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INTRODUCTION

“I wish I had a little Jew in me,” Theodore Roosevelt once mused to a friend. Mere wishing would indeed mark the limits of Roosevelt’s claim to Jewish ancestry—not a drop of Jewish blood coursed through his veins. If anything, he was the ultimate insider of the Protestant elite that had long dominated American life. His father descended from a wealthy family whose eminence in Manhattan dated back generations. His mother was a Southern belle from Georgia whose lineage included a delegate to the Continental Congress. Theodore lived a life consistent with his patrician pedigree, enrolling at Harvard, serving as a military officer, and seizing the grandest prize of all: the Oval Office.¹

This silver-spooned statesman who had grown up in the fashionable neighborhood of Gramercy Park in New York had little in common with the Yiddish-speaking immigrants moistening their brows in the sweatshops of the Lower East Side just a short walk away. Roosevelt’s privileged path was even further removed from the dreadful subsistence of Jews struggling to survive in Eastern Europe. And yet, for all the differences between Roosevelt and embattled Jews on both sides of the Atlantic, their causes became pivotal to his presidency. He would help shape their lives—and they, in turn, his legacy.

When an assassin’s bullet felled William McKinley and catapulted Vice President Roosevelt to the White House in 1901, few could have imagined the central role that Jewish issues would play in TR’s administration. But those issues would make front-page headlines, feature in State of the Union messages, and become rallying cries in political

campaigns. It is striking, then, how little ink historians have spilled on the Jewish dimensions of his presidential tenure. Many excellent volumes do comprehensively cover other aspects of Roosevelt's statecraft. Yet his Jewish affairs—diplomatic and domestic—have never before received book-length treatment. This study offers the first, surfacing numerous historical sources that were previously unexplored in the vast canon of Roosevelt scholarship.



Notwithstanding Roosevelt's blue-blooded background, arguably no predecessor of his would have arrived at the White House better prepared to address antisemitism abroad and its ripple effects at home. He served as New York's enterprising police commissioner in the mid-1890s, becoming a conspicuous presence on the Lower East Side. Nowhere else in America did Eastern European Jewish immigrants concentrate in such immense numbers. To New Yorkers, it was simply "the East Side." Jewish crowds crammed into local venues to hear Commissioner Roosevelt espouse his egalitarian ethos. He also sought to undermine antisemitic tropes about Jewish frailty by encouraging the neighborhood's brawny Jews to join his police force. And at East Side nuptials, Roosevelt even escorted Jewish brides to their wedding receptions.²

Soon TR was famously leading the Rough Riders into battle, where Jewish volunteers joined their mustachioed colonel in facing down Spanish snipers amid the Cuban hills. He took great pride in those Jewish soldiers, especially one nicknamed "Pork Chop." Roosevelt quickly translated his military renown into a successful gubernatorial race in New York. From the governor's mansion, he descended into the bowels of the East Side tenements to see for himself the Jewish garment workers slaving over sewing machines in hazardous conditions for paltry wages. TR consequently rallied the state legislature to implement major reforms.³

Roosevelt's deep history with the Jewish community would lend him insight and credibility when he seized the reins of presidential power at the record age of forty-two and confronted a vexing series of Jewish

issues. Yet his past experiences with Jewry only took him so far in forging a better future for Jews. With each challenge, he found himself navigating dueling demands. The opposing forces acting on Roosevelt at any given moment were often impossible to reconcile. This book argues that the combustion of those forces resulted in two Theodore Roosevelts. One inspired his Jewish constituents; the other disappointed them. One spoke up for persecuted Jews overseas; the other kept a studied silence. One roundly repudiated Jew-hatred; the other indulged in antisemitic tropes. One warmly embraced Jewish immigrants; the other sought to limit their admission. One called on Jewish newcomers to honor their heritage; the other expected their homogenized assimilation. One advanced Jewish causes selflessly for humane principles; the other did so self-servingly for electoral politics. In short, Roosevelt personified the contradictions and complexities of the nation that elected him.



