

Introduction

Commentary: *The First Sixty Years*

Murray Friedman

It was Irving Kristol, Ruth Wisse reminds us, who said that *Commentary* was one of the most important magazines in Jewish history. This may be an exaggeration, but not by much. Literary critic Richard Pells writes more soberly, “While other magazines have certainly had their bursts of glory—even Golden Ages—in which one has had to read them to know what was going on in New York, or Washington, or the world—no other journal of the past half century has been so consistently influential, or so central to the major debates that have transformed the political and intellectual life of the United States.”

The *Commentary* we are most familiar with today is widely seen as an organ of American political conservatism. Although this is so, from its beginning the magazine had broader scope and purposes, as indeed it continues to have today. *Commentary* was founded by the American Jewish Committee in 1945 as a monthly journal of “significant thought and opinion, Jewish affairs and contemporary issues.” It was modeled on the *Partisan Review*, a magazine of somewhat similar style and sensibility, although the latter had no formal Jewish institutional ties. A youthful Nor-

man Podhoretz once asked *Commentary*'s first editor, Elliot E. Cohen, what the difference was between the two magazines. Cohen responded that *Commentary* was a consciously Jewish magazine, but although the *Partisan Review* was Jewish because of its leadership and contributors, it didn't know it.

Although institutionally sponsored, *Commentary* won complete editorial freedom early on—a rare occurrence in organizational life. The magazine has gone through three stages and is in the midst of a fourth, roughly paralleling the incumbency of its three editors. The first stage (1945–1960) began with the appointment of Cohen as editor. The second phase saw the accession of Norman Podhoretz, who continued in the post until his retirement in 1995. Finally, in the third stage, Podhoretz's long-time associate and close collaborator, Neal Kozodoy, took over with the special responsibility, as it turned out, of moving the publication into the post–Cold War era.

Each of these editors faced unique challenges. As its first, Cohen had to deal with a Jewish community, and most especially its intellectual and cultural leadership, that was attempting to assimilate into American life. For most, this meant adhering to a vague, universalistic Socialism coupled with the Freudian modernism that was then fashionable. Both philosophies taught that religion and group identity were forms of primitivism that people outgrew as they became more knowledgeable and enlightened. In the immediate postwar years, Cohen set out to nurture the development of a proud American Jewish community that embraced modernity but found room within it to maintain a distinct Jewish spirit and cultural identity. At the same time, he sought to reach out to a broader public with serious observations on the central issues of the times.

To accomplish these objectives, Cohen assembled a group of extraordinary editors and writers including Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Clement Greenberg, and Robert Warshaw. Among *Commentary*'s special characteristics was that although it was created as a “specialist” Jewish magazine, it devoted so many of its pages to “general” affairs. Another special attribute was that, given its “heavyweight” editors and writers, it had a down-to-earth quality that included reporting on the day-to-day life of everyday Jews. A highly popular section that ran for many years was “From the American Scene.” Cohen later said

this section was closest to the heart of its purposes: “It was our thought,” he wrote, “to use many methods to help bring American Jews and their concerns into their own and public view with fuller knowledge and insight then generally obtains—historical reconstruction, intellectual analysis, reportage, religious reflection, sociological and other scientific study, [and] fiction.”

As Thomas Bell Jeffers points out in this book, *Commentary* welcomed and helped to advance the careers of writers who were then little known, including such figures as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Norman Mailer, and Joseph Heller, not to mention the extraordinary Yiddish-into-English achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer. In the dedication to her book of short stories, *The Pagan Rabbi*, Ozick even paid tribute to Podhoretz as her guiding spirit. Following the appearance of her short story, “Envy,” in the magazine, Ozick says, her career took off. “Very clearly, *Commentary* was able to avoid all of the second-rate Jewish fiction that was being published at the time,” literary critic Susan Klingenstein says. “It is amazing how well the fiction of these years . . . stand[s] rereading now.” All of these writers, not incidentally, have wrestled with the problem of what it means to be a Jew in American life.

