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978-0-521-47087-2 - Western Jewry and the Zionist Project, 1914–1933

Michael Berkowitz

Excerpt

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Introduction

One may think what one will about Zionism, but it cannot be denied that it is generated by latent power and energy, and an awakened self-consciousness.

Samuel Weissenberg (1900)¹

Today Jewry lives a bifurcated life. As a result of emancipation in the diaspora and national sovereignty in Israel Jews have fully reentered the mainstream of history, yet their perception of how they got there and where they are is most often more mythical than real.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1982)²

This is a study of the historical construction and reception of Zionism between the world wars in Western Europe and the United States.³ It is the first discussion of the movement outside Eastern Europe and Palestine which views Zionism in the Western nations as a distinct entity, as parts of an interwoven whole.⁴ In taking this perspective I wish to underscore the notion that Zionism became a greater part of secular Jewish consciousness and a ground for charity and philanthropy among Western Jewry, as the movement sought to connect Western-aculturated Jews to an emerging Jewish sovereignty. It is not my objective to write a comprehensive history of Zionism;⁵ or explore the travails of the movement in the wider worlds of politics and diplomacy;⁶ or reconsider Zionist ideology, per se;⁷ or examine how Zionism worked itself out in Palestine.⁸ In certain respects, this book responds to questions raised in my first book, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry Before the First World War*,⁹ namely: how did Zionist-nationalism function for those Jews not seen by the movement, or themselves, as the likely immigrants to Palestine, and how was knowledge about Zionism, directed toward Western Jews, produced by the movement?¹⁰ This study begins, however, with the changes wrought by World War I; it incorporates developments in the United States, as its Jewish community became more crucial to Zionist efforts, and extends the analysis until the advent of Hitler. The first book recognized and analyzed the Zionists' creation

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of a “supplemental nationality” for West European Jews. The current book builds on that assumption in looking at the period 1914–33; but the main argument is that as the nationalization of Western Jewry proceeded apace, the component parts of the movement took on a life of their own, and that the sustenance of the Zionist Organization – especially its fundraising mechanisms – came to dominate the practice of Zionism for Western-assimilated Jewry. Zionism as an institution, I maintain, was accepted as a supreme value in itself, rather than as a means to securing the aims of the movement.¹¹

This book confronts a historically perplexing problem: what accounts for the cohesion of those European and American Jews who called themselves Zionists, despite their apparent insulation from the threat of anti-Semitism, and the weighty differences between national and class-based contingents? What attracted them to the movement? What was it about Zionism that interested them? What exhilarated them? What might have bored them, or left them uninterested in the movement? How might one explain the uniformity of Western Jewish perceptions of, and ways of identifying with, the Zionist project in Palestine? How and why did Western Zionism’s development influence its reception from the First World War until the early 1930s, resulting in a lackluster period for the movement? Obviously, Zionists in different countries acted and reacted differently; but the relationships and commonalties have commanded little attention. This book – encompassing popular culture, political symbolism, historical memories, imagery, fundraising, relief efforts, gender roles, militarism, education, politics, and charity – deals with the question of why Jews in Central and Western Europe and the United States, who were relatively assimilated and comfortable, bothered to bother with Zionism, which offered them little apparent advantage. Although I have included the experiences of individual men and women from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy, I have considered mainly Zionists and Zionism in the United States, Britain, and Germany, because the latter were the communities which Zionists usually perceived as the most formidable areas of the movement’s support, among Westernized Jews, before 1933. It was only in the mid-1930s, for example, that Zionism in France seemed worthy of mention for something other than its dearth of popularity.¹² In sum, the movement was molded to fit Western Jews’ demands for an ever more “platonic” type of Zionism.¹³ Following the lead of Michael Brenner, Paula Hyman, and others, I wish to call into question the exaggerated image of patently “apolitical” Western Jewries, enthralled by delusions of hyperassimilation, which does little justice to the (broadly defined) Jewish political experiences of “emancipated” Jews in Europe and the United States.¹⁴