The thorniest dilemma involved crafting an American response to Russia's barbarous breed of Jew-baiting. From the czar's throne in the capital of St. Petersburg, Nicholas II ruled over half the world's Jews. They endured debilitating restrictions: schools instituted quotas on Jewish students, professional guilds curbed Jewish membership, and huge swaths of Russian territory excluded Jewish residents. As severe as these strictures were, no one yet knew when the twentieth century dawned that Russian Jewry was on the eve of its greatest crisis yet.⁴

Roosevelt's tenure in office happened to coincide with an appalling wave of mob attacks against Russia's Jews known as pogroms—a Russian term meaning “devastation.” For three horrifying years, marauding gangs of ordinary Russians routinely slaughtered their Jewish neighbors. Sometimes Russian authorities passively watched the butchery; other times they actively encouraged it. Never before in the dark history of that empire had Jewish blood flowed so freely. Most Russian Jews lacked the means to flee the corpse-strewn rubble of their communities, where they lived under the omnipresent threat of the next massacre. These catastrophic circumstances prompted Roosevelt

to engage in an ongoing calculus about how to stanch the Jewish bloodbath.⁵

Certainly, Russia wasn't the only country whose antisemitism begged Roosevelt's attention. So did Romania and Morocco. Roosevelt felt relatively emboldened in confronting those weaker states over their anti-Jewish bigotry. But Russia had far more power than these other nations. It also had far more Jews. Nowhere else were the risks—and the stakes—of Roosevelt's Jewish diplomacy so high. America was just then emerging as a major player in the global arena, and Jews the world over anxiously waited to see whether Roosevelt would use his nation's newfound stature to advance a humanitarian vision in the czar's dominions.⁶

As Roosevelt contemplated his options, several variables weighed in favor of a diplomatic intervention on behalf of Russian Jewry. TR harbored a longstanding affinity for the Jewish people and genuinely abhorred the atrocities visited upon them. He was also drawn to the idea of America as a moral lodestar in the world. Many of his constituents felt the same way. They were aghast at the gruesome details of Russian-Jewish life—men savagely beaten, women serially violated, children tragically orphaned. Across the United States, mass protests of Jews and Gentiles pleaded for their president to intercede. They imagined that if Roosevelt forcefully spoke out, his words would affirm America's high-minded ideals and shame Russia into reversing its repression.⁷

But countervailing considerations advised against a rebuke of Russia. European officials were unnerved that Roosevelt would potentially flout a strong diplomatic norm that forbade one country from meddling in another's domestic affairs. Roosevelt's own State Department was similarly alarmed at that prospect. Rumors flew—with more validity than the president realized—that his secretary of state might resign over TR's possible intervention.⁸ And any American remonstrance of Russia would carry substantial risks. It could alienate the czarist regime, which would resist the perception that St. Petersburg took orders from Washington. The Russians could retaliate by closing prized ports to U.S. trade or, even worse, severing diplomatic ties entirely. Roosevelt also fretted that issuing public denunciations of pogroms might actually exacerbate problems for Russia's Jews. Although he didn't specify what problems

he foresaw, undoubtedly his fear was that Russian Gentiles who resented America's bid to shame them might reassert their pride by further lashing out at their Jewish neighbors. Complicating matters was America's own scourge of mob violence directed at a marginalized minority—if Roosevelt admonished Russia over its Jewish carnage, he risked provoking an embarrassing censure from St. Petersburg about the ruthless lynching of Blacks in the United States. Perhaps most significantly, no other head of state in the world had dared to confront Russia over the pogroms. Roosevelt would be going it alone.⁹ These fraught factors underscore an exasperating truth about international affairs: evil in the world may be unambiguous, but determining the optimal diplomatic response is rarely straightforward. Amid profound uncertainties and competing exigencies, Roosevelt pursued an ever-changing foreign policy with Russia.

At times, Roosevelt defied both the czar and international custom by emphatically championing the cause of Russia's Jews. He insisted the United States had a "manifest duty" to condemn the brutality that pogromists inflicted on Jewish victims. Grateful Jews in America celebrated him for his rhetorical defense of their coreligionists abroad. Roosevelt's approach at such moments should suggest a reappraisal of his famous maxim, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," by which he meant backstopping diplomacy with armed force. That aphorism did fairly describe Roosevelt's imperial disposition toward Latin America. But in his willingness to challenge Russia absent any military threat, we see a striking illustration of the reverse: Roosevelt spoke loudly with no stick at all.¹⁰

In other instances, however, he opted for public silence. Conditions periodically required him to promote Russian-Jewish interests covertly and thereby forgo popular credit. Sometimes he deemed it prudent to abstain from even private entreaties to St. Petersburg, especially when Russian society at large began to spiral into a violent abyss. Despite his compassion for oppressed Jews, Roosevelt harbored significant doubts about America's ability to police the world. His calculated reserve at such times frustrated his Jewish supporters at home. But it should also serve to complicate accusations of "cowboy diplomacy" that his critics

leveled against him in his day and thereafter. Roosevelt has often been derided for applying a Wild West approach to global affairs and violently thrashing about the world stage.¹¹ To be sure, he oversaw an aggressive expansion of American influence in the Western Hemisphere. But declassified records from Roosevelt's Jewish diplomacy reveal his keen sensitivity to shifting context. We find in that version of Roosevelt not so much cowboy bravado as careful calibration.¹²

