

The Jewish Radical Right: Revisionist Zionism and Its Ideological Legacy

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Evan Daniel

Tel Aviv, 1933: Members of Betar, the Revisionist Zionist youth movement, march through the streets of Tel Aviv in clean, pressed, brown uniforms, performing militaristic drills to the jeers of socialists. In the minds of the Labour Zionists the uniforms, the emphasis on combat, and, above all, an ideology emphasizing force and strength pointed in one direction – fascism. Yet, when members of Betar travelled to Jewish communities throughout Europe at the end of 1935, they prompted a very different reaction. Riding across Europe on motorcycles and wearing leather jackets, these tough Jews, rather than the socialists, were the true avant-garde.

For Eran Kaplan, ‘the Revisionists embodied the dark side of the Zionist dream, and the violent and militaristic elements they represented has long been ignored and overlooked by both the Zionists (and Israeli) academic and political leadership.’ Instead, Israeli historiography has been dominated by Labour Zionist discourse since the founding of the state in 1947. Labour Zionists also monopolized the historiography of the Zionist movement for well over half a century. This is understandable as the majority of the leadership of the movement, as well as its rank-and-file, were leftists. Additionally, ‘the Zionist establishment’ as Kaplan notes ‘has for decades tried to portray its movement as a just and positive force, an idealistic quest to save the Jewish people by peaceful means. The Revisionists prophets of war fit this image poorly, if not at all’ (p. xiv).

Kaplan is sceptical of a new, critical, discourse that emerged in the Israeli academy during the 1980s from the far left. Often termed ‘post-Zionist,’ these historians, social scientists, cultural critics and artists aim, ‘to challenge Zionism’s accepted means of representation and undermine its self-perception as the only and necessary expression of Jewish history and culture’ (p. 168). Utilizing critical theories including post-colonial studies, gender studies and post-structuralism, these writers seek to challenge the hegemonic discourse of the Israeli academy. While some adopt an explicitly postmodernist stance, where historical truth and facts are unknowable, others focus on competing political discourses in their endeavour to

DANIEL | Jabotinsky's Legacy

determine which discourse is more truthful or more accurate in its depiction of reality. The most well known exponent of the latter perspective is historian Illan Pappé. Operating from a position on the extreme left these authors simplistically decry the Revisionist Zionists as fascists much as they make similar claims about the right in Israel today.

Another group challenging the dominant Israeli discourse are termed 'New Historians.' These scholars prefer a more moderate and measured role, excavating ignored archival records and interpreting historical documents in a variety of new, creative ways. Kaplan prefers the approach of these scholars who 'use modern and positivistic methodological tools but challenge the traditional interpretation of historical documents' in an attempt to 'provide what they consider a true description of critical events in the formation of the state of Israel' (p. 169). Benny Morris is the most recognized figure in this camp. Yet, like the post-Zionists, the New Historians are a diverse lot whose conclusions and use of archival data have been challenged by other scholars of Middle Eastern history, most notably Efraim Karsh. [1] Kaplan positions himself between these two approaches. Like the post-Zionists, he is comfortable with the application of critical theory, and like the New Historians he strives to construct an accurate description of events.

Jabotinsky

Kaplan's emphasis is placed on Revisionist Zionism's most well known figure, Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky. Yet he also spends some time discussing the differences between cultural revisionists like Jabotinsky and those Maximalists within the movement, such as Abba Achimeir and Uri Zvi Greenberg, who disagreed with Jabotinsky. A chapter on the legacy of revisionism and its relevance to contemporary Israeli politics, specifically the politics of Menachem Begin and Benjamin Netanyahu, is innovative in his interpretation of the ascendancy of the right, as is his critique of the post-Zionist political project. In this work – a dissertation expanded into a book – Kaplan makes use of a variety of archival and secondary sources including records of the Jabotinsky Institute and Labor Movement Archive/Lavon Institute, both in Tel Aviv, the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, the Abba Achimeir Archive in Ramat Gan and more than twenty newspapers from Israel, Italy, France and Poland.