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With the striking exceptions of Claudia Prestel's work on Zionist women, which covers Europe and Palestine from 1897 to 1933,¹⁵ Yigal Elam's wide-ranging history of the Jewish Agency for Palestine,¹⁶ and Ezra Mendelsohn's *On Modern Jewish Politics*, which features a comparative analysis of American and Polish interwar Zionism, the prevailing interpretations of Zionism before the Second World War stress its discrete components, such as the diplomatic maneuvering resulting in the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate for Palestine, state and institution building in Palestine, biography and collective biography, and the unique character of the movement in Russia, Poland, Germany, Britain, South Africa, Argentina, the United States, and elsewhere. Over the past two decades, to be sure, there has been progress toward a more critical and synthetic body of historiography; important studies have appeared in Hebrew, English, and German.¹⁷ But these works for the most part constitute an inner-group dialogue that rarely speaks to the non-Zionist community. Scholars of Zionism, with a few notable exceptions, neglect a rigorous comparative approach and confine themselves to a Zionist discourse.¹⁸ Often the focus is on why and how Zionists differed and disagreed. Such tendencies reflect the concerns of an "in" group, and ignore modes of historical analysis that have proved fruitful in other settings. In particular cultural history and the "new" history have not had a great impact on Jewish scholarship in general.¹⁹ My inclination (to borrow a phrase from Hobsbawm) is to see Zionism as an "invented tradition" which is remarkable for its adaptation to the circumstances of assimilated Jewries, and for devising diverse constituency-building strategies.²⁰ Simultaneously, the Zionists blurred the boundaries between belonging to an incipient nation, a religious group, a national movement, a local organization, a national organization, a fraternal order, a voluntary association, and a community determined by history and birthright. It may prove helpful, then, to look at the history of the Zionist movement in relation to the development of symbols, institutions, organizations, publicity, and popular community building that have been neglected in favor of mainstream "high" politics.

To carry out this study I have read the contemporary periodical literature and examined archives in Israel and the United States. Although the recent scholarship on Zionism is typically well researched, surprisingly few historians of the movement have systematically read the Zionist organs from Germany, Britain, and the United States, let alone the respective "propaganda and agitation" materials in the archives. I suspect that the lack of familiarity with different national settings of Zionism has bolstered claims of the uniqueness of Zionism in these

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countries. I base my analysis on the popular culture and perceptions of the movement, which along with the press includes consideration of promotional materials, graphic arts, iconography, and photography. I am particularly attuned to visual images, the manipulation of symbols, and the interpenetration of myth and reality, resulting in the processes by which certain perceptions became the common stock of Zionism.

In addition to filling a void in Zionist historiography, I wish to delve, as well, into some newer areas of inquiry. The first chapter focuses on the attempted appropriation of the First World War by the Zionist movement, showing that the Zionists reaped limited capital from the diverse war experiences of its constituents – despite the obvious political success represented by the Balfour Declaration. Chapter 2 is an excursion through the pantheon of heroic Zionist leaders in the West. My emphasis is on how the portrayal of these figures tended to produce an impression of harmony and consensus in the contentious movement. Above all, the organization seized on the image of Albert Einstein to highlight Zionism's professed affinity with the greatest hopes of human civilization and progress. Chapter 3, rather than clearing a new avenue of inquiry, instead turns to one of the better-trod paths in the history of interwar Zionism, that is, the “feud” between Chaim Weizmann and Louis Brandeis in the early 1920s, the creation of the Keren Hayesod (the Palestine Foundation Fund), and the reemergence of the opposition to Weizmann in the late 1920s. Although it was not my original intention to revise the judgments of Ben Halpern, Evyatar Friesel, and Jehuda Reinharz concerning what Halpern has termed “the clash of heroes,” I nevertheless offer a rereading of this controversial episode.²¹ I am not as concerned with exposing the inner workings of Zionist administration as much as I desire to explain the impact of the movement's politics on popular sentiments. Part of Zionism's frustrations in the interwar period were closely tied to this story, the “negative consequences” of which ran deeper than the “disarray” recounted in the historiography.²² I think that this controversy led to a widespread disaffection of Zionists, primarily among the women of Hadassah. Except for Ezra Mendelsohn's *Zionism in Poland*, there are few scholarly studies of pre-state Zionism that illuminate the culture of fundraising in the diaspora.²³ Most work in Zionist historiography concerning the role of money raised in the diaspora has dwelt on the “nationalization of capital” in the Yishuv,²⁴ and the general literature on philanthropy only mentions Jewish organizations in passing.²⁵ The formation and subsequent evolution of the Keren Hayesod, as the chief financial instrument and tool of Zionist nationalization, cannot be underestimated as a factor in the reception of Zionism in the West. Chapter 4 analyzes the drives to raise money for

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Zionism which were connected to polemics about catastrophe; this discourse established patterns of Western Jewish perceptions of Zionism and the reception of Zionist appeals.

