6
Anglo-Jewry Mobilises (Summer 1942–Spring 1943)

Recent criticism of Anglo-Jewry’s wartime record has focused almost exclusively on the question of whether sufficient effort was made on behalf of European Jewry. However, analysis of the effort itself has been hitherto lacking, the assumption being that what mattered was the will to achieve results rather than the ingenuity or practicality of individual endeavours. Notwithstanding the desperation and good intentions of the organisations, an element of naïveté and short-termism characterised much of their approach. This inevitably doomed their efforts to failure because, understandably, their exclusive focus on the Jewish tragedy, particularly after the summer of 1942, failed to take account of the wider political and military context within which it took place. The Anglo-Jewish leadership appeared unable to understand the dynamics of global war and incapable of comprehending the subtle and complex calculation with which officials treated its requests. The government was committed to a long-term strategy for winning the war whatever the unavoidable human cost; the organisations, by contrast, took the view that immediate rescue must take precedence. The official documents of this period reveal the government’s politely concealed impatience at the narrow-minded naïveté of the Jewish organisations, which were sagely offering diplomatcally phrased advice on aspects of the conduct of war without regard to logistics or possible consequences.

Until the summer of 1942 Anglo-Jewry still tried to sustain a balanced perspective on the European Jewish problem as both a Jewish and a wider humanitarian issue: ‘Anti-Semitism and its effects are a world problem . . . aiming at the undermining of decent human relations everywhere and endangering world peace.’ By emphasising the malign effects of anti-Semitism on non-Jews as well as Jews, the
Jewish leadership hoped to present the persecution of the Jews as both a Jewish and a non-Jewish issue. Even when the news of the Final Solution broke that summer, Brodetsky still tried to retain the universal perspective on Jewish persecution while at the same time pointing to the special nature of the Final Solution. ‘It is thus clear that the Jewish problem cannot be compared with the usual minority problem, and needs special attention.’ Soon, however, the leadership’s attention turned exclusively to the Jewish nature of the persecution. Contrary to the widely held view of the Anglo-Jewish community as timid and insecure, the documents show that after 1942 it was forceful, if polite, to the point of presumption in virtually instructing the government on its moral responsibilities and the ways in which these might be met. The Board seems at times to have been almost perversely intent on making self-defeating references to Palestine, which it must surely have realised would not be well received, while at the same time deferring perforce to government edict that the only way to help Jews was to win the war.

Certainly in the summer of 1940, the outcome of the war was far from certain. With ‘the defeat of the Low Countries and France between April and June, Britain was now on full alert in anticipation of a Nazi invasion. Though ‘Operation Sea Lion’, the proposed invasion, never materialised, Hitler’s bombing campaign against Britain continued for well over a year, killing tens of thousands of civilians and destroying countless homes. Until 1941 the run of spectacular German successes had been uninterrupted; before December 1941, when the US entered the war following Pearl Harbor, Britain faced Nazi Germany alone. With the fall of France in June 1940, the survival of Britain became the pivot on which the outcome of the war would depend. This could by no means be taken for granted, particularly after the disastrous retreat from Dunkirk. The outcome of the German air offensive, the Battle of Britain, was still uncertain at the end of 1941, while the war at sea, the Battle of the Atlantic, continued into mid-1943. The results of this latter campaign were crucial – ‘Success for the U-boats would have meant the strangulation of British imports, and perhaps even starvation and surrender.’ Even American entry into the war, with its concomitant overwhelming augmentation of resources to the Allies, could not for a long time be perceived as a guarantee of ultimate victory.

It must be borne in mind that the Anglo-Jewish organisations would not have been aware of the true degree of peril facing the country, any more than the population at large, which, for example,