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# Zionist-Revisionism: The Years of Fascism and Terror

LENNI BRENNER\*

Menahem Begin's surprising rise to power in 1977, after a lifetime of opposition within the Zionist movement, created considerable interest in his personal career. However, for all his present fame and power, Begin would still refer to himself as nothing more than a disciple of Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940), the founder of his ideological tendency within the World Zionist Organization (WZO), and the man he considers the greatest Jew since Herzl. Not to know Vladimir Jabotinsky is not to fully understand Menahem Begin—or contemporary Israel.

Jabotinsky was the most martial of the early Zionist leaders, organizing the Jewish Legion, a force of 5,000 soldiers as the WZO's contribution to the British conquest of Palestine during World War I. In 1920, Jabotinsky again organized the Haganah which, many years later, became the nucleus of the Israeli army. He was placed on the WZO world executive for his services, but resigned in January 1923, to build his "Zionist-Revisionist World Union," founded in 1925, as the far-right opposition within the WZO to its President, Chaim Weizmann.

After World War I, Britain dissolved the Jewish Legion and separated Trans-Jordan from the territory allotted to the "Jewish National Home"

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under the Balfour Declaration. The Zionist executive, too weak to do anything about London's policies, reluctantly acquiesced. Jabotinsky was determined to "revise" this stance toward the British and, ultimately, vis-à-vis the Arabs. The two central points of the Revisionist program were that Trans-Jordan belongs to the Zionists, and that the British must reconstitute the Legion as part of the permanent garrison in Palestine. In his political classic, "The Iron Wall," written in November 1923, Jabotinsky explained the absolute necessity of militarism for the success of the Zionist enterprise:

There can be no kind of discussion of a voluntary reconciliation between us and the Arabs. . . . Any native people . . . view their country as their national home. . . . They will not voluntarily allow, not only a new master, but even a new partner. . . . Colonization can have only one goal. For the Palestinian Arabs this goal is inadmissible. This is in the nature of things. To change that nature is impossible . . . colonization can, therefore, continue and develop only under the protection of a force independent of the local population—an iron wall which the native population cannot break through. This is, *in toto*, our policy towards the Arabs. To formulate it any other way would only be hypocrisy.<sup>1</sup>

The British never reconstituted the Legion and Jabotinsky had to set up his own "brownshirts," the para-military Betar youth group, in 1923, in Palestine and the Diaspora. It is this organization that the 16 year-old Menahem Wolfevitch Begin joined in 1929, in Poland, rising to head the national unit, the largest branch of world Betar.

### **A Fascist Party?**

Revisionism's growth was fairly rapid. By the 1931 World Zionist Congress, it had become the third largest faction within the organization, with 25 percent of the delegates. It demanded that the WZO formally call for a Jewish state, with a Jewish majority, on both sides of the Jordan. Whether it was to be an independent state, or a "seventh dominion" within the British Empire, was irrelevant. The key words were "Jewish majority." At that time, the Jews were a mere 18 percent of the population of Palestine—less if Trans-Jordan was taken into account—and most of the Zionist leadership opposed the proposition on the grounds that it could serve no practical purpose and would only antagonize the Arabs. The extremist demand was symptomatic of Revisionism's growing

<sup>1</sup>Vladimir Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall (We and the Arabs)," *Rassviet* (Berlin), November 4, 1923.

alienation from the mainline leadership with its patient policy of gradually increasing the Zionist holdings in the country.

Jabotinsky tore up his WZO membership card in disgust at the refusal of the Congress to admit that a Jewish state was the *Endziel* (final goal) of Zionism, and he called upon his followers to abandon the WZO. Most of his lieutenants opposed this move, arguing that they could gain nothing by quitting. After a series of compromises, Jabotinsky determined to get rid of his internal opposition, and on March 23, 1933, he announced without warning or consultation that as President of their world union within the WZO, he was superceding their duly elected executive and assuming personal responsibility for running their tendency pending a membership plebiscite. Then he suddenly reversed his position: the Revisionists would definitely attend the 1933 World Zionist Congress. The factional fight had revolved around WZO membership and now that Jabotinsky had suddenly accepted the position of his opponents, the question to be decided by the plebiscite was what kind of movement Revisionism was to be: merely an extreme faction within the broad parameters of bourgeois Zionism, or a proto-fascist party? On April 16, the membership overwhelmingly voted to support Jabotinsky's putsch: 31,724 (93.8 percent) backed him, and only 2,066 (6.2 percent) supported the elected executive. Thereafter, while dissent was still tolerated, it almost always came from maximalists, who complained that Jabotinsky was not sufficiently anti-Arab, anti-British or pro-Fascist.

