewish Americans simply care less about the cause of Jewish migrants from the Middle East than they did about the cause of Soviet Jews, perhaps because of a feeling of shared identity with the Ashkenazi Jews of the USSR over the more culturally unfamiliar Mizrahim? Or, was the Jewish American response shaped by wider contextual factors, such as domestic politics, the Cold War context, or access to information about the two cases?

Literature on MENA Jewish migration politics has almost without exception focused on the process of migration itself, considering the treatment of MENA Jews in their countries of origin, how, when, and why communities decided to leave, and their experience upon arrival in Israel and elsewhere.⁷ The few comparative studies tend to examine the link between MENA Jewish migrants and Palestinian migration in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁸ Where existing scholarship does examine the relationship between MENA Jewry and other Jewish communities, it is usually in relation to the process of migration; considering how, for example, the Israeli government facilitated emigration, or the role international organizations played in humanitarian and philanthropic relief work for MENA Jewish migrants both before and after departure. As with this paper, the majority of scholarly works on MENA Jewish migration have

⁷ See, for example, Fischbach's work on property claims by Jewish emigrants from Arab countries in Michael R. Fischbach. *Jewish Property Claims Against Arab Countries*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008;

⁸ Shayna Zamkane. "Justice for Jews From Arab Countries and the Rebranding of the Jewish Refugee." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2016, 511 - 530.

recognized that the wave was made up of nearly a dozen national stories, and have thus chosen to focus on just one of these countries in detail.⁹

Soviet Jewish migration has attracted increasing scholarly interest in recent years from a variety of historiographical perspectives. For example, historians of Soviet history have examined the refusenik movement inside the USSR, while diplomatic historians have examined the Soviet Jewry Movement's role in shaping American foreign policy, particularly its impact on US-Soviet relations in the context of the Cold War. Historians of Jewish American history have placed the Soviet Jewry Movement within this context, analyzing the impact that involvement in the international Soviet Jewry Movement had on American Jewish life. This dissertation aims to engage with this literature in its analysis of the wider social and political effects of the AJC's response to the Leningrad show trial. A number of scholars, journalists and former activists have sought to write the comprehensive story of the Soviet Jewry Movement, often from a rather hagiographic perspective.¹⁰ Historiography on the Leningrad show trial itself- written by scholars such as Lazin, Harrison and Peretz- has focused on the event's role as a turning point in the history of the Soviet Jewry Movement.¹¹ In using a comparative approach, this account takes an innovative approach not found commonly in the literature, which will enable an analysis which

⁹ Works which focus on the Iraqi case include Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq: 3000 Years of History and Culture*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1985; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews In Modern Iraq*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2012; Esther Meir-Glitzenstein. *Zionism In an Arab Country: Jews In Iraq in the 1940s*. London, New York: Routledge, 2004; Moshe Gat. *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951*. London, Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997.

¹⁰ For example, Altshuler repeatedly praises the actions of grassroots groups with whom he worked, and criticizes establishment groups; see Stuart Altshuler. *From Exodus to Freedom: A History of the Soviet Jewry Movement*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. Lazin offers a more balanced perspective, though focuses on the interaction between the American Soviet Jewry Movement and the State of Israel; see Frederick A. Lazin, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics: Israel versus the American Jewish Establishment*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005.

¹¹ Lazin, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry*, Andrew Harrison. *Passover Revisited: Philadelphia's Efforts to Aid Soviet Jews, 1963-1998*. Madison [NJ]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001, 41; Peretz. *Let My People Go*, 144.

addresses a number of poorly understood topics in Jewish American history.¹² Beginning with a chronological overview of the AJC's response to the trials, this paper will then turn to an analysis of the factors which influenced the organization's decision making, before concluding by returning to the wider questions this case study aims to answer.