By 1950, *Commentary* had become the leading journal in American intellectual life and thought. In the process, Terry Teachout notes in his chapter, *Commentary* developed a style of communication that made it a “must-read” for intellectuals but that was “equally accessible to ordinary educated people,” or the “common reader” as Teachout calls them here. Podhoretz once said he sought to publish essays like those that would be written by historians much later, when greater insight and information would be more readily available. *Commentary*, in short, has sought to avoid becoming a prisoner of its times: It tries to take a longer view of the subjects it examines.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that *Commentary* is often ahead of its time. To take an example at random, while developing this Introduction, I stumbled on a *Commentary* essay written by a twenty-six-year-old, little-known writer, Daniel Pipes, in August 1981: “The Politics of Muslim Anti-Semitism.” In this piece, Pipes developed a theme that is front and center today: the use of anti-Semitism as part of the politics of the present-day Arab/Israel encounter. “Hardly a

mishap occurs in the Arab world,” Pipes wrote twenty-three years ago “which does not get blamed on the Jews. . . . In brief, the Arabs have managed to make Israel a pariah in international politics.”

Starting in the late 1940s and 1950s, while still operating within the framework of the Left, *Commentary* recognized the aggressive designs of the Soviet Union on the world and the threat it posed to the West. *Commentary* proceeded to challenge vigorously the efforts, both at home and abroad, of those who still thought of that country as the land of the future—or who at least hesitated to take up the burden of confrontation for fear of nuclear catastrophe. This challenge was a task the magazine pursued relentlessly until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. Simultaneously, *Commentary* remained steadfast in its liberal orientation but grew restless with the formulas of the welfare state. However useful when first formulated and implemented, these formulas had grown stale and needed an infusion of new analysis and thought. *Commentary*’s movement to a neoconservative posture took place over a period of time and was highlighted in 1972 by George McGovern’s race for the presidency.

Whatever may have been its literary and cultural accomplishments, *Commentary* will no doubt continue to be best thought of as a prime architect of neoconservatism. (The other such vehicle was Irving Kristol’s journal, *The Public Interest*, which was created in 1965.) Curiously, Podhoretz did not start out as a neoconservative when he took over the magazine in 1960. Indeed, at first he made it a vehicle of the New Left. He published pieces by such figures as Edgar Friedenberg and Christopher Lasch, as well as putting forth much of the New Age thought that came to characterize the period. Before long, however, Podhoretz became concerned about the dangers the Left posed to the West, and especially to the embattled State of Israel.

Even as it went through this Left phase, *Commentary* never lost faith in America. If there is a continuing theme in the magazine’s history, it is the enormous pride it takes in the United States and the great promise of personal freedom and material well-being this country offers to our citizens and to the rest of the world. In the late 1960s and 1970s, *Commentary* also came to challenge the excesses of rebellious students in elite institutions across the land, many of whom viewed this country then and now as a repressive, imperial power.

Commentary could be trusted, the literary critic Alexander Bloom has written, to tell its readers what was right with American society more than what was wrong. Even in his own rebellious period, as he took up the reins of *Commentary*, Podhoretz rejected for publication the Port Huron statement—the guiding document of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the New Left—prepared by activist Tom Hayden, as not being thought through well enough. Podhoretz felt that the statement encouraged extremist behavior, which of course is exactly what happened.

In the second phase of *Commentary*'s history, the magazine and its stable of writers came also to review its earlier posture with regard to the welfare state and the role of government in alleviating poverty. As the urban rioting of the 1960s developed, signaling the breakdown of the social order and the various wild schemes intended to improve it, as Fred Siegel notes here, the issue for *Commentary* became not whether the country and its cities had a special obligation to help but, rather, how to help effectively. This was not so much a break with the magazine's older liberalism as a reflection of the exhaustion of that body of thought and action and the need to develop new ways of thinking about how to deal with the urban crisis. Thus, alongside its battle against Soviet imperialism, *Commentary*'s neoconservative posture was born.

Commentary's role in the Cold War came at an especially propitious moment. The fortunes of anticommunism were at a low ebb as a result of the war in Vietnam (which Podhoretz opposed early on as the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time). The mood that had developed in much of the country was that battling the spread of Communism abroad led inevitably to that war, and presumably other terrible disasters, and that we as a nation should refrain from such efforts. Many of our intellectual, political, and cultural elite had become paralyzed with regard to the continuing threat posed by the Soviet Union.

It was at this moment, as Richard Gid Powers indicates in his chapter here and in his book, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anti-Communism*, that *Commentary* picked up the fallen banner of anticommunism. In article after article by *Commentary* writers, as well as in his book, *The Present Danger*, Podhoretz and the magazine helped to renew the focus on the struggle with the Soviet Union. *Commentary*

and the neoconservative movement, which the magazine came to embody, sought to move beyond détente. The latter, however, accepted the status quo in Eastern Europe and only mildly resisted aggressive Soviet designs on the world. *Commentary* set out to undermine what Ronald Reagan later called an “evil empire.” Although there is a sharp debate presently underway in academic circles on the forces that led to the demise of the Soviet Union, *Commentary*’s efforts, which represented the intellectual and ideological heartland of the anticommunist movement, along with the internal weaknesses of that totalitarian state itself, helped to bring it down.