Jabotinsky had been distinctly unsympathetic toward Fascism in its early years. As a student in Italy, he had loved the liberal-nationalist traditions that Mussolini despised. In 1926 he had publicly sneered at Fascism:

There is today a country where "programs" have been replaced by the word of one man . . . Italy; the system is called Fascism: to give their prophet a title, they had to coin a new term—"Duce"—which is a translation of that most absurd of all English words—"leader." Buffaloes follow a leader. Civilized men have no leaders.<sup>2</sup>

For all his genuine sentiments against the intellectual nonsense of Fascism, in 1927 he also wrote a historical novel, *Samson the Nazerite*, which remains one of the classics of totalitarian literature. One day his hero

was present at a festival at the temple of Gaza. Outside in the Square a multitude of

<sup>2</sup>Jabotinsky, "Jewish Fascism," *The Zionist* (London), June 25, 1926, p. 26.

young men and girls were gathered for the festive dances. . . . A beardless priest led the dances. He stood on the top most step of the temple, holding an ivory baton in his hand. . . . The beardless priest turned pale and seemed to submerge his eyes in those of the dancers . . . all the repressed fervor of the crowd seemed to concentrate within his breast till it threatened to choke him. Samson felt the blood stream to his heart; he himself would have choked if the suspense had lasted a few moments longer. Suddenly, with a rapid, almost inconspicuous movement, the priest raised his baton, and all the white figures in the square sank down on the left knee and threw the right arm towards heaven—a single movement, a single, abrupt, murmurous harmony. . . . Samson staggered; there was blood on his lips, so tightly had he pressed them together. . . . Samson left the place profoundly thoughtful. He could not have given words to his thought, but he had a feeling that here, in this spectacle of thousands obeying a single will, he had caught a glimpse of the great secret of politically minded peoples.<sup>3</sup>

It was inevitable that Jabotinsky's "Legionist" militarism and hyper-nationalism would attract those who sought a Jewish version of Fascism within the camp of Zion. Whatever his temperamental reservations about the leader principle, the combination of the pressures from his ranks and the inner logic of his own increasing extremism inexorably led him and Revisionism into the orbit of Italian Fascism.

The Betar provided Jabotinsky with the bulk of his intra-Revisionist backing because, as Mordechai Katz, one of its leaders, later wrote, he was creating a "salutary revolution" in Zionism and they had to follow him, right or wrong.<sup>4</sup> The character of that "revolution" was captured by Katz's description of the attitude of the ranks toward their hero:

. . . it frankly worshipped him . . . when a Hitler, a Stalin, a Mussolini have desecrated the meaning of the word "leader," it was perhaps inevitable that to some confused and shallow minds the Jabotinsky-Betar phenomenon should appear as a reflection of a political trend, for which *Rosh Betar*\* had nothing but contempt. . . . Leadership, and even cult of personality, which comes from a choice of free men, prompted by faith in and admiration for fellow men endowed by Providence with great minds and valiant hearts, such leadership will always be a blessing.<sup>5</sup>

A wide range of observers have commented that, as an unmistakable generality, Zionism always found its social base, if at all, in the middle

\*Rosh Betar (literally High Betar). Jabotinsky was always the head of his youth movement, and he picked its national and local leaders, always top-down.

<sup>3</sup>Jabotinsky, *Samson the Nazirite* (US title: *Judge and Fool*) (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), pp. 200-201.

<sup>4</sup>Mordechai Katz, *The Father of Betar* (New York: Brit Trumpeldor, undated), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

