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THE ROAD TO 1936: THE GENEVA PREPARATORY CONFERENCES AND THE BIRTH OF THE WORLD JEWISH CONGRESS

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Abstract

This paper examines the three Geneva preparatory conferences of 1932, 1933, and 1934 that preceded the formal establishment of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) in 1936. It argues that these meetings constituted an experiment in applying democratic constitutionalism to a transnational, non-state collective at a moment when the League of Nations' minority-rights system was faltering and National Socialism was transforming the political landscape. Through an analysis of secondary scholarship and official organizational histories, the article reconstructs the conferences' debates on Jewish peoplehood, economic boycott, the Bernheim petition, refugee protection, and the design of the WJC constitution. It concludes that while the Geneva meetings could not shield European Jewry from the catastrophe that followed, they pioneered techniques of non-state diplomacy and contributed to the later vocabulary of international human rights and minority protection.

Keywords: World Jewish Congress, League of Nations, minority treaties, Bernheim petition, transnationalism, democratic constitutionalism

I. Introduction

In the early 1930s, no single body could plausibly represent "world Jewry" in the burgeoning international organizations landscape. Existing institutions like the Comité des Délégations Juives, established after World War I, functioned as elite lobbying groups rather than democratically elected assemblies. This made them increasingly ill-equipped to tackle the escalating antisemitism crisis in Europe. Meanwhile, the League of Nations' system of minority treaties, intended to safeguard vulnerable populations, proved both cumbersome and

politically fragile.¹

The World Jewish Congress, formally founded in Geneva in August 1936, emerged from preparatory conferences held in Geneva in 1932, 1933 and 1934. Led by Stephen S. Wise and Nahum Goldmann, these conferences weren't just logistical meetings; they aimed to establish a permanent, representative global Jewish body. This body would have a written constitution and elected organs, operating alongside and partly within the League's legal and diplomatic framework.²

This paper argues that the Geneva preparatory conferences represented a radical experiment in democratic constitutionalism for a non-state actor during a time of rising totalitarianism. Rather than a purely reactive response to Nazi persecution, the conferences should be understood within the context of the interwar minority rights regime, the impact of National Socialism and intra-Jewish debates over Zionism and diaspora representation. By doing so, the article seeks to clarify both the limitations and enduring significance of these conferences for international legal history.

II. Method

This argument draws primarily on secondary literature and institutional histories, supplemented by analyses of specific legal episodes like the Bernheim petition. Key works include Mark Mazower's study of the interwar human rights imagination, scholarship on League of Nations minority protections in Upper Silesia and research on Jewish minority diplomacy within organizations such as the Congress of European Nationalities. Official narratives and documentation from the World Jewish Congress and Jewish Virtual Library provide organizational perspectives on aims structures and League engagement.³

Methodologically, the article employs a historical-legal approach. It reconstructs institutional developments and legal strategies, contextualizing them within the League's minority rights procedures and mandates. It doesn't claim to present new archival discoveries but rather synthesizes existing scholarship to interpret the Geneva conferences as a constitutional

¹ Mazower, M. (2004). *No enchanted palace: The end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations*. Princeton University Press.

² World Jewish Congress. (n.d.). *About the WJC*. World Jewish Congress

³ Mazower (2004); World Jewish Congress (n.d.)

experiment in non-state diplomacy. This secondary-source-based method reflects the article's focus on legal-institutional evolution and the practical limitations of working with dispersed archival materials.

III. Crisis of Representation and the Choice of Geneva

Following 1919, the Comité des Délégations Juives emerged as the primary vehicle for Jewish lobbying on the international stage. It represented Jewish communities at the Paris Peace Conference and subsequently served as an intermediary in minority rights petitions to the League of Nations. While the Comité achieved some successes in incorporating minority clauses into new peace treaties, it remained an elite, self-selected body lacking democratic accountability to the diverse Jewish populations it purported to represent. By the late 1920s, the disparity between the Comité's diplomatic efforts and the realities faced by Jews in Eastern and Central Europe due to antisemitic legislation and violence became increasingly apparent. This led to calls, particularly from mass organizations like the American Jewish Congress, for a more representative world congress.⁴

The rise of National Socialism further exacerbated this perceived crisis of representation. As antisemitic measures in Germany intensified after 1933, existing organizations appeared inadequate, overly cautious or fragmented to respond effectively on a global scale. This institutional weakness paved the way for the Geneva preparatory conferences, which served as experiments in constructing a resilient, democratically grounded framework for Jewish representation.

