

Cohen im Kontext

Beiträge anlässlich seines hundertsten Todestages

Herausgegeben von

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Siglen

- ÄrG Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls, 2 Bände, Berlin, B. Cassirer 1912 [Werke 8 und 9].
- BR Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie, Gießen, Töpelmann 1915 [Werke 10].
- Briefe Briefe, ausgewählt und hg. von Bertha und Bruno Strauß, Berlin, Schocken 1939.
- EmkN Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zu F. A. Langes „Geschichte des Materialismus“, 3. Aufl., Leipzig, Brandstetter 1914 [Werke 5/II].
- ErW Ethik des reinen Willens, 1. Aufl. (A), Berlin, B. Cassirer 1904; 2. Aufl. (B), Berlin, B. Cassirer 1907 [Werke 7].
- HCb Die Hermann-Cohen-Bibliothek, Hildesheim u. a., Olms 2000 (= H. Cohen: Werke, Supplementa, Bd. 2).
- JS Jüdische Schriften, 3 Bände, hg. von Bruno Strauß, Berlin, Schwetschke und Sohn 1924. [JS 1–3]
- KBÄ Kants Begründung der Ästhetik, Berlin, Dümmler 1889 [Werke 3].
- KBE Kants Begründung der Ethik, 1. Aufl. (A), Berlin, Dümmler 1877; 2. Aufl. (B), Berlin, B. Cassirer 1910 [Werke 2].
- KKrV Kommentar zu Immanuel Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft, 1. Aufl. (A), Leipzig, Meiner 1907; 2. Aufl. (B), Leipzig, Meiner 1917 [Werke 4].
- KThE Kants Theorie der Erfahrung, 1. Aufl. (A), Berlin, Dümmler 1871 [Werke 1.3]; 2. Aufl. (B), Berlin, Dümmler 1885; 3. Aufl. (C), Berlin, B. Cassirer 1918 [Werke 1.1].
- LrE Logik der reinen Erkenntnis, 1. Aufl. (A), Berlin, B. Cassirer 1902; 2. Aufl. (B), Berlin, B. Cassirer 1914 [Werke 6].
- PIM Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte, Berlin, Dümmler 1883 [Werke 5/I].
- RuN Reflexionen und Notizen, Hildesheim u. a., Olms 2003 [Werke, Supplementa, Bd. 1].
- RV Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums, 2. Aufl., Frankfurt/M., Kauffmann 1929 [und div. Nachdrucke].
- SPhZ Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte, 2 Bände, hg. von Albert Görland und Ernst Cassirer, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag 1928.
- Werke [Werkausgabe] hg. von Helmut Holzhey, Hildesheim u. a., Olms 1977 ff.

Cohen's Jewish and Imperial Politics during World War I

Cedric Cohen Skalli

1. Editorial and Historical Background of Hermann Cohen's "Der Polnische Jude"

In June 1916, Hermann Cohen published an article entitled "The Polish Jew" [*Der Polnische Jude*] in the third issue of *Der Jude*, the new journal edited by Martin Buber.¹ That same month, he published another political article, "Zionism and Religion," [*Zionismus und Religion*] filled with harsh words on how Zionists identify religion with ethnicity [*Nationalität*]. "Without hope for messianic humanity, there is no Judaism for us," Cohen writes. He continues: "Who is reserving Judaism in its fundamental doctrine to the Jewish people, is denying the unique God of the messianic humanity."²

Soon after issuing Cohen's article in *Der Jude*, Buber published two vehement responses to the old Jewish philosopher in the August and October issues of the journal. There he wrote: "What Zionism fights against is not the messianic idea, but its misrepresentation and distortion as it is found in a considerable portion of liberal Jewish and anti-Zionist literature. It is a misrepresentation and distortion that glorifies, in the name of messianism, the dispersion, debasement, and homelessness of the Jewish people as something of absolute value and fortune that ought to be preserved to prepare a messianic mankind."³

Cohen's "The Polish Jew" was thus published not only in the middle of the Great War, but also in the middle of harsh political debates about the role of Jews and Judaism in the Reich, in the world conflict and in world history.⁴

¹ COHEN, *Jude*, 187–202. This whole essay is indebted to the unique scholarly and editorial work of Hartwig Wiedebach, especially to his seminal book: WIEDEBACH, *Element*. I also benefited from personal and direct help from Hartwig Wiedebach, for which I am deeply grateful. I thank also deeply Robert Schine for revising my translations and for his many comments and insights. Cf. also: SIEG, *Intellektuelle*; BEISER, *Cohen*, 300–349.

² COHEN, *Zionismus*, 217.

³ BIEMANN, *Buber*, 265. For the original German text cf. BUBER, *Judentum*, 289.

⁴ Cf. BEISER, *Cohen*, 329–332.

2. The paradigmatic importance of the German Jew

In the middle of “The Polish Jew,” Hermann Cohen recounts, for his and his readers’ benefit, his *Vortragsreise*, his lecture tour to St. Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Vilna and Warsaw in late April and May 1914.⁵

This recollection of the pre-war era appears in Cohen’s article following his explanation of “the great example, the paradigmatic importance of the German Jew for the future of Judaism, and even for the religious development of Judaism throughout the world.”⁶

The significance of German Jewry was also at the heart of Cohen’s attacks against Zionist war politics in the aforementioned article “Religion and Zionism.” While sensitive to the “increase of national feeling” and growing “anti-semitism,” Cohen criticized:

And the faithful Jew, who wishes to remain with his children in his German fatherland, and who believes, with all his religious and patriotic soul, in the historical idealism and optimism, and hopes for the improvement of the political and moral norms, in accordance with the principle of modern culture, freedom of conscience and mutual respect of religious confessions, and who therefore loves his fatherland as much as his religion – since faithfulness is the unity of his being [*Treue bildet die Einheit des Wesens*] – this dreamer is mocked and despised by Zionism.⁷

In “The Polish Jew,” Cohen designates the “paradigmatic importance of the German Jew,” not with the word *Treue* – faithfulness – but with the musical notion of *Einklang*, consonance. As he writes, “We [the German Jews] have managed to harmonize [*in Einklang zu versetzen*] our history, as the continuance of our ritual observance, with the innermost powers of both our religious tradition [*den innersten Triebkräften der religiösen Tradition*] and our culture in general.”⁸ This capacity to produce a dynamic unification of historical Judaism with a modern understanding of its essence in the age of idealism and science was for Cohen the differentiating character of the German Jew vis-a-vis the Polish Jew.