class. The Jewish haute-bourgeoisie never had the least interest in abandoning its wealth in the Diaspora for remote and poor Palestine; the Jewish working class tended to link its destiny to that of its fellow workers. The untenable position of the Jewish petite-bourgeoisie, particularly in eastern and central Europe, the “trading nation” par excellence, provided the recruits for all of the tendencies within the WZO.<sup>6</sup> They saw themselves between their class rivals of the “native” capitalist class, who sought to drive the Jews out of “their” home market; the peasants, who were organizing marketing cooperatives which replaced the traditional Jewish “middle man”; and the workers who, everywhere in Europe, intended to do away with the entire capitalist system. A portion of the Jewish petite-bourgeoisie, or more particularly a portion of their youth, fully abandoned their class for Marxism. But a substantial element retained their class ambitions and sought to transfer to a new colonial setting in Palestine.<sup>7</sup> The Mizrachi Religious Zionists were, with the exception of the tiny HaPoel HaMizrachi grouping, always pro-capitalist. However, with its total commitment to Orthodoxy, Mizrachi could never appeal to the vast majority of modern educated Jews, who had irrevocably abandoned the faith of their fathers. The General Zionists were also pro-capitalist but were divided into two independent factions, neither of which could hope to satisfy substantial elements of the middle class. The “A” faction was centered in the thriving orange groves in Palestine, its wealth based on the exploitation of cheap Arab labor. Its members had no economic interest in seeing a significant Jewish immigration to Palestine, as they had no desire to pay the higher wages they knew the articulate Jews would demand. Their drive for immediate profits was always at cross-purposes to their Zionism and they could never be thought of as potential leaders of the WZO. Faction “B,” identified with Chaim Weizmann, worked closely with the Labor Zionists in developing the kibbutzim, on the grounds that these idealistic collectives were the cheapest method of creating the rudimentary infrastructure necessary for the further expansion of the Zionist economy. Weizmann wrote to Baron Edmond de Rothschild in December 1931, denouncing those who called for a “more middle class colonization,” and complained that

<sup>6</sup>Meir Yaari, “The Zionist Organization and Class Struggle,” *Hashomer Hatzair* (February 1937), pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup>Enzo Sereni, “Towards a New Orientation,” *Jews and Arabs in Palestine* (New York: Hechalutz Press, 1936), pp. 282-283.

gentlemen of this type are utterly unfit for Palestine, and are a positive danger there. Their economic antics can be safely performed only in a country with a very highly developed economic system: their activities are more or less parasitical. . . . We saw the whole thing illustrated during the mass immigration—the so-called “middle class” immigration—of 1925-26. This immigration had two natural results: first an artificial trade-boom . . . and secondly, the inevitable collapse which followed the boom.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Jabotinsky saw precisely these elements as his natural constituency. He was never interested in recruiting Jewish workers to Zionism, as they had neither money nor the particular skills needed for the development of Palestine,<sup>9</sup> and they already worshipped before “another idol,” socialism.<sup>10</sup> He fully understood that socialism, if carried to its logical conclusions, was absolutely incompatible with Zionism. In 1933, a student wrote to him asking why Zionism couldn’t be combined with Communism. His reply was emphatic; two things were necessary for success: land and capital.

As regards capital: more than 90 percent of the money for construction comes from the pocket of our middle class. . . . And the pure essence of Communism declares for class struggle against the middle class. Wherever it conquers, it must destroy the bourgeoisie, confiscating its large fortunes. That means chopping off the only root from which capital for construction in Eretz Israel can be secured.

With regard to land, Marxism was equally anathema:

. . . the essence of Communism consists in that it agitates and must incite the Eastern nations against European dominance. This dominance in its eyes is “imperialistic” and exploitative. I believe otherwise and think that European dominance makes them civilized. . . . One thing is clear: Communism incites and must incite the Eastern nations and this it can do only in the name of national freedom. It tells them and must tell them: your land belongs to you and not to any strangers. This is how it must speak to the Arabs . . . of Palestine . . . For our Zionist lungs, Communism is suffocating gas and this is how you must deal with it.<sup>11</sup>

**A necessary corollary from these axioms was that strikes might be legitimate in an advanced country, but they could never be tolerated in a**

<sup>8</sup>Barnett Litvinoff, ed., *Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Vol. IV (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 238.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Nedava, “Jabotinsky and the Bund,” *Soviet Jewish Affairs* (Vol. III, No. 1, 1973), p. 44.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Schechtman, *Fighter and Prophet* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), p. 233.

<sup>11</sup>Jabotinsky, “Zionism and Communism,” *Hadar* (February 1941), p. 33.

developing society like Zionist Palestine. It was on this point that Jabotinsky came closest to classical Fascism. He insisted that "Fascism has some good ideas," among these the outlawing of strikes:<sup>12</sup> "both strike and lockout (as well as boycott of Jewish labor) should be declared treasonable to the interest of Zionism and repressed by every legal and moral means at the nation's disposal."<sup>13</sup>