Geneva wasn't chosen by chance; it was the League of Nations' seat and a hub for the burgeoning "supranational laboratory" of minority diplomacy and transnational advocacy. Organizations like the Congress of European Nationalities and international law associations used Geneva to coordinate efforts to expand and enforce minority rights norms. For Jewish activists, gathering there signified a commitment to framing Jewish claims within the same institutional framework where mandates minorities and peace were discussed. Subsequent preparatory conferences in Geneva also fostered informal contacts with League officials' national delegations and other minority representatives, enabling Jewish leaders to explore how a future World Jewish Congress might secure quasi-official recognition or

⁴ Mazower(2004).

consultative status. This early presence would later allow the WJC to build on and secure a recognized role within both the League and, after 1945, the United Nations.⁵

IV. The Interwar Minority-Rights Regime

Post-World War I minority treaties mandated certain newly formed or expanded states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, to guarantee equal civil and political rights to their minorities and accept international oversight through the League of Nations. These commitments were presented as international concerns and, in theory, subject to the League Council's "guarantee," elevating them beyond mere domestic constitutional provisions.

However, in practice, the system encouraged minority petitions but only through indirect channels and stringent procedural filters. Complaints needed to be relayed by states, reviewed confidentially by committees and potentially dismissed or "filed" without public debate. As historians, including legal analyses of the League's petition procedures, have demonstrated, this structure led to some significant interventions but generally favored diplomatic discretion over enforceable rights. Jewish organizations operating through the Comité learned to exploit and resent this system, which heavily relied on great power, will and was susceptible to the League's broader political decline in the 1930s.⁶

V. The rise of National Socialism and the system's limits

Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933 and the rapid enactment of anti-Jewish laws in Germany placed extraordinary strain on the already fragile minority rights regime. The Nazi government framed its policies as internal measures affecting German citizens and rejected the idea that international bodies could legitimately interfere, except where treaty obligations explicitly applied. The Bernheim petition, discussed in detail below, highlighted both the possibilities and the limits of the system by obtaining relief in Upper Silesia under a special treaty regime while failing to affect German policy elsewhere. For Jewish activists, this reinforced the conviction that a stronger, more coherent transnational organization was needed to monitor violations, mobilize public opinion, and press for more robust forms of international protection.⁷

⁵ Mazower(2004).

⁶ Mazower(2004).

⁷ Mazower(2004).

VI. The First Preparatory Conference, Geneva 1932

The first Geneva preparatory conference convened in August 1932, bringing together delegates from various countries. However, some established bodies like the British Board of Deputies and the American Jewish Committee chose to abstain. A key question arose: could Jews be treated as a single “people” for international representation, despite their dispersion, diverse citizenship and internal ideological divisions? Leaders such as Stephen S. Wise and Nahum Goldmann argued that global Jewish interests, ranging from minority protection in Eastern Europe to the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, necessitated a permanent world congress with democratic authority. Critics feared that any assertion of transnational Jewish peoplehood would fuel accusations of dual loyalty and potentially lead governments to restrict Jewish political activity. Consequently, the 1932 debates oscillated between a universalistic claim to speak for “the Jewish people” and a cautious awareness of the limitations imposed by state sovereignty and antisemitic narratives.⁸

The rise of National Socialism and its limitations were evident at the First Preparatory Conference in Geneva in 1932. The conference focused on debating Jewish peoplehood and the concept of a world congress. It ultimately endorsed the goal of convening a full World Jewish Congress, treating the preparatory body not as a temporary crisis committee but as the nucleus of a future permanent institution. Wise publicly presented the Geneva 1932 conference as a success, promising a soon-to-be-held world congress. This forward momentum faced internal skepticism, particularly from figures like Louis Lipsky. Lipsky worried that setting a rapid timetable without broader consultation would weaken rather than strengthen the legitimacy of the enterprise. This tension between urgency in the face of rising antisemitism and a slower, institution-building approach remained a theme throughout all three Geneva conferences.

Even at this early stage, delegates grappled with the problem that the envisioned congress would lack the hallmarks of statehood. It would have no territory, no coercive apparatus, and no direct capacity to sign treaties. Any authority would derive from the voluntary affiliation of national Jewish bodies recognized as representative, and indirectly from recognition by international organizations like the League. This raised difficult constitutional questions: Should only one organization per state be admitted? How could the congress ensure that

⁸ World Jewish Congress (n.d.).

member bodies were themselves democratic? What powers should the congress have over the internal affairs of communities simultaneously subject to domestic law? Early discussions sketched the outlines of a written constitution, a plenary assembly, an executive, and a council, anticipating the structure later adopted in 1936.