3. Cohen’s lecture tour in Russia

The epistemological gap between the German Jew and the Polish Jew was the reason for Cohen’s tour in Russia and its success, according to Cohen’s own account:

⁵ For further information and bibliography cf. WIEDEBACH, *Element*, 16–18.

⁶ COHEN, *Essays*, 56; ID., *Jude*, 195.

⁷ COHEN, *Zionismus*, 213.

⁸ COHEN, *Essays*, 56; ID., *Jude*, 196.

This unity, which the German Jew *grosso modo* manifests in himself [*diese Einheit, die im großen und ganzen der deutsche Jude in sich behauptet*], has been lost – or rather, has not yet been attained – by the Eastern European Jew. This perception prompted me to visit Russia two years ago, and it was the correctness of this perception that was responsible for the immediate and enormously great success of my lecture tour in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Vilna und Warsaw, for which I can praise myself, for the glory of the matter and for the glory of these men [Eastern European Jews].⁹

Recalling for his German-Jewish readers the “many hours of lectures” he gave, as well as the “personal relationship instantly developed between the speaker and the audience,” Cohen expresses an ambiguous praise of his hosts: “I am better known there – which I admit quite sadly – than in my own fatherland.”¹⁰ Cohen alludes *en passant* to the different reception of his work in Germany and in Russia, and maybe to a change in the cultural atmosphere which brought upon a greater suspicion vis-à-vis Cohen's work in early twentieth-century Wilhelmine Reich. The 3rd June 1914 issue of the *Berliner Tageblatt* also describes Cohen's triumph in Russia in a similar ambiguous manner:

This trip resulted in a true victory procession for the scholar as well as for his science [*Triumphzug für den Gelehrten ebenso wie für seine Wissenschaft*]. Although (or perhaps because) Hermann Cohen has become a prominent figure in Germany and has established a school of thought, he has not been accorded anywhere near the respect which his great importance deserves [*lange nicht entsprechend seiner hohen Bedeutung gewürdigt wird*]. Yet in the Russian intellectual world, he has always found great interest and understanding for his philosophy. His spiritual orientation, which represents a synthesis of German idealism and Jewish ethics, found a strong resonance in Russian intelligentsia – which is still constantly increasing. In Moscow, the real seat of the Russian intellectual world, he gave two talks in front of two-thousand listeners piously absorbing his words. Almost all the newspapers published detailed reports (some expressing much support) on the lectures, so that Cohen's tour in Russia should have a long aftermath.

Notwithstanding the personal dimension of the lecture tour, Cohen had a much larger project in mind than the promotion of his own philosophy of religion and science in the peripheral Russian zone.

4. Cohen's cultural and political plan

By crossing the German-Russian border a few weeks before the outbreak of WWI, Cohen hoped to launch a historical change in this part of Jewish Diaspora, an area incredibly meaningful in terms of Jewish demography and religious knowledge, as repeatedly outlined in Cohen's article. A few lines after the aforementioned praise of the German-Jewish model, the then 73-year-old [born

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

4 July 1842] philosopher resorts again to the word *Einklang* to describe the “plan” he had in 1914, and of whose prospect for success he was still convinced in 1916, in the midst of the Great War and of the German occupation of Poland:

During these four weeks in May 1914, I had detailed conversations with more than a thousand of these people. It is therefore no idle fancy, but an insight and a conviction that I brought back from the trip that it is possible that the plan may succeed, the plan that gave rise to my desire and decision to take the trip in first place: *my plan is to attempt to inspire the foundation of a free, vital religiosity in those countries, in keeping with [im Einklange mit] their cultural capabilities and to work toward the establishment of institutions for the cultivation of the Science of Judaism [die Stiftung von Pflanzstätten für die Wissenschaft des Judentums] as homes of this new religiosity.*¹¹

Cohen’s plan in these four weeks between April–May 1914 was to bring the *Ostjuden*, or at least a certain elite, to the same level of achievement as German Jewry, namely to this *Einklang*, or dynamic harmony, between a free Jewish religiosity and the achievements of Western European culture.

The model of this dynamic integration was the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, understood as the unrestricted scientific method which allows the progressive elucidation of the essence of Judaism. In his 1904 lecture on “The Establishment of Professorships for Ethics and Religion Philosophy in Jewish Theological Seminars,” Cohen attributes a special role to philosophy in the “elucidation of the essence of Judaism,” contending that “the philosophy of Judaism is the essence of Judaism; and without philosophy, this essence is not to be grasped.”¹² According to the methodological introduction of Cohen’s last magnum opus, *Die Religion der Vernunft*, the role of the scientific and philosophical study of Judaism is to identify within the “literary sources” of Judaism “the immediate spirit,” or the “creativity of a national spirit which strives to produce something peculiar and original.”¹³ Only the adoption of the scientific method in the aim of understanding Judaism can reveal “during the whole time of its development the uniform expression of the Jewish national spirit, and this, in spite of all the influences of which it partook.” For Cohen, the content of this Jewish national spirit was a “messianic religion from its very outset [intending] to be the world religion.”¹⁴

5. A new religiosity

This scientific clarification of the essence of Judaism out of its literary and historical context would also mean Judaism’s progressive and relative liberation from traditional scholarly approaches. Yet for Cohen, the abandonment of

¹¹ COHEN, *Jude*, 196–197.

¹² STRAUSS, *Schriften*, 115.

¹³ COHEN, *Reason*, 25; RV, 28.