The Revisionists were not about to wait until they had state power to begin to implement their anti-labor program. With the ban on Jabotinsky's return, the ideological leadership of their Palestinian unit went to Abba Achimeir, co-editor of their paper, *Chazit Ha'am*, the poet Uri Zvi Gruenberg, and Wolfgang von Weisl, the chairman of their Palestine central committee, all open fascists. Achimeir, whose newspaper column was called *Yomen Shel Fascisti* (Diary of a Fascist), set up a secret society, the *Brit HaBiryonim* (Union of Terrorists), and began to mobilize thugs against the Histadrut. He wrote in his private diary that "We must create groups for action to exterminate the Histadrut physically: they are worse than the Arabs: bombs into their gatherings."<sup>14</sup> He told his youthful followers, "You're no students: you're just so much molasses. There isn't one among you capable of committing murder after the fashion of those German students who murdered Rathenau. You lack that nationalist spirit which dominated the Germans."<sup>15</sup>

Achimeir and his friends put together a strike-breaking "union," and by December 1932, they were strong enough to break a strike at the Froumine Biscuit Factory in Jerusalem by providing scabs. On February 27, 1933, they tried to break a building strike in Petah Tikva. Dozens of strikers were arrested for battling the scabs. During Passover, the Betar organized a parade through Tel Aviv, and this time the brownshirts were roundly defeated in a furious street battle with outraged young workers.<sup>16</sup>

## Murder

When Hitler came to power, *Chazit Ha'am* announced that Nazism was

<sup>12</sup>Yaakov Shavit, "Fire and Water: Ze'ev Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement," *Studies in Zionism* (Autumn 1981), p. 224.

<sup>13</sup>Jabotinsky, *State Zionism* (New York: Zionist Revisionist Organization of America, 1935), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup>"Revisionism: A Self-Portrait," *Jewish Frontier* (January 1935), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Anita Shapira, "The Debate in Mapai on the Use of Violence, 1932-1935," *Zionism* (Spring 1981), p. 105.



a national liberation movement and that Hitler had saved Germany from Communism. Jabotinsky was more than willing to tolerate supporters of Mussolini in his movement, but pro-Nazis were too much for him, and he insisted that the paper stop running such pieces: "I demand an unconditional stop to this outrage. . . . Should *Chazit Ha'am* publish even a single line which could be interpreted as a new attempt at kow-towing. . . . I will demand that its editors be expelled from the party."<sup>17</sup> After this reprimand, Achimeir and the others suddenly began attacking the WZO leaders for their attempts to collaborate with Hitler.

The WZO had done nothing to mobilize the Jews—or anyone else—in Germany or elsewhere, to try to block Hitler from coming to power. With his ascension to power the WZO saw an opportunity to utilize the Nazis' Jew-hatred to build Zion. Hitler wanted the Jews out of Germany and the WZO wanted some of them, those with money or useful skills, to move to Palestine. Chaim Arlosoroff, the Laborite Political Secretary of the Jewish Agency (the WZO's executive arm in Palestine), conceived of an elaborate scheme for a "liquidation bank," to be operated in conjunction with Germany, Italy and Britain. It would gradually transfer German Jewish wealth to Palestine. He went to Berlin to negotiate with the Nazis, returning to Palestine on June 14, 1933. On the following day, *Chazit Ha'am* attacked him. The article, entitled "The Alliance of Stalin—Ben Gurion—Hitler," connected two major theses of the paper: the Labor Zionists were scheming to set up a pro-Communist Arab regime, and at the same time, to sell out the Jews to the Nazis:

We have read . . . an interview with Mr. Arlosoroff . . . . Among other meaningless words and stupidities in which this red mountebank excels, we find that the Jewish problem in Germany can be solved only by means of a compromise with Hitler and his regime. These men . . . have now decided to sell for money the honor of the Jewish people . . . to Hitler and the Nazis . . . Jewry will welcome the triple alliance of "Stalin—Ben Gurion—Hitler" with repulsion and detestation. The Jewish people has always known how to deal with those who have sold the honor of their nation and its Torah, and it will know today how to react to this shameful deed.<sup>18</sup>

On June 16, Arlosoroff was assassinated while walking on a Tel Aviv beach with his wife. The police used expert Bedouin trackers to investigate

<sup>17</sup>Schechtman, p. 216.

<sup>18</sup>Eliezer Liebenstein, *The Truth about Revisionism* (New York: Zionist Socialist Party, 1935), pp. 51-53.

and two Biryonim, Avraham Stavsky and Zvi Rosenblatt, were brought in and identified by the widow. The police raided Achimeir's home and found a diary note about a party held there immediately after the slaying to celebrate a "great victory," and arrested him as the instigator of the crime.<sup>19</sup> Upon hearing of their arrest, Jabotinsky immediately announced his conviction that they were innocent.

