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On Political Tradition and Ideology: Russian Dimensions of Practical Zionism and Israeli Politics

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Abstract

This article concerns the endurance of political traditions brought to Palestine at the turn of the 20th century from the revolutionary milieu in Imperial Russia. The Russian Empire and its neighbors, which form most of today's Eastern Europe and large swaths of Central Europe, was the homeland of most early Zionist settlers. They had acquired experience in a range of clandestine political organizations in the Russian Empire. It is this revolutionary experience that constitutes the bedrock of Russian Zionists' influence on the political culture of the pre-state Palestine and Israel. Later, those who found themselves in Poland after Versailles became familiar with parliamentary rituals, even though the Polish state did not enjoy democracy for long. We suggest that this seemingly distant history continues to manifest itself in the political culture of contemporary Israel. We consider epistemology, tradition, ideology, and political action while looking at Israeli politics through the lens of its Russian roots.

Keywords: Zionism; Russian Empire; Israel; tradition

Introduction

How enduring are political traditions? How do such traditions influence political values and actions? How do researchers gauge long-term effects of political traditions—especially, those that are shunned for reasons of political conjuncture and fashion—on our current politics? What happens when we try to ignore, repress, or deny their role in the shaping of our “new we”?

In this article, we approach these questions by looking at the Zionist movement and its embodiment in the state of Israel. To what extent do these reflect the political cultures brought to Palestine from Imperial Russia, the homeland of most of the early Zionist settlers? How does this history manifest itself in the political life of contemporary Israel?

We outline below various Russian inputs in the shaping of the Zionist movement in its formative years and trace their fate in Israeli sociopolitics. We argue that the study of political traditions and actions of Russian Zionist pioneers enhances our understanding of the political evolution of Israel. Political action shapes political ideology and expresses the political tradition that the settlers brought with them from the revolutionary underground in the Russian Empire.

It has been observed that “the Russian Revolution (what actually happened in Russia) was not the implementation of an abstract design worked out by Lenin and others in Switzerland: it was the modification in response to *Russian* circumstances. And the French Revolution was far more closely connected with the ancien régime than with Locke or America” (Oakshott 1991, 59n6). This view can be applied to the history of “the Zionist revolution,” as its leaders used to call their movement,

which combined thoroughly transformed elements of religious tradition, elements of European socialism and romantic nationalism, and other traditions that nourished them.

Diaspora as Source of Political Tradition

We propose, then, to adopt the above approach to Zionist, later Israeli, political culture and its rapport with its “Russian” roots—that is, the political practices and traditions of the Russian cultural world, particularly its revolutionary subculture, in the late 19th and early 20th century.

It is a truism that the Israeli state has been built by migrants from many different countries with a wide array of political traditions. Contrary to the nationalist narration of a homeland–diaspora relation, where Israel is the “center” around which the Jewish Diaspora revolves and in which it would eventually dissolve, we suggest viewing Israel as an amalgam of diverse national diasporas: Russian, Polish, Moroccan, Yemenite, German, etc. These were diasporas, large collectives sharing the same fate and the same immediate origin, rather than atomized immigrants. This accounts for a complex configuration of power and political culture in Israel. In this configuration, the more ideologically motivated founders came largely from Imperial Russia. They sought profound and drastic transformation, an idea imported from the revolutionary underground in the Russian Empire, which, in turn, absorbed elements of the European radical thought of their time.

The Russian immigrants played a defining role in the shaping of the state’s political, cultural, and even ethical foundations. Given the crucial role of the sovereign state in all aspects of Israeli life (foreshadowed by Zionist social and political institutions in Mandatory Palestine), it is only natural that these foundations have in turn shaped Israeli society and culture at large.

Other diasporas, while contributing their own traditions (for example, participation of Jews of Poland in parliamentary activities) had to adapt to the values and experience of the Russian one. Since 1977, when the former Revisionists were elected to govern Israel, the new rulers under the guidance of Menahem Begin, who was familiar with the parliamentary regime in Poland, had to work in a political space shaped by their socialist predecessors, mostly of Russian socialist origin.

The relevance of the Russian past to understanding modern Israel is “largely overlooked” (Avineri 1996, 163). Writing in the context of the 1990’s mass immigration from the Former Soviet Union to Israel, Shlomo Avineri, arguably one of the most influential interpreters of the Zionist ideology (among many other issues of political philosophy), rightly insists that Zionist and Israeli history must be understood by taking account of the deep roots they have in Imperial Russia. As he puts it, one can understand neither the foundations of the Israeli political system and its ideological debates nor Israeli culture (he himself focuses on literature and music) without realizing that they have developed in the “crucible” of East European history, politics, and culture (Avineri 1996, 167).

Yet, Avineri’s account of this argument underestimates the importance of those roots for understanding Israeli society today. Arguing that two major watersheds—the Nazi genocide, followed by the emergence of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe—have severed the ties between Jewish Israelis and their East European pasts, he seems to suggest that these traditional influences have become dormant and unacknowledged, as “a physical and psychological barrier developed between many of Israel’s Eastern European immigrants and their place of origin” (Avineri 1996, 169).

Moreover, he also suggests that these influences are limited to the descendants of East European Jews, drawing a distinction between them and the remaining half of Jewish Israeli society whose origins are in the Middle East and North Africa. The latter (often referred to as Mizrahim), he argues, “were able to delve into their historical memories and traditions and forge their identity as Israeli Jews in the context of their historical experience” (Avineri 1996, 169). It is quite telling that Avineri considers the Arab and Muslim Middle East and North Africa—or its traditions—as legitimate and available heritage of Israeli Mizrahim. But by doing so he almost reverses the ethnic power relations within Jewish Israeli society, assigning Mizrahim with the agency, cultural capital, and power to withstand the hegemony of the largely East European Zionist ruling class, who, Avineri argues, had

been deprived of a continuing contact with its cultural roots for several decades prior to the end of the 1980s (Avineri 1996, 169).

Ultimately, Avineri fails to address the enduring indebtedness of Israeli politics and culture, in their entirety, to their Russian origins. Although he celebrates the then incipient mending—in the wake of the dismantlement of socialism in Europe—of the aforementioned break between (Ashkenazi) Israeli Jews and their East European past, Avineri fails to see how this Russian heritage may have affected all Israelis, including those of non-European origin. This is, of course, due to the continuing hegemony of Israel's ruling elite of East European provenance, whether Russian socialist or Polish bourgeois nationalist.

Nationalist and Eurocentric in view, Avineri naturally glosses over this hegemony, and fails to see that non-European political cultures immersed in the crucible of the nation-statist “melting pot” came out shaped in the image of the East European Zionist founding fathers. This has led to acrimonious conflicts and social ruptures among these immigrants, whom Ella Shohat (2017, 37) has aptly called “Zionism's Jewish victims.” It is therefore not surprising that Avineri traces the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to the East European revolutionary tradition but does not mention that the assassin was a second-generation Yemenite Jew. Yet, this political murder illustrates the triumph of “Russian” political values, morphed into a national tradition, forced and enforced, as it was, on immigrants of all provenances. One may recognize the ethos of Russian revolutionary roots even in the political opposite of these early socialists—for example, in the intrepid adventurism of the nationalist right, with its disregard for law in settling the territories conquered in 1967 and its adamant drive to remove legal restraints on the political agency of the government.