Commentary also viewed with growing dismay the collapse of a number of universities and other institutions in the face of New Left pressures. As James Q. Wilson, then at Harvard, wrote in the magazine’s June 1972 issue, it is “within higher education that one finds today many . . . of the most serious threats to certain liberal values—the harassment of unpopular views, the use of force to prevent certain persons from speaking, the adoption of quota systems either to reduce the admissions of certain kinds of students or enhance the admissions of other kinds, and the politicization of the university to make it an arena for the exchange of manifestos rather than a forum for the discussion of ideas.”

As early as 1964, Podhoretz published an essay by Nathan Glazer, who was then teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, on free speech, following the famous campus eruption there. It was a mild piece but marked the beginning of a full-blown effort by *Commentary* and others to challenge “political correctness” in the broader society. Its writers used *Commentary*’s pages to condemn the cowardice of many of our leading universities and other institutions and to encourage them to stand strong against threats to the values of a free society. Glazer challenged the notion that student radicals were rebels against unjust authority; they were in fact “red diaper” babies, Glazer argued, emulating their parents but coming from another direction. More recently, these ideas have found support in broader circles including, not incidentally, liberal circles, as marked by the publication of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1991) and by *New York Times* cultural writer Richard Bernstein’s *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for*

America's Future (1994). The phrase “politically correct,” more often than not today, has become a form of mockery as well as a description of a social phenomenon.

Much as it had done with literary figures earlier, George Nash writes in this book, *Commentary* “opened a door to a new generation of conservative Jewish writers not just by publishing some of their work . . . but by the compelling example of its history.” As the nation enters a new and dangerous era, marked by an unprecedented war on terrorism, “*Commentary's Children*,” as John Ehrman writes here, including William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, and David Brooks, now a regular Op-Ed columnist at the *New York Times* and many other publications, have come to play a critical role in shaping the nation's thought and policies.

With the end of the Cold War, the direct influence of the publication may have diminished somewhat. The world has changed significantly since those halcyon days. Once a lonely voice in the wilderness, it has been joined by a number of similarly minded magazines including *The Public Interest*, *First Things*, *The National Interest*, and *The Weekly Standard*, which, along with “*Commentary's Children*,” view things from much the same perspective. Under Kozodoy, Podhoretz's successor (and his collaborator for many years), the magazine has remained much the same in style and substance, though unlike Podhoretz, Kozodoy has let the magazine speak entirely for itself and has not joined personally in the ideological wars that left Podhoretz with a trail of what he calls “ex-friends.” As the war on terrorism has heated up, *Commentary*, under Kozodoy's direction, has published some of the most thoughtful and penetrating analyses of the direction it is taking, including the work of Josh Muravchik, Arthur Waldron, Andrew C. McCarthy, and Norman Podhoretz, without which it is not possible to fully understand this new dimension in American life. See especially Podhoretz's thirty-eight-page essay, “World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win,” in the September 2004 issue.

This book was undertaken because *Commentary* has received little scholarly attention from historians. Although not speaking of *Commentary* directly, historian Michael Kazin has written in the *American Historical Review* that, “like most people, historians are reluctant to

sympathize with people whose political opinions they detest.” Overly cosmopolitan in their cultural tastes and liberal or radical in their politics, scholars of modern American history have largely eschewed “research projects about past movements that seem to them either bastions of a crumbling status quo or the domain of puritan, pathological yahoos.” When cultural historians explore the subject of important cultural influences at mid-century and beyond, most have focused on the *Partisan Review*. As indicated, the *Review* preceded *Commentary* and initially served as its model, especially in the *Review*’s hard-line early anti-Soviet policies. Later, however, the *Review*’s editors shifted ground and became a voice not unlike that of the New Left. In any case, the *Partisan Review* has ceased to exist even as *Commentary* continues to endure and even to prosper.

This book represents the first attempt to place this journal under historical scrutiny and to measure the role it has played for almost sixty years. The essays published here were commissioned, and most of them were delivered at a symposium convened by the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University in Philadelphia in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee and the graduate school at City College of New York on March 10 and 11, 2003. It was our hope that both the conference and this book would stimulate further studies of this magazine and closer examination of the leading figures associated with it over the years.