By the trial, which began in April 1934, an Arab, Abdul-Majid Bukhari, already jailed for another murder, had confessed to the crime, claiming that he and a friend had wanted to rape Mrs. Arlosoroff. Bukhari recanted after a week, made another confession, and recanted again, saying that he had been bribed by Stavsky and Rosenblatt. By any reckoning it would be an astonishing coincidence that the Political Secretary of the WZO should be called a traitor and threatened by a fascist group, modeling itself after the assassins of ancient Judea, and then killed in a chance encounter with an Arab rapist. Yet Jabotinsky maintained that "This confession looks very much like the truth."<sup>20</sup>

Achimeir was acquitted without even having to put up a defense, as the diary was not enough to prove prior conspiracy, though he was held on a new charge of belonging to a terrorist organization. Rosenblatt was cleared as well for lack of corroborative material evidence, required by Palestine law. But, by two to one, Stavsky was found guilty and on June 8, 1934, sentenced to hang. On July 19, however, the Palestine Court of Appeals overturned the decision on a combination of technicalities, including procedural errors committed by the trackers. Once that evidence was dismissed, there was no longer any material corroboration to support the widow's identification. The Chief Justice pointed out that "in England the conviction would have to stand"; and he emphatically denounced the bogus confession: "the whole interposition of Abdul-Majid in this case leaves in my mind a grave suspicion of a conspiracy to defeat the end of justice by the suborning of Abdul-Majid to commit perjury in the interest of the defense."<sup>21</sup>

Stavsky's release on a technicality infuriated the Labor Zionists, who rioted against him when he showed up in the Great Synagogue of Tel Aviv. The charge that they had murdered a fellow Zionist was to pursue the

<sup>19</sup>"Revisionists in Palestine seek to explain away Incriminating Testimony," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, August 29, 1933, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup>Jabotinsky, "Jackels and Clams," *Our Voice* (April 1934), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup>"Stavsky Appeal Allowed," *Palestine Post*, July 22, 1934, p. 8.

Revisionists throughout the 1930s, although there is no reason to think that Jabotinsky was involved in the assassination or wanted it. But by denying that they had anything to do with it, the Revisionists were unable to defend it on political grounds—that Arlosoroff had been dealing with the Nazis. With the exception of some other right-wing Zionists, who saw the Revisionists as part of the front against Labor Zionism, the world interpreted Jabotinsky's stubborn disbelief in the widow's identification of his followers, and his claim to believe the incredible Abdul-Majid story, as proof of the movement's responsibility for the crime.

### Revisionism and the WZO

After the Arlosoroff slaying, but even before the trial, the Revisionists were totally isolated, and the split in Jabotinsky's movement further weakened their position within the Zionist camp. Their vote in the poll for delegates to the August 1933 World Zionist Congress dropped to only 14 percent. Nor did Jabotinsky improve their image by walking into a Jewish convention, only months after Hitler had come to power, surrounded by a bodyguard of brownshirts. The presidium promptly banned the uniforms, fearing they would provoke the Laborites. During the Congress, Jewish Telegraphic Agency dispatches told of the police discovering Jabotinsky's letter to Achimeir denouncing him for his pro-Nazi articles.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of the delegates believed that the Revisionists had murdered the Political Secretary of their movement, and the letter only reinforced their opinion.

The WZO leadership wanted to say little about Germany, as it knew that negotiations were proceeding to work out a trade agreement with Hitler. Jabotinsky brought forth a motion to support an anti-Nazi boycott, but it was defeated 249 to 43.<sup>23</sup>

Relations between the Revisionists and the WZO were at their worst in the period immediately after the Congress. The demographic exigencies of Zionism in Palestine—that immigration had to constantly grow just to keep pace with the Arab birth rate—coupled with the lack of financial resources in the midst of the Depression, made it inevitable that the "Practicals" of the WZO leadership would seek an arrangement with Hitler. Jabotinsky did not know it, but while the Congress was meeting,

<sup>22</sup>*Jewish Daily Bulletin*, August 24, 1933, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup>"Zionists reject Boycott of Reich," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1933, p. 6.

the Jewish expert of the SS, Baron Leopold von Mildenstein, was the guest of the WZO in Palestine. Nor was he informed that, in December 1933, Weizmann asked the Nazis for permission to come to Berlin to negotiate for the further development of the transfer trade pact into the full-scale liquidation bank envisioned by Arlosoroff.<sup>24</sup> However, at that same time, Jabotinsky was negotiating, via his Unione Revisionisti, for a Betar school in Italy.