Another noteworthy feature of Roosevelt's foreign relations was his tendency to relocate decision-making on Jewish matters away from the State Department and toward an inner circle of Jewish allies. Only one of his Jewish confidants even worked for his administration. Roosevelt was perfectly content to resolve key questions of Jewish diplomacy through, say, a freewheeling conversation over lunch at his summer house with a handful of informal Jewish advisors. The State Department often found itself reduced to executing orders instead of driving policy. And Roosevelt's Jewish associates didn't merely guide his thinking on Jewish issues. They also pursued their own shadow diplomacy, directly beseeching foreign officials to alleviate Jewish suffering. In Roosevelt, these Jewish leaders found a partner willing to discreetly augment their efforts through his own channels.¹³

The composition of Roosevelt's Jewish brain trust reflects a schism in Jewish life in that era. His Jewish foreign policy concerned the great mass of Eastern European Jews who subsisted on meager earnings and Orthodox pieties. Yet Roosevelt didn't consult immigrants who had freshly fled that benighted world. Instead, he relied on the counsel of elite American Jews whose profiles were very different from their persecuted coreligionists overseas—his advisors were Central European in their origin, rich in their resources, and Reform in their Judaism. They lived in Upper East Side townhomes, not Lower East Side tenements. For all Roosevelt's handshaking and speechifying in Jewish slums, behind closed doors he depended on the kind of assimilated Jew he might have once met amid the verdant quads of Harvard Yard or at a posh party in an uptown brownstone.¹⁴



Antisemitism posed problems not just beyond America's borders but also within them. Roosevelt well knew that Jew-hatred had significant purchase on his own country. After all, many of his best friends were antisemites. The elites who populated his social stratum were often aghast at the specter of their summer resorts and prep schools becoming overrun with affluent Jews. Nor did these genteel Anglo-Saxons thrill to the immiserated Jewish immigrants flooding their city streets.¹⁵

Roosevelt may have hobnobbed with bigots, but that didn't mean he let their prejudice stand unanswered. Shortly after his college graduation, Roosevelt castigated fellow members of a Republican club who wanted to reject a Jewish applicant on religious grounds.¹⁶ Likewise, a Roosevelt companion once claimed in print that no Jew should become a military officer, prompting TR to press him, "Don't you think this criticism was unjust?"¹⁷ And after hosting a novelist for an afternoon at the Harvard Club, Roosevelt noticed that the writer's newest short story featured a Jewish antagonist but exclusively Gentile protagonists. "There ought also to be a Jew among them!" urged Roosevelt.¹⁸ The best indicator of TR's goodwill toward Jews wasn't his vocal defense of Jews in public, where he stood to score points with Jewish constituencies. It was, rather, his willingness in private moments to risk alienating friends over their intolerance of Jews when he had nothing to gain.

American antisemitism was hardly limited to Anglo-Saxon aristocrats who knocked back champagne flutes at Newport parties while scoffing about Jewish bankers. Heartland farmers and urban slum-dwellers also engaged in their share of Judeophobia. All manner of stereotypes gained traction across these varied segments of society: Jews were puppet masters manipulating Gentiles; Jews were perverted seducers of Christian girls; Jews were rapacious capitalists bamboozling the common people. But America wasn't uniformly prejudiced toward Jewry. The nation had a philosemitic streak that cherished the Jewish community. Many Gentiles extended a helpful hand to Jewish immigrants and denounced Jew-hatred in its many forms.¹⁹

Roosevelt embodied that very contradiction. He repeatedly repudiated antisemitism, and yet Roosevelt himself periodically peddled the

kind of prejudice he condemned from others. TR once derided a Jewish journalist as a “circumcised skunk.” And in a letter to a friend, Roosevelt employed the antisemitic epithet “sheeny” to describe a Jewish politician. The word “sheeny” was sufficiently offensive by the standards of TR’s own era that his friend doctored Roosevelt’s letter before it appeared in a published collection of their correspondence. Roosevelt also occasionally suffered from delusions that furtive Jewish machinations lay behind troubling global developments.²⁰