This is less trivial than appears at first sight. Scholars have, of course, discussed the “Russian roots” or “Russian context” of varying aspects of Israeli life, specifically of the wider field of cultural production, from music to literature (Regev and Seroussi 2004; Bar-Yosef 2020). Others have noted the influence of revolutionary Russian thought on the development of the Zionist idea in Russia (Avineri 1981; Shimoni 1995; Tsirki-Sadan 2012; Horowitz 2017). Curiously, there is very little in the literature to suggest to what degree these “roots” or “context” survive and are shaping Israeli reality to this day, especially on matters of broadly defined political culture.

In line with this argument, a recently published collective volume dedicated to the study of some of the Russian and Polish lineages of Zionism and Israel (Moss et al. 2021) argues against the prevalent view of Israel as an outpost of the West, whether as a beacon of democracy or a colonial outpost. The Zionist settlers, the editors argue, developed an ambivalent attitude toward the anti-imperial cultures of ethnonationalism that abounded and continue to abound in Eastern Europe. “Zionists both reacted against and emulated such [...] nationalisms and violence” (Moss et al. 2021, 5). In other words, Zionists reacted against it in Europe and emulated it in Palestine. “Violence not only affected the material, physical, and external conditions of Jewish life, it also became an internal element of interwar Jewish political culture. Portions of Jewish youth internalized political violence in certain settings as part of the general pan-European drive toward radical transformative and coercive politics” (Moss et al. 2021, 12).

Quite a few Zionist settlers had acquired experience in revolutionary activities (including political terrorism) in Russian revolutionary groups, which abhorred ethnic nationalism. “Quite paradoxically,” writes Israel Bartal (2021, 20) in this volume, “a cultural center developed in Palestine that, while encouraging innovative Jewish arts and endeavors, strengthened the influence of the Russian imperial culture in the New Yishuv [settlement].” This included attempts that the imperial authorities undertook for over a century to reform the Jews, turn small shopkeepers into farmers, and make them thereby “productive.” These very attempts, inspired, of course, by influential Zionist theoreticians like Ber Borochov and A. D. Gordon rather than the tsar's ministers Sergei Witte and Vyacheslav von Plehve, came to underlie the dominant Zionist ethos, with its stellar symbol—the kibbutz. For several generations, Russian Zionists and their descendants embraced this ethos, first practically, later rhetorically, and formed the elite of Israeli society.

Although Polish nationalism also had its influence, “Polish Zionists never reached the first ranks of the world Zionist leadership and never obtained a degree of power and influence within the world movement consistent with the numerical strength of the community that had made them its representatives” (Engle 2021, 221). One might add that German Jews, who immigrated to Palestine mostly after 1933, never attained the political influence commensurate with their role in building up universities and industries in the new country (Segev 2000).

The dominant discourse for almost a century of the Zionist colonization was that of left-wing progressive internationalism that the settlers brought from the Russian Empire or, rather, from the revolutionary movements working against the empire. Arriving before 1917, and many even before 1905, they also brought with them deep reverence for Russian culture, music, and literature. The doyenne of Zionist historians, Anita Shapira (2021, 74) is keenly insightful when she writes that “Russia became a myth, and admiration for it increased precisely because the real Russia was inaccessible. Russian songs were translated and became Hebrew folk songs, and Russia was idolized.”

Moreover, most of those who idolized Russian culture had imbibed it from afar, they had never lived in Russia proper, but in the Pale of Settlement surrounded by Ukrainians, Poles, and Lithuanians. For them, Russia was embodied in the novels of Chekhov, Chernyshevsky, and Tolstoy. It was also a unifying language of communication: in 1911 the subscription to the Russian-language Zionist publication *Rassvet* was nearly three times higher than the number of subscribers to the *Ha-Olam* published in Hebrew by the World Zionist Organization (Tsurumi 2021, 50–51).

A thorough consideration of the Russian provenance of Israeli political culture, including the Russian variety of orientalism, should shed light on its contemporary characteristics such as its understanding of democracy, individual liberty, war and peace, the rule of law, the relationship between individuals and society, that between Jew and Arab, the meaning of Jewish and Arab identities and their politicization, the value of territory, the uses of political power, and so much more. These are all informed by a wider framework of diverse aspects of public life—from architecture to military thought, from art, literature, and music to nature and *Weltanschauung*. Although we envisage exploring the interaction of these aspects in the future, this article explores the context of our argument, focusing primarily on two issues: “Israeli” versus “Jewish” identities and political uses of violence. We should also note that this article does not seek to produce a chronologically ordered account. Rather, it uses historical material to emphasize often neglected commonalities among different streams of Zionism and to interpret this movement’s development in terms of its roots in the Russian revolutionary ethos.

The Tsarist Context of the Emergence of Zionism

All settler societies are built of elements of the settlers’ home cultures. Some of these elements may appear incongruous in a new climate and a different natural environment. Yet they appeal to the aesthetic and civic sense of the settlers even when they try to make a break with the old. This ambivalence was not unknown among the Zionist settlers in Palestine. An interesting expression of this has been the deployment of “European” (mostly Russian) literary conventions, imageries, and metaphors in Hebrew poetry. For example, the image of autumn in Hebrew poetry has much more to do with the European autumn than with the Israeli one (Ben-Porat 1991).

It is worth recalling that the cradle of practical Zionism was located mostly in the Russian Empire, then spreading from Warsaw to Tashkent and from Helsinki to Odessa (none of these are in today’s Russia). The spread of Zionist ideas mirrored a deep shift in the collective consciousness of East European Jews. The Zionists had resorted to mass propaganda to bring it about. The Zionist idea, while simple and natural enough in the context of modern nationalism, appeared as something entirely new, a break with millennia of Jewish tradition—which explains the reticence of most Jews at the time to accept it (Rabkin 2006). On the other hand, the Haskalah (the European Jewish version of the Enlightenment) and secularization paved the way for the creation of the new Jewish

consciousness. Zionism could only succeed by adding an ethnic component to the otherwise universal phenomenon of secularization.

The tsarist regime maintained most Jews in the Pale of Settlement, at a distance from the centers of Russian culture and their undeniable attraction. Therefore, in contradistinction from France, for example, secularization did not bring about widespread assimilation of Russia's Jews. Secularized Jews in France could simply abandon their Jewish identity, move to a big city, and dissolve in urban anonymity, but Russian Jews did not have this option and had to remain concentrated in the Pale of Settlement.