¹⁴ COHEN, *Reason*, 30; RV, 35.

traditional models was also to be complemented by the rise of a renewed and free adoption of the essence of Judaism, a new religiosity which could serve as a political model of Jewish harmonization with Western European culture, especially valid for the Eastern European Jews:

So the Polish Jew will not merely learn scholarliness and German ways, plainness, uprightness, and rigorous conscientiousness, traits that have been weakened in him by the tricks and intrigues of despotism and persecution; he will acquire a deep empathy with the religiosity of the German Jew [...]. He will learn to understand that only true, scientific philosophy, which does not cultivate the dilettantism of imagination but is methodically integrated with the sciences, can justify the one God. This faith is therefore a matter of ethical cognition. German philosophy calls it "rational faith" [*Vernunftglaube*]. *And this ethical rationale of religious morality will also become the basis of the political principles of the Eastern European Jew; out of it he will subjectively derive his right of citizenship.*¹⁵

The German concept "*Vernunftglaube*," as used by Cohen, refers to Kant's *Canon of the Pure Reason* at the end of the latter's first *Critique*, as pointed out by Hartwig Wiedebach. There, Kant distinguishes logical certainty from the moral certainty of God's existence: "The belief in a God and another world is so interwoven with my moral disposition that I am in as little danger of ever surrendering the former as I am worried that the latter can ever be torn away from me."¹⁶ By submitting himself to the scientific method, which cannot objectively establish the existence of God, the Eastern European Jew will discover a new scientific justification of God – moral and messianic finality – which he can derive both from the scientific understanding of Jewish sources and from other realms of activities of modern reason, such as arts, culture, ethics, and politics. Liberating Judaism from its pre-scientific and pre-critical hermeneutical framework, Cohen hoped to bring the Eastern European Jew to discover in the "ethical rationale of religious morality" the true justification for his civic emancipation. Indeed, Jews can derive their religious existence from a rational source, pure as the "original [political] contract"¹⁷ according to Kantian philosophy. Therefore, they are entitled to be equal citizens of the republican regime into which the western areas of the Russian Empire should evolve.

6. Facing pogroms and Jewish alienation

Cohen's lecture tour was conceived as a movement within the Jewish Diaspora, from its modern epistemological center, the German-Jewish *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, to its borders, the Polish-Russian Judaism of the Yeshivas, which was historically retarded. In Cohen's view, "the intelligentsia of Eastern Euro-

¹⁵ COHEN, *Essays*, 58. ID., Jude, 200.

¹⁶ KANT, *Critique*, 689.

¹⁷ KANT, *Peace*, 322.

pean Jews” was plagued by a “spiritual gap” [*ein geistiger Riß*], by an “absence of reconciliation between orthodoxy and religious indifference.”¹⁸ This division of Eastern Jewish intelligentsia between “alienation from [modern] Jewish ideas and hopes” among the Orthodox Jews and “religious nihilism” among Zionists and other Jewish modernist currents, was a tragic cultural situation which, in the eyes of Cohen, was responsible for the Jewish interest in Russian nihilism and served as a pretext for the pogrom policy to which Russian Jews were subjected. Cohen pens a strange sentence in which he brings together this political and cultural despair of Russian Jewry:

Since cultural historians tend to discern some kind of rationale for all the horrors of history, I was able to translate the familiar reproach about the participation of the Jews in Russian nihilism into that of their religious nihilism, and thus once again the imponderables that enter into pogrom policy had been located with dismal satisfaction.¹⁹

Later in the article, dealing still with the Russian pogroms, Cohen echoes an alleged statement of the Count Plehve: “If [the Russian Jew] had the morality and religiosity of European Jews, ‘we would be able to deal with you [the Russian Jew] in a completely different way.’” Russian Jewish orthodoxy, with all its epistemological backwardness, was in part responsible for Jewish attraction to Russian intellectual trends like nihilism and pan-Slavism, which were for Cohen “the moral rationale for the inhumanities of Russianism and its direct and indirect pogroms.”²⁰ The lack of diffusion of the German-Jewish model was thus having terrible consequences.

In the second volume of *Die Judenpogrome in Russland* published in Germany in 1910, Plehve is described as the spirit behind the 1903 Kishinev pogrom:

For all this inhumanity [...], there is no easy answer. Yet, a sure guideline for evaluating the whole situation is easy to be found, if one bears in mind that the terrible [...] Plehve, in whose Machiavellic plans, pogroms against Jews were considered an essential means to fight against the growing dissatisfaction of the Russian people, was then the prime minister, and the leading inspiration for all higher and lower organs of the Russian government.²¹

The difficult question of how to oppose the Russian pogrom policy also features in Samuel Löb Zitron’s account of Cohen’s visit to Warsaw, written for the 26 May 1914 issue of the Hebrew newspaper *Hatzefrah*.²² Cohen is repeatedly blessed for visiting his fellow Jews in Russia and for opposing the physical and

¹⁸ COHEN, *Essays*, 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

²¹ MOTZKIN, *Judenpogrome*, 23.

²² HAZEFIRAH, 16 May 1914, 2. The signature of the article with the Hebrew letter *tsaddik* most likely refers to Samuel Löb Zitron who collaborated at that time with the Hebrew newspaper *Hatzefrah*.

ideological violence exerted against the Russian Jewry with the ideality of Judaism. The journalist attributes a high political and historical value to the visit of the great German Jewish philosopher, while inserting in his praise some ironic words and tones.

In a difficult time for Russian Jewry, the greatest Jewish philosopher of his generation decided to travel and visit his brothers in Russia. We are already used to physical tortments; our troubles and sufferings have already ceased to be considered food for sensational news or object of interest in Europe “which does not interfere in internal matters of a foreign state.” In this year in which, with the trial [of Beilis] in Kiev, the tormenters of the Jews are renewing their attacks, in this hour in which the Jewish religion sits on the bank of the accused, some “specialist” and scholars in the science of Judaism and in Jewish ethics have shown up and begun to stab with their sword the curtain [protecting the Torah ark] and to desecrate the soul and essence of Judaism. Blessed are the circumstances which bring to us in this harsh time this great Jew from Marburg, the Apostle of Judaism and defender of its highest ideals.²³

Toward the end of the article, the journalist hopes and imagines that the “Professor from Marburg [would] present the outline of his system and his understanding of Judaism, revealing the treasures concealed in it and forcing even our foes to bend their head before the head of an old man, before the Jewish genius of Marburg”²⁴.

7. The idealization of Eastern Jewry

Facing the difficult questions raised by Russian pogroms, Cohen developed a cultural and political plan before the War. This plan was to bridge the historical gap between Russian and German Jews through the establishment of new institutions of learning and through a transfer of German knowledge, which would eventually produce the “idealization” of Eastern Jewry: “It is with such an idealization that I view the future of Eastern European Judaism. On the old and venerable sites of the Yeshiva, there shall be erected faculties of Jewish scholarship [*Fakultäten der jüdischen Wissenschaft*].”²⁵ The article concludes with Cohen’s vision of the successful “idealization” of the Eastern European Jew:

When, in the towns and villages of the East, the synagogue service no longer performs with the drama and gesticulation of lamentation and immediate woefulness, but instead with a solemnity derived from a sense of the present, a solemnity of an intellectually objective cult of religious consciousness [*der dem Gegenwartsgefühl gleichsam enthobenen*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ COHEN, *Essays*, 59.

