

The Exodus From Paducah, 1862

‘When General Grant Expelled the Jews,’ by Jonathan D. Sarna

By Janet Maslin, April 4, 2012, The New York Times

Jonathan D. Sarna’s provocative new book, “When General Grant Expelled the Jews,” is exactly what it sounds like: an account of how Gen. Ulysses S. Grant issued an order to expel Jews from their homes in the midst of the Civil War. Anyone seeking to rock the Passover Seder with political debate will find the perfect conversation piece in Mr. Sarna’s account of this startling American story.

There are good reasons that the document known as General Orders No. 11 has remained only a footnote to Civil War history. Argument endures about what Grant meant, how much damage his order inflicted and how significant this act of explicit anti-Semitism really was. But the incontrovertible part of the story is that the perception of profiteering in Paducah, Ky., and his tendency to use the words “profiteer” and “Jew” interchangeably, provoked a written outburst from Grant, commander of the Territory of the Department of the Tennessee, which included Paducah.

On Dec. 17, 1862, Grant issued the order that read: “The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled from this department within 24 hours from the receipt of this order.” While this mandate conformed to Grant’s pattern of associating Jews with illicit business activities, the exact reasons for his action are anything but clear. What is clear is that on Jan. 4, 1863, one week from the day (Dec. 28, 1862) on which Paducah’s Jews were actually expelled, President Abraham Lincoln ordered Grant to revoke the controversial edict.



Ulysses S. Grant's wartime order, quickly overruled, had later political reverberations. Credit Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

What tangible damage did the expulsion do? Very little, as far as Mr. Sarna, chief historian at the [National Museum of American Jewish History](#) and the co-editor of [“Jews and the Civil War: A Reader”](#) can tell. He can provide no individual accounts of families fleeing the order, no more than four affidavits about the expulsion and no reports of physical hardship beyond those who claimed they had been jailed briefly, treated roughly or forbidden from changing out of wet clothes. It is not the magnitude of the incident that makes it so enduring, ugly or willfully ignored.

The reaction of one Jewish merchant in Paducah, Cesar Kaskel, touched off a firestorm. He took off on what Mr. Sarna calls a “Paul Revere-like ride to Washington.” He alerted and roused the press. And he managed, through a congressman, to gain access to Lincoln, who “turned out to have no knowledge whatsoever of the order, for it had not reached

Washington.” Here is an excerpt from the overblown conversation Kaskel claimed to have had with Lincoln:

Lincoln: “And so the children of Israel were driven from the happy land of Canaan?”

Kaskel: “Yes, and that is why we have come unto Father Abraham’s bosom, asking protection.”

Lincoln: “And this protection they shall have at once.”

The real effects of Grant’s action took the form of similarly extreme, sometimes hyperbolic responses from American Jews. Suddenly everything about them, including the question of exactly what “American Jews” means in terms of allegiance, was part of the debate. Mr. Sarna delivers a careful, warts-and-all accounting of the ugliness surrounding all sides of this incident, right down to quoting the fearful, competitive, even hostile attitude some Jews held toward newly freed slaves. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation had arrived on Jan. 1, 1863, right between the enforcement and revocation of Grant’s order.



Jonathan D. Sarna (Credit: Joseph Wertheim)

“Historians, understandably, have played down this fear, not wishing to besmirch the reputations of some of American Jewry’s most illustrious leaders whose words, in retrospect, are painful to read,” Mr. Sarna writes.

“Painful” is an understatement.

One of the most egregious came from Isaac Leeser, editor of *The Occident*, a Jewish publication: “Why are tears shed for the sufferings of the African in his bondage, by which his moral condition has been immensely improved, in spite of all that may be alleged to the contrary, whereas for the Hebrews every one has words of contempt or acts of violence?”

But it is the long-range repercussions of Grant’s order, and the Jews’ enduring anger about it, that prompt the most disturbing aspects of Mr. Sarna’s story. When Grant ran for president in 1868, his treatment of Jews became campaign fodder for Democrats seeking to defeat him. The Jewish vote was not numerically large enough to sway the election; still, the issue became highly inflammatory. Vengeful rhetoric against Grant sounds even worse now than it did at the time, as in “General Grant and the Jews,” a pamphlet that threatened that Jews would vote “as a class,” just as Grant had described them:

“We are numerous, we are wealthy, we are influential, we are diffused over the whole continent, we are as one family; wherever our influence reaches, every Jew — no matter of what political party — every Jew, with the voters he can command, will endeavor to defeat, and with God’s blessing, *will* defeat you!” This argument is an anti-Semite’s dream. It may also be an anti-Semite’s handiwork, since the pamphlet was ascribed to a pseudonymous author and signed “A Jew.”

Grant had a legitimate some-of-my-best-friends-are-Jewish case to make. He appointed Jews to some prominent positions in his administration. He also inveighed on behalf of human rights when Jews in Russia and Romania were, like those from Paducah, threatened with expulsion. And he attended the dedication of a synagogue in Washington, surprising other attendees by sitting through a three-hour ceremony. Grant also let it be known that his original order “would never have been issued if it had not been telegraphed the moment it was penned, and without reflection.”

Mr. Sarna’s book is part of a prestigious series matching prominent Jewish writers with intriguingly fine-tuned topics. (Also published or forthcoming: “Burnt Books,” “Judah Maccabee,” “The Dairy Restaurant” and “Mrs. Freud.”) One of the book’s purposes is to put the Grant episode into its proper context. To that end Mr. Sarna places undue

emphasis on the narrow question of whether Grant ultimately “earned” the support and forgiveness of Jews. But he also asks how any voter balances self-interest with patriotic conviction if the two are at odds — as they were when the General Grant who expelled Jewish citizens became Candidate Grant, courting Jewish votes for the presidency.

“No final decision ever resolved this debate,” he writes.

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By Jonathan D. Sarna

Illustrated. 201 pages. Nextbook/Schocken. \$24.95.