His antisemitism and philosemitism didn’t always sit in tension; they sometimes fused together in unexpected ways. As police commissioner, he wanted to gather Jewish officers for an important opportunity, but Roosevelt engaged in stereotyping by instructing a subordinate to identify Jewish policemen based solely on their facial features: “the stronger their ancestral marking, the better,” Roosevelt insisted. During his presidency, he made a historic appointment of a Jew to a major office; however, TR indelicately suggested that younger Jews should look up to that appointee as the “ideal of the successful man rather than some crooked Jew money-maker.” And after his administration, Roosevelt praised Jewish children for outpacing their Gentile counterparts in school, yet by asserting that “the Jewish children are very much brighter than the American,” he implied that Jewish students were somehow not quite American.²¹

In paradoxically melding philosemitic and antisemitic sentiments, Roosevelt was actually typical of innumerable American Gentiles. One historian of Jew-hatred has perceptively observed, “A stereotype may express ambivalent emotions. It may blend affection and contempt. . . . Many Americans were both pro- and anti-Jewish at the same time.”²² Roosevelt’s own mixture of benevolence and bias toward Jews does not appear to have damaged his standing with his Jewish constituents—perhaps because Jews themselves sometimes advanced Jewish interests by relying on antisemitic stereotypes. For example, the czar’s regime genuinely believed that Jews manufactured public opinion in the United States, and Roosevelt’s Jewish-American allies were more than happy to leverage that unfounded paranoia in their shadow diplomacy with Russian officials.²³



Roosevelt's views about Jewish immigration were similarly conflicted. From colonial times until McKinley's death—a period stretching a quarter-millennium—America had amassed a Jewish population of one million. It took only the seven-and-a-half years of Roosevelt's presidency to nearly double that figure, as Jewish survivors of persecution packed the docks at American ports. This unprecedented crush of Jewish refugees raised hard questions for the nation, both practical and moral. Indigent Jews overwhelmed city slums and saturated the labor market. Whether to receive these desperate souls in unlimited numbers was a difficult quandary. Certainly, Jews weren't the only immigrant group whose inflow generated controversy. But American antisemitism made Jewish migration especially charged.²⁴ Rival imperatives over immigration led to two Theodore Roosevelts: one who earned the devotion of his Jewish constituents and another who elicited their distress.

The first Roosevelt spoke movingly of Jewish immigrant contributions to American life. His administration openly celebrated the idea of the United States as an asylum for the world's downtrodden. Acutely aware that turning back Jewish arrivals often meant consigning them to a grim fate in their lands of origin, TR chastised the Ellis Island commissioner over his questionable deportation of Jews. Roosevelt even made a dramatic visit to that symbolic speck of land in New York harbor to announce a special committee—with Jewish representation—that would expose prejudicial practices. Most strikingly of all, Roosevelt entrusted the oversight of immigration law to a foreign-born Jew, an audacious move in an era when many "old stock" Americans were in thrall to xenophobia.²⁵

But Roosevelt aggrieved his Jewish friends by backing a congressional bill that threatened to close the gates to the most marginal Jewish immigrants. The bill sought to make literacy in any language a prerequisite for admission into the country. Although neutral on its face, the bill would disproportionately reject Eastern European Jews, whose literacy rates were much lower than newcomers from the likes of England or Denmark. Roosevelt's intentions weren't sinister in endorsing the

bill. He worried that immigrants who had already settled stateside would struggle to overcome poverty if their wages and living conditions were perpetually suppressed by an unrestricted deluge of foreign labor. A literacy test, Roosevelt maintained, could check industries that were taking unfair advantage of mass migration.²⁶

Even so, Roosevelt's position alienated his Jewish allies. They rightly fretted that a literacy test would pose an existential threat for countless Jews seeking to escape habitual bouts of butchery overseas. And Roosevelt's support for the bill placed him on the same side as prominent xenophobes—or "nativists"—who wanted to attenuate Jewish immigration for fear it was corrupting the nation's racial purity. The bill ultimately failed to pass, but no thanks to the president.²⁷

His odd confluence with nativists on the literacy test wasn't the only strange dynamic that immigration engendered in American political life. Recent Jewish arrivals, who favored an open door on immigration, found themselves aligned with the very industrial interests that exploited them. Meanwhile, some antisemitic nativists joined American Jewry in demanding pro-Jewish reforms in Russia. These nativists hoped that improved circumstances for the czar's Jewish subjects would stem the succession of steamships filled with Russian Jews clutching one-way tickets to Ellis Island.²⁸