While giving up their loyalty to the Torah, these secular Jews developed a proto-national character and a nationalist outlook. Moreover, *maskilim*, promoters of Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe “would be the first to denounce the erosion of the Jewish identity, as well as to proclaim the need to shape a modern national identity” (Feiner 2010, 262).

The Jews of Russia possessed at least two of the attributes of a “normal” nation: a common territory (the Pale of Settlement) and a common language (Yiddish). Several other national movements—for example, Polish, Lithuanian, and Finnish—came into being as the wave of secularization swept over the Jews of Russia at the end of the 19th century. Zionism, inspired by these movements of national rebirth, gained dominance largely as a reaction to the murderous anti-Semitism that afflicted Europe during the first half of the 20th century (see also Tsurumi 2008). Albeit firmly opposed to this identity, developed in what Shlomo Sand calls “Yiddishland” (Sand 2009, 248), Zionism capitalized on the national sentiment that undergirded it.

Even though only one percent of turn-of-the-century Russian Jewish emigrants were eventually to make their way to Palestine (the majority chose North America), Russian nationals formed the hard core of Zionist activism. The secular Hebrew culture they had adopted and nourished (see our discussion below) dominated the entire Zionist enterprise. Despite their determination to expunge the past, Zionist elites consciously replicated European cultural and political models in Palestine. The early Zionists naturally saw the Land of Israel as did the Russian romantics, with their exalted vision of Mother Russia. The dozens of Russian songs about *Rodina*, translated into Hebrew as *moleDET* in the first decades of Zionist settlement, were to instill the love of the new-old motherland in the new arrivals.

This is not just an historical relic. “The feeling of the soil” is quoted by Soviet immigrants in Israel, including baptized Jews, in the end of the 20th century (Deutsch Kornblatt 2003, 185):

For Viktor, then, Israel fulfilled his Jewish identity. He became reconnected with the “soil”, of his very being, with an internal sense of himself as a Jew. What is more, that identity is not diminished by his position in the Russian Orthodox Church, but, as for many others, in fact enhanced. As David confessed, “only after baptism did we feel ourselves to be Jews [*yevrey*]”. Today, Viktor is a person of faith, living on the land of his ancestors.

The soil as a potent vector of national identity is not unique in Russia: it can be found in many varieties of nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe. What is striking in this example is the transfer of this vector to Israel and the resulting feeling of an intimate connection of this *yevrey* (see below) with its non-Arab inhabitants. The antireligious enthusiasm that once galvanized the secular Jews of Russia produced long-lasting results for Jewish life around the world. The Zionists were by no means the only ones caught up in the anticlerical urge. When they migrated to North America in the early 20th century, Russian Jews promoted a new secular identity, founded vibrant press and theatres in Yiddish, and established secular socialist schools in major cities like Buenos Aires, Montreal, and New York. This secular culture flourished for several decades but has fallen victim to acculturation to the dominant language and culture (Howe 1995). “An ethnic identity divorced from religious concerns has shown no basis for survival beyond the immigrant generation” in Western countries (Liebman 2003, 345). However, this Russian-born identity not only survives but flourishes in the state of Israel.

Because there was no legal political life in Imperial Russia prior to October 1905, Zionist settlers were imbued with the ethos of revolutionary underground, ardent dissident writings, daring terrorist assassinations of tsarist officials, and other forms of opposition to the imperial order. They also brought with them the tradition of bitter ideological controversies. Parliamentary activity authorized—under duress—by the emperor in October 1905 was short and inconclusive. But the future leaders of Zionist settlers in Palestine were too young and provincial to have any involvement in this incipient parliamentary activity. Rather, it is their experience of revolutionary activities against the imperial regime that became political tradition in the new context of colonial settlement in Palestine. To what degree can—and should—we trace to these Russian sources the origins of Israeli politics, past and future?

Much has been written and debated on possible links of Jewish political traditions with Zionist ideology and Israeli political culture (Elazar 1980, 1998, 2020; Walzer et al. 2003a, 2003b, 2018; Cohen 2007; see also Cooper 2016). Zionist ideologues used to emphasize the rebellion and rupture that Zionism represented with respect to Jewish traditions (Shimoni 1995). In the last few decades, obverse attempts have been made to de-emphasize the revolutionary nature of this political movement and to insert Zionism and the state of Israel into Jewish continuity.

This search for Jewish roots in the Zionist project (Peri 2012; Walzer 2015; Peled and Peled 2018) reflects the decline of revolutionary ideologies (Traverso 2022) and the subsequent need to find new forms of legitimation of the Zionist state, both in Israel and among Jews and, more importantly, Christians in other countries. This ideological interest in the “Judaization” of Israel’s image tends to obscure the foundational role of the Russian experience. Revolutionary traditions that shaped early Zionism need serious scholarly attention if we are to understand today’s Israel.

Split Identity

When asked by a journalist to explain the results of the 1996 elections, Shimon Peres—who had just lost to Benjamin Netanyahu (the early elections were called following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin)—summarized it as the loss of “us,” the “Israelis” to “them,” “all those who do not have the Israeli mentality [...] call it the ‘Jews’” (quoted in Segev 2001, 77). Peres was echoing a prevalent sense in Israeli political culture, that Jewish-Israeli identity, the supposed backbone of Zionist nationalism, is split and conflicted. The main outlines of this split reflect the tension between the Zionist endeavor to create a “new man” or a “new Hebrew” as the antithesis of the “old Jew.” This was part of the ideological imperative of the “negation of exile” in the valiant effort to build a modern identity, albeit inspired by secular visions of biblical stories. “The dizzying pretension that they could build a bridge as long as exile itself, between the hired killers of Masada and the soldiers of the IDF” fired the imagination of early Zionists (Barnavi 2000, 219).

Peres’ musing on his election loss betrayed the fact that half a century after the establishment of the state, the tension “Israeli versus Jew” was not only discernible but also determined the course of Israeli politics. Importantly, this tension corresponds—conflates, even—with other identity conflicts that define Israeli political culture, such as the “secular vs. religious,” the “modern vs. the traditional,” the “Ashkenazi versus Mizrahi” schisms, and, of course, “Jew versus Arab.” This distinction (“Israeli versus Jew”) seems to find its roots in the Russian language and in the development of the Zionist idea in the Russian empire.

Hebrew versus Jew

The more ideologically minded Zionist founders wanted “to build and to be (re)built” (*livnot u-lehibanot*), both as individuals and as a collective. A crucial goal of this transformational project has been the shaping of a new identity and a new vocabulary to describe it. Zionist pioneers preferred to label their identity as Hebrew (*ivri*) as opposed to Jew (*yehudi*)—the pre-state predecessor of Peres’s “us,” the “Israelis”—and to distinguish it from Jewishness. The word *ivri* stood for a new

type of intrepid and free, “new” man (women took a clearly subordinate place in the Zionist project) about to build a new society in “the wilderness” of Palestine. They “sought to create an entirely new Jew for the future by attempting to reach back to a prebiblical Hebraic past, fully Hebrew but not at all Jewish. Along with many early Labor Zionists in the 20th century, they [...] seized on the term *ivri* in their crusade to decouple their ideally conceived prospective state from everything associated with the Jewish diasporic experience, including the Jewish religion, opting for a *Hebrew* rather than a *Jewish* state” (Diamond 2021, para. 25).