Feierlichkeit eines gedanklich objektiven Kultus des religiösen Bewußtseins], when the Idea gains priority [*Vormacht*] over the compulsive power [*Zwangsmacht*] of traditional sentiment with the magical paraphernalia of superstition, and when, accordingly, the spirit of genuine criticism enters science and scholarship so that studying doesn't turn into praying, and finally into skepticism and error, because it is a confident persistence on the trail of scientific truth [*zuversichtliches Verharren auf der Spur der wissenschaftlichen Wahrheit*], when all these things come about, the house of prayer and the house of study will be united into true places of cultures. [*dann werden das Bethaus und das Lehrhaus vereinigt wahrhafte Kulturstätten werden*].²⁶

In these lines written during the War, Cohen anticipates the internalization of modern science, culture and religious consciousness in a vision of a regenerated Eastern European Jew, no longer filled with gesticulations, traditional sentiments or skepticism, but assuming the ideality of Judaism and its coherence with science and ethics in the new solemnity of his own individual prayer and of the common prayer house. In Cohen's rational fantasy, individual and collective religious service would harmonize God, scientific truth, and social respectability into a new confidence [*Zuversicht*], according to which ideality would progressively gain priority [*Vormacht*] in history.

8. The greatest triumph of the German Jew

In 1914, during a period of peace, Cohen likely thought that such a transformation of Eastern Jewry could be realized, progressively transforming the image and status of Jews, and diminishing the reasons or pretexts for pogroms. Yet the world war that ensued starting in August 1914 could also produce or even accelerate this necessary change, as Cohen seems to imply:

Jews of all countries shall unite against the persecution of the Jewish spirit just as previously they have united for political and social assistance. It will be the greatest triumph of the German Jew [*der höchste Triumph des deutschen Juden*] when his fatherland is permitted to bring about such a true liberation, the inward rejuvenation of East European Jews by means of gradual progress. How it would overshadow the piecemeal emancipation hitherto granted to the Jews! The higher meaning of this liberation would derive not alone from the greater number of people enjoying it. It is the true achievement of the historical meaning of Jewish emancipation that will ripen fully in the self-awareness of the Jew.²⁷

By fostering the German Fatherland to promote the emancipation of the greater part of East European Jewry through war, conquest and political reorganization, German Jews would not only serve as a cultural model for future Judaism, but accomplish a major historical change: the full assumption and realization by Jews of their own ideality, rationality and modern mission. Furthermore,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Cohen thought that this change would not only benefit Eastern European Jews, but would also “become a blessing for Jews the world over.”²⁸ The old German Jewish philosopher knew how important “this cradle of European Jewry” was and how the Eastern European “old heritage of intellectual elasticity [Talmudic training] will inspire emulation among us.”²⁹ Cohen had a trade in mind: German Jews would bring German military and political expansion to include emancipation of Eastern European Jewry, and, subsequently, the circulation of these newly liberated *Ostjuden* would “sharpen,” “temper,” and “spur” German Jewry, and Western Jewry in general, to unprecedented achievements. In conjunction with his plan, Cohen nourished the “hope [...] to continue and repeat [his] interrupted journey” under these new political and cultural conditions. “I can wish for no higher conclusion to my life,”³⁰ he wrote.

9. Informal German and Jewish diplomacy

Crossing the German-Russian border in May 1914, Cohen intended to engage in a kind of informal German and Jewish diplomacy, which worked at two levels: firstly, the progressive cultural transformation of Russian Jewry; and secondly, the political transformation of the western part of the Russian Empire for the benefit of the Reich. The diplomatic aspect of Cohen's tour can be seen in the description published by the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* on 22 May 1914:

On the 7th of May, the old scholar visited the Public Library and the Hermitage [in St. Petersburg]. In the evening, at the house of the Baron Alexander H. v. Günzburg, a great reception was organized, in which the well-known personalities of the community – scholars, writers and so – took part. On the 8th of May, a public session of the Society for Religion Philosophy took place in the N. J. Pirogov Museum, in which Professor Cohen delivered a lecture in German entitled “The Essence of Jewish Religion.” It was followed by a lively discussion [...] The religious service on the 9th of May at the Central Synagogue, in which the noble guest took part and much interest, transformed itself into an edifying religious feast [...].³¹

The informal diplomacy deployed by Cohen took various forms: visits to libraries and museums, dinners at the house of Baron Alexander von Günzburg and other personalities together with leading figures of the Jewish community, public lectures for philosophical societies in official buildings with a large audience of both Christians and Jews, and prayers in great synagogues. Hermann Cohen's trip was a complex diplomatic enterprise, involving Cohen, likely in

²⁸ Ibid., 59.

²⁹ Ibid., 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

³¹ Cf. <http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/periodical/titleinfo/3229145>.

association with other German Jewish figures, and leading Jewish Russian actors such as the jurist Genrich Sliosberg.³² Cohen's lecture tour in Russia was a unique combination of intellectual events in different cities, formal and informal discussions involving known scholars and public figures, newspaper articles published in German, Russian, and Hebrew, and religious rituals and prayers. It addressed hundreds and even thousands of Russian, Polish and Lithuanian Jews and Christians, who participated in the events or read about Cohen's visit. In their minds, as well as those of the organizers, Cohen's initiative to change the image of Jews and Judaism in Russia was important, even if interpreted in various and conflicting ways, as can be understood from Dubnow's testimony:

In April, the philosopher Hermann Cohen visited St. Petersburg and the Jewish society greeted this guest in an exceptional manner. A series of evenings were filled with public lectures and banquets. I also partook in the banquet at the apartment of Sliosberg, but I could not add my voice to the choir of those who praised a philosopher defending an abstract Judaism without acknowledging a living Jewish Nation.³³

10. A new diplomatic mission at the beginning of WWI

Cohen's articulation of philosophy and German-Jewish diplomacy did not stop with the outbreak of WWI in August 1914. On the contrary, a few months after his tour in Russia and during the War, Cohen appears in several documents as attempting to make another diplomatic mission. In a letter dated 28 January 1915, Ludwig Holländer, Counsel of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, describes to the Foreign Office [*Auswärtiges Amt*], the new trip which Hermann Cohen was willing to undertake to another part of the Jewish Diaspora:

Privy Councilor Cohen has stated to the author of this letter that he is prepared to travel to America, despite his old age (he is over 70) and to act there not only for the enlightenment of his audience, but also to appeal to them, giving lectures and consultations in circles of university professors – among which he should enjoy a quite high regard – as well as in circles of educated Jews. Above all, he is likely to be influential because of his extraordinarily effective personality – Cohen is a firebrand [*Feuerkopf*].

