

## *NMAJH presents 1917: How One Year Changed the World* Past tense, present tense

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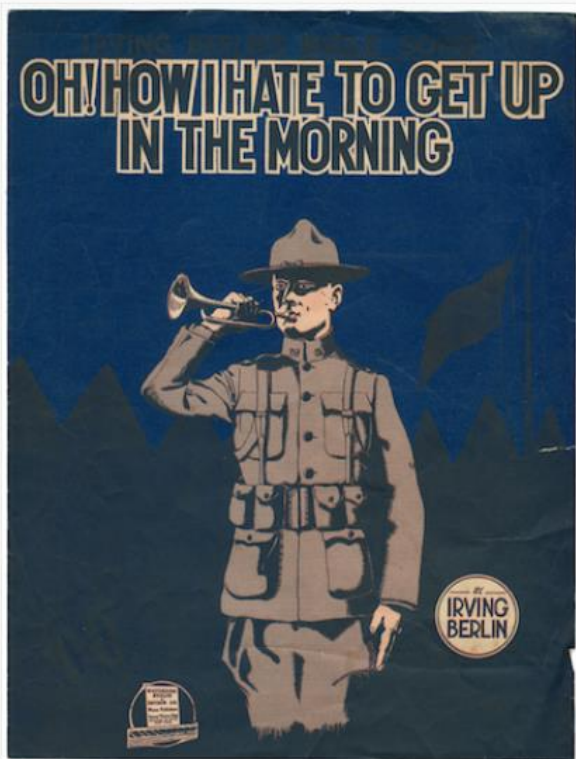
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A century ago, the world was in turmoil and the United States passed a law to restrict immigration. Louis Marshall of the American Jewish Committee wrote on January 23, 1917:

“It is artificial and arbitrary, and would exclude from this country those whose sole offense is that they have, without fault of their own, been denied the benefit of an education, but whose brawn and muscle and energy are essential to the development of the country. It is not a test of character, and would deprive the United States of valuable economic forces. Some of our best citizens are the descendants of illiterate immigrants.”

Sound familiar?



*Irving Berlin, sheet music for "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," 1918. (Image courtesy of National Museum of American Jewish History)*

### Déjà vu all over again

Such moments of recognition occur throughout *1917: How One Year Changed the World*. With remarkable documents and personal objects, the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) tells the story of a watershed year from the perspective of America's Jewish community, with particular focus on World War I, Russia's Bolshevik Revolution, and Britain's Balfour Declaration.

Several forces collided in 1917: a rising tide of populism intensified suspicion of outsiders, America was pulled into the European conflict it had avoided for three years, and people from Ireland to Africa sought to create free states.

Beginning in 1914, World War I brought destructive new weapons to battle, flamethrowers, poison gases, and machine guns. Cavalry gave way to aircraft raining down explosives, wreaking havoc on whole towns and shattering the minds and bodies of soldiers and civilians alike. Half the world's Jewish population lived in peril. American Jews, many with loved ones in harm's way, sent help.

### Leadership of the diaspora shifts

Humanitarian aid for Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire was organized by the Central Committee for the Relief of Jewish Suffering Through the War. Poland, Lithuania, Turkey, Palestine, Russia, and other areas received almost \$9 million in food and supplies through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

Expressed in ledgers and letters, postcards and proclamations, the humanitarian – and later military – contributions of Jewish Americans are well documented. Co-organized by NMAJH and the American Jewish Historical Society in New York, *1917* is a thoughtful exhibit that requires time to absorb.

A letter from Julius Rosenwald, then president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., pledges a million dollars to the JDC. A corresponding telegram from President Woodrow Wilson thanks Rosenwald for his generosity. Next to these, a handwritten 1922 ledger records starving families in Steblev, Ukraine, who received supplies of flour, sugar, rice, milk, and butter – the result of contributions such as Rosenwald's.



*World War I soldier William Shemin's Medal of Honor framed with certificate, 2015. (Photo courtesy of Elsie Shemin-Roth)*

presented posthumously in 2015 by President Obama.

Also on view is the draft card of another doughboy, stationed on Long Island, who composed songs like "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," and "God Bless America." That was Irving Berlin.

Despite seizing opportunities to demonstrate their patriotism, Jewish citizens experienced suspicion and flagrant anti-Semitism. The standard "100 percent Americanism" was anything but, marginalizing ethnic, religious, and racial minorities. Legislation such as the 1917 Immigration Act, 1917 Espionage Act, and 1918 Sedition Act cast doubt and encouraged prejudice.

One of the effects of the war, it becomes clear, was the shift of financial and cultural leadership of the Jewish diaspora from Europe to the United States. According to [one website](#), "The Jewish infrastructure in Eastern Europe, socially, economically, culturally, and religiously, was almost completely destroyed by the war." The site indicates that 250,000 Eastern European Jews died in battle during World War I.

### Personal items carry stories

Jewish soldiers fought on all sides, representing the nations they considered home. In Germany, 100,000 soldiers were Jewish, as were a quarter-million of the American Expeditionary Forces.

Sergeant William Shemin's belongings fill several display cases. After enlisting at 18, Shemin fought in France and was seriously wounded saving his fellow soldiers. Visitors see his uniform, ammunition belt, gas mask, and baseball spikes (he played for 47th Infantry, Company G), as well as his Distinguished Service Cross, Purple Heart, and Medal of Honor,



### **Bolshevik Revolution raises hopes, intensifies mistrust**

In Russia, the fall of Tsar Nicholas II and the eventual institution of the Soviet government in 1917 and 1918 was a hopeful sign for American Jews that conditions would improve for their relatives overseas. The exhibition displays a letter from Leon Trotsky to the U.S. ambassador announcing the new government.

American officials were wary of the development and did not recognize the Soviet government until 1933. They were also apprehensive about socialist fervor at home, and those suspicions eventually metastasized into Red Scares that threatened basic freedoms.

Support for the Communist cause within the Jewish community provided fuel for anti-Semites and others who questioned their allegiance. A 1919 document signed by J. Edgar Hoover, then with the Justice Department, recommends deporting radical political activist Emma Goldman.

### **Balfour Declaration validates national aspirations**

Late in 1917, the Balfour Declaration strengthened the dream of a Jewish state by affirming Britain's support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." The exhibit includes Lord Arthur Balfour's draft, handwritten on stationery from London's Imperial Hotel. Though far short of a true plan, it was the first such support from a prominent nation.

Nearby, there's a postcard from the 1918 American Jewish Congress, held in Philadelphia. The writer reports on the weather and her hopes for the meeting. In 1921, she and her husband would move to Palestine to help establish Israel, which achieved statehood in 1948; she became its first ambassador to the Soviet Union and in 1969, 51 years after writing from Philadelphia, Golda Meir was elected Israel's prime minister.

In its exploration of a seminal moment, *1917* beautifully refracts history through the Jewish experience, demonstrating how Jewish Americans were influenced by, and influenced, world events.



*"Food Will Win the War" poster written in Yiddish. (Image courtesy of National Museum of American Jewish History)*