Commentary’s greatest asset, Ehrman has suggested in this book, is its consistency. “It’s arguments,” he adds, “will continue to build on the same themes it has used until now adding the threats of terrorism and Middle East desperatism to its memories of the struggles against Fascism and Communism.” It will continue, he concludes “to carry out its important institutional role, sending its adherents into the world of intellectual debate and politics to put their ideas into action.”

"America Is Home"

Commentary *Magazine and the Refocusing
of the Community of Memory, 1945–1960*

Nathan Abrams

A magazine helped revive and focus the community of memory.¹

—Howard M. Sachar

The year 1945 marked a period of disruption for American Jewry, and for New York's community of Jewish intellectuals in particular. The end of World War II, with the full revelations of the Nazi genocide in Europe, the possibility of a Jewish state in Palestine, and the shift of focus from Europe toward America, had a disorientating effect on American Jews. As they emerged from the war, many young Jewish intellectuals felt the need to seek institutional alignment not only to overcome a sense of alienation but also as a solution to a new economic reality that had destroyed their bohemian lifestyles forever. Recognizing these developments, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) became a major agent both in institutionalizing these intellectuals and in reconciling them with their communities of origin through the establishment of a new intellectual magazine, *Commentary*, under the editorship of Elliot E. Cohen. As Howard Sachar has observed of the postwar era, *Commentary*

helped to "revive" the community of memory as well as refocus it around constructing a viable Jewish American discourse. *Commentary* provided the vehicle and voice through which a whole new generation of alienated and untried Jewish writers, thinkers, and poets, such as Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Delmore Schwartz, Lionel Trilling, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Irving Howe, Sidney Hook, and Leslie Fiedler, would move back into their community of origin after World War II. Now, more than at any time in their history, Jewish intellectuals became committed to constructing a new Jewish American community complete with its own Jewish American memories.²

Commentary magazine became one of America's most celebrated periodicals. Under Cohen, it developed into the premier postwar journal of Jewish affairs, attracting a readership far wider than its Jewish community of origin. *Commentary* soon became a central organ of the group that was subsequently labeled the "New York Intellectuals," and consequently assumed a leading position in American intellectual life from the mid-1940s onward. The magazine still occupies an important place in both American and Jewish political and cultural thought today. *Commentary*, however, has suffered from a conspicuous lack of academic attention. Although a great deal has been written about the New York Intellectuals and their publications, these studies have overwhelmingly focused on the *Partisan Review* (PR); thus, the scholarship surrounding *Commentary* is still surprisingly and inexplicably thin.³ I intend to begin filling this vacuum by examining *Commentary*'s prehistory, in which a group of young Jewish intellectuals who had previously rejected their community of origin became an institutionalized feature of American Jewry. I concentrate on the magazine's formative years, from 1945 to the end of the 1950s, and examine the concept of "editorial freedom" in particular. In doing so, I show how this literary and cultural initiative led to the formation of a new intellectual community with its own new and particular brand of discourse—a Jewish American discourse of America as "home."

The American Jewish Committee is the oldest existing Jewish defense agency in America. Founded in 1906 in response to the pogroms and the worsening condition of Jews in Eastern Europe, it was an elite organization of middle- and upper-class American German-Jewish

philanthropic and community leaders. The AJC differed from those defense organizations that followed it, the Anti-Defamation League (1913) and the American Jewish Congress (1918), in the scope of its operations: It was dedicated to protecting the civil and religious rights of the global, rather than simply the American, Jewish community.⁴ The committee's founders believed in the promise offered by American democracy of producing a new vision of Jewish life in the Diaspora that would supersede all others that had preceded it. This expression of belief would influence the whole of the AJC's operations. According to its official historian, Oscar Handlin, this "article of faith" remained "fixed," and the "complex of these ideas was gradually to define the character of the American Jewish Committee in the next half-century."⁵ The committee urged American diplomatic intervention to assist Jews abroad and protested against immigration quotas, which would limit the number of Jews allowed into the United States. Although the AJC remained elitist in nature, it continued to promote its self-imposed function as the mouthpiece for the entire Jewish community. In doing so, the committee worked covertly with government authorities at the highest level, favoring the traditional "court Jew" approach of quiet mediation rather than outright protest.

Moving away from the proactive promotion of Jewish rights, the AJC adopted a reactive fight against anti-Semitism, initiating a campaign in 1939 to curb bigotry in America. Its aim in that period was the representation of Jews as "real" Americans. The AJC also took a firm non-Zionist line, as manifested by its decision—in contrast to every other major American Jewish organization—not to join the American Jewish Conference in 1943, which umbrella organization sought to work toward the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. "By the very nature of their ideals," wrote Oscar Handlin, "the founders of the Committee had opposed any ideology that considered the United States as exile."⁶ The AJC therefore devoted its full energies to the promotion of a Jewish American ethic rather than to the establishment of a homeland elsewhere.