The AJC responds to the trials

The Baghdad hangings

The last time the AJC had intervened robustly in Iraq was from 1948 to 1951, when the organization had advocated against antisemitic actions in the country and had intervened with US government officials to push for freer emigration. The AJC had acted to protect a number of Iraqi Jews accused of various crimes and condemned in show trials.¹³ Thus, the organization had a modicum of experience in protecting Iraqi Jews. Nonetheless, the AJC's involvement in Iraq in 1969 was relatively modest. The organization kept abreast of news regarding the conditions for the country's Jewish community, put out occasional press releases publicizing poor treatment of Iraqi Jews, and wrote from time to time to relevant diplomatic and political figures to inform them of the issues faced by Iraqi Jews and to ask them to do what they could to alleviate the problem. The AJC had recently increased the attention paid to the community in the aftermath of

¹² Indeed, the only other analysis using this comparative lens is Harold Troper, 'Syria, A Special Case: A Comparison of the Campaigns on Behalf of Syria and Soviet Jews' in Hillel Shulewitz, Malka. *The Forgotten Millions: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands*. London, New York: Cassell, 1999.

¹³ Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, 69-70.

the 1967 Six Day War and the 1968 Ba'athist coup, but still devoted only a small amount of time and resources to the problems of the Iraqi Jewish community.

The AJC's New York office first heard reports of the trial on January 10th, 1969, some seventeen days before the hangings took place. One of the organization's first steps was to contact the AJC's Paris Office and the US State Department to gain as much information about the trial as possible.¹⁴ Obtaining such information was extremely difficult, given that the USA had no direct relations with Iraq, and that many in the Iraqi Jewish community were under strict surveillance and denied contact with foreigners. Two weeks after the first reports of the trial reached the AJC, its representative in Paris complained in a memo that 'we still have no hard news about what is happening in Iraq'.¹⁵ Lack of available information about the treatment of Iraqi Jews would continue to frustrate AJC staff throughout 1969.

Along with attempting to locate information about the trial, the AJC also put out two press releases in January 1969. The first, on January 14th, 'called on the US government, the UN and its member countries, and non-governmental agencies to urge the Iraqi government to tell the whole story on reports that at least four Iraqi Jews have been secretly condemned and may be facing execution after a secret military trial'¹⁶; two weeks later, the AJC's second press release urged 'the US, the UN and all member states of the UN, along with appropriate

¹⁴ Memo from Jerry Goodman to Simon Segal, 10 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

¹⁵ Memo from A S Karlikow to the AJC Foreign Affairs Department, 24 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

¹⁶ Press release, 14 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

non-governmental agencies, to join in condemning what has occurred and lend their voices in opposition so that, hopefully, further executions might be avoided'.¹⁷

The AJC would not put out another press release regarding the trials. Rather, it employed what could be termed indirect public relations. This method involved identifying a mouthpiece whom the organization could use as an unofficial spokesman for the Iraqi Jewish issue. This spokesman came in the form of Rouben Rafael Horesh, a middle-aged Iraqi-Jewish American businessman living on Long Island, whose brother had been among those hanged. Horesh began speaking on the AJC's behalf almost immediately after the trials. On 31st January, an AJC memo lists a number of appointments between Horesh and media organizations, 'as arranged by AJC'.¹⁸ Horesh's work was publicly unconnected with the AJC, with his connection to the organization kept confidential.

A third aspect of the AJC's initial reaction to the Baghdad show trial involved using the organization's contacts with the US government, with the aim of indirectly influencing the Iraqi regime. For example, on 28th January 1969 AJC president Arthur Goldberg wrote to the US Secretary of State: 'while I realize that our government has no direct diplomatic relations with the government of Iraq, I hope that we can find appropriate means to attempt to influence the government of Iraq to permit the Jews to emigrate.'¹⁹ By 5th February, a possible route for this influence had been posited: 'The French at the UN will be asked to make some public declaration calling upon Iraq to let the Jews emigrate and then indicate that France is ready to admit at least some of those refugees. This would then be followed by a similar statement by the

¹⁷ Press release, 27 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

¹⁸ Memo from Myrna Shinbaum to Mort Yarmon, 31 January 1969, Box 17, AJC archive.

