

AAARGH REPRINTS

Israel : The revisionist background

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THOUGH THE PROGRAM AND POLITICS of the Stern Gang (*Lehi—Lohamei Herut Yisrael*, "Freedom Fighters of Israel") changed radically between 1940 and 1949, there is little doubt that its origins lay in Revisionism. An understanding of the group therefore requires an analysis of the political and ideological character of Revisionism, and in particular of its internal struggles with regard to fascism and democracy, which eventually led to *Lehi's* emergence.

The character of Revisionism was largely shaped by the charismatic personality of Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, who founded the movement in 1925 and led it until his death 15 years later. Born in Odessa in 1880, Jabotinsky was deeply influenced by that dynamic cosmopolitan centre of commerce and by its flourishing secular Jewish culture. Equally, if not more, influential were his university days in Rome (1898-1901). There he first became familiar with socialism and with Marxist doctrines, though he was far more powerfully drawn to nationalism, liberalism and individualism, romanticism and futurism. In particular he was attracted by Garibaldi and Mazzini. The former had a lasting impact on him, greater than that of any other historical figure. Jabotinsky, indeed, considered himself a Jewish Garibaldi, though his actions tended to recall Cavour. He adopted a pragmatic position, combining Herzl's political Zionism and his political visions, with Max Nordau's "muscular Jewry." It was with Herzl, however, that Jabotinsky identified most, admiring both his revolutionary leadership and his political and social beliefs. For him, *Altneuland* did indeed map out a new society. There is no doubt that Jabotinsky considered himself Herzl's successor and tried throughout his life to emulate him, by becoming the Zionist revolution's "flywheel" and "torch."¹

Actively involved in Zionist political work in Constantinople (1909-10), Jabotinsky projected the image of a calculating politician who understood the need for careful manoeuvring between Ottomanism and Arabism. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of British imperial dominance, of which Jabotinsky was a staunch supporter, wrought a political revolution in the Middle East. It also generated a basic and lasting rift between Jabotinsky and Weizmann. Jabotinsky believed that only after the formation of Jewish battalions and their active participation in the war could the Zionists lay serious claim to Palestine. Weizmann, though supporting the creation of such units, advocated a political breakthrough, to be achieved by diplomatic efforts, such as the Balfour Declaration and a British Mandate for Palestine. Jabotinsky's personal battlefield experience as an officer in the British army led him to create the most important myth of his life—the vital role played by the Jewish Legion, which his followers would later liken to that of Pilsudski's Legion in the liberation of Poland. Since Palestine had supposedly been conquered by Jewish blood, this feat could be repeated. Jabotinsky frankly discounted the mounting objections to Zionism in the military and civil administration: he was in fact arrested in 1920 for attempting to organise illegal Jewish defence during the first Arab pogrom. Jabotinsky regarded the Jewish battalions as an essential element in a larger plan whereby Britain would implement the Zionist colonisation of Palestine and thus establish its most reliable bastion in the

Middle East. In fact, Jabotinsky's great expectations from Britain led, ultimately, to the abandonment of the naive attitude towards Britain in the Revisionist movement (and its affiliated bodies, *Betar* and IZL) and to the emergence of policies hostile to the Mandatory Power. But Jabotinsky's initial belief in the "mutual loyalty" between Britain and the Jewish people was reflected in the principal document of the Revisionist movement:

Our attitude towards the Mandatory Government is based on two factors: we believe faithfully in the integrity and justice of the British people...but there is another factor: the cooperation of interest. It is not true that England is doing us a favour, without benefit to herself. With our assistance England gained a great deal and might obtain more in the future...there are powerful states in Western and Eastern Europe that are publicly envious of the cooperation of England with the Zionists...Moreover, in the Mediterranean—England's corridor to the East—where both on the eastern and southern shores there exists a danger of anti-European tendencies, the Jews are building the only mainstay which is morally affiliated with Europe and forever will be part and parcel of Europe...²

Throughout his life Jabotinsky considered himself a devout liberal, and pro-British, but so did Weizmann, the leading Zionist politician until the early 1930s. Why, then, did they differ so fundamentally? Personal jealousy certainly played a part, but they also adopted radically different approaches towards operative politics. Jabotinsky's liberalism constituted a political ideal in the service of his Zionist programme; Weizmann took a contradictory approach. The latter had learned from the Zionist positivist thinker Ahad Ha-Am that liberalism was an empirical political philosophy. Hence his systematic collaboration with the general Zionists, the middle-class non-Revisionist conservative right, and with the labour movement. His "synthetic" policy viewed both political endeavour and settlement as essential components of Zionism.