Jabotinsky's early life in Russia, the marginalization and exploitation of living in the Pale of Settlement, and the pogrom against the Jews of Kishinev in 1903, had an

undeniable impact on his views regarding the necessity of Jewish self-defence. He took the lead in organizing self-defence units that year and was elected as a delegate to the 6th Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland where he met Theodore Herzl. During World War I Jabotinsky worked for the establishment of a Jewish combat unit in the British Army, the Jewish Legion, which experienced combat in Palestine fighting to free the land from the yoke of the Ottoman Empire.

In addition to his militant and political activities, Jabotinsky's education in the newly emerging Italian state led to his embrace of the values of the Enlightenment and nineteenth century classical liberalism. He arrived in Berne, Switzerland in 1898 at the age of eighteen to study law and served as a correspondent for the Russian newspaper *Odessky Listok* (p. 3). He moved to Rome later that year.

While in Italy, Jabotinsky studied under Antonio Labriola, the pre-eminent Italian intellectual and Marxist, and the liberal economist Benedetto Croce. But perhaps the greatest influence was exerted by the anti-materialist syndicalist and founder of modern criminology, Enrico Ferri. From Labriola came Jabotinsky's notion that individual will and the collective efforts of human beings determined the extent to which a society progresses. Croce fostered Jabotinsky's preference for liberal over state-controlled economies as well as his support for liberal democracy. Like Labriola, Ferri insisted that revolution could be sparked and its success determined by the 'will and enthusiasm of the people, not on materialistic parameters' (p. 28). Yet, as a social scientist, Ferri attempted to explain human history with a scientific approach based on natural laws not metaphysics. For Ferri, modern science 'starts from the magnificent synthetic conception of *monism*, that is to say, of a *single substance* underlying all phenomena – matter and force being recognized as inseparable and indestructible, continuously evolving in a succession of forms – forms relative to their respective times and places' (p. 43).

Above all else, the Jabotinsky that emerges in the book is an intellectual, not a pragmatic politician – a student of history and a cultural critic committed to the lofty goals of cultural rebirth and resistance. 'The unique qualities of Revisionist thought in the interwar period' according to Kaplan, 'lay in how its leaders saw themselves: primarily as intellectuals and visionaries, not as political activists. And from this unusual position they created a unique brand of Jewish radical nationalism, an all-encompassing ideology that attempted to reinvent the Hebrew nation by cultural means' (p. xvii).

DANIEL | Jabotinsky's Legacy

Intriguingly, Kaplan notes how the Revisionists found inspiration in the Black cultural renaissance occurring in the United States in the 1920s – in particular among Black poets – as search for Black authenticity and racial consciousness through a rejection of the dominant (white) Western culture (p. 120). Jabotinsky admired another source of Black creativity and culture, jazz, ‘which he considered the true expression of the American pioneering spirit’ (p. 121). Yet while advocating the widespread flourishing of the Hebrew language and the development of Hebrew culture, his message to young Jews was expressed most clearly in his article ‘*Affen Prippacheck, the New A B C*’ (1933). He wrote, ‘For the generation growing up now and upon whose shoulders responsibility for the greatest turning point in our history will apparently be placed, the A B C has a very simple sound: young people – learn to shoot.’

Kaplan describes Revisionism, like other right-wing ideologies, as in opposition to the advances of the Enlightenment and individualism (p. xv). In my estimation this is too clear-cut. Jabotinsky placed primacy on the role of the individual in political organization as well as expressing anti-statist views that shared some commonality with anarchism. An interesting tension, if not contradiction, in Revisionist thought – and certainly that of Jabotinsky – is the struggle between Zionism’s striving for collective national identity and liberalism’s need for political and economic individualism. For Jabotinsky, national identity and the identity of peoples are tied to the land. Jabotinsky was not unique in this regard. English historian Henry Thomas Buckle posited that the fundamental characteristics of a nationality are constructed by the climatic and geographic conditions of the land. In a similar fashion, Jabotinsky believed that Jewish intellectual, social and political development was predicated on a return to the Jewish homeland, Israel.

