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978-0-521-42072-3 - Zionist Culture and West European Jewry before the First World War

Michael Berkowitz

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Although a “longing for Zion” has always existed in Judaism, Zionism’s call for the Jews’ return to Palestine is a distinctly modern phenomenon. This book investigates Zionism’s reception by bourgeois West European Jews from 1897 to 1914, with regard to the movement’s approach toward those who were not seen as the potential immigrants to Palestine. The episodes considered here – the institution of the Zionist Congress, debates about a secular-national culture, idealization of Zionist heroes and a “New Jewish Man,” Zionist art, presentations of Palestine, and the Jewish National Fund – helped foster European Jewry’s identification with Zionism. These partially succeeded in establishing a ‘supplemental nationality,’ shaping Western Jewry’s perceptions of the movement and profoundly influencing modern notions of Jewish identity. The Zionists were able to ‘nationalize’ part of Western Jewry because they drew on the liberal view of nationalism which had spawned Jewish emancipation, combined with vague and unobjectionable elements of Jewish culture which did not always imply a deep commitment – especially *zedakah*, the tradition of giving to charity. Even though the “problem of culture” is typically portrayed as a divisive force in the movement, this study contends that a shared ideal of culture helps account for the attraction of middle-class, assimilated Jewry to Zionism.

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I dreamed I had a lovely fatherland.  
The sturdy oak  
Grew tall there, and the violets gently swayed.  
Then I awoke.

I dreamed a German kiss was on my brow,  
and someone spoke  
The German words: "I love you!" (How they rang!)  
Then I awoke.

Heinrich Heine, translated by Aaron Kramer

Not all are free who mock their chains.

G. E. Lessing, "Nathan der Weise," IV, 4

All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty  
recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the  
dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with  
open eyes, to make it possible . . .

T. E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Don't you realize that we don't even have a people yet?

Nahum Sokolow, 1903

After all, we did not intend to be schnorrers.

Theodor Herzl, 1897

*We were victorious too early . . .*

Gershom Scholem, in a letter to Walter Benjamin, 1931

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**T**his book, on the invention of a Zionist culture among assimilated Western Jews in the early twentieth century, concerns the question: what does it mean to be a Jew in the modern world? In light of the prewar Zionist agenda, one of the great successes of the movement was that the myths and symbols it put forward were largely accepted as part of an authentic, generic Jewish identity. Articulating a view that was initially and overwhelmingly rejected by assimilated Jewry, the Zionists asserted that a Jewish national regeneration had begun, that a unified Jewry already existed, and that Palestine was a Jewish homeland with a uniquely Jewish national landscape – which would become the basis of a flourishing, mass Jewish settlement. In order to activate a sense of belonging to a Jewish nation among the Jews of Europe, Zionism’s leadership was compelled to devise tools to fashion a unified people and an earthly nation where none existed.

The processes and products of this effort, what the Zionists themselves referred to as the creation of a national culture, is the subject of this book. I have explored the political style, myths, and symbols that helped engender the unity and growth of Zionism, and fostered Jewish identification with the Zionist program in Central and Western Europe from 1897 to 1914.

Without questioning the legitimacy of Zionism as a national liberation movement, for all that that entails, I have examined it as a European–Jewish national movement, from the perspective of its reception among primarily middle-class Western Jewish men – who were assumed to be a main group from which Zionism’s leadership would emerge. I believe that the movement established enduring

paradigms of perception within this constituency, which would remain consistent for those who rarely, if ever, were seen as the likely immigrants to Jewish Palestine. These perceptions have had a fateful impact on the ways Western Jews see themselves and their relationship to the Zionist project.

What I have found striking and chosen to investigate about Zionism is not that the poor, persecuted, or religiously motivated turned to Zionism – which is not to say that poverty, anti-Semitism, and messianism are factors to be taken lightly. Instead, I have been interested in the attraction and sustained commitment of relatively comfortable Jews to the movement. So that is the first problem: why and how did Zionism work among assimilated European Jewry, west of the Pale of Settlement? The answer, in brief, is that the movement created a form of nationalist thought and participation that drew on aspects of the European nationalisms acceptable to Jews; it was a product of a specific subculture of assimilated Jewry; and it incorporated aspects and symbols of traditional Judaism providing a common core of mythology for the movement.

The second problem with which I deal is: what kept these people who called themselves Zionists together? I was intrigued by the degree to which the historiography of the Zionist Movement underscores bitter factional divisions and widely divergent, idiosyncratic ideologies. I have sought to answer the questions: if their quarrels were as important as the historiography implies, why didn't the movement become more diffuse?, or, if they are so busy arguing with each other, what is it that holds them together? In short, Zionism was able to survive and grow because its members and increasing numbers of Jews could wholeheartedly agree about a vague set of myths and symbols, which might mean different things to different people. Even after their most acrimonious debates, Zionists could lock arms, sing "Hatikvah" under the blue and white flag, and tears would well in their eyes.

