

TO OUR READERS...

Jonathan D. Sarna and Adam Mendelsohn recently edited a fine volume titled *Jews and the Civil War: A Reader*.¹ This new book contains seventeen noteworthy essays that focus on the history of American Jewry during the Civil War era. The majority of these scholarly articles were originally published between 1960 and 2000, and a considerable number first appeared in the 1960s, when the nation marked the centennial anniversary of the Civil War. Collectively, the articles in this book constitute a handsome bouquet of historical writing on Jews and Jewish life during this period of national upheaval.

In 1951, a full decade before the advent of the Civil War centennial, Bertram Wallace Korn (1918–1979) published his magnum opus, *American Jewry and the Civil War*, the first interpretive historical analysis on the topic. Korn concluded his book by asserting that the Civil War had “far-reaching effects” on the American Jewish experience. A decade later, when the nation marked the centennial of the Civil War, Korn reiterated his conviction that the era had “shaped the life of American Jewry for several generations.” He called on American Jewish historians to examine the topic in greater depth: “We need to know much more [about American Jewry and the Civil War] than we know now.”² In many respects, the contents of Sarna and Mendelsohn’s new volume constitute a historical response to Korn’s appeal.

Today, America is in the midst of commemorating the Civil War’s sesquicentennial. It has been noted that “on the anniversaries of historical events, ancient or modern, there is an opportunity to inform about what these events meant so that they may be known by the new generations.”³ In other words, the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Civil War should prompt a new generation of scholars to venture into unplowed fields of historical research.

In an effort to fertilize this instinctive process that typically accompanies historical anniversaries, an academic conference titled “Jews, Slavery, and the Civil War” was held at the College of Charleston on 24–26 May 2011, wherein more than two dozen scholarly papers were delivered. Many of these papers explored new avenues of research. In this special double issue of the journal, we take great pride in publishing an elite selection of articles that began as conference papers but were later expanded for publication. This then, is a commemorative and enlarged edition of *The American Jewish Archives Journal* containing some of the first fruits of scholarship written on the occasion of the Civil War’s 150th anniversary. Our readers will also be interested in knowing that some additional essays from this same conference will appear in a forthcoming issue of *American Jewish History* (vol. 97, no.1).

Yet the historiography on American Jewry and the Civil War did not begin with the centennial and Bertram Korn’s groundbreaking research. In fact, the nascence of historical interest in Jews and the Civil War may be traced back to the last decades of the nineteenth century. It was then that those who had

actually lived through the war were beginning to pass from the scene, and researchers and historians were eager to capture and preserve the story of those who had experienced the great drama first-hand. For American Jews, however, there was an additional factor that spurred their interest in providing the public with documentation of the prominent role that Jews played during the Civil War, an event that has also been called “The Second American Revolution.”⁴

In 1899, Mark Twain published a controversial essay titled “Concerning the Jews.”⁵ The famed writer had been asked to offer his personal view on why Jews had been incessantly and historically subjected to “baseless, vicious animosities.”⁶ In his article, Twain praised the Jewish people generously and vigorously denounced bigotry. With his trademark humor, Twain insisted he personally held no bias toward any race or religion. “All that I care to know,” he famously quipped, “is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can’t be any worse.”⁷ Twain wrote earnestly of his deep admiration for the Jew, but some of the candid views he expressed in this essay were clearly influenced by contemporary prejudices and popular opinion:

[The Jew] is a frequent and faithful and capable officer in the civil service, but he is charged with an unpatriotic disinterest to stand by the flag as a soldier—like the Christian Quaker.⁸

This charge provoked an outpouring of defensive rebuttal. Simon Wolf (1839–1923), a prominent lawyer and Jewish activist, was particularly irked by Twain’s observation. Three years earlier, in 1895, Wolf had published a remarkable volume, *The American Jew as Patriot, Soldier and Citizen*. This book—nearly six hundred pages long—took Wolf four years to write. It sought to provide readers with as complete an account as possible of the “American citizens of Jewish faith who had ‘stood shoulder to shoulder’ on the field of battle, and to add thereto the record of some typical instances of exceptional energy and public spirit in the civil walks of life.”⁹ What had inspired Wolf to undertake such a massive research project *four years* prior to the publication of Twain’s controversial assertion?