¹⁹ Letter from Arthur Goldberg to Secretary of State, 28 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

US and as many other governments as possible. On the basis of these pronouncements, U Thant will be urged to acknowledge these offers, to endorse them, and to name a prominent individual to represent him in carrying out this program.²⁰

In February the AJC also began to expand its efforts at private diplomatic negotiation by approaching foreign governments. Throughout the spring and summer, the AJC's leadership contacted French, Canadian, Spanish and Italian government officials.²¹ In all these cases, however, the AJC's attempt at lobbying came to little: for example, by May, the AJC's Foreign Affairs department had noted that 'the French apparently have admitted to failure in Iraq'.²²

The AJC leadership coordinated its response to the trials with humanitarian organizations- many of them Christian groups- who were interested in aiding the Iraqi Jewish community. For example, on 4th March 1969 A S Karlikow of the AJC's Paris office met with the International Red Cross and the World Council of Churches in Geneva.²³ The following month, Zachariah Shuster wrote to the Foreign Affairs Department of the AJC's New York office, discussing his attempts to work with Christian groups to find a way for the AJC to channel financial support to Jews in Iraq.²⁴

²⁰ Letter from Hyman Bookbinder to A S Karlikow, 5 February 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

²¹ Letter from Morris Rombro to Ted Feder, 16 July 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; Memo from Zachariah Shuster to Foreign Affairs department, 14 February 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 99; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; Memo from Hyman Bookbinder to Bertram Gold and Simon Segal, 27 May 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

²² Minutes of AJC Foreign Affairs department meeting, 5 May 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 99; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

²³ Meeting record, A S Karlikow and International Red Cross/World Council of Churches, 4 March 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

²⁴ Memo from Zachariah Shuster to the Foreign Affairs department, 22 April 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 99; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

On May 5th 1969, in an AJC Foreign Affairs department meeting, those present decided to create ‘a national committee of concern for Jews in the Arab countries’.²⁵ Retired General Lucius Clay was recruited to serve as the Chairman of the ‘Committee of Concern’, with the group quickly becoming dubbed ‘the Clay Committee’, and becoming the key organization advocating on the AJC’s behalf to protect Jews in the Middle East and North Africa. The organization, which had notable figures such as Hubert Humphrey and Bayard Rustin on its board, was to be supported by the AJC but operate largely independently. The committee put out its first press release in October 1969, stating its aim: ‘to focus world attention on political trials and hangings of Jews, Christians and other minority elements in Iraq, and discrimination in other middle East countries’.²⁶

The Leningrad hijacking trials

The AJC had placed the issue of Soviet Jewry much higher on its agenda than the problems of Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. The organization had advocated for the rights of Soviet Jews for decades. The years 1945 to 1953 had seen particularly robust AJC involvement on behalf of Soviet Jews, who faced severe repression and harassment in a period which became known as the *shvartze yoren*, the black years. The AJC was one of the major Jewish organizations which had attended the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry in April 1964, at which the AJCSJ had been inaugurated as a coordinating body to

²⁵ Minutes of AJC Foreign Affairs department meeting, 5 May 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 99; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

²⁶ Letter from Lucius Clay, 19 October 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 99; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

advocate for Soviet Jewry.²⁷ So, the six years prior to the Leningrad show trial had seen the AJC at the forefront of an international campaign for the Soviet Jewish community.

The Leningrad trial can be divided into two chronological sections: firstly, the period between June 1970, when the arrests were made, and December 1970 when the trial began, and the shorter period between the start of the trial and the commutation of the death sentences in January 1971. The AJC learned about the Leningrad trial as soon as the arrests were announced. Its initial response was moderate in pace, given that a delay of several months was expected between the arrests and the trial. In mid-July, Jerry Goodman suggested to the AJCSJ that ‘a committee similar to the committee of concern’ - that is, the Clay committee for the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa- be created.²⁸ The following month, the AJC gave the AJCSJ the list of names of ‘appropriate persons in this country or abroad’ who might wish to serve on its board.²⁹

By the fall of 1970, the campaign on behalf of the Leningrad accused had gained pace, and the AJC was part of a wider campaign with the aim of increasing popular awareness of the trial, with the aim of either stopping proceedings altogether or mitigating the sentences.³⁰ The AJC’s role in this push for publicity involved producing and disseminating materials such as leaflets and fact sheets.³¹ In addition, the AJC also worked directly with other organizations to encourage them to publicize the trials. For example, in September 1970, Director of European

²⁷ Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, 508.