What I have done, therefore, is to examine the most important factors of cohesion, self-consciously controlled or fabricated by the movement, that nurtured Western Jewish commitment to Zionism. I look at the institution of the Zionist Congress, the theories and debates about language and culture, the image of a new man and heroism put forward by the movement, the artistic expressions of the movement to concretize its national ideals, the representations of Palestine to provide a sense of the old/new Jewish homeland, and the chief fundraising mechanism of the movement, the Jewish National Fund.

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My main conclusion is that the Zionist Movement achieved the partial nationalization of Western Jewry by inventing a supplementary nationality – one that could coexist with other national identifications. Zionism succeeded in the West because the Zionists invented a way for Jews to be good Zionists while remaining in the nations where they lived, apparently without conflict with their being good Germans, Austrians, or Englishmen. With this approach, I will not consider the aforementioned elements of anti-Semitism and religious messianism, or Jewish literature and the non-Zionist press, beyond their application to official Zionist efforts to nationalize the Jews – because these were not explicitly invented or regulated by the Zionist Organization.

Not surprisingly, much of the phenomena I deal with has only occasionally been the concern of historians of Zionism. Zionism was, in fact, born into an age when what one saw was at least as important as what one read. Nevertheless, there has been little investigation of the visual imagery that summarized, transmitted, and symbolized the Zionist project. The images appropriated or created by the early Zionists are simply taken as assumptions that need not be qualified or studied. This attests to the ultimate success of these myths and symbols, but it leaves an important gap in the historical comprehension of Zionism.

Along with papers, memoirs, newspapers, and journals I have analyzed pictures, postcards, promotional booklets, fundraising materials, and artifacts. I found that such “agitation and propaganda” (terms which were not then connoted negatively) was taken very seriously as part of the attempt to impart a Zionist national culture. Another main subject of this study is the debate on the creation of a secular, national culture, or Hebrew culture – the so-called *Kulturdebatte*. Hebrew was not simply or immediately acclaimed as the new national language of the Jews by a plurality of Zionists. There was deep-rooted resistance to Hebrew, which foreshadowed important divisions within the movement. Overall, however, the thought and debates on culture, along with the actual attempt to revitalize Hebrew as a living language of the Jews, and the material culture of Zionism complemented each other in producing the basis of a new, supplemental nationality. All of these aspects showed Zionism as embodying a complete Jewish civilization. I have therefore sought to reconfigure and analyze how the early Zionists thought, talked about, saw, and experienced their nascent national culture.

\*

The conception of the thesis upon which this book is drawn would have been impossible without George L. Mosse. I consider it my great fortune to have worked with him at the University of Wisconsin and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This work owes its largest intellectual debt to his books and his teaching. Professor Mosse's concern, humor, warmth, and friendship are a magnificent complement to his academic counsel. He is an ideal mentor, and an outstanding exemplar of a Judaic tradition which holds that "the honor of your student should be as dear to you as yourself" (*Pirkei Avot* 4: 15).

A sensitivity to the importance of pictures as an agent of memory, history, and culture was instilled in me by my father, William Berkowitz, who does not know that he is a cultural historian. As an employee of Eastman Kodak in Rochester, New York, it was a matter of course that he became an amateur photographer; he is quite good. My father's awareness of aesthetics was also passed on to my sister and me through the stream of pictorial histories and popular science books that entered our home. Perhaps my mother's funny and perceptive comments as we looked at these images was my first training in historical analysis.

In the course of my graduate studies at Madison, Sterling Fishman's graciousness, encouragement and advice were a consistent and invaluable part of my experience; I also benefited from working with Robert L. Koehl. Steven Kale helped me refine this project in its formative stage; he is a superb colleague and friend. From my student years and beyond, from Madison, Jerusalem, Vienna, Boston, Canton (New York), Los Angeles, New York, Columbus, and Tel Aviv, I also would like to acknowledge the assistance of Kitty Kameon, Bud Burkhard, Maureen Flynn, Jeffrey Watt, Monys Hagen, William Schara, Greg Moule, Dennis Koepke, Amira Proweller, Ulrich Lehmann, Derek Penslar, Marsha Rozenblit, Miriam Dean-Otting, Alexander Orbach, Jacob Heilbrunn, Susan Shapiro, David Harari, Carol Selkin, Miriyam Glazer, Elliot Dorff, Sue Lemkuil, Kevin McAleer, Richard Freund, Ernest Oliveri, and Andrew N. Bachman. Andy tirelessly tracked down a number of Hebrew references, helped with translations, and was an essential source of goodwill and spirit in Jerusalem and Madison. Joel Truman lent his expertise in cultural history and thoughtful editing skills to drafts of the dissertation; I warmly thank him for his generosity and friendship.

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original thesis. Steve Zipperstein's forthcoming biography of Ahad Ha-Am is certain to be one of the most important works in the field in several years.

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*Tel Aviv and Columbus*