It meant more than acceptance of the new vernacular, Modern Hebrew, but also connoted a break with, and disdain of, the past—that is, the two millennia of “exilic” (Jewish) history. Religion with its attention to myriad moral and material commandments, was part of this embarrassing past that was to be discarded alongside with the Yiddish language. But how and where did this distinction originate? This is not a question of the etymology of *ivri* and *yehudi* initially found, respectively, in the Pentateuch (Genesis 14:13) and Kings II (16:6). Rather, it is the distinction between the contemporary uses of the two terms that deserves our attention.

The Russian context sheds important light on this distinction. The contemporary usage of *yevrey* (еврей, cognate to *ivri*, Hebrew) denotes a nationality, whereas *yiudey* (иудей) refers to a faith, a religious identity. For example, the Russian-language Wikipedia entry on Jews (*yevrey*) begins with this distinction. This usage has even entered legal terminology. For example, an ex-priest was accused of fomenting hatred against *yevrey* and *yiudey*—that is, against two separate categories of citizens (Akhtyrko 2021). One of the earliest Russian-language books about the Jews uses both terms (Nevakhovich 1803).

This distinction (which neither English, nor French, German and Spanish Wikipedia articles make) was born in the cradle of Jewish nationalism in Eastern Europe. For centuries, Jews were called *zhid* in most Slavic languages including Russian. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, and more specifically Catherine the Great, the Biblical term of *yevrey* came to be used in polite company while *zhid* became a pejorative word in Russian, though continued to be used as a traditional, mostly neutral word, by the less educated and rural inhabitants as well as in Polish and other Slavic languages.

This terminological split was drastic and irreversible. Although similar substitutions took place in English (Hebrew in lieu of Jew) and French (*Israélite* in lieu of *juif*), the new appellations did not denote ethnicity, let alone nationality; quite the contrary, in the context of the Emancipation they reduced the old identity, whether Jewish or Hebrew, to its religious component. Moreover, the old terms remained socially acceptable and have now made a comeback. However, in the Russian Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the absence of Emancipation created strong social pressure to convert to Christianity. This process, involving mostly Jews in big cities, gave birth to the concept of the Baptized Hebrew (*kreshchyonyi yevrey*).

A century later, baptized Jews in Russia insisted that their belonging to the church “actually increased their sense of *Jewish* identity. ... Although all interviewees would identify themselves as *yevrey*, all equally felt alienated from the term *yiudey*.” But a baptized Jew “saw in Jesus a Jew (*yiudey*) [...] And the deeper I went into the Church, the more deeply I felt myself as belonging to the Jewish people” (Deutsch Kornblatt 2003, 173, 175, 186). This was the reason a chapter devoted to baptized Jews was included in a book titled *New Jewish Identities* (Gitelman et al. 2003)

Emergence of a Secular Jew

The shift from “Jew” to “Hebrew” reflected the need to root the national revival in the rejection of Rabbinic Judaism disdained as an exilic malaise. Thus, one of the leading ideologues of Zionism, Ahad Ha-Am, (the pen name of Asher Hirsch Ginzberg, 1856–1927), a Russian Jew from Odessa, insisted that Judaism (that is, Jewish “religion”) was nothing more than an optional aspect of Jewish national identity. However, Ahad Ha-Am insisted that dialogue with the vast wealth of Jewish tradition is of the essence for what he viewed as a much needed “spiritual revival” of the nation.

Other Zionists, who had adopted a Nietzsche-inspired negation of the Jewish past, fiercely objected to any kind of commitment to this Jewish tradition. David Ben-Gurion, for example, reportedly saw Judaism as “the historical misfortune of the Jewish people and an obstacle to its transformation into a normal nation” (Leibowitz 1995, 144). As Dan Miron, a leading scholar of Hebrew literature, recently summarized this stance,

[Mikha Yosef] Berdyczewski—Ahad Ha-Am’s rival whose influence on Ben-Gurion and on certain other members of the Second ‘Aliya [the leading cohort of the Zionist movement from the mid 1920’s onward] has yet to be thoroughly examined and properly understood—wanted to transform the Jews into Hebrews, corporal and instinctual, released from the culture of the Book and the Law. A. D. Gordon mused about a Jewish man whose soul was reshaped by the combination of manual labor, avoiding commerce, and a return to spiritual living that emerges from a direct connection with the cosmos. [Yosef Hayim] Brenner wanted to burn and peel away from the body and soul of the Jewish man the “parasitical” trait. (2021, § Books).

In any event, when adapted to the situation of the Jews of the Russian Empire, where they were officially segregated and lived in relatively compact communities, the idea of an “optional Jewish religion” produced an entirely different effect. The Haskalah undermined the practice of Judaism without diluting the Russian Jews’ sense of cultural belonging preserved by the obligation to reside in the Pale of Settlement. As noted earlier, compared with Jews in France and Germany who enjoyed the fruit of Emancipation, the Jews of Russia had very limited opportunities to assimilate into the surrounding society.

Thus crystallized the concept of the “secular Jew.” *Svetskiy yevrey*; светский еврей, the word *svetskiy* corresponds to “mundane,” “worldly” as an antonym of “religious,” “divine.” It correlates with the Yiddish *veltlikh*, (“worldly”). The new concept, which quickly gained popularity in the Russian Empire, eliminated the religious—and thus normative—dimension of the Jewish identity and retained only its biological/genealogical and cultural dimensions. The perennial latent tension between universalism and tribalism in Jewish continuity was thus resolved in favor of the latter.

The secular Jew became the term of self-identification in the former Russian Empire. Intellectual histories of Jewish secularism often trace it back to Spinoza. Indeed, ideas of Jewish secularism developed in Western and Central Europe. But Jews of that region, eager to become part of the ambient nation, continued to identify as a confessional group whatever their level of Judaic observance or transgressions thereof. Spinoza as “the first secular Jew” is no more than a powerful myth (Feiner 2010, 17).

Secularization could become incarnated in a new identity only under the conditions prevailing in the Russian Empire. The term “secularist” was coined by lapsed Christians in England in mid-19th century as a positive term of self-identification in lieu of “atheist” that implied immoral behavior. A few decades later, Jews who left behind Judaism did not want to be called *kofrim* (renegades) or *resha'im* (evildoers) that Jewish tradition reserves for such individuals. “Secular Jew” was coined as a positive self-identification to avoid these terms of opprobrium.