The committee, however, never shook off its early influences. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it was accused by the increasing numbers of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who felt excluded, of being "autocratic and undemocratic" and the "instrument of a small

self-appointed group of families who wished to control the whole community.”⁷ The AJC lacked wider communal support, and in 1943 it acknowledged that this support would have to be developed. The new executive vice president, John Slawson, was given the responsibility of implementing this reorganization through the establishment of local chapters. The New York chapter, however, remained the dominant chapter, as the apportioning of delegates to the governing bodies was defined according to the size of the population covered by the chapter rather than by the chapter’s size.⁸

In the aftermath of World War II, the AJC’s size and function were expanded. The death of the founding generation led to the succession of individuals such as Judge Joseph M. Proskauer, Jacob Blaustein, and Irving M. Engel. This paved the way for a broader base of membership than hitherto expressed, which was filled by second-generation, acculturated Jews of Eastern European origin. It now took upon itself the obligation of strengthening the foundations of a pluralistic democratic society. The committee had long since learned that the most efficacious approach to fighting anti-Semitism was not to argue for the rights of Jews alone so much as to defend the equality of all Americans, including Jews. World War II did not produce any change in the committee’s attitude toward Zionism, however. Without accepting the condemnation of Israel pouring out of the American Council for Judaism, a more extreme anti-Zionist splinter group, the committee stuck to its principle that the United States provided a home for Jews. The AJC was very committed to its American homeland and to constructing a viable Jewish American community.⁹ As a part of this effort, the AJC envisaged the leadership of a cultural vanguard, or an “informed constituency who would lead others” toward the full “adjustment as American citizens of the Jewish religio-cultural identity.”¹⁰ Out of this initiative grew *Commentary* magazine.

Commentary appeared at the very point when it would be most accepted by Jewish intellectuals: 1945.¹¹ Before this time, Jewish intellectuals were characterized by their attempts to escape from overt ethnic identification through an embrace of the universalism of Marxism and its variant forms. During the 1920s and 1930s, a strata of Jewish intellectuals emerged in America. Rejecting the orthodoxy and observance of their parents and exploiting the new spaces opened up

to them, these intellectuals sought to accommodate themselves within the mainstream of American culture. As youngsters, many of them had attended public schools that had attempted to acculturate these Jews into American society by “civilizing” them into becoming Americans. Allied to this Americanizing impulse was the powerful appeal of secular American culture and its promise of the full active participation of Jews as citizens in society, rather than as the parasites they had been considered in the Old World. Young Jewish intellectuals, therefore, sought to take advantage of this new and unprecedented freedom, which American seemed to promise.¹²

As they sought to move into the American mainstream, however, they found their advance blocked by anti-Semitism, which had greatly increased during the decade following World War I as the result of a potent combination of fashionable pseudoscientific racist thought and as an effect of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The experience worsened during the 1930s, which was an extremely formative period for those Jewish intellectuals who wanted to move into the American mainstream. Opportunities for Jews were increasingly hard to find, and Jewishness was found to be both a handicap and an impediment, particularly in academia. Because of an increasing perception of a “Jewish problem,” the major Ivy League schools introduced quota systems to bar Jews.¹³ For those Jews who were affected, the answer to anti-Semitism lay outside of their communities of origin. They had learned that although their Jewishness restricted their opportunities, their communities could not provide outlets for their creative impulses either. Instead, such Jews began to look outside the Jewish communities and found solutions within those communities that stressed universalism rather than ethnic particularism. In their search for “place,” young Jewish intellectuals overtly rejected particularistic ethnic characteristics and embraced the new concepts of cosmopolitanism and universalism promised by Marxism and its variant forms. Not only did these theories explain the roots of the economic crash that had destroyed their aspirations, but they were also perceived to be the solution to the problem of “homelessness” or “alienation” for which Jews were considered to be the central symbol.¹⁴