Jabotinsky, on the other hand, was contemptuous of the settlement policy. His Zionism emphasised bourgeois urban development and placed total and unconditional reliance on the British colonial system. Above all, he advocated political activism. Jabotinsky's plan was in essence Herzl's charter, modelled on the Greeks who were expelled from Turkey (1919-22) and the white settlers in Southern Rhodesia.³ But while Herzl's charter remained moribund, Jabotinsky put his faith in the Balfour Zionist document approved by the League of Nations. For him both documents had the force of international law. He clung to this policy until the end of his life. Yet Jabotinsky was obsessed with the idea that the Jews would never survive as a minority in Palestine, even if they succeeded in creating an indigenous culture of their own. Without a Jewish majority Palestine would never constitute a national territorial unit, as shown by the models of the German minority in the Baltic lands, the Greeks in Asia Minor and probably also, in the long run, the whites in southern Africa.⁴

It is a major paradox of Revisionism that within 15 years (1929-44) it veered from Anglophilia to bitter Anglophobia. This shift was generated by Jabotinsky's own stubborn adherence to the British connection, deriving from a misreading of Britain's *realpolitik* considerations in its foreign and colonial policies, even before it was threatened by the Axis powers; under his influence, it became a fundamental tenet of his Zionist faith, notwithstanding Britain's all-too-obvious retreat from Zionism. Jabotinsky's conception of the "Seventh Dominion" ⁵ which he first expressed publicly in 1928, also gave rise to the unfounded hope that the establishment of a Jewish state was imminent.

More significantly, he also suggested that "common" Anglo-Zionist interests in Palestine would lead the British to establish a "colonising regime" there. By facilitating an annual influx of 40,000 Jews, within 25 years the British would have created a Jewish majority in a state on both sides of the Jordan. Inevitable Arab opposition would be unable to overcome the "iron wall" to be created with British help. In accordance with good liberal principles, the Arabs would receive equal individual rights, though of course no national rights. Revisionism thus argued for the attainment of Jewish statehood in an ineluctable, evolutionary process. However, Britain's departure from its initial Zionist commitments, a policy which first emerged in the Passfield White Paper of 1930, as well as in the Report of the Shaw Commission of Inquiry a few months earlier and in the Hope-Simpson Report, sparked the first crisis between Jabotinsky and Britain. It was particularly acute because of the impact of the new maximalist wing which had just become the dominant element in the Revisionist movement in Palestine. Its leader, Abba Achimeir,⁶ called on the Revisionist movement to revise its foreign policy orientation. Britain should no longer be relied upon as it was a declining imperial power. Moreover Achimeir, who believed in integral nationalism and admired Il Duce, rejected parliamentary democracy and demanded that Revisionism emulate the fascist model. Achimeir's pressure forced Jabotinsky to change his tactics and project himself as a radical politician. Consequently, he called for a "final period of experiment, at the end of which the people of Israel could arrive at the right conclusions and clarify whether leaving the mandate in the hands of the British is compatible with the interests of Zionism."⁷ This was the first time, though not the last, that Jabotinsky had to cope with strong ideological and political opposition in his own movement. The crisis with the Achimeir faction reached its height in 1932-33, and only Achimeir's arrest staved off the Revisionist movement's internal disintegration. Achimeir made a come-back in 1936 but by then he was no longer a serious political rival to Jabotinsky. Yet his ideological influence remained formidable, and in 1937 the new exponents of maximalist views in Revisionism, such as Uriel Heilperin (later Ratosh) [*please see: "Two Brief Introductions to Hebrew Canaanism" by Ron Kuzar for further information on Uriel Heilperin and his movement, [Hebrew Canaanism](#)—web editor*], again attempted to revolutionise it by transforming it into a fighting liberation movement. Heilperin was followed by Begin and his colleagues in 1938, and finally by Avraham Stern in 1940.