These secular Jews, like Chaim Zhitlovsky in America and Simon Dubnow in Eastern Europe, delved into Jewish past in search for precursors and, ultimately, legitimation. For Zhitlovsky, “Jews are a nationality with a historic culture, whose central characteristic is the Yiddish language.” A true idealist, he believed that “it would degrade true religion to transform it into an instrument for the perpetuating Jewish existence.” Dubnow believed that “the tragedy of Spinoza would have been avoided if, in the seventeenth century, Sephardic Jewry had adopted the concept of Jewish secularism” (Goodman 1976, 9–10, 15). Although the subject lost most of its relevance where it was once very important, secular Jewish identities continue to be vividly debated in Israel, their natural habitat (Ben-David 2019).

Two main factors account for the emergence of this new identity in Russia. First, Jews were officially discriminated and could not become part of the Russian nation. Moreover, the Russian

Empire, unlike France or Germany, was not a nation-state but a multinational empire. Second, as early as 1835, Russian bureaucracy's classification listed the Jews as *inorodtsy* (инородцы), "of a different origin," "heterogeneous," a category that was used to designate mostly nomads of the Asian part of the empire. In fact, the Jews were the first European settled group to be designated *inorodtsy*. Unlike these other groups, individual Jews could get rid of this designation by converting to Christianity. Traces of this paradox can be observed in contemporary Israel, where conversion to Judaism turns a Gentile into a member of the officially recognized and dominant Jewish nationality.

Most Jews were estranged from the Imperial State, particularly following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, which triggered a wave of anti-Jewish violence. The influence of pogroms and socialist doctrine forced de-Judaized Jews of Russia to define themselves in a radically different way, both in relation to Judaism and the Russian Empire. "Secular Jew" came to denote those who, in contradistinction to French or German Jews, could not move to big cities and merge with the ambient population but could no longer feel part of the traditional community. All this, in turn, necessitated the use of another term, as *yiudey* (cognate of Jew and the disrespectful *zhid*, жид) referred specifically to those who practice Judaism.

Baptized *yevrey*, particularly in big cities, where he could now reside thanks to his new status, continued to socialize with the Jewish community, sometimes occupying positions of authority in Jewish (that is, *yevreyskie*) organizations. He was routinely considered *yevrey* by Gentiles and Jews alike.

This led to the emergence of the concept of Jewish nationality in the late 19th century, stemming from "a synthesis of secularity and national Jewishness" (Goodman 1976, 6). Secular Jews came to identify themselves as a national rather than a confessional minority (Khanin 2003). In the context of Eastern Europe, inhabited by many national minorities (such as Poles or Lithuanians), this was a natural evolution, particularly for Jews who no longer practiced Judaism but could not (or would not) shed their origins. They assumed the Jewish nationality, a novel concept that gradually penetrated common Russian usage. Those who took part in the revolutionary organizations would later join not only the Zionist movement but also the Bund and the Social Revolutionaries (SR) as well as the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks.

Jewish socialists, who had accepted the proposition that the Jews were not a nation, now suddenly realized that Russian society considered the Jews a separate nation (Goodman 1976, 6). Thus, in the wake of the pogroms, these political movements became the hotbed of the secular Jew as a new identity. Although secularization of the Jews began over a century earlier in Western and Central Europe, it became a social reality in Russia at the turn of the 20th century (Biale 2010). But it was a typically Russian identity, even when removed to other countries. "Jewish radicals in America remained, for a long time, Russianized [sic] intellectuals, as if they had been living in Eastern Europe" (Goodman 1976, 7). No wonder that it was in the Soviet Union that all Jews were grouped as a "Hebrew nationality," which came to be marked in their identity cards, quite like the Armenians, the Uzbeks, or the Russians in the 1930s.

This secular identification along with the antireligious attitudes promoted by the Communist Party, and particularly by its Jewish members, became the new normal. No wonder, "strictly ethnic definitions are ... pervasive among Jews in the former Soviet Union" (Liebman 2003, 345).

Among Soviet immigrants in Israel "more than 93% of the participants mentioned nationality as a criterion [for considering themselves Jewish] and only 7% religion" (Persky and Birman 2005, 563). Another study has found "no more than 3 per cent of Jews in Russia and Ukraine in recent years [turn of the 21st century] that would say that practicing Judaism defines 'being a Jew.'" In terms of affinity to a religious faith, 26% named Judaism, but a substantial 13% named Christianity (Gitelman 2003, 180).

Hebrews in Palestine

Just like their comrades who moved to the United States, Zionist settlers brought this new identity of "secular Hebrew" to Palestine. They also took along a commitment to leave behind their cultural

roots in the East European shtetl. They Hebraized their own names, abandoning the Ashkenazi surnames in favor of untraditional words, often with connotations of power: Oz (strength), Bar-On (son of power), Barak (lightening), Lapid (fire torch)—to mention but some of the names commonly occupying the Israeli public sphere. This was an attempt at “de-Judaization” rather than at “de-Russification” of identities. Thus, the Jewish surnames Grün and Rosenblum became Ben-Gurion and Vardi (from *vered*, rose) while the Russian-sounding Borokhov, Sokolov, and Jabotinsky remained unchanged. Even before Israel’s unilateral declaration of independence in 1948, Hebraization of the names of geographic locations throughout Zionist Palestine was in full swing and became compulsory for certain categories of state employees. It embodied a consistent attempt to erase the past (both Jewish and autochthonous Arab) to build a new man and a new society in a renamed land that was to undergo drastic change.

The Zionist settlers from the Russian Empire in the early 20th century came imbued with a revolutionary enthusiasm for radical change. This Russian distinction between *yevrey* and *yiudey* was probably transposed onto Modern Hebrew that these settlers made ideologically motivated and valiant efforts to speak. As Miron stresses,

it would be gravely mistaken to discount and disregard the critical influence of this aspect of Zionism as if it were nothing but a false vision of naive dreamers. These dreamers’ contribution to the very real development of the Jewish settlement project in the Land of Israel has been much greater than that of the “political” Zionists, who hoped to establish a state by an international charter, achieved by diplomacy. The sense that a revolutionary renewal of the spiritual and cultural life of the Jewish People is of existential necessity was deep and “real”, no less so than the concern about the material fate of the Jews. [...] The [Zionist] pioneers who arrive [in Ottoman and later Mandatory Palestine] and laid the foundations of the Zionist settlement followed in the footsteps of these ideologues, and not in [Theodore] Herzl’s. [...] Some of the ideologues mentioned above had a direct influence on the organisational, political and economic development of the new Yishuv. (Miron 2021)

A small but influential group of intellectuals, most born either in Russia or of Russian origin in Palestine, called themselves “Young Hebrews” and argued for a total break with Judaism and Jewish continuity. They traced their national roots to a supposed ancient Hebrew kingdom and their more immediate intellectual roots to Mikha Berdichevsky and Shaul Tcherniakhovsky, both of Russian origin, who had rejected Judaism with hate and disdain. They have adopted a sometimes-militant stance. One of the Young Hebrews, Amos Kenan, was suspected of attempting to take the life of the Minister of Transport because he had made a concession to the hated *dosim* (pejorative for “the religious”) by shutting down public transportation on the Sabbath. They were also anti-Zionist because Zionism, in their view, did not break enough with Judaism. Also known as the “Canaanites” (meant as a pejorative term coined by one of their detractors, poet Abraham Shlonsky—also of Russian origin), they have—as the Moravian-born and German-educated Benedict (Barukh) Kurzweil has convincingly argued—brought the Zionist impetus of the “negation of exile” to its logical conclusions (Kurzweil 1953; Diamond 1986; Vaters 2015).