The experiences of anti-Semitism led to a marked intellectual shift away from the Jewish community. Where many had contributed to

the overtly Jewish *Menorah Journal*, they now wrote for Marxist organs. The problem of Jewish identity, it was felt, could be solved not through a particularistic communal identification as Jews but through their positions as universal citizens. The embrace of Marxism was part of the Jewish intellectuals' search for a community to replace the Jewish one they denied and the American one denied to them. Furthermore, membership in the Communist Party offered those concrete advantages denied to them by the lack of institutional affiliation, most importantly, access to the wider world through small magazines. Rejecting their immigrant backgrounds and rejected by America, young Jewish intellectuals discovered a new community in which they were accepted, it seems, without prejudice. Marxism offered a "sense of belonging."¹⁵ Jews were welcomed as equals and were comforted by the promise of egalitarianism, further nourished by the Soviet experiment, which initially appeared to be the very model of an egalitarian society, spurning anti-Semitism and discrimination. More important, according to Terry Cooney, Marxism and the radical movement "promised acceptance, belonging, opportunity—a home and a career."¹⁶ At last, it seemed, these alienated intellectuals had found a home and a community.

These feelings of security, however, were soon to be destroyed for many. The community of organizational Marxism became unacceptable for the young Jewish intellectuals, just as the Jewish community had been before it. Although distaste for the Communist Party was felt throughout the 1930s, for many it provided the only significant force for organization, and hence retained their continued allegiance. This distaste, however, soon began to develop into desertions. Rather than offering solutions to anti-Semitism, communism seemed to exacerbate it. Stalin manifested increasingly anti-Jewish impulses as his denunciations of the Bolshevik old guard progressed, compounded by his persecution of Leon Trotsky. Accordingly, the earliest conversions away from the Party to anti-Stalinism began to occur in 1933–1934, following news of the Moscow Trials. Other desertions followed with the second round of the Moscow Trials, which were reported in America during 1936–1937. The experience of the Spanish Civil War, and finally the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939, convinced many others who had not yet left the party to do so. Not only had communism not

destroyed anti-Semitism but it had allied itself to those who most actively and openly advocated it.¹⁷

Eventually abandoning organized Marxism and the Communist Party, the young Jewish intellectuals regrouped around the newly reformulated *PR*. Although *PR* had been launched under the auspices of the John Reed Club, a Communist Party organization dedicated to promoting the creation of a proletarian literature and the training of radical writers, its editors had from the beginning made it clear that they did not share the party's cultural assumptions. The editors of *PR* objected to the party's domineering behavior and to its attacks on avant garde literature. Around the time of the second wave of desertions, the editors had drawn up plans for a new, autonomous *PR*. These plans were announced in 1937, and issues of the new *PR* appeared soon after. *PR* subsequently developed into the focal point for those leftist but anti-Stalinist intellectuals who had abandoned the party. The magazine became an independent publication of Marxist opinion.

In spite of its "new start," however, *PR* still continued to manifest clearly Marxist modes of thought, which primarily took the form of Trotskyism. Trotskyism represented a good vehicle for anti-Stalinism and for criticism of the party because Trotsky's estrangement from Stalin meant that he was free of stigma and of responsibility for the nature of the violent regime that had developed in the Soviet Union. Although the Communist Party and its official organs were abandoned, Marxism per se was not.¹⁸

The result of this move away from party was the establishment of Jewish literary, rather than Halakic, communities. Bereft of the services offered by the Communist Party, and in the absence of any other institutional sponsor, *PR* in effect began to discharge the functions of a sponsor, shaping a distinctive communal identity. Appearing among the pages of *PR* signified community membership and was a badge of acceptance.¹⁹ The *PR* circle had to mark itself off from the American mainstream, Stalinism, and the Jewish community, as well as produce its own peculiar brand of discourse based on notions of marginalization, detachment, separation, and independence.²⁰ The overt abandonment of Marxism led to a subsequent investment in Modernism because it privileged the outsider, autonomy, and critique of bourgeois society. In this way, *PR* attempted to build a "commu-

nity of discourse"²¹ that rejected Jewishness as a central defining feature. Much of this circle was also drawn in by a shared anti-Stalinism, which served to bind the group together. The *PR* circle stood for a cosmopolitanism that advocated an expansive and comprehensive culture based on an open society that valued free discussion and the interchange of ideas in a meritocratic environment, whereby no individual or group was to be excluded on the grounds of heritage. Instead, ethnic and other differences were viewed as contributing to the general outlook of the group, and bigotry and insularity were rejected in the name of cosmopolitanism. Jews, by this view, should support the notion of an open democratic society and should thus oppose both fascism and Stalinism. This approach did not require the abandonment of Jewishness; rather, it valued the contributions that particular ethnicities could make to the broader, more universal culture.²² Throughout these transitions, however, these Jewish intellectuals never lost a sense of community. Their cultural wanderings through the 1930s constituted a search for a community to replace those they did not want or could not have.