The fifth chapter examines the interwar representations of Jewish Palestine. Images of the Jews' newfound preeminence in agriculture was a major part of this effort, while the Zionists' success in creating a new urban style also was triumphantly expressed. Chapter 6 discusses the unfolding of one of the most enduring dimensions of the Western-oriented Zionist project – the appropriation of Jewish tourism to Palestine. Primarily through improvising changes to existing tours, the organization engendered a secularized pilgrimage ritual to the Holy Land; many of its essential elements would not be fundamentally altered for more than fifty years. Chapter 7 deals with one of the most significant segments of world Zionism, its youth divisions in the West. Although important differences did exist from one nation to another, I argue that many characteristics were shared, and that there was a certain symmetry in Zionist youth groups in relatively acculturated societies. Organized Zionist youth not only reflected the world of its Zionist elders, but found its own means to adapt Zionism to life outside Palestine. British Zionist youth, for instance, was apparently the first section of diaspora Zionists to accommodate large numbers of Jewish returnees from Palestine into Zionist ideology and practice. Chapter 8 explores organized women in Zionism, focusing on the place of the German Kulturverband, Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), and Hadassah in the context of the history of women in Zionism. Particularly with regard to Zionism in the United States, my aim is not simply to add an account of women's "contributions," but to show how the integration of women affects the entire movement's history, and to consider the impact of the resistance to organized women in diaspora Zionism.

My main hypothesis is that, between 1914 and 1933, Zionism came to be styled increasingly as a rescue mission and object of philanthropy, and that the Zionist Organization and its preeminent institutions – especially its fundraising instruments – were held up by the movement as sacrosanct bodies. Given the Zionist goals of unifying Jews in support of the national home in Palestine and radically changing the modern Jewish condition, I wish to call into question the degree to which this kind of institutional development was propitious. While Zionism was creative and successful at making its aims and view of the world a part of Western Jewish life, Jews also lost faith in the movement due to its apparent mismanagement and obsession with fundraising. Yet however much Zionism may have declined in this period, it nevertheless assumed

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much of its principal shape with regard to Western Jewish integration in the movement – that is, before the birth of the State of Israel. The main questions with which I am concerned are: how did Western Jews, especially in Germany, Britain, and the United States perceive the Zionist movement? How did this perception change during the First World War, and from the war years until the rise of Hitler? What was the role of philanthropy and charity in the movement? How was it possible, with the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine) assuming more and more a life of its own, to be a Zionist outside Zion? How might one evaluate the values, ethics, intellectual standards, and behavior of the organization in relation to its professed mission? I wish to illuminate the background of what Alain Finkelkraut perceives as “the apparent inconsistency of Western Jews” in the post-1945 world: “they’re all Zionists, but they all stay settled right where they are . . . They see no contradiction between life in the Diaspora and love for Israel.”²⁶ My study has led me to explore how diaspora Zionism – which might have been more widely interpreted as a contradiction in terms – was rationalized in the middle-class Jewish mind, and the processes by which it was made concrete in the lives of Western Jews from 1914 to 1933.

While the movement obviously gained power in the diaspora and disseminated a bold language of revolutionary, Jewish national transformation, Zionism also can be seen as inheriting many of the tendencies of pre-Zionist Jewish communal organizations and charities, which it had pronounced as a blight on Jewish self-help, and pointedly vowed not to replicate.²⁷ Many of the successors of the interwar Zionists vehemently denied that Zionism was a charity, yet they continued to rely on the charitable instincts of the Western Jewish middle class to explicitly or implicitly support the movement. A question to be raised, then, is whether or not there might have been any other means to rally Western Jewry under the banner of Zionism, or perhaps whether there should have been an attempt to redirect the course of the movement, or reformulate the original aims of Zionism. This was, in fact, the period in which the Jewish masses were approaching their most serious and ultimately fatal challenge.