VII. The Second Preparatory Conference, 1933: Nazism, Boycott, and the Bernheim Petition

By the time of the second Geneva preparatory conference in 1933, Adolf Hitler had been in power for several months, and Jewish organizations were already grappling with a host of challenges, including dismissals, boycotts, and escalating discrimination in Germany. The situation was dire, and the tone of discussions at the conference shifted dramatically from long-term architectural questions to a sense of immediate emergency. The developments in Germany cast a long shadow over all the debates, influencing the priorities and focus of the conference. The prospective World Jewish Congress was increasingly described not only as a vehicle for global representation of Jewish interests but also as a crucial instrument for mobilizing world opinion and coordinating responses to the growing Nazi threat. The 1933 meeting thus sharpened the link between institutional design and immediate defensive strategy, highlighting the urgent need for a unified Jewish response to the crisis.

One of the most contentious and heated issues at the 1933 conference was whether Jewish organizations should endorse and help coordinate an economic boycott of German goods. This debate was fueled by the ongoing persecution of Jews in Germany and the desire to exert economic pressure on the Nazi regime. Stephen Wise and other advocates of the boycott argued passionately that Jewish consumers and allied groups had a moral and political obligation to respond to Nazi policies with economic pressure. They believed that a boycott could be an effective tool to challenge the oppressive regime and bring attention to the plight of German Jews. On the other hand, opponents of the boycott, including some Anglo-Jewish leaders and cautious figures associated with existing bodies, expressed deep concerns. They worried that an explicit, centrally organized boycott would provoke further reprisals against Jews in Germany and might jeopardize behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts that could potentially yield better outcomes. The debate exposed diverging conceptions of Jewish diplomacy: whether it should prioritize public campaigns and mass mobilization to raise awareness and garner support or rely primarily on quiet lobbying within governmental and

League channels to achieve incremental change.⁹

The 1933 Bernheim petition provided a concrete example of how Jewish organizations could use international law to challenge Nazi measures and seek justice for individuals affected by discriminatory legislation. Franz Bernheim, a Jewish resident of German Upper Silesia, was dismissed under racial legislation and took the bold step of petitioning the League of Nations in May 1933. His petition was based on the 1922 German-Polish accord on Upper Silesia, which contained robust minority rights provisions and an exceptional mechanism allowing individuals to bring complaints directly to the League. After procedural objections by Germany were rejected, the League bodies responsible for the case reached a compromise under which Germany pledged not to apply most anti-Jewish provisions in Upper Silesia until the treaty's expiry in 1937, and Bernheim received compensation for his dismissal. Scholars have described this as one of the few clear successes of the interwar minority rights regime, offering German Jews in Upper Silesia a "few years of calm" in contrast to the rest of the country, where the situation continued to deteriorate. However, the Bernheim episode also dramatized the regime's narrowness: relief depended on a specific regional treaty, was time-limited, and did nothing to alter the broader trajectory of German policy, which remained hostile towards Jews. For advocates of a World Jewish Congress, the Bernheim case illustrated both the potential of legal mobilization to achieve specific victories and the pressing need for an institutional framework capable of systematically identifying such openings and pressing them at the international level to address the broader challenges faced by the Jewish community.¹⁰

VIII. The Third Preparatory Conference, 1934: Constitution-Making and Refugee Politics

By the mid-1930s the League of Nations offered only a limited framework for refugee protection. Earlier refugee arrangements after World War 1 had focused on specific groups like Russians and Armenians under Fridtjof Nansen's guidance. While instruments like the "Nansen's Passport" provided some displaced persons with internationally recognised documentation, refugee protection remained fragmented and dependent on state consent. A comprehensive international refugee system was lacking and states retained broad control over

⁹ Mazower(2004).

¹⁰ Mazower(2004).

immigration policy. These weaknesses became more apparent after 1933 as Jewish Refugees fleeing Nazi Persecution put new pressure on existing international mechanisms. Unlike earlier crises, the Jewish Refugee crisis rapidly intertwined with minority protection statelessness and international policy advocacy. This highlighted the limitations of existing refugee mechanisms strengthening arguments within the Geneva preparatory conferences for a permanent transnational organisation capable of diplomatic representation and coordinating refugee assistance and lobbying. Consequently refugee politics became central to the evolving constitutional vision of the World Jewish Congress itself.