In September of 1891, a British historian and writer named Goldwin Smith (1823–1910) published an essay titled “New Light on the Jewish Question” in the distinguished literary journal the *North American Review* (*NAR*). According to Smith, if contemporary Jews were being reviled and scorned throughout eastern Europe, they were merely suffering the consequences of their own unsavory behavior. “To hold the Jew wholly irresponsible for the evils of an unhappy relation, you must frame an indictment against human nature and mankind.”¹⁰ As a citizen of the state, Smith proclaimed with certitude, the Jew was consistently a “parasite” and an exploiter. “[The Jew] refused none of the burdens of the state,” Smith wrote, “though he has made them as light as he could.”¹¹ To further substantiate the veracity of his accusation, Smith mustered

Judah P. Benjamin (1811–1884), the secretary of state for the Confederacy, as a case in point: “When the Southern Confederacy fell, its leaders generally stood by the wreck and did their best for those whom they had led; Benjamin went off to pastures new.”¹²

Smith’s incendiary assertions incited a volley of responses in successive issues of the *NAR*. First, an unidentified writer using the intriguing nom de plume Isaac Besht Bendavid insisted that Smith’s assertions were baseless. During the Civil War, he wrote, Jews stood “shoulder to shoulder with their fellow citizens. . . . The rolls of the War Departments of Washington and Richmond will show what proportion the Jewish soldiers on either side bore. . . .”¹³ The following month, a Civil War veteran named James M. Rogers (1828–1908) wrote a note to the editor in Smith’s defense.¹⁴ During his eighteen months of active duty, Rogers wrote, not once did he see a Jew in uniform: “If so many Jews fought so bravely for their adopted country, [then] surely their champion ought to be able to give the names of the regiments they condescended to accept service in.”¹⁵

These volleys in the *NAR* debating the nature of Jewish involvement in the Civil War unquestionably touched a sensitive nerve in the body of American Jewry. Early in 1892, an eighteen-year-old Stephen S. Wise (1874–1949) jumped into the fray. In a note to the editor, Wise posted a vituperative response to Roger’s testimony in a style that betokened the frank outspokenness that would ultimately become his stock in trade: “There is not a semblance of truth in the charges with which [Rogers] attempts to impeach Jewish national pride. . . .” As far as Wise was concerned, Smith and Rogers had launched a “scurrilous attack” on the patriotism of American Jewry. “Another page must be added to the historical record of the Civil War,” Wise thundered, “telling of the heroic martyrdom the Jews rejoiced to suffer, to save their land from further degradation.”¹⁶

It was, in fact, Simon Wolf who took up Wise’s challenge. Wolf collected the names of more than seven thousand Jews who fought for either the Union or the Confederacy. Embracing the historical trends of his era that sought to demonstrate how the Civil War ultimately led the nation to embrace the ideals of “reconciliation, shared sacrifice, and common cause,” Wolf’s tome trumpeted the themes of Jewish patriotism, civic duty, and loyal national service. This attracted a great deal of popular interest, and a noteworthy parade of Jewish researchers followed Wolf’s lead by publishing articles and monographs that documented the story of Jewish military gallantry during the American Civil War.¹⁷

Over time, American Jewish historians began to look beyond Jewish involvement in Civil War military battles and explored Jewish attitudes toward slavery, Jewish economic activity, and the factors that contributed to an increase in antisemitism during this era. Korn’s own scholarship—which examined the attitudes of Jewish rabbinic, lay, and journalistic leaders on issues such as slavery and abolitionism, Union and secession, war and peace—greatly influenced this trend. Between the Civil War centennial and the sesquicenten-

nial, researchers working on Jewish life during the Civil War have continued to examine “underexplored themes.” The articles in this commemorative issue of our journal break new ground even as they demonstrate that there still exist vast acres of untilled soil in this particular field of study.

Howard Rock’s study sheds new light on New York Jewry during the Civil War. He forcefully demonstrates that Jews living in New York City during the Civil War were not of one mind in their attitudes toward war, slavery, African Americans, Abraham Lincoln, or even the Union itself. Writing in 1864, Myer Isaacs—the son of Rev. Samuel Isaacs—admitted that there were “a large number of faithful Union supporters among our prominent coreligionists—but there [were] also supporters of the opposition.” Rock’s work uncovers the vast complexity of Jewish attitudes that prevailed in New York during this turbulent period.

In the second article, Leonard Rogoff offers readers an interesting and instructive analysis of the role that the concept of “chosenness” played in Civil War rhetoric and ideology. His article informs us that “Jew and Christian, Southerner and Northerner, the enslaved and the emancipated all . . . found in the narrative of ancient Israel the providential story of the American republic.”

Barry Stiefel’s biographical study of David Lopez Jr. examines the career of a prominent Charlestonian Jew whose construction firm built Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim’s Hasell Street synagogue in 1840. Stiefel’s valuable reconstruction of Lopez’s life serves as a case study that reveals a number of fascinating details about Jewish life in Charleston, both during and after the Civil War.