The Revisionists were not the only ones to denounce the WZO's Transfer Agreement. The Jewish Communist press reported on the WZO's open relations with the Fascists and the Nazis; and the Socialist International also denounced the Transfer. There was immense opposition to it within the WZO, particularly in Poland, where the Jewish masses instinctively knew that any compromise with Hitler could only weaken them vis-à-vis their own anti-Semites; and in the US, where the bulk of the Zionist ranks and some of the leadership were infected by the reforming spirit generated by the election of President F. D. Roosevelt.

Jabotinsky tried to set up the Revisionist World Union as a boycott center, but his strategic conception was ludicrous. He did not want a "negative" boycott; there was no need to tell people not to buy German goods, for their own revulsion at Hitler's actions would take care of that. It was better to set up an office to tell people the exact make and model of competitive wares they could buy. Not even Jabotinsky's most faithful followers in the freshly-purged Revisionist executive wanted to get involved, knowing that a serious boycott effort would take cash, which they did not have. Jabotinsky, a half-time secretary, and an unpaid typist became the international boycott staff. But without Jewish unity, a boycott was doomed to be ineffective, and the last group likely to unite the Jews was an organization notorious for its terrorist attacks on Jewish labor unions in Palestine. The boycott campaign dwindled away to nothing. Hitler was not Jabotinsky's priority. He knew Hitler was venomous, but he really did not think the new regime could last, believing that either Hitler would be curbed by the German capitalists or that Germany would go bankrupt due to world reluctance to buy its goods. Poland, with its huge Jewish population, was always the prime European focus of the Revisionists, and Palestine was the exact center of their universe.

By August 1934, the Revisionists recognized that their "National Labor

<sup>24</sup>Werner Braatz, "German Commercial Interests in Palestine: Zionism and the Boycott of German Goods," *European Studies Review* (October 1979), p. 504.

Union" would never surpass the Histadrut, whose membership was ten times larger; so they offered to negotiate a pact to eliminate violent conflicts between the two unions. The Histadrut's ranks, having seen Hitler's triumph, opposed a compromise and decided to destroy their own fascist menace before it got out of hand. Without notifying their vacillating national leaders, the Haifa Labor Council decided they would not permit any Revisionist meetings in their city. On October 17, 1934, 1,500 Histadrut members and kibbutzniks battered down the doors at the Revisionists' new Haifa headquarters, trapping 100 of them, sending 20 of them to the hospital, and, in formation, marched through the streets in a victory parade. But their leaders, who were trading with the Nazis, were not eager to carry out a campaign against their own fascists, primarily out of concern that a climate of civil war would frighten off Zionism's middle class following in the Diaspora.<sup>25</sup>

Through the intervention of Pinhas Rutenberg, a Zionist businessman, a secret meeting was arranged between Ben Gurion and Jabotinsky. On October 16, 1934, the two signed an agreement to ban violence in their disputes. Later pacts sought to regulate the relations between the rival unions, but the agreements were unpopular with the ranks on both sides. The Revisionist world congress in January 1935 accepted them, but Achimeir in Palestine and Menahem Begin in Poland bitterly opposed such pacts. A Histadrut referendum, in late March 1935, repudiated the pacts by 15,227 to 10,187. In preparation for its 1935 world congress, the WZO modified its regulations to compel all members to adhere to the discipline of the organization in dealing with outside political forces and Jabotinsky finally decided to consummate the inevitable split. On June 3, 1935 his ranks voted overwhelmingly to set up their own New Zionist Organization (NZO).

### Ever Closer to Fascist Italy

By the 1930s it became apparent, even to Jabotinsky, that Britain would never consider giving Trans-Jordan to the Zionists and, despite his reservations about Fascism as a system, he became increasingly oriented toward Italy. In November 1934, Mussolini set up a Betar squadron at his *scuola marittima* at Civitavecchia, where 134 cadets were trained by the notorious Blackshirts; in 1936, Il Duce himself reviewed his Zionist wards.<sup>26</sup> The

<sup>25</sup>Shapira, p. 104.

training in Italy only certified Revisionism's fascist image, but the imperious Jabotinsky scarcely cared. In 1931 he had written one of his Italian followers, who was handling the preliminary negotiations with the regime, that they could set up the training program elsewhere, but "we . . . prefer to have it established in Italy."<sup>27</sup> Jabotinsky became an advocate of Mussolini in the Jewish political world and, in April 1935, while touring the US, he wrote an article, "Jews and Fascism—some Remarks—and a Warning."