Jabotinsky first parted company with the Zionist establishment in 1923, when he resigned from the Zionist executive. His complaint was that the executive, under Weizmann's leadership, had failed to extract from the British government an undertaking in favour of a more definitely pro-Zionist policy. Jabotinsky had his own views on how to secure British support. To realise them, he not only established a separate party in 1925 but, as early as 1923, set up a youth movement, *Betar*. Its prime function was educational: to forge the new Jewish personality and prepare recruits for future battalions which would protect the Jewish state from Arab interference during its formative periods. *Betar's* twin symbols were Yosef Trumpeldor (who had died fighting the Arabs at Tel-Hai in 1920: the name *Betar* was an acronym of *Brit* [Alliance] Yosef Trumpeldor) and the city of Betar (the last Jewish stronghold of the Bar-Kochba rebellion, which fell to the Romans in 135 CE). It was modelled on the Czech Sokol but was later also influenced by the Italian fascist *Ballila* and maintained a naval school at Civitavecchia. Its militarist leaders were strongly encouraged by Jabotinsky himself, attracted as he was to such heroic figures as Samson, Spartacus, Garibaldi and the Polish heroes Mickiewicz and Sienkiewicz. Still, Jabotinsky also tried to give it constructive functions, such as the "recruiting

troops" programme under which each *Betar* member was to volunteer to work for two years in Palestine to meet the needs of the coming Jewish state.⁸

By the 1930s Jabotinsky also found himself acting as supreme commander of the *Irgun Zvai Leumi* (IZL, National Military Organisation, also known as the *Irgun*) which had split from the *Haganah* in 1931 on purely military grounds. True, Jabotinsky did not originally intend the IZL to replace his dream of a revived, legal Jewish Legion. On the contrary, the Legion had a central standing in his ideology which the IZL never attained. For a while, he had even rejected the approaches of the IZL's founder and commander, Avraham Tehomi. But by 1936 Jabotinsky had come to appreciate that the IZL could become a useful tool in his overall campaign to achieve the leadership of the Zionist movement.

By 1937 the IZL was thus a purely Revisionist organisation. But neither it nor the later Stern Gang (*Lehi*) were products of the main body of evolutionary Revisionism. Rather, they were offshoots of its maximalist wing, which was dominated by three renegades from the Zionist Labour Movement. These were the historian-propagandist Abba Achimeir, already mentioned; the messianic prophet-poet Uri Zvi Greenberg⁹; and the right-radical journalist Yehoshua Heshel Yeivin¹⁰ from *Ahdut Ha-Avodah* ("Unity of Labour"). What attracted them to Jabotinsky's movement was its leader's "activist" image, gained by his adoption of views which originated in part with Max Nordau and Israel Zangwill.¹¹ Despite this infusion of former socialists, Jabotinsky's party remained firmly wedded to middle-class economic ideas, partly because of the social affiliation of his original supporters.

Virtually from the outset the labour movement saw the establishment of the Revisionist organisation as a direct provocation, not least because of its militant anti-working-class orientation. Thus it was no accident that Jabotinsky and his followers acquired the image of a fascist, and later Nazi, party. In large measure they themselves were responsible for that image. From its inception, Revisionism advocated the principle of "Monism"—*Chad-Ness* (one banner)—and strongly rejected what Jabotinsky called the "incongruous mixture" (*shaatnez*) of socialism and nationalism. Moreover, he claimed, the majority of the Jewish people belonged to the middle class and not the working class. Technological advances, he claimed, would lead to the disappearance of the proletariat. This "modernising ideology," typical of the radical right of the inter-war era, went hand in hand with the advocacy of Italian fascist theories of corporatism and integralism. These included a legislature based on occupations, compulsory arbitration in labour disputes, the complete rejection of class war while the nation-building process continued, and last but not least the primacy of Nation over Class in all walks of life.¹²

In present-day Israel, Jabotinsky has once again become the subject of a trenchant ideological dispute. Shlomo Avineri described him as a disciple of integral nationalism and racism (that is, fascism), whereas Israel Eldad, the former *Lehi* ideologue, depicted him as a shining example of liberalism.¹³ Jabotinsky himself seems to have behaved eclectically. He took from fascism what he found convenient, especially its socio-economic ideas; but his liberal heritage prevented him from adopting additional elements, as many of his adherents wished. For example, Jabotinsky remained a firm proponent of democracy; he also regarded reason as a surer guide to political action than either emotion or instinct. Furthermore, he formally—if not in practice—rejected the leadership principle so characteristic of fascism. He did not, before 1938, indulge in the glorification of violence by his maximalist followers, although in times of internal crisis he would encourage his followers by evoking myths and activist slogans such as "to die or to conquer the mountain" (*Betar* anthem, March 1932) or recommending imitation of the Serbian

national myth of Kosovo (*Betar* conference, Warsaw, September 1938); this was after the British hanged Shlomo Ben Yosef, a *Betar* member. If he was prone to use the word "race" in connection with the Jews, it was meant, as so often during this period, more in the sense of "people" or "nation" than in the specific biological sense connoted by the German *Volk*.