In perhaps the most counterintuitive development, Roosevelt's closest Jewish advisor—who usually embraced Jewish immigration—encouraged TR to officially lament the Jewish influx from Romania. The origins of this peculiar tactic resulted from the diplomatic protocol that discouraged a given country from criticizing another's internal affairs, even on humanitarian grounds. Roosevelt's Jewish aide prevailed upon him to adopt the following pretextual argument: because Romanian antisemitism prompted a Jewish exodus to American shores that purportedly burdened the United States, Romania's Jew-hatred was an *international* issue and thus susceptible to American reproach.²⁹

In truth, Roosevelt had no qualms about admitting Romanian-Jewish refugees—they then numbered fewer than seven thousand annually—but he understood the merit of posturing as if he did. By citing America's self-interest in reducing immigration, the Roosevelt administration

was able to issue a rebuke of Romanian bigotry while paying heed to diplomatic norms. This episode runs counter to the commonplace judgment that America's foreign policy has repeatedly used the language of altruism to camouflage a self-serving agenda. To be sure, that critique does fairly describe numerous incidents in the nation's history. But the Roosevelt administration's censure of Romania offers a stunning example of the opposite: America's disingenuous invocation of its self-interest to justify what was actually a humanitarian endeavor.³⁰



It doesn't follow, however, that Roosevelt's intentions in his Jewish diplomacy were purely magnanimous. His international statecraft bore an intimate relationship to his pursuit of the Jewish vote at home. Roosevelt was a political animal whose ascent began in New York City, where the booming Jewish population enjoyed increasing clout with each new campaign season. Even as Roosevelt reached the national stage, he remained ever mindful of newly naturalized Jews who flocked to polling stations on election days. His Jewish diplomacy became his central pitch to these voters.

Roosevelt made sure that his resistance to antisemitism abroad featured in his party platform, his nomination acceptance, and surrogate speeches. So attuned was Roosevelt to the Jewish vote that he even let his electoral ambitions dictate certain foreign policy decisions. Amid the height of his reelection bid in 1904, for instance, Roosevelt empowered the chairman of the Republican National Committee to opportunistically declassify State Department records that would reveal a recent clandestine effort by TR on behalf of Jews. And during another election cycle, Roosevelt appeased Jewish voters by placing incessant pressure on his secretary of state to reverse an extradition ruling that would have returned a Russian émigré to the bear's claws. It would go too far to suggest that Roosevelt's Jewish diplomacy was exclusively a tool of his electioneering—after all, he sometimes secretly advanced Jewish causes overseas without any intent or attempt to later garner public credit. But it would be obtuse to ignore his willingness, whenever November grew

near in even-numbered years, to make foreign policy the handmaiden of domestic politics.³¹

Given his vast remit as president, Roosevelt's granular attention to the Jewish vote is rather remarkable. One might think that a sitting head of state—responsible for a breathtaking array of challenges—wouldn't have time to peruse obscure Jewish periodicals. But when a Jewish college student published an article endorsing Roosevelt's reelection in a monthly magazine called *Menorah*, TR gushed about the piece to a friend. Nor did Roosevelt's presidential duties preclude him from keeping a close eye on municipal Jewish politics back in New York City. He was indignant when the local Republican Party put forward a slate of judicial nominees for the city bench that featured merely a secular Jew and not also an Orthodox candidate. Indeed, Roosevelt personally intervened to remedy the omission.³²

Roosevelt's consistent focus on the Jewish electorate paid dividends at the ballot box. Naturally, he found favor with assimilated Jews who conventionally voted Republican; the genuinely striking feature of Roosevelt's electoral success is that he fared so well with Democratic-leaning Jewish immigrants. It is a testament to his popularity with the latter set of Jews that Roosevelt pulled off an extraordinary coup for a Republican presidential nominee: he actually won the Lower East Side. In another measure of his Jewish support, Roosevelt outran every last down-ballot Republican at East Side polling stations. TR's astounding performance with Jewish constituents demonstrates that their appreciation of his boldest actions in Jewish diplomacy far outweighed their frustration with his more cautious moments.