Whatever any few think of Fascism's other points, there is no doubt that the Italian brand of Fascist ideology is, at least, an ideology of racial equality. Let us not be so humble as to pretend that this does not matter—that racial equality is too insignificant an idea to out-balance the absence of civic freedom. For it is not true. I am a journalist who would choke without freedom of the press, but I affirm it is simply blasphemous to say that in the scale of civic rights, even the freedom of the press comes before the equality of all men. Equality comes first, always first, super first; and Jews should remember it, and to hold that a regime maintaining that principle in a world turned cannibal does, partly, but considerably, atone for its other shortcomings; it may be criticized, it should not be kicked at. There are enough other terms for cussing use—Nazism, Hitlerism, Polizeistadt, etc.—but the word "fascismo" is Italy's copyright and should therefore be reserved only for the correct kind of discussion, not for exercises in Billingsgate. Especially as it may yet prove very harmful. That government of the copyright is a very powerful factor, whose sympathy may yet ward off many a blow, for instance in the League of Nations' councils. Incidentally, the Permanent Mandate Commission which supervises Palestinian affairs has an Italian chairman. In short—though I don't expect street urchins (irrespective of age) to follow advise of caution—responsible leaders ought to take note.<sup>28</sup>

The apologist for "fascismo" was quite impressed by the Italian romp over Ethiopia: "England is now by far not the strongest power in the Mediterranean." By 1936, he became convinced that it was time to shop around for a new mandatory, preferably one with the proper willingness to use the sternest measures against the Arabs. "Logically," he wrote a friend, "the *Ersatz* could be either Italy, or some condominium of less anti-Semitic states interested in Jewish immigration, or a direct Geneva

<sup>26</sup>This scene was shown in a film entitled *Mussolini, My Husband*, narrated by Rachele Mussolini, produced by Globe Studios, and shown on KCET-TV (Los Angeles) in 1979.

<sup>27</sup>Jabotinsky, "Letter to Leone Carpi, October 7, 1931," *Scritti In Memoria Di Leone Carpi*, D. Carpi, A. Milano, Al Rofo, eds. (Milan: Fondazione Sally Mayer, 1967), p. 42.

<sup>28</sup>Jabotinsky, "Jews and Fascism—Some Remarks—and a Warning," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, April 11, 1935, p. 3.

Mandate. . . . Before June 30-July 15 I sounded alternative no. 1. Result: not yet ripe, not by a long shot.”<sup>29</sup>

Jacob de Haas, a co-worker with Herzl, had come over to Revisionism, and had chaired the founding congress of the NZO in Vienna in September 1935. He described the gathering in his column for Chicago’s *Jewish Chronicle*: “The delegates were not fascists, but having lost all faith in democracy they were not anti-fascist. They were however very anti-Communitic.”<sup>30</sup> He did not consider himself a fascist, which would have been bizarre in America, so de Haas convinced himself that his comrades were “only” anti-democratic. But Wolfgang von Weisl, then the NZO’s financial director and diplomatic representative in eastern Europe, was certainly more accurate when he told a Bucharest diplomatic paper that, “although opinions among the Revisionists varied, in general they sympathized with Fascism.” He assured his interlocutor that “He personally was a supporter of Fascism, and he rejoiced at the victory of Fascist Italy in Abyssinia as a triumph of the White races against the Black.”<sup>31</sup> Naturally such opinions were well received in Rome, and Mussolini told David Prato, later to become chief rabbi of Rome, that “For Zionism to succeed you need to have a Jewish state, with a Jewish flag and a Jewish language. The person who really understands that is your fascist, Jabotinsky.”<sup>32</sup>

By 1936, the Fascist regime had irrevocably moved into Hitler’s camp; the training at Civitavecchia was abandoned in 1937, and Jabotinsky severed all ties with Mussolini. But the hard-core fascists among his followers became convinced that the Jews were responsible for Mussolini’s turn to Hitler. Hadn’t they warned the Jews not to attack Fascism? If only the Zionists had supported Italy in the Ethiopian war, and showed that they were really prepared to fight Britain, Mussolini would have backed them. Many of these later split off from Jabotinsky and backed Avraham Stern and Yitzhak Shamir (now Israeli prime minister) and the “Stern Gang” in their fantastic wartime proposals to Mussolini, and then Hitler, for a military alliance against the British in Palestine.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Schechtman, p. 304.