Early in the previous century (1903), Jabotinsky advocated *Kadima* as the slogan for the Zionist movement. *Kadima* has a dual meaning in Hebrew: ‘progress’ and ‘east.’ For the Revisionists, theirs was a progressive movement dedicated to moving the Jewish people eastward to Israel. By the 1920s Jabotinsky rallied for a Jewish majority as *the* program for all Zionists. This perspective flowed from Jabotinsky’s notion of the nation. Nations reflected the psyche of their people. If Jews remained a minority all the problems of the Diaspora would continue even in *Eretz Yisrael*. Jews must become a majority to express their will through the development of Hebrew institutions and social structures, including the establishment of a liberal-democratic state. Given his political liberalism, Jabotinsky realized that a democratic state with an Arab majority would exhibit an Arab national character.

Simply stated, without a Jewish majority, the goals of Zionism would never be realized. In 'The Idea of Betar' (1934), Jabotinsky writes, 'When will we be able to say that "Palestine" has become "Eretz Yisrael"? Only when more Jews than non-Jews live in the land. The first condition for a national state is a national majority' (p. 180). Jabotinsky and the minority Revisionists arrived at this conclusion long before the majority of political Zionists advocated similar policies. Furthermore, to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish majority, the Revisionists advocated the forced removal or 'transfer' of Arab populations from historic Palestine. This is a marked contrast to the opinions of left-Zionists at the time. Perhaps naively, but undoubtedly with great faith, Jabotinsky believed that once the state was established Jews throughout the Diaspora would return home and the 'Jewish Question' would be solved.

Monism and Revisionist Zionism

Much of Kaplan's work is spent explicating Jabotinsky's monistic philosophy and its differentiation from Revisionist Maximalism and, by extension, fascism. Echoing Ferri's observations, monism posits a unitary and unifying force binding everything in the cosmos to a universal, underlying reality. While not inherently fascist – the Hindu school of Advaita Vedanta, or non-dualism, is monistic – monism underpinned and united most ideologies on the radical right during the early twentieth century.

The Revisionist Maximalist Abba Achimeir wrote numerous articles during the 1920s and 1930s highly critical of socialism and liberalism while expressing support for fascism (p. 15). Jabotinsky, by contrast, continually expressed his avowal for democracy, parliamentarianism and classical liberalism. Achimeir also advocated a biological and cultural interpretation of world history that shared more common ground with the theories of Oswald Spengler than Jabotinsky's Bucklean environmental nationalism.

Another key difference between Jabotinsky's Zionism and fascism is his emphasis on individual volition and agency. For Jabotinsky, like the anarchist advocates of 'propaganda of the deed' in Italy and Spain, and the nihilists and Maximalist Social Revolutionaries in Russia, membership in the political organization was a matter of individual choice. Unlike fascism, man was not subservient to the state. In fact quite the opposite was the case. In Jabotinsky's idealistic philosophy every individual was a king, sovereign in their decisions and beliefs. Once Jews were a majority, then

DANIEL | Jabotinsky's Legacy

individuals working together would, through the force of their wills, change society and develop Israel as a 'light unto the nations.'

For the Zionist Revisionists monism was more than a programmatic political plan. As Kaplan writes, 'It was a means to cure the Jewish spirit after two millennia of the Diaspora. Jabotinsky maintained that "a perfect soul is only a monist soul. By its content the word ideal can have only a single meaning. In a healthy soul there is only one ideal"' (pp. 33-4). Thus any appeal to universal ideals – socialism, communism – would not only delay the establishment of Israel but doom the Zionist project by preventing the return of exiles in the Diaspora to their historic homeland. Once a Jewish majority was established in Israel, there would be space for a diversity of opinions and goals. As another historian of the Revisionist movement, Raphaella Bilski Ben-Hur, observes:

Ideological zealotry thus needed to exist only until the creation of a Jewish Majority in the land of Israel; it had no place once the state was established. On this point Jabotinsky's concept of zealotry differed from that of the fascists who held that the individual had to sacrifice his life for the collective – the nation and the state – in any situation and in any period of time. [2]

The same author notes a confluence with a certain strain of anarchist thought in Jabotinsky's writings, equating any attempts at collectivization as slavery under a different name. Jabotinsky also agreed with Bakunin's anti-statist critique of Marx. However, as the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian Revolutions make clear it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to regain freedom of speech and tolerance for differentiation of opinions after one rigid faction or another seizes power, and especially if the seizure of power occurs after a civil-war or other contentious political struggle. Jabotinsky clearly did not learn or heed this crucial tenet of classical anarchism.