²⁸ Memo from Jerry Goodman to Simon Segal, 30 July 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 65; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

²⁹ Memo from Jerry Goodman to the Staff Committee on Soviet Jewry; 3 August 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 73; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³⁰ Letter from Jerry Goodman to the Secretary General of Amnesty International, 15 September 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 65; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³¹ Memo from Judah Graubart (AJC) to Jerry Goodman, 10 September 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 71; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

Affairs Jerry Goodman wrote to Amnesty International asking that it publicize the names of those arrested in connection with the Leningrad trials.³²

The following month saw the AJC start to lobby the US government to intervene in the case. AJC staff reached out to their existing contacts at the highest levels of US politics: for example, Hyman Bookbinder wrote to Leonard Garment, a White House staffer, describing the Leningrad trial as ‘a show trial, a la the 30s’ and requesting that President Nixon bring up the issue at his meeting with Soviet leader Andrei Gromyko, due to take place the following day.³³ The AJC was able to obtain its own meeting with the President to discuss the Leningrad trial, which led to a statement of support for Soviet Jews from Nixon.³⁴

After the Leningrad trial began in December 1970, the AJC continued these efforts with an increased sense of urgency, which reached a peak after the death sentences were announced on December 25th. The urgency of the situation and the involvement of organizations which favored direct action prompted the AJC to engage in campaigning which was a far cry from its usual indirect quiet diplomacy. For instance, on December 31st 1970, AJC staff appeared on stage at a public rally in San Francisco.³⁵ In the aftermath of the commutation of the death sentences, the AJC continued its efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry, albeit with a reduced sense of urgency. In particular, the AJC continued to push for the creation of an organization modeled after the Clay committee, an endeavor which was ultimately successful: the NCSJ (National

³² Letter from Jerry Goodman to the Secretary General of Amnesty International, 15 September 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 65; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³³ Letter from Hyman Bookbinder to Leonard Garment, 21 October 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 65; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³⁴ AJC Foreign Affairs department Activity Report for 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 65; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³⁵ Memo from Joel Ollander to Jerry Goodman, 31 December 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 71; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

Coalition Supporting Soviet Jewry) was formally created in November 1971. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the NCSJ would play a significant role in advocacy for the emigration rights of Soviet Jews.

Analysis

Having considered the ways in which the AJC's staff sought to respond to the Baghdad and Leningrad show trials, this paper will now turn to consider the decision making behind these approaches. This decision making was framed by the AJC's aims in responding to the trials, which was dualistic. Firstly, the organization had a specific short-term goal. In the Soviet case, the organization wanted the sentences of the defendants to be reduced, and commuted in the case of the two death sentences. In the Iraqi case, with the defendants in the show trial already having been executed, the AJC's short-term goal was to prevent additional arbitrary arrests and executions. Secondly, the organization had a more general goal which it hoped its response to the trials would help achieve: in both cases, an end to the community's suffering through emigration.

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In order to achieve these short- and long-term goals, the AJC used the same basic toolkit of approaches in response to both trials. This toolkit included five major techniques: information gathering, publicity management, collaborating with other organizations, and creating committees specifically to address the issues of the community in question. The AJC employed all five approaches in response to both trials. Its response differed only in the emphasis placed on

³⁶ Memo from Hyman Bookbinder to AJC Paris office, 28 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Memo from Philip E Hoffman to AJC leaders, 16 February 1971; Box 193, AJC archive

each approach. In the Iraqi case, the organization focused to a greater degree on collecting reliable information on the trial and the conditions of the local Jewish community. In its response to the Leningrad trial, the AJC promoted the case publicly to a much greater degree, even involving itself in public protests- in contrast to its response to the Baghdad trials, where the AJC worked hard to ensure that its name was not associated with publicity about the trial. In that case, the AJC's approach emphasized indirect media work through the use of a spokesman seemingly unconnected to the organization- something it did not employ in its response to the Leningrad trials. In its response to both trials, the AJC collaborated with other organizations, particularly interfaith and Christian groups. In the Leningrad case, collaborating with other groups was a particularly important part of the AJC's work. In reacting to both trials, the AJC pursued its traditional methods of using its political and diplomatic networks to lobby on a domestic and international level. The most notable outcome of these lobbying efforts was, in the case of both Baghdad and Leningrad, the creation of committees focused on protecting MENA and Soviet Jews respectively.