Furthermore, Cohen intends to write an article that will demonstrate that the Jews of the whole world should consider Germany the foundation of their culture and education, and to disseminate it in America. Cohen would, of course, only undertake this journey if it were approved and supported by the Foreign Office.

The author of this letter is well aware that similar attempts to influence American public opinion have been made previously by other Jewish personalities. Yet he believes that

³² For more bibliography, cf. WIEDEBACH, *Element*, 16–18; ID., *Cohen*, 23–33. I profited greatly from materials that Vladimir N. Belov gave me.

³³ DUBNOW, *Buch*, 150 [My translation].

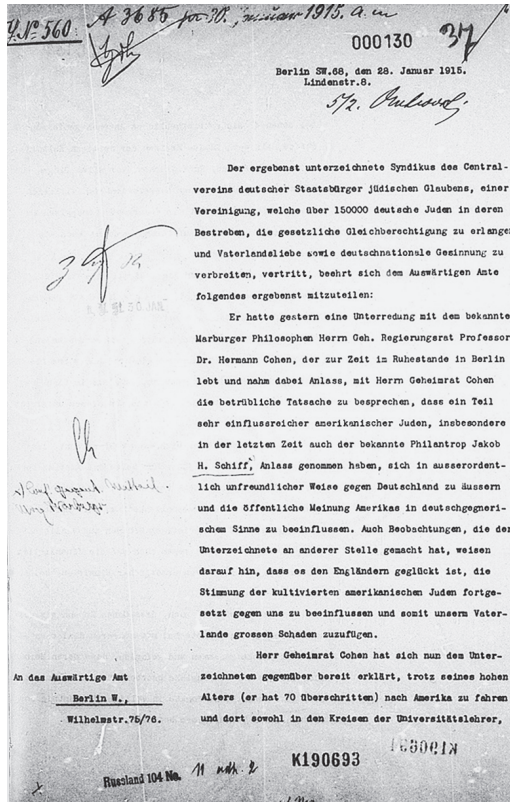


Abb. 1: Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20944-2f. 130.

such an effective personality as Hermann Cohen could have a great impact on leading [American] intellectuals and, on account of his fame, perhaps on influential financial agents as well [...].

The author of this letter is of the opinion that Cohen's proposition, the proposition of a man who, in his old age, is still willing to render such a sacrifice for his fatherland, should be considered seriously.³⁴

Ludwig Holländer's letter was written after Cohen had already proposed the idea of his propaganda trip directly to the Foreign Office in October-November 1914 and had been met with a lack of interest in return. In a letter from 5 October 1914 Cohen writes to his colleague and friend Paul Natorp about his encounter with the *Generalstäbe* at the Office of Foreign Affairs and asks under strict confidentiality [*in strenger Vertraulichkeit*] "if you would be ready to travel together with me and others to America, in order to enlighten there firstly

³⁴ Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20944-2, f. 130.

the Jews about Germany.” After asking his friend “if he could recommend a Catholic,” Cohen concludes his letter with the following hope: “It would be wonderful if once again we could appear there [in the next programmed meeting at the Office of Foreign Affairs] arm-in-arm.” Two weeks later, Cohen informs Natorp that “today occurred the last meeting [at the Office of Foreign Affairs], which decided finally to abandon the America project.”³⁵

Ludwig Holländer’s initiative to revive Cohen’s initial project a few weeks later did not fare any better.

Although the project of Cohen and his entourage to send a German intellectual delegation to America failed, it is still noteworthy that just several months after his successful journey in Russia, Cohen was already prepared to undertake another lecture tour in the other great demographic center of Jewish Diaspora: the United States of America. Instead of a lecture tour, Cohen had to suffice himself this time with the publication of an article in several American newspapers in German, English and Yiddish.

Drawing on the verse in Leviticus (Lev 19:16), Cohen titled his German essay “Do Not Go About Spreading Slander Among Your People: An Appeal to the Jews of America” [*Du sollst nicht einhergehen als Verläumder. Ein Appell an die Juden Amerikas*]. In the English translation, the original title was substituted by a milder one: “*To the American Jews, Condition of Jews in Germany and Russia Contrasted.*” The article itself, its translation or its summary was “offered” to the editors of several American newspapers in a joint effort of the German Embassy in Washington and a group of German Jews working in direct collaboration with the Foreign Office in Berlin, with the goal of developing a specifically Jewish propaganda for the Reich among American and Russian Jews. Cohen’s article was part of this German Jewish propaganda campaign.

11. Deutsches Komitee zur Befreiung der Russischen Juden

On 19 August 1914 the German Zionist Max Bodenheimer wrote a letter to the Office of Foreign Affairs which would become one of the founding documents of the *Deutsches Komitee zur Befreiung der Russischen Juden*, the German Committee for Liberation of Russian Jews.³⁶ The letter opens with the following paragraph:

I am convinced that the six million Russian Jews, deprived of equal rights [in the Russian Empire], have an interest in the advance of the allied armies of Germany and Austro-Hungary. I am further convinced that they could therefore, if adequate measures were

³⁵ HOLZHEY, *Neukantianismus*, 432–433.

³⁶ Cf. ZECHLIN, *Politik*, 117–154; SILBER, *Nationality*. I want to express my gratitude to Marcos Silber for the much advice he gave me.

