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978-1-107-09707-0 - The Mortality and Morality of Nations

Uriel Abulof

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The Mortality and Morality of Nations

Standing at the edge of life's abyss, we often seek moral meaning and "symbolic immortality" in religion, civilization, state, and nation. What happens, however, when the nation itself appears mortal? *The Mortality and Morality of Nations* seeks to answer this question, theoretically and empirically. It argues that mortality makes morality, and right makes might; the nation's sense of a looming abyss informs its quest for a higher moral ground, which, if reached, can bolster its vitality. The book investigates nationalism's promise of moral immortality and its limitations via three case studies: French Canadians, Jews, and Afrikaners. All three have been insecure about the validity of their identity or the viability of their polity, or both. They have sought partial redress in existential self-legitimation: by the nation, of the nation, and for the nation's very existence. The rise and fall of nations transpire not only in blood and iron but also in pride and shame, in justice and in guilt.

URIEL ABULOF is an associate professor of politics at Tel-Aviv University and a senior research Fellow at Princeton University's LISD / Woodrow Wilson School. He is the author of *Living on the Edge: The Existential Uncertainty of Zionism* (2015), which won the Bahat Prize, Israel's most prestigious academic book award. Abulof studies political legitimation, nationalism, and ethnic conflicts. His articles have appeared in journals such as *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Political Sociology*, *Nations and Nationalism*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *International Politics*.

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Princeton University and Tel-Aviv University



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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107097070

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First published 2015

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Abulof, Uriel.

The mortality and morality of nations Jews, Afrikaners, and French-Canadians / Uriel Abulof, Princeton University.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-09707-0 (Hardback : alk. paper)

1. Jews-Israel-Identity. 2. National characteristics, Israeli. 3. Afrikaners-South Africa-Ethnic identity. 4. French-Canadians-Quebec (Province)-Ethnic identity. 5. Group identity-Israel. 6. Group identity-South Africa. 7. Group identity-Québec (Province) 8. Israel-Ethnic relations. 9. South Africa-Ethnic relations. 10. Québec (Province)-Ethnic relations. I. Title.

DS113.3.A279 2015

320.54-dc23 2015009559

ISBN 978-1-107-09707-0 Hardback

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Preface

We search for immortality, and the kind of immortality we seek determines the kind of life we lead.

– Hans J. Morgenthau, *Death in the Nuclear Age*

Small nations. The concept is not quantitative; it points to a condition; a fate; small nations lack that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future; at a given moment in their history, they all passed through the antechambers of death; in constant confrontation with the arrogant ignorance of the mighty, they see their existence as perpetually threatened or with a question mark hovering over it; for their very existence *is* the question.

– Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*

Standing at the edge of life's gaping abyss, we seek everlasting meaning, a sense of purpose and propriety, transcending the transient individual. We often find this solace in the morality of seemingly immortal collectives. Religions, civilizations, states, and nations are such "timeless beacons," shedding their eternal light on the right path. What happens, however, when the nation itself appears mortal, when its members live with a constant sense of uncertainty about their collective's existence?

The Mortality and Morality of Nations presents this puzzle and pieces it together. It submits that mortality makes morality, and right makes might: the nation's sense of a looming abyss informs its deliberate and deliberative quest for a high moral ground, which, if reached, can bolster its vitality. The book investigates nationalism's promise of moral immortality, and its limitations, via the narratives of three "small nations": French Canadians, Israeli Jews, and Afrikaners. All three have been insecure about the validity of their identity or the viability of their polity, or both. They have sought partial redress in existential self-legitimation: by the nation, of the nation, and for the nation's very existence. If this endeavor fails, however, the nation may pursue different

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Preface

existential paths. For the most part, Israeli Jews still subscribe to Zionism's ethnonationalism, but French Canadians – now Québécois – have largely shed ethnicity, and Afrikaners have surrendered national sovereignty. The rise and fall of nations transpire not only in blood and iron but also in pride and shame, in justice and in guilt.

Acknowledgments

Living in Jerusalem is living on the edge. I was born there, spending most of my life among, and between, Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, left and right, doom and deliverance. Jerusalem has seen them all, and more, witnessing the rise and fall of peoples, empires, religions, civilizations, and nations. Existential fears and hopes are so omnipresent as to be near transparent. Studying them thus becomes ever more daunting – yet rewarding. Leading this existential investigation, I am fortunate to have had the company of family, friends, and colleagues, who have inspired and encouraged me along this long, and often lonely, journey. I am especially grateful to Baruch Kimmerling ז"ל, Avraham Sela, and Sasson Sofer from the Hebrew University; Azar Gat, Yossi Shain, and Motti Tamarkin at Tel-Aviv University; and Wolfgang Danspeckgruber at Princeton University. This book could not have been accomplished without their help and insights.

I have worked on this book, on and off, for seven years, but in retrospect it seems to have always been there, lurking in fateful moments of my youth: the Israeli bombing of Iraq's nuclear facility, the Lebanon War, the First Intifada, the Oslo peace process, and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Then came the haunting days of the Second Intifada. I still recall walking with Shani, my wife to be, in the horribly empty streets of downtown Jerusalem during Passover, meeting with friends, and wondering together if this was the beginning of the end. Then, as now, I have been struggling to make sense of it all. Looking at the world through the worldviews of my people, and of other peoples, is the best way I have found to do so.

I owe thanks to many I have conversed with about this research. Each exchange of ideas was valuable in the ongoing learning process that produced the book before you. In particular, I wish to thank Evelyn and Jeff Abel, Pierre Anctil, Mike Aronoff, Daniel Bar-Tal, Avi Bareli, Mark Beissinger, John Breuilly, Walker Connor, Daniele Conversi, Ronnie Ellenblum, Beth English,

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Matthew Evangelista, Bill Finan, Chaim Gans, Hermann Giliomee, Steven Grosby, Tamar Hermann, Donald Horowitz, John Hutchinson, Hedva Ish-Shalom, Piki Ish-Shalom, Arie Kacowicz, Amir Lupovici, Ian Lustick, Alison McQueen, Benny Miller, Benny Morris, Ilan Peleg, Derek Penslar, David Pervin, Gabriel Sheffer, Gideon Shimoni, Sheva and Jack Steiner, Julia Tréhu, Michael Walzer, Andreas Wimmer, Stefan Wolff, Bernard Yack, Gad Yair, Alexander Yakobson, Jill Yonassi, and Ronald Zweig. I have benefited enormously from their feedback on the book. Over the years, I have been fortunate to receive the material support that made possible my excessive devotion to a life of the mind. I am in debt, luckily not literally, to several funds at the Hebrew University, Tel-Aviv University, and Princeton University, in particular the Halbert Centre for Canadian Studies, the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, and the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, which became a home away from home.

Completion of the book, I quickly learned, was just the beginning of another journey, and here I found the best companion I could hope for in Robert Dreesen of Cambridge University Press. I am deeply grateful for his intuitive understanding of this project and professional help in its publication. In this process, I gained invaluable insights from the comments of the three anonymous readers of my manuscript.

Finally, family: it is hard to be an existentialist, but it might be even harder to live with one. To my parents, Noga and Daniel; my siblings, Dikla, Dror, and Rachel; and most of all to my wife, Shani, and children, Nevo and Keshet, it is my happy duty to inform you, we have only just begun . . .