These differences in approach can be explained by three key contextual factors: (1) organizational landscape; (2) opposition; (3) the character of the problem the AJC sought to solve.

Firstly, the AJC's response to the Leningrad trial took place in a significantly different organizational context from its reaction to the Baghdad trial. When news of the hijacking broke, the AJC was just one of many dozens of organizations with experience of lobbying on the Soviet Jewry issue to respond. Its response was framed in the context of a significant international protest movement for the protection of Soviet Jews. The Soviet Jewry Movement had been

campaigning for over half a decade by the time of the trial; though its public protests had not yet reached the massive attendances of the 1980s, the issue had become enough of a hot topic by 1970 that the AJC did not need to distribute fact sheets in the same way as it did after the Baghdad trial. Rather, news of the Leningrad trial reached a world where NGOs, political leaders and the general public were already far more knowledgeable about Soviet Jewry than about the Jewish community of Iraq.

The AJC framed its response to the Leningrad trial in the context of this organizational landscape. The existence of other groups for whom public protest was already a key activist tactic pushed the AJC to react more publicly to the Leningrad trials. For example, on 28th October 1970 the AJC wrote to community organizers asking them to organize radio spots on the trial, to write letters to their local newspapers and Congressmen, and to send notes of protest to the Soviet embassy, the UN, and the State Department. It notes in this memo that the scripts for these radio spots ‘were based on the proposal last suggested by Jacob Birnbaum’, leader of grassroots protest group Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry.³⁷ The AJC’s staff did not simply use the ideas of other organizations, however. Rather, they reacted to the presence of more radical groups in the campaign against the Leningrad show trial sentences by putting their own views forward in a more public manner, in the hope that doing so would make the response more moderate in tone.

Contrarily, when news of the Baghdad hangings filtered out to the West in 1969, there was no comparable movement with the resources and experience to launch a robust response. The AJC thus lacked ‘back up’ for its work to protect Iraqi Jewry; it could not call on other

³⁷ Memo from Jerry Goodman to Jerry Hochbaum, 28 October 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 68; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

organizations with years of experience advocating for Middle Eastern and North African Jews, nor did the AJC itself have more than a moderate amount of experience on this issue. Thus, it emphasized the information gathering approach in order to inform other organizations about the issues faced by Iraqi Jewry.

Secondly, the AJC's opponent- that is, the government whose policies it hoped to change in response to the trial, that of either Iraq or the Soviet Union- determined which of the five toolkit approaches the organization emphasized. Negotiating with the Soviet government was far easier than lobbying the Iraqis. The Soviets had a much closer relationship with the US than the Iraqis and were significantly more sensitive to US public opinion. Iraq could afford to be more intransigent in dealing with US NGOs like the AJC than the USSR could in the context of the detente process. Thus, the AJC found in the Soviet case that it had an opponent which was more willing to listen to public protest, and this is the approach it favored in this case.

In the Iraqi case, the AJC used indirect lobbying via third parties far more than in its response to Leningrad. This approach was emphasized because the AJC was simply unable to lobby the Iraqi government directly. The United States had no diplomatic relations with Iraq, and the AJC was incapable of operating in the country or engaging with its government. Collaborating with other organizations enabled the AJC to have a greater humanitarian impact on the Iraqi Jewish community, as groups like the International Red Cross were permitted a level of freedom to operate in Iraq denied to Jewish groups like the AJC. Working with third party governments was also favored. The greatest hope was placed in interventions via the French government, based on U Thant's advice that despite the country being Western and therefore suspicious to the Iraqis, the French 'still have influence in the area and might be more

understanding of the humanitarian needs of Iraqi Jews'.³⁸ Such efforts were unnecessary in the Soviet case.