Contemporary Right-Wing Zionism

Despite lofty aspirations, radical ideologies and political projects are always delimited by material conditions. In Jabotinsky's time, Labour Zionists dominated the structures and institutions of the *Yishuv* and they would continue to do so after the establishment of Israel. However, the arrival of Mizrahim from Arab countries in Asia and North Africa, the continued existential threat Israel faced from belligerent neighbours, and perhaps most importantly, the coalescence of a variety

of conservative political elements into one party, the Likud, led to the ascendancy of the right in Israel.

Kaplan, himself a descendant of Zionist Revisionists, has written an engaging and balanced assessment of the Jewish radical right. He also crafts a succinct work that will interest scholars of intellectual and political history, in particular those concerned with Zionism and radical political ideologies, in addition to general readers who seek to understand how a minority tendency within Israeli society rose to political ascendancy. Neither is an easy task. For detractors, the Revisionists and their ideological kin are nothing less than fascists, while many on the right cling to the Revisionist tradition as the only authentic form of Zionism, or at least the only version that can effectively defend the Jewish people from military defeat and existential elimination. These debates continue in Israel and the Jewish Diaspora today.

In an interesting twist Kaplan observes that the post-Zionists unknowingly succumb to a worldview quite similar to that of the Revisionists. Thus, 'as the post-Zionists have traced the implications of their theories in a rapidly changing Israeli society, they have, much as other postmodernists have globally, found themselves proposing solutions to societal problems that could best be termed conservative or even reactionary' (p. 170). As Kaplan further explains,

Postmodernism declared the death of the modern subject as the central point of the intelligible universe. Instead of an epistemological regime that has a clear center, it offers a deconstruction of texts, a process by which the one who manufactures the critique and exposes the text's power mechanism becomes himself part of the text. Thus the human subject loses its autonomous position and becomes yet another symbol in an endless series of signs and images. Zionism, as a modernist movement, sought to create the New Hebrew subject as the centrepiece of its historical revolution. The post-Zionists, like the early Revisionists, seek to destroy this subject and abolish the differences – homeland/exile, Hebrew/Jew – that, they claim, constitute it (p. 171).

A common ailment of doctoral dissertations that are turned into works for broader consumption is an overabundance of theoretical jargon. If more attention had been paid to what the Revisionists said, wrote, and thought and less to contemporary theoretical considerations and the interpretations of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, the book would have appealed to a broader audience. Put another way,

DANIEL | Jabotinsky's Legacy

Kaplan's historical writing is best when describing the ideas, publications and programs of the Revisionists. The work is less successful using contemporary post-modernist terminology to explain the past. Yet his use of these methods is quite novel in critiquing the approach and consequences of following the post-Zionist political project to its reactionary conclusions.

I also wish more time had been paid to the fascinating early twentieth century Italian political milieu which produced Benedetto Croce, Enrico Ferri and Antonio Labriola. The philosophy of classical liberalism and the political ideas of these individuals had a major impact on Jabotinsky. While leftist political opponents are quick to point to the connections between these three men and Benito Mussolini they are more reluctant to note that two of these luminaries – Croce and Labriola – greatly influenced the Italian Marxist intellectual, Antonio Gramsci.

Nevertheless, Kaplan has crafted a work of value to English-speaking readers who wish to escape the stifling and stale divide between laudatory hagiography and vindictive political screeds that unfortunately dominates writings on Jabotinsky, the Revisionists, and their ideological legacy. Lastly, this a welcome contribution and an inspiring call for a new historiography addressing social groups previously marginalized in historical texts, including the *Mizrahim* and *Haredim* (Ultra-Orthodox Jews) as well as members of right-wing political parties including *Ha'ihud Ha'Leumi* (the National Union), *Ma'afdal* (the National Religious Movement) and *Shas* (Sephardic Religious Party).

Evan Matthew Daniel is a Ph.D. candidate studying history and political science at the New School for Social Research, an archivist at the Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University and a signatory to the *Euston Manifesto*.

References

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Notes

- [1] Karsh 1997.
- [2] Ben-Hur 1993, p. 185.