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1 Manly men and the attempted appropriation of the war experience, 1914–1918

In the summer of 1914, Zionists in both the Central and Allied powers responded enthusiastically to their nations' call to arms. Along with declaring that there was no contradiction between loyalty to the European nations and to Zionism, they rationalized that their own country's victory would hasten the conversion of Zionist dreams into reality. German and Austrian Zionists particularly were thrilled to engage the enemy who had trampled on their nations' honor.¹ Because one of their chief adversaries was the Russian Empire – the great tormentor of the Jewish masses, “the poorest of the poor” – the ardor of Zionists in the German *Kulturbereich* was fortified. Subduing the anti-Semitic tsar was portrayed as a life-or-death struggle between the “cultured world” of Central Europe versus Asiatic “barbarism.”² Heinrich Loewe, the German Zionist stalwart, wrote that it was “only from the German side that the Jews will find protection and freedom.”³ Jonathan Frankel suggests that such fervor was not unique to the Zionists during the First World War, as

the experience of the Jewish people mirrored – but also magnified – that of the belligerent societies in general. The gulf separating the tangible realities of the Jewish situation from the way in which that situation was perceived proved time and again to be immense. Never before in modern history (specifically, since the expulsion from Spain) had the inherent vulnerability and weakness of the Jews as a scattered minority been exposed with such insistent brutality and impunity. Yet at the very same time, many Jews – movements, groups, individuals – came to the conclusion that the moment of emancipation or autoemancipation (national liberation, however variously defined) had arrived. The Jewish people had it within their grasp to solve the Jewish question.⁴

Before the British entry into the war, Zionists in Britain anticipated the country's joining with trepidation due to the predicted suffering that would be inflicted on Eastern Jewry, and objections to assisting tsarist Russia. Neither side in the unfolding conflict seemed very attractive to British Jews and Zionists. “We have no interest in the upholding of

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Austria and far less in the debasement of Germany,” ran an editorial in the London *Jewish Chronicle*:

For England to fight alongside of Russia would be as wicked as for her to fight against Germany, with whom she has no quarrel whatsoever. The plunging of Britain headlong into a melee, the prime object of which would be the upholding of Cossack rule, with its negation of all that human progress stands for would be such a stupendous affront to humanity, as well as to British interests, that we are astonished and aghast at its bare suggestion.⁵

As is often the case in politics, a turnabout quickly ensued when it seemed inescapable that the British would be allied with Russia. “In the Land of the Tsar,” it was asserted, “the [Russian] army can never be the same prejudice-ridden institution as before it found itself in comradeship of arms with the British and French nations.”⁶ Now the ancillary objective, along with subduing the official enemy, became the transformation of the tsarist regime. With the war raging, the Allies and especially the Jews among them were desperate to hold up evidence of the Russian change of heart, that is, until the Revolution of 1917. For instance, allegations that the Russian army had instigated pogroms in Vilnius as soon as war broke out were denounced as “absolutely false.”⁷ The British Zionists’ faith in this pre-revolutionary reform of tsarism was said to be validated by the fervor with which the Russian Jews rushed to defend their country, despite their oppression.⁸ The tsar himself was claimed to be deeply moved and appreciative of the “loyalty and ability” of Jewish soldiers.⁹

Immediately the Anglo-Jewish press proclaimed that the heroism of Russian Jewry was brilliantly illustrated on the field of battle.¹⁰ Of course, the record of the British Jews themselves was instantaneously judged to be one of shining honor and willing self-sacrifice. “I have been told by men of my corps who have just returned from convoy,” read a letter quoted in London’s *Jewish Chronicle*, “that the men in the Middlesex Regiment really love our men for their bravery and good work. They say that it is a credit to work with the Jewish soldiers, as they really have their mind on what they are doing.”¹¹ A British soldier assured a reporter that the fine British Jewish soldiers were not unique, saying that he “came across a number of Jews in the British, French, and Belgian forces, and the very sight of them made me feel proud of my Jewish birth. These were splendid fellows and, without exaggeration, fine fighters and game to the last.”¹²

But the attempt to put the best face on the Jewish war effort for Britain was obscured by the intermittent controversies which erupted over the issues of “alien conscription,” that is, the drafting of Jewish immigrants

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from Eastern Europe and Russia in the spring of 1916, the proposed raising of a “Jewish Regiment,” and finally, the actual creation of a “Jewish Battalion.”¹³ More than the Germans or Americans, British Jewry felt pressed to demonstrate that “the foreign-born Jew” of Britain was capable of serving with honor,¹⁴ as the Russian emigrants in their midst were eventually faced with the specter of “enlistment or deportation.”¹⁵ The most distinctive “Zionist” contributions to the British war effort, however, comprised the research of Chaim Weizmann,¹⁶ which was publicly recognized after the war, and the creation of a Jewish Battalion, which always was clouded by the “deep misgivings” British Jews and Zionists worldwide held over treatment which smacked of “discrimination or exceptionalism.”¹⁷