The 1934 Geneva discussions decisively moved towards formal constitutional drafting. Delegates worked on provisions governing the future World Jewish Congress's aims, membership criteria, its organ structure and delegate selection. Later constitutional texts reflected these debates, defining the WJC as a federation of representative Jewish communities and organizations committed to defending Jewish rights, strengthening unity and supporting the Jewish National Home in Palestine. Membership was generally restricted to one nationally representative body per country. The Congress emphasized that only democratic organizations with internal autonomy could affiliate. A plenary assembly served as the supreme authority while a council and executive managed day-to-day affairs.¹¹

By 1934 Jewish leaders faced not only legal discrimination but also growing refugee flows. German and later other Central European Jews sought to leave their countries. Existing relief organizations struggled with limited resources and restrictive immigration policies in potential destination states including Palestine under the British Mandate. Preparatory conferences began linking the WJC's political aims with practical refugee assistance tasks like lobbying for visas, coordinating resettlement and advocating for refugee recognition within League forums. This shift from abstract claims of peoplehood to the logistics of rescue and migration would shape the WJC's wartime activities and post-war involvement in reparations and resettlement.¹²

The third conference further solidified the WJC's ambition to establish itself as a recognized interlocutor within the League of Nations system. This role foreshadowed later "consultative status" for nongovernmental organizations. Even before its formal founding in 1936

¹¹ World Jewish Congress (n.d.).

¹² Mazower(2004).

Goldmann and colleagues were already active in Geneva. They submitted memoranda monitored League agendas and met with officials concerned with minorities and refugees. Following 1936 the WJC would further institutionalize its presence. During the United Nations era it secured special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, solidifying a pattern of engagement originally developed during the Geneva preparatory period. Therefore the 1932–1934 conferences weren't just planning a congress; they were rehearsing a style of non-state diplomacy that would become increasingly prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century.

IX. Analytical Themes

The Geneva preparatory conferences illustrate how a non-state collective, lacking territorial sovereignty, could nonetheless develop diplomatic practices that engaged and sometimes constrained states. Jewish organizations operated as part of broader transnational networks—alongside other minority groups and international associations—using petitions, conferences, memoranda, and public campaigns to influence League debates.

The Bernheim petition stands out as a paradigmatic example: an individual, backed by minority organizations, used a treaty-based petition mechanism to secure tangible relief against a powerful state, even if only within a limited region. As Mazower and others have argued, such episodes shaped later reflections on how international institutions might be re-designed after 1945 to provide stronger individual and group protections, contributing to the genealogy of modern human rights.¹³

Another central theme is the problem of democratic legitimacy in a dispersed and internally diverse population. The WJC model required national Jewish bodies to hold or at least approximate elections, allocate seats, and send delegates who could credibly claim to represent their communities, even in states where political freedoms were limited.

The 1934 constitutional debates attempted to address this by insisting on democratic internal structures and limiting affiliation to one representative body per country, but this design inevitably left out dissident groups and operated unevenly across different political systems. Critics like Lipsky questioned whether a single institutional framework could genuinely

¹³ Mazower(2004).

capture the plurality of Jewish political and religious life, especially under authoritarian regimes where free elections were impossible. Nonetheless, the attempt itself was significant: it projected a model of diaspora self-representation that was normatively grounded in elections and written constitutional rules rather than in philanthropy or elite diplomacy alone.¹⁴

The Geneva conferences also reveal the legal tensions between state sovereignty, citizenship, and the protective claims of an international ethnic-religious collective. Most Jews in interwar Europe were citizens of states that insisted on exclusive jurisdiction over their nationals; interventions on behalf of “the Jews” by external bodies were often denounced as illegitimate interference in internal affairs. The minority-rights regime, and especially the Upper Silesia arrangement underlying the Bernheim petition, offered a partial workaround by transforming certain obligations into matters of international treaty law backed by League oversight. The WJC’s efforts at the League and later at the United Nations built on this logic, pushing the idea that states owed duties to individuals and groups as rights-holders under international law and that organized minorities could claim a voice in defining and enforcing those duties. In this way, the Geneva conferences contributed—all be it indirectly—to the broader shift from a purely state-centric system to one in which individuals and communities gradually acquired standing in international discourse.¹⁵

The three Geneva preparatory conferences culminated in the formal founding of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva in August 1936, with several hundred delegates from dozens of countries adopting a constitution and electing leadership under Wise and Goldmann. The WJC defined its aims as mobilizing Jews and democratic forces against Nazism, defending the rights of Jewish minorities, supporting the Jewish National Home in Palestine, and constructing a unified, democratic representational structure for world Jewry.