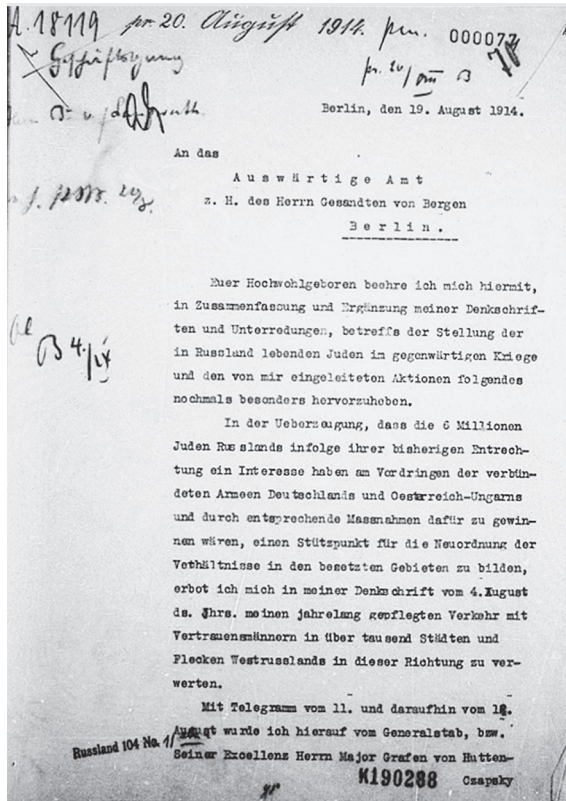


Abb. 2: Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20942-1 f. 77.

taken, be won over to this cause and could constitute a base of support for the reordering of affairs in the occupied areas. For these reasons, in my memorandum of the 4th of August of this year, I proposed to put my relationships with representatives [of Jewish communities] to use for this cause. These relationships, cultivated over many years, extend to more than a thousand towns and places in West Russia.³⁷

Less than a month later, Bodenheimer wrote another letter to the Office of Foreign Affairs in which he summarizes the activities of the German Committee for the Liberation of Russian Jews. Among other achievements, he mentions: the diffusion of an official war report to “our men of confidence in the neutral countries,” as well as the publication of “a war bulletin in Yiddish and Hebrew, which we diffuse at the [Eastern] border of the Reich by our men of confidence, which we will be ready to diffuse in the newly conquered Russian territories as

³⁷ Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20942-1, f. 77.

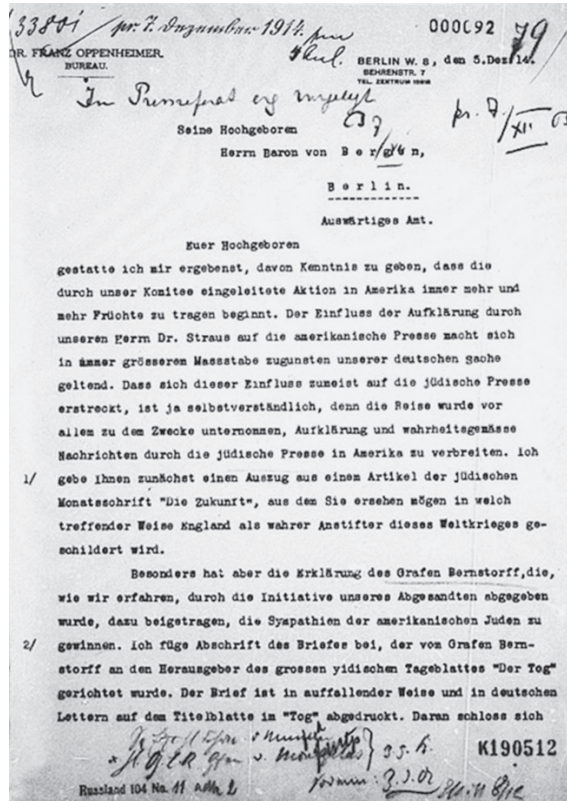


Abb. 3: Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20943-1f. 92.

well." Bodenheimer explains further: "In collaboration with the *Reichsmarineamt* and with the authorization of the *Unterstaatssekretär* Dr. Zimmermann, we have sent a delegation of three men under the leadership of Sir Dr. Straus from Berlin to America, who shall diffuse opinions favorable to Germany in North-American Jewish Press and high Finance milieu."³⁸ The *Komitee* constituted a parallel and relatively independent center of diffusion of German war news and propaganda, transforming Jewish international networks of religious, cultural, social and Zionist nature into a political network, which could serve the interest of the Reich in the war. Yet, as developed in several *Memoranda* sent to the Office of Foreign Affairs, Bodenheimer and other members of the *Komitee* tried to develop a political line, which was submitted to the Reich's war interest, but would also serve the interest of Polish and Russian Jews in

³⁸ Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20942-2f. 153-155.

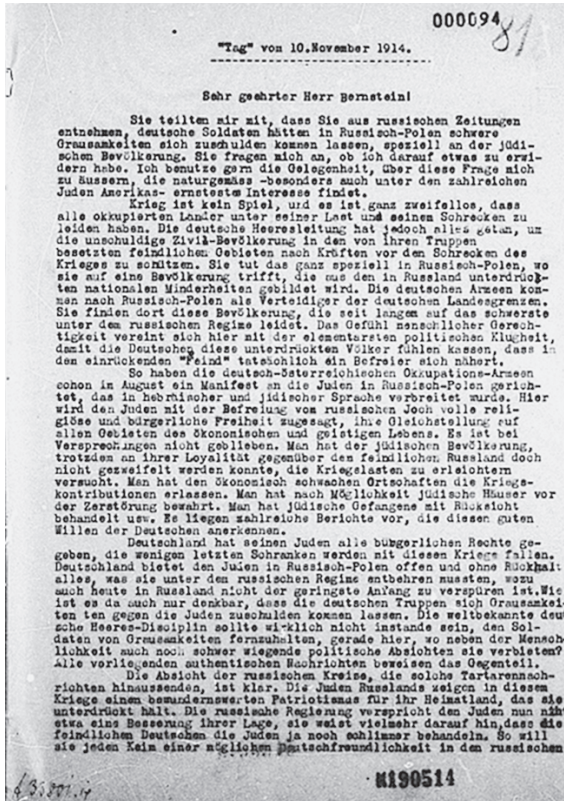


Abb. 4: Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20943-1 f. 94.

the long run. For this reason, they advocated for the transformation of Russian conquered territories into "a buffer state" which would not be a Polish state, but a larger state including various minorities – Jews, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Belorussians and Ruthenians – and would therefore relativize the demographic weight of Poles. Such a state could not only be created on the basis of civil equality, but rather it would grant national rights to its different national components, including the Jews. In this envisioned buffer state, in which civil equality and national rights would be guaranteed, Jews could play an important political role, and assure the benevolence of their state vis-à-vis the Reich.³⁹

The complex and always evolving relationship of the *Komitee* with the Reich's Office of Foreign Affairs entailed the secret delegation of Dr. Isaac Straus to New York. Dr. Straus collaborated closely with the German Ambassador in

³⁹ Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R. 20942-3 f. 239 and following.