The AJC also emphasized the use of indirect methods in its approach to publicity management in response to the Baghdad show trials. Rouben Horesh's involvement in the AJC was, unusually for information on the AJC's work on behalf of Iraqi Jewry, kept confidential even within the organization itself. Horesh's many letters to the media and notable individuals—ranging from the Secretary of State to the Pope— and media reports which quote his views (often anonymously) depict his involvement as entirely separate from any organization; he is shown as an aggrieved relative mounting a one man campaign against the Iraqi government.³⁹ There was no such equivalent to this arrangement in the AJC's response to the Leningrad trials; its publicity in that case was managed, but direct and open.

Finally, there were key differences in the character of the problem the AJC sought to solve in responding to each trial. Firstly, in the Baghdad case, the accused had already been hanged before the AJC could establish the facts of the situation, let alone mount a robust reply. Therefore, the AJC's response was less urgent, framed instead by the desire to save future defendants and the community at large. In order to do this, the AJC needed to negotiate with the Iraqi government, a potentially drawn out process which required a response that was patient, indirect, and de-emphasized publicity. In the Soviet case, on the other hand, the AJC had a more immediate goal: pressure the Soviet government to commute the two death sentences, before the executions were carried out. This meant that an approach which placed as much pressure as

³⁸ Memo from Jerry Goodman to Simon Segal, 2 May 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 99; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³⁹ Report by Religious News Service, 29 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

possible on the Soviets, as quickly as possible, was favored by the AJC in this case. Secondly, the size of the problem was substantially different. While the number of defendants in each trial was roughly the same, the communities they came from were dramatically different. Iraq had just a few thousand Jews left; the USSR had some three million.

These three factors explain the difference in the AJC's approach to the two show trials. They also explain the differing scale and success of this approach. Firstly, while the AJC's response to Iraq was by no means lazy or half-hearted, it pales in comparison to the massive efforts the organization undertook to protect the defendants in the Leningrad trial. After that show trial, the AJC pledged that the Soviet Jewry issue would be its highest priority. At a time when the AJC's budget was under serious pressure and it was forced to make thirty three staff members redundant, the organization still committed to a robust defense of Soviet Jews.⁴⁰ There was also a significant difference in the success of the AJC's response: in the Soviet case, the death sentences were commuted to fifteen year prison terms on New Years' Day 1971; in the Iraqi case, the international reaction to the trials of January 1969 (such as it was) did not even lead the government to pause arbitrary arrests and show trials of Iraqi Jews. Eight months after the first Baghdad hangings, there were more executions; compare this to the fact that after Leningrad, the USSR would never again sentence a refusenik to death.

⁴⁰ Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, 197.

Conclusions

The AJC's response to the two trials reflects how it understood itself and its role within Jewish American politics and the world of non-governmental organizations more broadly. While historians have emphasized intra-communal rivalries and conflicts over authority in the American Jewish domestic context as driving factors in shaping the AJC's overseas work, the Baghdad and Leningrad show trials suggest otherwise. The late 1960s AJC was an organization whose leaders clearly understood themselves to be an integral part of a wider organizational landscape, one of many organizations who cooperated with each other for the benefit of all. The AJC was particularly strong in interfaith engagement; in responding to both trials, it sought out connections with secular and Christian organizations.

The AJC was far from a radical group in late 1960s political terms; it was moderate in both its choice of approach and its goals. Its response to these show trials shows that the AJC's staff understood that the organization was located on the more moderate end of the Jewish activist spectrum, and that it had a tolerant attitude toward the work of organizations on the more radical end. The AJC publicly repudiated only the most radical and violent groups, such as the Jewish Defense League.⁴¹ In the case of grassroots, non-violent groups, the AJC maintained an approach which was polite but not overly friendly; affirming its support for the same goals as these groups, while avoiding expressions of endorsement.⁴² The AJC was also keen to manage its

⁴¹ The AJC repudiated this group publicly on a number of occasions. See: AJC telegram to President Nixon, 8 January 1971; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 73; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