In retrospect, the WJC could not avert the catastrophe of the Holocaust or overcome the profound structural limits of the interwar international order: restrictive immigration policies, the weakness of the League, and the radicalism of Nazi ideology left little room for effective external pressure. Yet historians have emphasized that the WJC did play important roles in refugee advocacy, information gathering, wartime diplomacy, and post-war efforts at

¹⁴ World Jewish Congress (n.d.).

¹⁵ Mazower(2004).

restitution and reparations. The institutional forms and diplomatic techniques rehearsed at the preparatory conferences made these later interventions possible, even if their impact was tragically constrained.¹⁶

From a legal-historical perspective, the Geneva meetings also matter because they anticipated later patterns of NGO participation in international organizations and contributed to the conceptual groundwork of international human rights and minority-rights law. The WJC's pursuit of consultative status, its insistence on democratic internal structures, and its strategic use of petition mechanisms and public advocacy foreshadowed the roles that global civil-society actors would assume in the United Nations era.

X. An Indian Parallel: Anticolonial Movements and the Question of Jewish Representation

The Geneva preparatory conferences did not unfold in isolation from the broader currents of global anticolonial politics. While the three conferences of 1932, 1933, and 1934 were primarily a European and North American Jewish enterprise, their underlying questions, how a non-sovereign people without a state could claim international recognition, assert collective rights, and build democratic representative institutions across national borders, resonated powerfully with struggles unfolding in British India at the same moment. Examining this parallel enriches the legal-historical significance of the Geneva conferences without displacing them as the paper's central subject.

The Indian National Congress, in the same decade that the WJC's architects were meeting in Geneva, was itself grappling with questions of representational legitimacy, democratic constitutionalism, and the relationship between a mass movement and international institutions. Just as the WJC's founders debated who could legitimately speak for "the Jewish people" across dozens of states, Indian leaders were navigating how a colonial subject population with no territorial sovereignty could press legal and moral claims before international bodies. The League of Nations' limited machinery, which the Geneva conferences sought to exploit through petitions and memoranda, was the same institutional architecture that Indian nationalists viewed with ambivalence, an interwar international order that formally promised self-determination but in practice sustained empire.

¹⁶ Mazower (2004); World Jewish Congress (n.d.).

Beyond structural analogy, there were direct points of contact between the Indian independence movement and the Jewish question that the Geneva conferences had placed at the centre of international attention. The persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, the very crisis that transformed the 1933 and 1934 Geneva preparatory conferences from institution-building exercises into urgent exercises in defensive diplomacy, was not lost on Indian leaders. Jawaharlal Nehru, who by the mid-1930s had emerged as Gandhi's designated successor and the leading voice of the Indian National Congress, worked actively within the Congress to obtain visas for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany on humanitarian grounds. The Nazi crisis, in other words, was not a purely European concern; it registered among the leaders of one of the world's largest anticolonial movements as a test of the international community's willingness to protect vulnerable minorities, a theme that sat at the very heart of the WJC's foundational project.¹⁷

This engagement was not without internal contestation that mirrored, in instructive ways, the intra-Jewish debates documented at the Geneva conferences themselves. Within the Indian National Congress, Nehru's efforts to welcome Jewish refugees were blocked by Subhas Chandra Bose, then Congress president, in 1938, the same year the WJC was pressing European governments and the League for refugee protection as one of its first post-founding campaigns. The disagreement exposed a fault line in the Congress between a universalist, humanitarian approach to the Jewish crisis and a more narrowly nationalist calculation about India's own interests under British colonial rule. This internal fracture is structurally analogous to the division at the 1933 Geneva conference between those who favoured a public economic boycott of Nazi Germany and those who feared that public confrontation would endanger Jews already inside Germany. In both cases, a movement operating without state power was forced to weigh the moral imperatives of solidarity against the practical constraints of political weakness.¹⁸

Mahatma Gandhi's engagement with the Jewish question adds another dimension to this Indian context. In November 1938, weeks after the Kristallnacht pogrom, Gandhi published an article entitled "The Jews" in his newspaper *Harijan*, expressing sympathy for Jews while advising that they resist Nazi persecution through satyagraha, non-violent non-cooperation.