Washington, Count Bernstorff, in order to publish in the Jewish American Press as many articles and as much news as possible in favor of the Reich, but also including a clear German commitment to an emancipation of Polish and Russian Jews. In a letter from 5 December 1914 (Abb. 3), Dr. Franz Oppenheimer wrote to Baron von Bergen at the Office of Foreign Affairs, explaining how the “work of explanation accomplished by Dr. Straus is producing a greater and greater effect in American press for the benefit of the German cause.”⁴⁰ Oppenheimer mentions the publication of a letter of the German Ambassador, Count Bernstorff, in the great Yiddish-English newspaper *The Day* as a noteworthy success of Straus’ initiatives (Abb. 4).

While defending in this published letter the German army against the accusation of “cruelties” perpetrated against Jews, the Count of Bernstorff is openly endorsing major ideas of the *Komitee*. He pretends that “the German armies entered Russian Poland to defend their national frontiers. They found this [Jewish] population which has been suffering greatly at the hands of the Russian regime for so long. [...] Therefore, the Germano-Austrian occupation armies already distributed a manifest to the Jews in Russian Poland in August, which was diffused in Hebrew and Yiddish.”⁴¹ By the apparent collaboration between the occupation armies in Russian Poland, the Office for Foreign Affairs and the *Komitee* in Berlin, as well as the German Embassy and Dr. Straus in the United States, the impression could be created for the American Jewish readership that the Reich was also serving Jewish interests in its warfare.

12. An appeal to the Jews in America, a new mobilization of Jewish Diaspora

In a letter to Natorp dated 28 November 1914, Cohen tells his friend that despite his health problems, he “did not stop to work, and wrote a few pieces [...], among them an appeal to Jews of America, which was a demand of the Office for Foreign Affairs. Our delegate in New York submitted it to an American newspaper.”⁴² The delegate mentioned by Cohen was most probably Dr. Straus. The article written by the old Jewish philosopher in those days was thus part of

⁴⁰ Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R 20943–1 f. 92.

⁴¹ Auswärtiges Amt, WK Nr. 11 adh. 2, R 20943–1 f. 94.

⁴² Hermann Cohen to Paul Natorp, 28. November 1914, in: Holzhey, Neukantianismus, 435. Dr. Strauss’ role as “Delegierter des jüdischen Komitees” is attested in the archives of the Auswärtiges Amt (Washington 820–821), specifically Washington 820, f. 89–91. His role in bringing Cohen’s article to *Die Wahrheit* (January 30, 1915), and to the *Sonntagsblatt der New-Yorker Staatszeitung* (January 31, 1915) is recorded in a letter sent by Strauss to the German ambassador in Washington February 18, 1915) 821 (f. 24–25). Likewise, Strauss’ role in publishing Cohen’s article in *The American Israelite* (March 4, 1915) is attested in another letter sent to the ambassador in Washington (March 13, 1915) 821 (f. 97–98).

the joined initiatives of the *Komitee* and the Office for Foreign Affairs to shape the American Jewish public opinion in favor of the Reich and the Jewish politics of the *Komitee*.

In the article, Cohen develops a conception of Jewish Diaspora similar to the one evoked in "The Polish Jew." The difference between the political status of the German and the Russian Jew, in Germany and Russia respectively, serves as the background for a claim that this time concerns all the Occidental Jews. From Russia to America, all the Jews owe their modern religiosity to Germany. Cohen explains this through the figure of Mendelssohn:

Moses Mendelssohn, the friend of Lessing, was a German thinker and writer. Out of his German "*Gemüt*," Mendelssohn, another Luther, translated the Pentateuch into German and thus made German literary speech and culture accessible to Jews. The Divine Service of the synagogue was first rejuvenated in Germany and in the German Spirit. Both in faith and morals the Jews always felt akin to the Germans, both felt animated by the same spirit. For the historical spirit of Protestantism has also been our own vital nerve, animating the religious philosophy of medieval Judaism ever since the time of Saadja Gaon. Reform Judaism is a German movement, and from Germany Liberal Judaism has migrated to America.⁴³

Reminding his Jewish-American readership of their Jewish-German background, Cohen depicts the reform of Judaism as proceeding from Mendelssohn's perfect assimilation of German spirit and language. More broadly, Cohen presents it as an historical affinity [*Verwandtschaft*] of Jewish reform "with the historical spirit of Protestantism." The political implication of Cohen's interpretation of Jewish modernity as an idealization of Judaism made in the medium of German language and thought, and pursuing the same goal, is made very clear a few lines further on:

Dear Brothers in America! Every Jew in Western lands, apart from his political fatherland, must acknowledge, honor and love Germany as the mother country of his modern religion and of his aesthetic principles – in short, of modern Jewish culture [*das Mutterland seiner modernen Religiösität, wie seiner ästhetischen Grundkraft und damit des Zentrums seiner Kulturgeseinnung*]. I am convinced that every educated Russian Jew harbors the same feelings of piety toward German culture [*diese Pietät für die deutsche Bildung*]. I am, therefore, also confident that his Jewish heart leads him to side with Germany in its present military campaign against Russia. At the same time, I know well the native strength of the patriotic feeling with which the Russian Jew loves his country. Nevertheless, I dare not say his fatherland, for Russia cannot yet have become a fatherland to him.⁴⁴

⁴³ This is the English translation of Cohen's article published in the American Israelite, the 4th of March, 1915. Following the kind advice of Robert Schine, I made some changes for the sake of greater accuracy. For the German text, cf. COHEN, Appell, 307–308.

⁴⁴ This is the English translation of Cohen's article published in the American Israelite, the 4th of March, 1915. For the German text, cf. COHEN, Appell, 308–309.