⁴² Correspondence between AJC and Heskell Haddad, 1 and 8 August 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Letter from Jerry Goodman to Robert Goldman, 15 July 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 75; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

place within the wider Jewish activist group landscape through keeping an eye on other groups' response to both trials. It collected posters and flyers from different organizations, noted information on their demographics, and cataloguing their motives and approaches. The AJC focused these attentions on grassroots groups such as SSSJ, with a particular interest in those groups who stated their opposition to the American Jewish establishment and the organizations which represented it.⁴³

The AJC also responded to the trials with careful consideration of the wider social and political landscape in which it operated. For example, at the time of the show trials, the U.S. government had begun the process of detente with the Soviet Union. Unlike some organizations involved in the Soviet Jewry struggle, who had a difficult and publicly antagonistic relationship with the U.S. government and the detente policy, the AJC valued its strong connection with the American government throughout the Soviet Jewry Movement era. With this in mind, the organization never criticized detente either publicly or in its private organizational materials. Furthermore, the AJC recognized the now warmer relationship between the US and the USSR, and attempted to capitalize on this in order to solve the issues faced by Iraqi Jews after the Baghdad show trials. The organizations attempt to persuade the Soviets to pressure the Iraqi government failed, however, as 'the Iraqis do not care to appear to be under Soviet influence at this time'.⁴⁴

The AJC also understood its response to both trials as being framed by another geopolitical conflict: that of the Middle East. The organization worked with Israeli officials in its

⁴³ Committee of Twenty Nine materials, May/June 1970; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 75; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

⁴⁴ Memo from Hyman Bookbinder to Bertram Gold and Simon Segal, 27 May 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

reaction to the Iraqi trial. Furthermore, the AJC's response to the trial was influenced by its pro-Israel perspective.⁴⁵ However, the involvement of Israeli officials and the private hopes of AJC staff members did not influence the organization's public statements regarding the trial, which never mentioned Israel or the Middle East conflict. The AJC also refrained from discussing the issue of Palestinian refugees, or from comparing Palestinians with Middle Eastern Jews. Indeed, the only mention of Palestinians in response to the show trials was by Rouben Rafael Horesh- the AJC's unofficial public spokesman for the Iraqi Jewish issue- who engaged in correspondence with Senator Jacob Javits in which he asked that the US government bring up the issues faced by Iraqi Jewry in its discussions on Palestinian rights with the other four Big Powers.⁴⁶

The AJC's response to the Baghdad and Leningrad show trials shows that there was a difference in the scale and success of the organization's reaction to the suffering of Iraqi and Soviet Jews. However, this was not due to a difference in the amount of interest or care that the AJC held for either of the communities; rather, it was framed by the significant differences in context. When the AJC responded to the issues of Iraqi and Soviet Jewry, it did so within a different organizational landscape, facing a different opponent, and seeking to address a different problem. The AJC's staff did not care less about Iraqi Jews than it did about Soviet Jews; they paid attention to both communities and sought to solve their problems using the same toolkit of approaches. This case study offers a snapshot of an organization which has a nuanced understanding of its place within Jewish American politics and the geopolitical situation at large.

⁴⁵ Memo from Hyman Bookbinder to AJC Paris Office, 28 January 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

⁴⁶ Correspondence between Rouben Rafael Horesh and Senator Jacob Javits, 29 October, 1 December, 8 December 1969; American Jewish Committee Records, Foreign Affairs Department Files; RG 347.7.1 (FAD-1); box 31; YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The AJC responded to the Baghdad and Leningrad show trials in a way which reflected this understanding. It would continue to use these approaches in its advocacy on behalf of Iraqi and Soviet Jews. In the Iraqi case, the efforts of AJC and other organizations would facilitate the emigration of the vast majority of the country's remaining Jews by 1973. In the Soviet case, the AJC continued to campaign as part of the international Soviet Jewry Movement until the collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end to the plight of refuseniks. Thus, the organization's approach to the Baghdad and Leningrad show trials showcases a methodical and consistent response to human rights crises affecting foreign Jewish communities, using approaches which had served it in the past and would continue to serve it into the future.

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