Still, Revisionist ideology was reminiscent of the European radical right and was accompanied by violence, especially between 1930 and 1938, when Mussolini's racial legislation finally induced Revisionism to discard its pro-Italian orientation. Secretly, though, the *Irgun* in particular continued to flirt with Italy.

This was the period in which the Revisionist movement increased its proportion of the overall vote for delegates to the Zionist congress, from less than 7 per cent (18,000) in 1929 to 21 per cent (more than 55,000) in 1931. Zionism was then facing its most serious crisis to date—the 1929 riots and the 1930 White Paper. Numerically, Revisionism reached a peak in 1933, when it received more than 95,000 votes, though this represented a decline in its overall share. In 1935 the Revisionists left the Zionist movement, claiming that the incipient New Zionist Organisation (NZO) could command the allegiance of 713,000 voters. This figure was certainly exaggerated.¹⁴

Jabotinsky ignored the dangers inherent in his assumption of three incompatible functions: president of the NZO, head of *Betar* and supreme commander of the IZL. Paradoxically, he also failed to foresee the coming crisis within Palestine, let alone that a world war was looming.¹⁵ But these developments were to inject a completely new political-military mentality into Revisionism in general and into the IZL in particular. For many of his maximalist followers, Jabotinsky's pro-British orientation was now outdated. While he was still advocating his grand plan of establishing a "colonising regime," they were being influenced by the concepts of war and liberation. Jabotinsky's concessions to the maximalists, such as the founding of a new Zionist organisation (1935), or the lip-service he paid by consenting to change the *Betar* oath in 1938, were of no avail, since the issue at stake was not organisational but ideological. The unbridgeable gap created in the Revisionist movement between its pro-British ideology and the political reality, especially after the White Paper of 1939, was bound to bring with it the final collapse of Revisionism, since its basic ethos was in ruins. Jabotinsky was fighting a losing battle, and his precipitate death in August 1940 signalled Revisionism's final collapse, parallel with that of its main bastion, Polish Jewry, now under Hitler's boot.

It was Begin who usurped power from Jabotinsky's political heirs, and not Stern and his disciples, since they, unlike Begin, totally rejected his leadership. Begin, rather than rebelling against the founding father, preferred to "interpret" him in his own radical way, turning him into the "Father of the Revolt." In this sense the Sternists were far more intellectually honest. The price they paid for that honesty constitutes one of the main themes of this book.

Lehi, as it emerged in 1940, was a product of the sweeping crisis that engulfed the Revisionist movement at the moment of Jabotinsky's death. The founding father had been able to create the bridges necessary to maintain Revisionism as an unbroken movement in ideology and organisation, though always threatened by the maximalists. But none of his successors could keep it together. The cement, in the form of Jabotinsky's charismatic leadership, was missing. Yet Jabotinsky's dominance had extended only to the Revisionist movement as such; in *Betar* and in the IZL he had continuously lost ground since 1938, when his pro-British orientation failed to justify itself and the movement had to accept as a *fait accompli* the martyrs of *Betar* and of the IZL.

When Avraham Stern found that he could not succeed Jabotinsky he formed an underground movement which failed abysmally owing to a lack of means and its faith in an Axis victory. However, its total collapse in 1942 proved only temporary, though its revival the following year required a significant change of course. Unlike the IZL, it tried to acquire legitimisation from the Zionist left. In external politics it gradually leaned towards Soviet Russia, particularly after the Second World War, a stance accompanied by the adoption of some elements of communist ideology. This new vision of the world, in which Stalin was to be the final moderator, did not alter *Lehi's* radical right programme. Instead, it produced a new kind of ideology: a unique amalgam of right and left, recalling the National Bolshevism of the Weimar Republic. The Israeli public, though, was unconvinced, and *Lehi* fared poorly in the elections to the first Knesset. Menachem Begin's more simplistic interpretation of Jabotinsky's contradictory messages was far more persuasive than the views propounded by the trio of Nathan Yellin-Mor, Israel Eldad (Scheib) and Yitzchak Shamir.