Adam Mendelsohn’s pioneering article begins by noting a paradoxical observation. Despite the fact that Jewish interest in Civil War history cut its teeth on the “obsessive counting” of Jewish soldiers and highlighting case studies of Jewish political patriotism, Mendelsohn contends that Jewish military involvement during the Civil War has received “outsized attention” from scholars. Instead of focusing on Jewish military involvement during the Civil War that, according to Mendelsohn, constituted a “small and relatively inconsequential role,” readers will learn about the juggernaut of Jewish suppliers—sutlers, manufacturers, wholesalers, dry-good merchants, etc.—that played a truly “monumental” role in enabling American Jews to profoundly influence the commercial life of the nation during the postbellum period. Mendelsohn shows how this massive phalanx of entrepreneurial Jews took advantage of the economic opportunities that arose during the Civil War. Ultimately, these circumstances placed Jews on the vanguard of the nation’s burgeoning garment industry, where postbellum “jobs aplenty” helped them to transform clothing manufacturing into what Mendelsohn calls “a Jewish ethnic economy.”

Like Mendelsohn’s work, Michael R. Cohen’s groundbreaking study underscores the significant role that Jews themselves played in Jewish economic growth in the South during the postbellum era. Cohen’s meticulously documented

article suggests that the history of the Jewish merchant class in the American South—particularly during the postbellum era—was much more complex than had been previously noted. Cohen’s research asserts that Southern Jewish merchants were certainly not all Northern interlopers, as many have argued. To the contrary, Cohen’s research indicates that “the engine of Jewish economic growth in this era may have been more rooted in the South” than had been previously believed.

Robert F. Southard, a German scholar, had been examining nineteenth-century American rabbis as intellectuals and social justice advocates when he unexpectedly passed away in 2007. Southard was keenly interested in nineteenth-century Jewish life, and there is no doubt that he would have delivered a paper at the academic conference in Charleston had he yet been among the living. Since one important facet of his research—his examination of the rabbinic debates on the propriety of African slavery in America—had been largely completed, we decided to publish it in this commemorative edition. It is gratifying to present this final segment of Southard’s work as a garland of tribute on the career of a talented researcher, beloved teacher, and devoted friend of the AJA.

In his foreword to Korn’s *American Jewry and the Civil War*, the distinguished American historian Allan Nevins (1890–1971) noted that the history of American Jewry during the Civil War was a “striking story” with so much “scope, color, and importance” that it cannot but “astonish” the inquiring student.¹⁸ The new scholarship and interpretive analyses contained in this commemorative edition of our journal demonstrate that Nevins’s assessment is as relevant today as it was when he wrote those words more than six decades ago.

Between now and 2061, when the nation marks the bicentennial anniversary of the Civil War, we can anticipate that many new “scholarly and interesting” contributions will shed more light on this “striking story.” Bertram W. Korn (who, we recall with pride, once served as the associate director of the American Jewish Archives) would unquestionably be gratified to know that the American Jewish Archives and its journal continue to embrace his scholarly counsel by striving to make people “aware of the experiences of Jews during the Civil War and of the influence of those experiences on succeeding generations.”¹⁹

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Notes

¹Jonathan D. Sarna and Adam Mendelsohn, *Jews and the Civil War: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

²*Ibid.*, x.

³*America’s Daily: A Journal of Opinion* (translated from Spanish), 12 October 2010, <http://www.diariolasamericas.com/print.php?nid=109037&origen=1> (accessed 5 June 2012).

⁴Most agree that Charles and Mary Beard were the first to dub the Civil War the “Second American Revolution.” See *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927).

⁵Mark Twain’s essay, “Concerning the Jews,” appeared in the September 1899 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, which one can read on Harper’s digital archives. Harper’s published numerous reprints of Twain’s essay. All of the page citations in this brief essay come from the 1934 edition.

⁶Michael J. Feldman, *Blessings of Freedom: Chapters in American Jewish History* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing, 2002), 127.

⁷Twain, 3.

⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

⁹Simon Wolf, *The American Jew as Patriot, Soldier and Citizen* (Philadelphia: The Levytype Publishers, 1895), 8.

¹⁰Goldwin Smith, “New Light on the Jewish Question,” *The North American Review* 153, no. 417 (August 1891): 138.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 141.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Isaac Besht Bendavid, “Goldwin Smith and the Jews,” *North American Review* 153, no. 418 (September 1891): 265.

¹⁴On Rodgers, a farmer from Indiana, see the Indiana County History Preservation Society’s online documents, <http://countyhistory.org/books/doc.benton/024.htm> (accessed 15 May 2012).

¹⁵James M. Rogers, “Jewish Soldiers in the Union Army,” *North American Review* 153, no. 421 (December 1891): 762.

¹⁶Stephen S. Wise, “Jews in the Union Army,” *North American Review* 154, no. 423 (February 1892): 249–251.

¹⁷For an expanded analysis of the historiography relating to Jews and the Civil War, see Adam Mendelsohn’s excellent introductory essay, “Before Korn: A Century of Jewish Historical Writing about the American Civil War” in Sarna and Mendelsohn, 1–26.

¹⁸Bertram Wallace Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951), ix.

¹⁹Sarna and Mendelsohn, x.