This terminological distinction between Jews and Hebrew has aged well. In an autobiographical novel, the celebrated Israeli author Amos Oz (2004), refers to Tel Aviv as “the Hebrew city” (7, 41), uses terms like “a dangerous Hebrew suburb” (38), “Hebrew history”—that is, heroic history inspired by the Bible (13), “the Hebrew revolution of workers and peasants” (15), “the Hebrew government” (40), “the Hebrew youth” (48).¹ It would be interesting to explore why David Ben Gurion and his comrades did not call the new state “Hebrew” rather than “Jewish” in 1948. The Declaration of Independence uses “Jewish” fourteen times and “Hebrew” only four times, referring once to the Hebrew language, twice to the Zionists’ Hebrew settlement, and once to the Hebrew people. This may be due to the growing need to connect to Jewish communities in search for support and to downplay the new state’s radical ideology.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the distinction between Jews as a confession and Hebrews as a nationality appears to be limited to Russia/the Soviet Union and the Zionist settlement in Palestine.² It remained an alien innovation for autochthonous Jews of Palestine and to most Jews in the rest of the world. Non-Ashkenazi Jews would discover this distinction upon arrival in Israel after 1948, but most have not internalized it (or its updated version in Peres's Jew versus Israeli distinction) to this day. With the decline of the socialist ethos and the rise of the Orthodox' clout, the term "Hebrew" became less frequent, but the concept itself remains operational for administrative and social purposes. The Law of Return, phrased as a riposte to the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws and using the latter's definitions, frames the notion of "Jewish nationality" in continuity with the Russian precedent.³

National Valour

Traditionally, Rabbinic Judaism has been delighted to eschew and disdain violence and considered this attitude a sign of valor. Some traditional Passover *haggadas* (text recited during the Passover meal) portray "the evil son" as a military man (for example, the 1695 *haggadah* published in Amsterdam).⁴ Others argue that the rabbis had made a virtue out of necessity. The Andalusian poet and scholar Judah Halevi (1080–c.1141) presents a rabbi who praises the pacific character of the Jews. To which his interlocutor, the King of the Khazars, who is about to choose between the three monotheistic religions, responds with a touch of cynicism: "This might be so, if your humility were voluntary; but it is involuntary, and if you had power you would slay" (Halevi 1964, 78).

In the event, the shift took place well before the Jews gained any kind of power. It happened in Russia, a country that was home to millions of Jews concentrated in the Pale of Settlement and ruled by a cruelly punctilious bureaucracy. The great majority felt both impatience and exasperation at the restrictions and persecutions they were forced to endure. In the 19th century, the Russian government busily promulgated new laws to integrate the Jews, but still the restrictions remained. At the same time, educational opportunities, as well as Russification, were surging ahead: in the 1880s, the absolute number of Jews in Russian universities exceeded the number of Jews studying in the yeshivas of the empire (Stampfer 2012, 257–258). The gap was all the more significant in that university access for Jews was limited by the *numerus clausus* (quota), which did not apply to the yeshivas. But opportunities for social promotion remained proportionally scarce for Jewish university graduates, amplifying their frustration—and accelerating the spread of radical ideas that embraced political violence.

Two decades were to prove critical. In 1861, the liberal reforms of Alexander II opened the doors to the integration of the Jews and, as in Germany and Austria, gave every appearance of leading them to identification with the empire. Jews flocked to the universities, into new trades and rapidly became a significant portion of the Russian intelligentsia. But when a terrorist bomb killed the tsar in the center of Saint Petersburg in 1881, the period of liberalism came to an end, and for the first time in more than two centuries, a wave of pogroms swept across Russia. This wave had been gathering force within a wider context of conservative rejection of all political opposition. One of the prime causes of the pogroms was said to be the visibility of the Jews in revolutionary movements (Khiterer 2015).

Reactions among Russian Jews were anything but uniform. The rabbinical authorities, in their majority, opposed political violence (Lederhendler 1994, 67). Traditionalists, motivated above all by concern for the future of their families, sought escape via emigration, usually to the Americas. But a few Russified Jewish intellectuals, who identified with modern, European values, could not be satisfied with individual solutions: they perceived a collective "Jewish problem" and sought a large-scale remedy. They also felt self-confident to resort to armed force. The choice of radicalism and violence was a logical one in a social context that excluded the Jews and, at least up until the 1905 revolution, had proscribed all political activity. The circumstances of the secularized Jews in Russia differed drastically from those of such people in Western countries, where these people could

simply merge with the rest of the population. The effect of heating water in an uncovered pot is very different from that of heating it in a pressure cooker. Water evaporates and disappears in the first case but may lead to an explosion if there is no safety valve in the pressure cooker.

Autocracy had driven to extremism those Jews who, unlike their elders, were no longer inclined to interpret suffering as a stimulus to moral self-improvement. But to understand the origins of this massive shift among the Jews of Russia, we must examine how ideas of political violence penetrated the strictly Jewish movements of the day.

The pogroms of the late 19th century deepened the insecurity of the Jewish populations of the Russian Empire. The fear of physical violence spread during the riots of 1881 and a generation later, following the 1903 Kishinev massacres. This was a sudden dread of the non-Jew, of the neighbor who might, at any moment, kill, rape or kidnap. In contrast to Jewish reactions during the pogroms of the 17th century, which had been far crueller and more violent, for a growing number of secularizing Jews the insecurity and suffering they encountered at the end of the “century of progress” had lost all religious significance. Rather than scrutinizing their own behavior and intensifying their penitence, a number of Jewish activists asserted their pride and called for resistance. It was a radical departure from tradition (Rabkin 2006, chap. 4).

Zionism emerged from a climate of shame, of insulted dignity. Even though the Torah, both written and oral, repeatedly cautions Jews against personal or collective pride, it was precisely in these traits that the Zionists sought the kind of respect that they defined in terms of the classic Western criteria for success: a country, an army, political independence. What gave the Zionist movement its extraordinary vigor was not the suffering of pogrom victims (many more emigrated to America than to Palestine) but the humiliation of the rejected supplicants, those whose hopes of integration into Russian society the pogroms had shattered. They felt themselves drawn by the doctrine of Herzl, another rejected aspirant for social acceptance (Falk 1993).

