

National Museum of American Jewish History show about 1917 has violence, revolution, refugees

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NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

From the exhibition "1917: How One Year Changed the World" at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

The United States enters a war overseas and people are dying and fleeing their besieged lands.

Unrest ripples across Russia. Tensions brew in the Middle East.

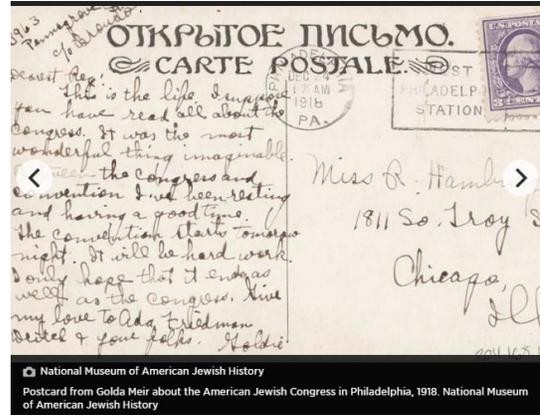
Immigrants find themselves unwanted in America, targets of surveillance, arrest, and deportation.

Such a fraught situation, riddled with resentments, class hostilities, racial and ethnic strife – it could be happening today.

And, of course it is.

But earlier manifestations of many of the world's intractable problems were all there, too, during one momentous year chronicled in an exhibition now on display at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

"1917: How One Year Changed the World" takes a close look at three far-reaching events that year. It runs through July 16 and will then move to the American Jewish Historical Society in New York City, opening there in September.



On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany, entering the devastating European conflict.

Just a month earlier, the Russian Czar Nicholas II abdicated, and in October the radical Bolsheviks, led by V.I. Lenin, seized power in a bloodless coup and declared the primacy of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

Thirdly, in a letter dated Nov. 2, 1917, which was published a week later, British foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour declared that Britain viewed "with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."

The letter, to Baron Rothschild, was intended to be passed along to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. As the Great Powers were carving up the postwar world, the Balfour Declaration was incorporated into the treaty with the defeated Ottoman Empire and set the stage for a seemingly endless Arab-Israeli conflict.

"The conflicts and consequences of 1917 are often overshadowed by later events, but they determined so much about the world as well as American and Jewish experiences thereafter," said museum curator and director of exhibitions and collections Josh Perelman. "The U.S. emerges from World War I as the leading military power in the world. This was not the case before, and it represents a dramatic shift in America's role. We've been navigating that leadership role for a century and continue to navigate it to this day."



Back in that long-ago day, the show introduces us to a young Golda Myerson, later Golda Meir, attending the first meeting of the American Jewish Congress in Philadelphia in 1918 and writing a chatty postcard to a friend in Chicago. "I've been resting and having a good time," she writes. "The convention starts tomorrow night. It will be hard work." She signs it, "Goldie."

Myerson planned to move to Palestine, with her husband Morris, as soon as possible. They left the U.S. for a kibbutz in Palestine in 1923. She became Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1948 and eventually became Israeli prime minister.

Here, too, is Emma Goldman, anarchist, feminist, lover of anarchist Alexander Berkman. Both were born in Lithuania, then part of the Russian empire. Both came to the U.S. in the 1880s. A photo shows her sitting with Berkman in 1919, awaiting deportation. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the precursor to the FBI, called them "two of the most dangerous anarchists in this country."



National Museum of American Jewish History
Jacob Lavin (center) with group of American Expeditionary Forces in France. One of the 250,000 American Jews who fought in the war. National Museum of American Jewish History.

Goldman, proponent of birth control and revolution, looks simply sad. Berkman has crutches in his lap.

Here is Julius Rosenwald, of Sears, Roebuck, raising millions for the American Jewish Relief Committee to aid Jews battered by world war. Here is the Medal of Honor awarded posthumously and very belatedly to Sgt. William Shemin. President Barack Obama, in 2015, awarded Medals of Honor to both Shemin and Henry Johnson. Both had been denied the recognition for their bravery on the world war battlefields at the appropriate time – Shemin because of anti-Semitism, Johnson because of racism.

Lest it all seem grim, then, like now, there was music. Irving Berlin's war-inspired songs swept the country. George M. Cohan's *Over There* was a big hit.

All is documented in the 1917 exhibition.

"Coming out of 1917," said Perelman, "War, revolution, the on-going navigation of nationalism in the Middle East lead to decisions – there is a popular perception that allowing foreigners into the country needs to be managed."

Jews fled Europe, but had hopes for revolution in Russia. But the violence of pogroms gave way to the greater anti-Semitic violence of the post-revolution civil war. The Middle East beckoned to battered Jewish refugees, just as the revolution soured and America slammed the door.

America the Beacon became Fortress America. The last image in the show is a cartoon by Herbert Johnson. A huge wave of immigrants – labeled "alien undesirables" – press against a massive wall of the fortress, which is labeled "immigration restriction." World War I served as catalyst for migration and flight, as well as for draconian restrictions on immigration.

The cartoon is titled "Make This Flood Control Permanent."

A big, beautiful wall. What could be more contemporary?