¹⁷ Bhatti, A., & Voigt, J. H. (Eds.). (1999). *Jewish exile in India 1933–1945*. Manohar Publishers and Distributors.

¹⁸ Bhatti & Voigt (1999).

His argument drew a pointed comparison between the condition of Jews in Europe and the Harijans (untouchables) in India, framing both as peoples subjected to religiously sanctioned persecution. The article drew sharp responses from Jewish intellectuals, most notably the philosopher Martin Buber, who argued from his own recent experience of Nazi Germany that the conditions of totalitarian persecution made satyagraha inapplicable. This transatlantic, cross-civilizational exchange illustrates how the Jewish crisis that the WJC had been built to address, a crisis first diagnosed and debated at the three Geneva conferences, had become by the late 1930s a reference point in global conversations about resistance, dignity, and the limits of non-violence. The WJC's institutional response and Gandhi's moral response were products of the same historical emergency.¹⁹

The Indian connection did not end with independence in 1947. India's Jewish community, historically rooted in communities such as the Bene Israel of Maharashtra and the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay and Calcutta, was represented at the international level through bodies affiliated with the WJC. The Council of Indian Jewry, operating out of Bombay, became the Indian affiliate of the WJC through the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, translating the organizational model pioneered at the Geneva preparatory conferences into the Indian subcontinental context. Moreover, Nahum Goldmann, the co-architect of the WJC and chairman of its executive board from 1936, maintained personal engagement with Indian leadership after independence. Goldmann met Nehru in London and received an invitation to visit India for discussions on the Arab-Israel question, a meeting that illustrated how the WJC's founders saw engagement with newly independent, non-aligned states like India as part of their broader diplomatic strategy. The diplomatic architecture rehearsed at Geneva in 1932–1934, in other words, continued to shape how the WJC navigated the post-colonial world.²⁰

Placing the Geneva conferences in this wider frame does not diminish their centrality but deepens it. The problem the WJC's founders confronted in Geneva, how a people without a state could build institutions capable of engaging sovereign governments and international

¹⁹ Gandhi, M. K. (1938, November 26). *The Jews*. Harijan; Buber, M., & Magnes, J. (1939). Two letters to Gandhi.; Shimoni, Gideon. *Gandhi, Satyagraha and the Jews: A Formative Factor in India's Policy Towards Israel*. Jerusalem Papers on Peace Problems, No. 22. Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1977.

²⁰ Goldmann, N. (1969). *The autobiography of Nahum Goldmann: Sixty years of Jewish life*; Jewish Telegraphic Agency. (n.d.). Nehru invites Dr. Goldmann to visit India, discuss Arab-Israel peace. JTA Archive. <https://www.jta.org/archive/nehru-invites-dr-goldmann-to-visit-india-discuss-arab-israel-peace> ; World Jewish Congress (n.d.).

organisations on terms of legal and moral equality, was the constitutive challenge of the mid-twentieth century for multiple communities simultaneously. The Indian independence movement was one such community. That both movements, Jewish and Indian, were engaged in overlapping intellectual and political conversations about persecution, representation, and international law in the 1930s suggests that the Geneva preparatory conferences belong not only to Jewish history or European history, but to a broader global history of non-state actors learning, under conditions of duress, to speak the language of international rights.

XI. Conclusion

The Geneva preparatory conferences held in 1932, 1933, and 1934 were not merely preliminary steps leading to the official establishment of the World Jewish Congress (WJC); they were significant arenas where Jewish leaders engaged in innovative efforts to translate the principles of democratic constitutionalism into a transnational, non-state context. This was particularly challenging given the ominous rise of totalitarian regimes during that period. The participants at these conferences tackled a wide array of complex issues, including the concept of peoplehood, representation, the implementation of boycotts, legal mobilization, the protection of refugees, and the design of constitutional frameworks. Their goal was to create an institution that could function as the “diplomatic arm of the Jewish people” without relying on the support of a sovereign state. Despite the WJC’s inability to prevent the catastrophic destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust, the Geneva conferences left behind a lasting legacy. They introduced new practices of non-state diplomacy and fostered a more ambitious vision of what minority organizations could demand from the international legal order. Furthermore, these conferences provided an early model of diaspora constitutionalism, which is a written, democratic framework designed for collective action across national borders. This model continues to influence contemporary discussions about representation, legitimacy, and sovereignty within the realm of international law. The legacy of the Geneva conferences thus extends far beyond their immediate historical context, shaping ongoing debates and practices in the international arena.

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