Russian Jewish intellectuals, even those like Ahad Ha-Am, who had earlier expressed doubts about the use of armed force, now called upon the Jews to defend themselves. But it was Haim Nahman Bialik, a Russian author who would later be idolized in Israel as “the national poet,” that stoked the fires of revenge and violence. In a poem written following the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, the Odessa based poet castigated the survivors, heaping shame upon their heads and calling upon them to revolt not only against their tormentors but also against Judaism. Bialik lashed out at the men who hid in stinking holes while their non-Jewish neighbors raped their wives and daughters. The acute anger and shame that had swept over many Jews, including Bialik, a former yeshiva student, resulted from an overturn of the traditional value system. He mocked the tradition that attributed all adversity to the misdeeds of the Jews: “Let fists fly like stones against the heavens and against the heavenly throne” (Bialik 1965, 124). In a radical departure from tradition, Bialik issued a ringing challenge: defend yourselves or perish!

Y. H. Brenner, another author and like Bialik the son of a pious Russian Jewish family, also rebelled against Jewish tradition. He radically transformed the best-known verse of the Jewish prayer book “Hear, O Israel, God is your Lord, God is one!” one of the first verses taught to children and the last to be spoken by a Jew before his death. Brenner’s revised verse proclaimed: “Hear, O Israel! Not an eye for an eye. Two eyes for one eye, all their teeth for every humiliation!” (Brenner 1919, 7). He was to die a violent death in clashes with Arabs in Jaffa.

Pride, as a motive, had been invested with a new meaning, and some secularized Jews sought it at all costs, even at the cost of life. Heroic romanticism, in a clean break with Jewish tradition, put down roots in these new Jewish circles. It went hand in hand with Herzl’s idea of legalizing dueling, the ultimate manifestation of noble honor, in his state of the Jews (Kronberg 1993, 67). Yet the idea of dueling would have occasioned only revulsion among those who clung to Jewish tradition, for whom life was too precious to sacrifice for an illusory honor. Honor, pride, the thirst for power and revenge: these were the new motives that swept into Jewish consciousness at the turn of the 20th century.

The shift in outlook that took place then among many Russian Jews was undoubtedly more significant than the real effect of Jewish self-defense in Russia. It radically modified the meaning of Jewish history in the eyes of the youth, who thirsted after specifically Jewish activism.

Large numbers of Jews overtly and defiantly broke away from the Jewish pacifist tradition. One of Jabotinsky's favorite poems clearly illustrates the total reversal that had taken place. The poem's hero is a Russian rabbi teaching little children the Aleph-Bet (alphabet). He begins with a groan and a sigh laden with four thousand years of pain and loneliness and continues: "One has to be strong to survive all that we have borne ... consolation may only be found in strength ... there is no other consolation but one's own strength." Thus, does he turn Judaism on its head, telling the children that "each generation has its own Aleph-Bet"; that of their generation is as simple as it is concise: "Young men, learn to shoot! ... Of all the necessities of national rebirth, shooting is the most important... . We are forced to learn to shoot, and it is futile to argue against the compulsion of a historical reality" (Schechtman 1961, 445).

The radicalized Jews' shock, anger, and frustration at the pogroms found an outlet in radical, often clandestine parties that preached the systematic use of violence (Tessendorf 1986). Jews flooded into the Russian oppositionist movements. At the same time, they founded several specifically Jewish ones (among them the Socialist Bund, antipogrom self-defense groups, and various Zionist parties). The pervasive atmosphere of nihilism and contempt for human life (Landry 2000) generated an upsurge of terrorism whose spectre haunts the world to this day. Some observers have even drawn a connection between the Russian ideological heritage of the 19th century and the broader history of terrorist activity, including the Middle Eastern variety, up to and including the spectacular attack on the Twin Towers in Manhattan (Glucksman 2002).

While other Jewish communities the world over remained faithful to the tradition of nonviolence and contemplated no armed action against the populations among which they lived, that tradition became ever weaker in Russia, as great numbers of Jews active in revolutionary groups discovered the allure of political violence. Many Russian Jews supported the radical political parties through their periods of crisis and decline, due in part to their unshakeable idealism and to their knowledge of smuggling networks used by the revolutionaries. Russian civil servants of the day saw Jews as the "most dangerous component of the revolutionary movement" (Haberer 1995, 254). According to a Paris police report written in late 19th century, "Jews and Slavs sit like friends, intermingled at all their secret meetings, and they express a common sense of hatred. The Israelites stand out as more absolutist and more decisively violent" (Goldberg and Green 2000, 170).

Western historians have corroborated the observation: Jews were the dominant element among illegal opposition groups. In some organizations, Jews accounted for more than 50 percent of the membership. More than three-quarters of the members of a radical group uncovered by the police in 1889 were Jews. For example, 83 percent of political exiles in the Yakutsk region of Siberia were Jews (Haberer 1995, 253–272).

The Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRP), among the most violent of these radical movements, preached and practiced the systematic use of terror. Many Jews were party members, both in the leadership and among the rank and file. One of the last actions of the SRP, and certainly one of the most notorious, is attributed to Fania Kaplan, a Jewish member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party who attempted to assassinate Lenin in the summer of 1918.

The Bolsheviks, whose doctrine also endorsed overt recourse to violence, boasted a strong Jewish contingent as well. In October 1917, six of the 21 members of the Central Committee of Lenin's party were Jews (Frankel 2000, 294). There were more Jews in Lenin's first government than members of any other minority group.

In addition to setting up self-defense units in many cities, Jews carried out assassinations of Russian government officials. The appetite for political violence increased with use. Two motives merged: Jewish self-defense and the struggle for a just society. This merger took on particular importance in the early years of the 20th century, when groups of Russian Jews migrated to Palestine where they would play a critical role in the development of a new Zionist consciousness.

Zionism must be seen in the context of several movements originating in tsarist Russia and continuing in Eastern Europe outside the USSR between the two wars. It attempted to “normalize” the Jew of the Diaspora, transforming the allegedly meek traditionalist Jew into a brawny, strong-arm Hebrew. The radicals swore to straighten the spine of the Jew, long curved before oppressors and long bent beneath the weight of the volumes of the Talmud, to free the Jew from the burden of exile as well as from the yoke of Jewish tradition, “the yoke of the heavenly kingdom”—meaning loyalty to the Torah. Implicit in this process of liberation was an increased reliance on the use of force. Within a single century, the repugnance felt by Jews toward violence had been transformed, in some of them at least, into defiant militarism, no longer a concession to the imperatives of self-defense. This would have important consequences for Israel’s political culture.

Emotional Projections

The early Zionist settlers had projected onto Ottoman- and later Mandatory-Palestinian reality the memories of bygone Russia: What was construed as the Arab threat was often likened to the murderous shadow of the pogroms (Sherman [1939]). But their actions were like those of all settler groups in a foreign territory: they took up arms to defend their settlements. The arrival of masses of traumatized European Jews following World War II and the Zionist interpretation of the Shoah reinforced the perception of the Arabs as inveterate enemies of the Jews (Massad 2020). It also strengthened a cultural fusion of immense power: a self-image of the just and virtuous victim. That too was another inverted transposition from rabbinical tradition, which presents the Jews as weak in physical strength but powerful in their trust in God. In the Zionist version, courage takes the place of trust in God. Intense devotion to a cause, to a nation, to a leader, was far from unique in the 1930s. Parallels could be found in many European countries, where youth was militarized from the young age in the name of the fatherland.