The organization of separate Jewish troops under the British flag, typically referred to as the “Jewish Legion,” had two main incarnations: first as the Zion Mule Corps, which served in Gallipoli (April 1915) and was disbanded after the Dardanelles campaign, and second, as the Jewish Battalion, known as the “Judeans,” which was supposed to participate in the fight for Palestine. As opposed to very scanty coverage allotted the initial force while it was in action, the second unit, the Judeans, was extensively and sympathetically dealt with in the British and American Zionist press. By May 1918, it was reported that over 1,200 Jews from the United States (who did not possess US citizenship and therefore were ineligible for the draft) had volunteered.¹⁸ In the end the unit served a more symbolic rather than substantive function, and the very insignias which represented the regiment were hotly contested.¹⁹ Although it would later occupy a place of prominence in the discourse of Revisionist Zionism, neither the Mule Corps nor the Judeans became a shared, lasting component of Zionist identity in the West compared to other aspects of the Zionist project.

The uniformed Jew whose star shone the brightest during the First World War was General (later Sir) John Monash, commander of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand) forces on the western front in 1918.²⁰ Monash, however, did not become involved in Zionism in Australia until the late 1920s,²¹ and his legend was not widespread. The leading military hero who appeared to be representing Jewish and Zionist interests was General Allenby, a non-Jew, whose success “was as swift as it was brilliant” in delivering “almost the whole of Palestine from Turkish domination.”²² From the first reports it did not seem that the Jewish fighters had had any influence in the conquest of Jerusalem. Allenby, though, perhaps sensitive to allegations of anti-Semitism,²³ “made it clear in the later dispatches that not only Australians and New Zealanders had participated in the fight, but that the Jewish troops had

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taken a conspicuous part in driving the Turks back into Amman.”²⁴ The general perception, nevertheless, remained that the Jewish Legion had been incidental, rather than critical, in Allenby’s heralded campaign. It was, in the generous appraisal of David Vital, “something of a disappointment.”²⁵

When it became clear that the United States’ entrance into the war was imminent, American Zionists heartily seconded “the break with Germany” articulated by President Wilson. Zionists harbored no thoughts of Jewish separatism in the United States; in fact, the very opposite was the case:

The Jews of America share the interests of the American people, of whom they are an integral part. Our love and loyalty go out to America not only because it has been a haven of refuge for our oppressed people, but because we have derived inspiration and strength from the ideals and enthusiasms that are America’s contribution to modern civilization. The democratic education we have received here has strengthened our own movement for self-emancipation, for we have felt that American ideas give their sanction to the efforts of any people to secure itself against the future by making such sacrifices to-day as would render that future worthy. The Zionist movement runs parallel with the idealism of this land and is in fact a natural growth and the normal consequence of thinking in terms of democratic American idealism. In this land we have the opportunity for the first time in our history to realize our national hopes, living in a friendly environment. It is a source of Jewish gratification to find ourselves in perfect accord with the ideas and interests of the American people. We shall be among the first to come forward prepared to make our personal sacrifices for American national interests should the efforts of the President to avert war be unsuccessful, just as we have done in the past moments of national crises.²⁶

By September 1917, the Zionist press boasted that contrary to “the impression” that “the Jews – especially the Yiddish-speaking Jews – are the prime movers in the pacifist propaganda in this country and that our young men are avoiding the draft,” the general Jewish and the Zionist response could not have been more different. Jews evinced “an unmistakable enthusiasm for the war,” in which “the Zionists are unusually well represented.”²⁷ Within a few months of mobilization there were reported to be some 50,000 Jews under arms for the United States.²⁸

Zionists throughout Europe, and eventually, the United States, seized what they saw as an opportunity to prove themselves on three levels. Firstly, as individuals, their manliness could be tested and demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt. The war rekindled the early Zionists’ call for the creation, in Max Nordau’s words, of a *Muskelfudentum*, a “Jewry of muscle.” And as members of an embryonic nation, as Zionists, they could show their worth as a fighting force, deserving of their own nation and Jewish national honor. Furthermore, they also were fighting as Jews