The effect of World War II and the extermination of European Jewry persuaded many Jewish intellectuals to reconsider their Jewishness. The cumulative effect of anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust, led to a drastic reawakening of Jewish memories in the late 1940s. These intellectuals were always searching for a place in American intellectual life outside of their own Jewish community. Having been alienated (once or twice), as they believed they were, they wanted to solve the problem of rootlessness and find a home. The attempted solutions of Marxism, cosmopolitanism, and modernism had all failed and misled them, as none of these philosophies had prevented Hitler. Instead, the war had increased their sense of identification with both the American and the Jewish communities.²³ Through service in the U.S. Army or in federal wartime agencies such as the Office of Strategic Services, Jewish intellectuals felt a greater identification with the national community because it offered a more effective form of comradeship than the party membership card, as individual fates were bound with that of the national community.²⁴

The postwar period witnessed a resurfacing of Jewish identity, which may have been at least in part a direct result of the Holocaust.

Irving Howe recalled how many grew increasingly interested in Jewish concerns and “timid reconsiderations of what it meant to be Jewish.”²⁵ Some manifested this resurgence in the form of practice, holding the traditional Seder ceremony,²⁶ and Alfred Kazin reflected this change in his attitude when describing the effect of listening to the radio in 1945: “I heard the liberated Jewish prisoners in Belsen say the *Shema*—‘Hear O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One.’ Weeping in the rain, I said it with them. For a moment I was home.”²⁷ Midge Decter summed up the change for many young Jewish intellectuals when she said, “To put it much too crudely, Hitler taught them that they were Jews.”²⁸ To which Howe added, “We knew but for an accident of geography we might also now be bars of soap.”²⁹ As a result of the Holocaust, these Jewish intellectuals discovered that they could not escape from their inscribed Jewishness whether they actively chose to or not, acknowledging the irreversibility of their identities. The Holocaust reawakened the Jewish impulses that they had tried to suppress for so long. It came to be realized, therefore, that Jewishness was almost somatic, as if marked on their bodies, which Norman Podhoretz referred to as “Hitler’s altogether irrefutable demonstration of the inescapability of Jewishness.”³⁰

Jewish intellectuals convinced of their inescapable Jewishness began to use it as the materials for a renewed self-fashioning. They looked to the traditions and memories of Judaism as the available discourses and community in which they could position themselves. The postwar period witnessed a reawakening of interest in Jewish culture, heritage, and history. The abandonment of organized Marxism had left a void in the aftermath of World War II, and many of the intellectuals who had been involved in Marxism felt that the combination of intellectualism and Jewishness could fill it. The AJC presciently sensed this change: In 1944, it ran a symposium in its journal, the *Contemporary Jewish Record (CJR)* entitled, “Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews,” to which many young Jewish intellectuals formerly associated with the *PR* community contributed.³¹ The *CJR* asked questions about the relationship between the Jewish writer and his or her heritage and asked whether there were any notable distinctions between Jews and Gentiles engaged in literary endeavors. The symposium it-

self was a manifestation of the Jewish intellectuals' renewed sense of Jewish identification. As Stephen Longstaff has put it: "in even deigning to answer the *CJR* questions, they were acknowledging (back-handedly, to be sure) their own tenuous Jewish ties."³² Before this event, almost no one associated with *PR* had written for the *CJR*, with the exception of Hannah Arendt.

With the appearance of the symposium, however, Jewish intellectuals, such as Sidney Hook, Harold Rosenberg, Saul Bellow, Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, David Bazelon, Nathan Glazer, and Clement Greenberg, began to contribute to and edit the magazine. Perhaps the shrewdest acknowledgment of this change was the decision of its editor, Adolph S. Oko, to hire Philip Rahv, a former editor of *PR*, as Managing Editor. Fully appreciative of Rahv's links to the *PR* community, Oko hired him in an attempt to bring these "alienated" Jewish intellectuals back into the Jewish community,³³ yet the AJC did not consider this measure far-reaching enough. The AJC also acknowledged "the need for a journal of significant thought and opinion on Jewish affairs," proposing a new publication, *Commentary*, to provide for that need.³⁴