In 1936, Jabotinsky, the “liberal revisionist,” a native of a major cosmopolitan city (Odessa) and thus an oddity among Russian Zionist settlers most of whom came from the *shtetl*, opposed to the dominant socialist parties in the Zionist movement, proclaimed, loud and clear, “Jewish youth, learn to shoot!” a slogan that was to have a direct influence on the thousands of secular Jews guided by strong-arm Zionism. This emphasis on the use of force was almost as common among the socialist Zionists. Ariel Sharon’s father, a Russian socialist settler in Palestine, offered his son “an engraved Caucasian dagger” for his bar-mitzvah gift (Sharon 1989, 23). Traditionally, for their bar-mitzvah, or confirmation, young Jews receive Judaica books, which embody the concept of mitzvah, or divine commandment, that they become obliged to perform at the age of 13. In this case, the bar-mitzvah was filled with new content, a dagger that may have predestined the young Ariel Schneiderman (Sharon’s original name) to become an intrepid soldier.

Joseph Trumpeldor, a veteran of both the Russo-Japanese war and the Russian revolution, is the incarnation of romantic heroism in the Zionist curriculum. Killed in a skirmish with the local Arab population, he allegedly managed to utter the last words, “It is good it is to die for the fatherland.” The phrase, apparently borrowed from the Roman author Horace (*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*), was to become, alongside the officers’ oath at Masada, one of the symbols of the new determination to take up arms. Trumpeldor’s predecessor in the Diaspora was the Russian Zionist activist Pinhas Dashevsky (1879–1934), who held a central position in the Zionist education system. Dashevsky attempted to assassinate one of the instigators of the 1903 Kishinev pogroms and went on to become “the first revolutionary manifestation of Jewish national consciousness.” His terrorist act was an exemplary one, for “he understood the true nature of Zionism and adhered to it throughout his life” (Sternhell 1998, 50).

The example of Trumpeldor, who had been decorated by the tsar for his bravery in battle, inspired Zionist youth throughout the former Russian Empire. Students from Riga had originally encouraged Jabotinsky, in 1923, to set up a Zionist activist organization that took the name Brit Yosef Trumpeldor (the Josef Trumpeldor Covenant), the acronym for which—Betar—harked back

to Bar Kokhba's last stand. The organization was established and developed on the lands of the former Russian Empire rather than in Central and Western Europe where Jewish nationalism, let alone militant one, had little appeal. It quickly became a Zionist educational movement with a strong military component and continues to be a stronghold of right-wing nationalism and Arabophobia in contemporary Israel.

To educate intrepid fighters, Jewish history had to be reduced to a continuum of suffering that could only lead to Jewish self-emancipation and to the enfranchisement of the Jews as a modern people on its own land. An expression frequently heard in Israel is *ein berera* ("there is no choice"), meaning that there is no other choice but the use of force. As we have seen, the roots of this propensity to resort to violence can be traced to certain secular reactions to the pogroms at the turn of the 20th century.

But Russian Jews not only made up the majority of the founders of the State of Israel but also became the most influential group within its military elite. The man who did more than any other Zionist to introduce terror into Palestine was the Russian Avraham Stern (1907–1942), a member of several paramilitary groupings. Traces of the Russian cultural influence are likewise visible in recent history: Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weizmann, Itzhak Rabin, Rehavam Zeevi, Raphael Eitan, and Ariel Sharon are all descendants of Russian Jews, whose penchant for the use of force can only be likened to their estrangement from Jewish tradition.⁵ The two things that set them apart were, at the time, closely related: only by completely rejecting Judaism and its cult of humility could the Russian Jews acquire a newfound confidence in their own strength and in their capacity to reconquer and defend Israel.

Conclusion

The Russian diaspora has played a crucial role in the shaping of the Zionist settlement in Palestine. One telling indicator is the composition of the Knesset 12 years after the founding of the state. Despite the almost total prohibition of emigration from the Soviet Union for more than four decades, over three-quarters of the members of this political elite were Russian born (70%) or born in Palestine/Israel of Russian parents (13%). The American Zionist elites, whose support was crucial for Zionism's success, were also composed primarily of Jews of Russian origin (Gilbert 1992, 115). The replacement of the Jewish elites of German origin with those originating in Russia also contributed to the shift between the two world wars of Jewish public opinion in the United States in favor of Zionism. Even in Morocco, Zionist ideas and activities were introduced almost exclusively by Russian Jews (Kenbib 1994, 478–480).

Though all expression of Zionist feelings was proscribed throughout the long Soviet period, cultural continuity has remained solid. Massive arrival of Soviet Jews in Israel at the turn of the 21st century has greatly strengthened the nationalist right in the country. Most Soviet Jews were predisposed to internalize the powerful self-image of a perennial victim. In the absence of traditional Jewish values of restraint and compromise, this produces a powerful urge to destroy—without scruples or hesitation—the no less perennial enemy, who this time happens to be Palestinian. "The Russians" constitute a sizable part of Israel's right and extreme right (Khanin 2011). The influence of Russian political radicalism appears to remain strong and requires further scholarly exploration.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

- 1 The numbers in brackets refer to pages in the English edition, which has not lost this distinction in translation.
- 2 We explained earlier in this article that the terms like "Hebrew" or "Israélite" were introduced as means of integrating with the surrounding nation and getting rid of the national separateness in

their public image. Thus, in Britain, for example, Jews became “Englishmen of the Hebrew persuasion” (Shatzkes 2002).

- 3 Another trace of this distinction can be seen in the street names of the “first Hebrew City”, Tel Aviv. There are several streets commemorating Jewish musicians, and as is usual in Israel, one can find explanations of the street names on corner buildings. Thus, Jascha Heifetz is called a famous Jewish (*yehudi*) violinist, and so is David Oistrakh. However, the word “*yehudi*” is not used in references to Anton Rubinstein and Gustav Mahler, referred to as “prominent composers,” as both converted to Christianity. The word “*ivri*” is not used either, but these two musical personalities are implicitly considered as belonging to “the Hebrew nation” (*ha-‘am ha-‘ivri*): why would they otherwise be chosen for the street names in this Hebrew city? Of course, this observation can only illustrate the point, rather than prove it; it is more akin to an “*asmakhta*” (scriptural support) in Talmudic hermeneutics.
- 4 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/uchicagolibary/6880878050>.
- 5 This does not mean **all** Russian settlers who attained positions of power. For example, the Motal-born Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, or the Kherson-born Moshe Sharet, Israel’s second prime minister, were known as masters of negotiation and compromise.

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