Jewish Diaspora from Russia to America is, for Cohen, *Ashkenaz* in a new sense. This Diaspora was decisively informed and shaped by the historical and philosophical drive resulting from the proximity of Judaism and German Protestantism in their reformist impulse. The new German historical and philosophical orientation of Ashkenazic Jewish Diaspora makes Germany its spiritual center. Yet the novelty of Cohen's attitude towards the spiritual geography of modern Jewish Diaspora relies on his willingness to transform it into a political resource for the Reich and into a justification for the future German victory, in complete agreement with the other members of the *Kommittee*. Cohen envisions and elaborates on a common interest shared by the German Reich and the Jews of Germany, Russia, and America. This common interest was the German conquest of Polish and Russian areas, and their subsequent political redefinition according to the program of the *Kommittee*. In the months between May 1914 and early 1915, Cohen succeeded in transforming his pacific conception of a Jewish Ashkenazic Diaspora spiritually centered in Germany into a pro-German international network that could help the Reich in its war efforts and, above all, in the development of an international political solution following the German victory – in the interest of Germans, Jews and humanity.

13. Cohen's Geistpolitik

One of the clearest documents of Cohen's imperial orientation is probably "On the Specificity of German Spirit" (*Über das Eigentümliche des deutschen Geistes*), a lecture Cohen delivered in Berlin in October 1914 and published around that time. From the very beginning of the text, Cohen establishes the imperial significance of German national originality:

One understands a nation of world-historical originality such as Germany only when one has grasped its deepest *originality*. Such an understanding goes beyond the universalism of such a nation, which it shares, up to a certain measure, with all nations, and which enables it, the more original it is, to absorb with greater ease all the other nations in their best humane form. Due to this originality, this nation, being both universal and original, absorbs everything from other nations that is human-universal [*alles menschlich Allgemeine*], in the past and in the present, but transforms it internally according to what the vital element of [German] national originality requires and allows.⁴⁵

From the perspective of world history, the originality, the inner characteristic of the German people, is its great capacity for assimilating into its own originality the originality of other peoples according to the most universal principle, a principle that can only be found in German philosophy. As Cohen's subsequent

⁴⁵ My translation (with the advice of Robert Schine). For the German text, cf. COHEN, *das Eigenthümliche*, 240–241.

reference to Pericles' funeral oration in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* makes clear, the national capacity to integrate and systematically implement the organizing principle of historical and cultural diversity is the *arche*, the *imperium* which defines and elects the nation capable of imperial leadership.

Cohen defines Kantian philosophy as the philosophical discovery of the highest principle of organization, which selects and elects the German people to imperial leadership. This principle is not a substantive principle, but the necessity and capacity of reason to anticipate or ground its own activity by establishing a differentiated system of rational categories:

However, when the *a priori* itself must first be grounded by the transcendental, then it means that the foundational principle must be grounded by an act of laying the foundation [...] This remark points directly to the most intimate depths of the whole Kantian terminology, to the transcendental apperception, and particularly to its double meaning: the unity of consciousness, and the unity of synthetic principles, which are nothing less than the foundations of scientific knowledge.⁴⁶

The right of Germany to win this war of empires is founded in its perfect understanding of the activity of reason, which it accomplishes through the two sides of subjectivity. If the highest principle of rational organization is to be founded in subjective unification, both as consciousness and as the unity of scientific knowledge, then the way for a nation to embody the highest consciousness of universal reason and to ground its right to imperial leadership – by displaying the marks of this consciousness through philosophy, science, religion, arts, social politics, education and so on – is philosophically open.

14. An idealist and Jewish foundation of Empire

A brief comparison with a seminal text from the Italian Renaissance might illuminate the Jewish political implications of Cohen's act of grounding German imperial leadership in German idealism. Leonardo Bruni develops Florence's right to imperial leadership in his 1404 *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*, drawing on Latin authors and the Greek tradition of Panegyrics. While he emphasizes beauty, literature and scholarship as clear markers of the imperial superiority of Florence, ultimately Bruni grounds Florence's imperial right in race and historical genealogy:

Recognize, men of Florence, recognize your stock and forebears [*stirpem ac prosapiam vestram*]. Consider that you are, of all races, the most renowned [*omnium gentium sitis clarissimi*]. For other peoples have as forebears refugees or those banished from their fathers' homes, peasants, obscure wanderers, or unknown founders. But your founder

⁴⁶ My translation (with the advice of Robert Schine). For the German text cf. COHEN, *das Eigenthümliche*, 262.

is the Roman people – the lord and conqueror of the entire world [*Vobis autem populus Romanus, orbis terrarum victor dominusque, est auctor*].⁴⁷

By founding the German right to imperial leadership in idealism, Cohen hoped to eliminate the genealogical and racial foundation of empires and thought to pave the way for a messianic integration of Jewish Diaspora in the imperial project of Germany. A Jewish Diaspora centered around a German Jewry and regenerated by the German spirit could play a central role in the political deployment of German idealism through the Reich and its future international policy. This desire and fantasy of a new imperial politics burst forth in the final paragraph of Cohen's 1915 *Deutschtum und Judentum*:

We see again in this farthest point at the horizon of the historical world Germanness and Judaism intimately bound together. Indeed, the guiding star of perpetual peace is the messianic idea of Israelite prophetism, the focal point of Jewish religion. In their hope for the messianic era, the prophets made hope the fundamental affect of politics, history and religion: what otherwise is called "faith" they call "hope." Their diversion from given sensual perception, their leading beyond the present toward the future, and their liberation from the omnipotence of reality is the idealism of the prophets. In its range and extension, it does not fall short of the idealism that philosophy accomplishes against the [substantive understanding] of Being. For the prophets, by projecting the human world in this future, draw the being of nature into this realm of hope and future as well.⁴⁸

The dynamic consonance, or *Einklang*, of Germanness and Judaism relies for Cohen on a differentiated but similar prioritization of ideality over the empirical. More precisely, it relies on a differentiated but complementary projection over the present, one in the form of German imperial expansion, the other in the form of a Jewish international Diaspora anticipating the messianic humanity. In an impressive series of war writings, Cohen thus developed the idea of a messianic consonance or collaboration of German modern imperial ambitions and Jewish Diaspora, especially in the new context of the world conflict. Together with the other Jewish activists from the *Deutsches Komitee zur Befreiung der Russischen Juden*, Cohen contributed decisively to the invention of 20th century Jewish politics.

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⁴⁷ BRUNI, Panegyric, 149. For the Latin text, cf. BARON, Petrarch, 243–244.

⁴⁸ For the German original text cf. COHEN, *Deutschtum*, 545.

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