The relationship of Jewish intellectuals to their community of origin, however, was not initially a harmonious one. They scorned what they perceived as the middle-class, liberal, bourgeois institutions of the Jewish community, and this sense of distrust was mutual, producing a distance between the two groups. As a consequence, many Jewish intellectuals did not claim to speak for their communities or its official institutions. The AJC's initiative in forming *Commentary* to replace the earlier *CJR* was an attempt to build that bridge and to overcome mutual differences. Norman Podhoretz wrote of Elliot Cohen's "dream" to arrange "reconciliation" between the intellectuals and the Jewish community:³⁵ Cohen called for greater collaboration between the Jewish intellectuals and the Jewish community to create a more symbiotic relationship. He acknowledged that "the future of Jewish heritage in America" is primarily dependent on the intellectuals, and only secondarily on the "community elders and our institutions." Although the intellectual displays a "hunger for some group attachment" she or he also exhibits a reticence that "such communities, if they exist, will welcome him."³⁶

Many of the intellectuals, it seemed, could be persuaded (under the right conditions) to move back into the Jewish fold and away from the universalism that had failed them—and many did so under the aegis of *Commentary* magazine. The AJC thus became a major agent in this institutionalization, through its magazine, as *Commentary* dispensed the functions of an academic community, providing both careers and opportunities for publishing. This reawakened community was revitalized and refocused around *Commentary*, and a new community of discourse was constructed that accounted for the new realities of the postwar world following the devastation of Europe and the emergence of the United States as a new world superpower.

Commentary first appeared in November 1945 and superseded the *CJR*, which had been published by the AJC since 1938. *CJR* had been a bimonthly small-scale operation, whereas it was desired that *Commentary* would be “a new magazine, coming out more frequently, monthly, with a larger appeal, less scholarly, less a record of events and more a magazine,” and that would appeal to a wider readership than that of the *CJR*.³⁷ John Slawson, the vice president of the AJC, recalled that “when we created *Commentary*, we wished to have a journal of the highest quality that could be concerned with matters of a universal import but that would also include a considerable number of articles on Jewish content and specifically, of Jewish concern.”³⁸ To this end, in his first editorial statement, Elliot Cohen placed great stress on Jewish tradition. He later expressed the primary change: “The main difference between *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* is that we admit to being a Jewish magazine and they don’t.”³⁹

Commentary was theoretically allowed to operate with intellectual autonomy. It was never explicitly intended to function as either a public relations journal for the AJC or as a forum for its philosophies. According to Norman Podhoretz, who later replaced Cohen as editor, “the AJC understood that unless the editor of the new magazine were given a free hand and protected from any pressures to conform to the committee’s own line, the result would be a pretentious house organ and nothing more.”⁴⁰ Instead, Podhoretz recalled, “the AJC’s mandate to Cohen had been to produce ‘a journal of opinion on Jewish affairs and contemporary issues’ that would be nonpartisan with regard to the often bitter politics of the Jewish community but that would also

square with 'the Committee's own program to fight bigotry, protect human rights, and promote Jewish cultural interest and achievement in America.'"⁴¹ Podhoretz concluded that, "What the AJC probably envisaged was a kind of Jewish *Harper's*, only more scholarly."⁴²

As a consequence, the AJC granted full "editorial freedom" to *Commentary's* editor and staff. According to Podhoretz, this editorial independence "consisted simply in this: no person except the editor or anyone he might voluntarily wish to consult could read articles in advance of publication or could dictate what should or should not appear in the magazine."⁴³ The journal has been seen as a unique enterprise in this respect: No other organization has sponsored a publication and then left it to operate independently. Although the magazine was a creation of the AJC and was funded by it, both parties assert that the editorial board has always been autonomous. This claim of "editorial freedom" is valid to a point, in that the AJC never exercised any direct control over the publication in terms of its content. However, the term belies the true nature of the relationship between *Commentary* and its institutional sponsor, the exact nature of which will be delineated below, as it is essential to understanding the space in which the magazine was allowed to operate and how this affected its content.

Commentary was established as a separate administrative arm of the AJC, yet it was still part of the committee. A Publications Committee, which was largely responsible for the magazine's business affairs, oversaw the magazine and was also responsible to the AJC's Budget and Evaluation Committee. The Publications Committee acted in a purely advisory capacity. It was composed of lay members who met infrequently—as little as once a year. It had no policy-making role and concerned itself largely with the business and budgetary matters of the magazine.⁴⁴ Throughout this period, the magazine was funded by the AJC and represented a significant proportion of the committee's expenditures. Many executive members of the AJC who questioned that spending did not unhesitatingly accept this state of affairs. It was the role of the Publications Committee to defend the magazine at budget hearings and to ensure that the AJC's money was well spent.⁴⁵

Initially, Elliot Cohen, the first editorial appointment, was offered "complete administrative autonomy and was not to be a member of