Roosevelt's pitch to Jewish voters was, like nearly all else, riddled with contradiction. He often decried identity politics, insisting that he paid Jews in the United States the respect of treating them as simply Americans. Roosevelt esteemed the notion of civic life as a realm where common citizenship, not ethnic identity, mattered. But that was a pleasing fiction. Ethnic issues resonated with ethnic voters, Jews among them;

politicians responded accordingly, Roosevelt among them. Whether touting his defiance of the czar or lining up Jewish surrogates to barn-storm the East Side, the reality is that Roosevelt routinely courted Jews as Jews.³³

This tension between identity-neutral and identity-centric politics frequently surfaced when Roosevelt exercised his power of appointment. He regularly espoused the importance of religious diversity in his hiring. But Roosevelt was equally attracted to a competing conceit: the government workforce as an identity-agnostic sphere where talent alone counted. These dueling strains in his thought led to a fair degree of incoherence—in one breath he would remark on the need to deliberately include Jews in American governance, and in the next he would deny that religion played any factor in his selection of Jewish appointees. Roosevelt never was able to resolve the conflict between the identity-driven ideal of inclusivity and the identity-free ideal of meritocracy.³⁴

Ambivalence about the pertinence of Jewish identity also characterized his checkered approach to Jewish assimilation. Sometimes Roosevelt emphasized a kind of uniform Americanism that called on Jewish immigrants to leave behind their Old Country ways. The version of Roosevelt who preferred homogenizing assimilation was most pronounced in his enthusiasm for the controversial play *The Melting Pot*. It tells the improbable love story of two young Russian immigrants in New York: a Jewish man whose family was slaughtered in a pogrom, and a Gentile woman whose father perpetrated that very pogrom. Across the United States, Jews panned *The Melting Pot* for effectively expecting them to abandon their heritage and intermarry their way into self-erasure. But Roosevelt saw in the play's storyline the promise of a unified America freed from Old World enmities. He considered *The Melting Pot* one of the greatest influences on his life.³⁵

There was, however, a pluralistic Roosevelt who believed that Jews could integrate into the United States by honoring, not disowning, their culture. He praised Jewish Americans for remaining admirably “loyal to their faith and their race traditions.” And the Jewish tradition that Roosevelt most venerated was the heroism of the Maccabee warriors. He upheld those ancient Jewish rebels as a model for American men of

Jewish faith. TR saw Maccabee lore as a useful antidote to the antisemitic trope that male Jews were feckless cowards. In Roosevelt's estimation, Jewish men needn't shed their heritage to shed that stereotype—to the contrary, they should embrace their own proud legacy of Maccabean valor.³⁶ When Roosevelt once said he wished he had a little Jewish blood in him, he surely meant this archetype of the American Maccabee.



Writing presidential history is often a fraught exercise, Jewish history even more so. The nexus might well be combustible. Some caveats here will hopefully mitigate the risk of readers misinterpreting the book's goals.

In recovering the underappreciated role of Jewish people and Jewish issues to Roosevelt's life, this study doesn't intend to imply that his days comprised an endless succession of Jewish matters. His attention was divided across many other concerns, which have received ample treatment from other scholars. In other words, I seek to enrich our already robust understanding of a multifaceted leader. Precisely because Roosevelt's presidential portfolio was so extensive, he regularly entrusted Jewish allies with the daily management of his Jewish affairs, and he would weigh in at crucial moments—accordingly, some chapters that follow tell their story even more than his. This investigation, moreover, circumscribes its scope to Jewish causes, so it could give the misimpression that Roosevelt engaged those Jewish allies exclusively on Jewish topics; the reality is that he leaned on them for all manner of advice. Another important disclaimer: this volume does refer passingly to other ethnic groups for context, but as every work of scholarship must mark its limits somewhere, a comprehensive discussion of non-Jewish communities lies beyond my ambit here.

When a new book appears on an American president, it is a natural instinct for many readers to reassess that president's reputation—for better or worse—in light of fresh findings. The ensuing chapters may burnish Roosevelt's reputation in some eyes and tarnish it in others. Whether readers close the covers of this book thinking better or worse of the twenty-sixth president is their prerogative. But neither outcome

is the author's aim. The sole ambition of this study is to reckon with the historical record in its full complexity.



The Jewish issues that preoccupied Roosevelt were significant—making front-page headlines, featuring in State of the Union messages, turning up in campaign speeches—because they weren't of consequence to Jews alone. Indeed, they implicated paramount questions of American life. Would the United States become an ascendant voice for moral clarity on the global stage? Would the country serve as a refuge for huddled masses from foreign lands? Would recent arrivals to American shores find that abandoning their heritage was the cost of acceptance? At stake in all these questions was nothing less than America's self-definition. That Roosevelt's answers were so conflicted reflected a nation struggling to know its own soul; that these questions remain contentious still today lends the story of Theodore Roosevelt and the Jews a timeless urgency.

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