This book describes and analyses the intense dialectical game played by the *Lehi* leaders in their endeavour to preserve their original heritage, together with their parallel and tireless effort to adapt to the dramatically changing world around them. In fact, it was only the relentless anti-British terrorist struggle that kept them together as the ideological gaps within the leadership deepened between those who sought reunification with the IZL and those who sought a *modus vivendi* with the *Haganah*. The inevitable result was the movement's disintegration. A final morale-boosting attempt—the assassination of Count Bernadotte, the UN mediator—failed to achieve its purpose, as was demonstrated by the outcome of the Knesset elections.

Notes

1. Cf. Z. Jabotinsky, "The Igniter" (1912) in *Notes*, pp. 13-17; "An Exemplary Leader" (Dr Herzl) (1904) in *ibid.*, pp. 221-3; "Leader?" (1934) in *Memoirs of a Contemporary*, pp. 213-17. Apart from Jabotinsky's own writings I rely, in this summary, on Y. Shavit, *From Majority to a State. The Revisionist Movement: The Plan for the Colonisatory Regime and Social Ideas* (Tel Aviv, 1978); see also his *Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement, 1925-1948* (London, 1988). J.B. Shechtman, *The Vladimir Jabotinsky Story* (New York, London and Tel Aviv, 1959-61): Vol. 1, *Rebel and Statesman*; Vol. 2, *Fighter and Prophet*.
2. Z. Jabotinsky, "What Do the Zionist Revisionists Want?" *idem*, *On the Way to Statehood* (Jerusalem, 1953), pp. 297-8.
3. Z. Jabotinsky, "How Does a State Colonise?" *Ha-Zafon*, 24 June 1927, 15 July 1927; *idem*, "Old Zionism," *Raasvet*, 16 Aug. 1925.
4. Cf. his speech to the XVII Zionist Congress in 1931: *Stenographisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des XVII Zionistenkongresses*, Basel, 30 June-17 July 1931 (London, 1931), s. 170-1.
5. Z. Jabotinsky, "England and Us," *Raasvet*, 25 March 1928. He enlisted J. Wedgewood to disseminate the pamphlet but it made little impression on policy-makers in either the Foreign Office or the Colonial Office. Cf. J. Wedgewood, *The Seventh Dominion* (London, 1928).

6. A. Achimeir (1896-1962), b. Russia, emigrated to Palestine 1912 for two years and again in 1925. Developed an intense hatred of Soviet Russia, and sympathy towards fascist Italy. His PhD thesis was on Spengler and Russia.
7. Z. Jabotinsky at the 4th World Conference of the Zionist Revisionists, Prague, 17 Aug. 1930. *Speeches 1927-1940* (Jerusalem, 1948), p.103.
8. Cf. "The Idea of Betar" (1934) in *On the Way to Statehood*, pp. 23-4.
9. Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896-1980), b. Poland. Served in the Austrian Army in the First World War and afterwards witnessed a pogrom in Lvov (1919). After leaving *Ahdut Ha-Avodah* joined the Revisionists in 1930.
10. Y.H. Yeivin (1891-1970), b. Russia. Served as a surgeon in the Russian Army in the First World War.
11. Z. Jabotinsky, "Aliyah," *Ha-Aretz* (14 Nov. 1919) and "M. Nordau" (20 Jan. 1929) in Y. Nedava (ed.), *Zionist Revisionism Crystallised: Collected Articles from Raasvet 1925-29* (Tel Aviv, 1985), pp. 35-8; "Declaration at a Press Conference in Bucharest," *Unzer Velt*, 25 Nov. 1938. On Zangwill's influence, "A Talk with Zangwill" (21 July 1939), *Memoirs of a Contemporary*, pp. 253-63.
12. Z. Jabotinsky, "On the Zionist "NEP" (Second Time)," *Doar Ha-Yom*, 23 March 1928; idem, "Jews and Fascism. Some Remarks and a Warning," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 11 April 1935; Jabotinsky to Jacoby, 4 Oct. 1933, Collection of Letters, Jabotinsky Institute.
13. Cf. their debate in *Ha-Aretz*: 4 Jan. 1980; 11 Jan. 1980; 8 Feb. 1980. S. Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism* (New York, 1981), pp. 159-86.
14. Leonard Stein, an adviser to the Jewish Agency in London, estimated the NZO's membership at no more than 150,000. Arthur [Lourie] to M. Shertok, 24 June 1938, CZA S25/2090.
15. J.B. Shechtman, *The Vladimir Jabotinsky Story* (Tel Aviv, 1959-61), Vol. 3, pp.130-2.

Joseph Heller, *The Stern Gang : Ideology, Politics and Terror, 1940-1949*, Frank Cass, 1995, pp. 1-8