<sup>30</sup>Jacob de Haas, “New Struggles in an Old World,” *Chicago Jewish Chronicle*, October 18, 1935, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup>“Dr. Von Weisl Believes in Fascism,” *World Jewry* (London), June 12, 1936, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup>Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben Gurion—The Armed Prophet* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 46.

### The 1936 Palestinian Revolt

The story of the uprising has been told elsewhere and will not be detailed here. It is sufficient to say that between 1933 and 1936, 164,267 Jewish immigrants poured into Palestine; the Jewish minority rose to 29.9 percent by December 1935, and the Arabs could foresee the Zionists becoming the majority within the country in the near future. Tremendous unrest had followed the November 18, 1935 discovery of a cache of weapons that the Haganah had tried to smuggle into the country in a cement cargo; that same month Shaikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a popular Muslim preacher, went into the hills with a guerrilla band. British troops soon killed him, but the crisis exploded again on April 15, 1936, when a group of Qassam's followers stopped travellers on the Tulkarm road and killed two Jews. Two Arabs were killed in retaliation, and the funeral of the two Jews turned into a demonstration marching on Jaffa, only to be driven back when four Jews were shot by the police. A counter-march soon started out for Tel Aviv and the revolt was on. A spontaneous general strike broke out and popular pressure forced the rival effendi cliques to form an Arab Higher Committee under the Mufti's leadership. Frightened that continuation of what was basically a jacquerie would throw the peasantry permanently out of their control, the Palestinian establishment prevailed upon the naive local strike committees to call off the strike on October 12, pending the outcome of a promised Royal Commission investigation.

The local British administrators, like bureaucrats everywhere, wanted as little trouble as possible and they saw that Zionism, with its pretensions, provoked the natives. These British tended to become anti-Zionist and even anti-Semitic, although even those who affected to be pro-Arab usually saw them as just another race of stupid wogs who needed protection from the cunning Jews. Zionism was more successful with the politicians in London who were removed from local Arab pressures and who tended to think in more strategic imperial terms. But it was Sir Ronald Storrs, Jerusalem's first military governor and the most philosophic of the local administrators, who summed up London's overview: the Zionist enterprise was "one that blessed him that gave as well as him that took, by forming for England 'a little loyal Jewish Ulster' in a sea of potentially

<sup>33</sup>David Yisraeli, *The Palestine Problem in German Politics 1889-1945* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1974), pp. 315-317.



hostile Arabism.”<sup>34</sup> On balance, for all of Britain’s vacillations, without British patronage, and particularly the presence of the army, Zionism’s ambitions would have been thwarted by the overwhelmingly Arab population.

The Zionist Yishuv was eager to play the role of the local Orangemen. The WZO’s Haganah, dominated by the Labor Zionists—which was previously illegal and, in practice, barely tolerated—was enrolled in the Crown’s service as “Ghaffirs” or “native” police, or as Jewish Settlement Police, to help the colonial administrators, who were mostly veterans of the infamous Black and Tans. By the end of the revolt in 1939, no less than five percent of the entire Jewish population was enrolled in these forces.

The Revisionists, along with most other right-wing Zionists, had split from the Haganah in 1931. There had been complaints about its lack of preparedness during the 1929 riots, but the prime reason for the split was opposition to its domination by the Histadrut. They formed a new “Haganah-B,” commanded by Abraham Tehomi, a Revisionist; in December 1936, he formally agreed that the militia would operate under Jabotinsky’s direction. However it was not until April 1937—after Tehomi and about a quarter of his 3,000 men, supporters of the Mizrachi, General Zionists and Jewish State Party, with very few Revisionists, split off to return to the Haganah—that the group became a genuinely Revisionist force.

At first Jabotinsky had gone along with the Haganah’s defensive strategy of *havlaga* or self-restraint. He had always preferred a fully legal legion, formally affiliated to the military, and he feared that illegal counter-insurgency would choke off that potential. However, there really was no place for an illegal shadow of the Haganah and, after Tehomi split, the fully Revisionist force, now known as the Irgun (from Irgun Zvei Leumi, National Military Organization) only made sense as an underground terrorist grouping. Jabotinsky had a genuine distaste for such activities; in July 1937 he told a meeting of its high command in Alexandria that “I can’t see much heroism and public good in shooting from the rear an Arab peasant on a donkey, carrying vegetables for sale in Tel Aviv.”<sup>35</sup> But the fascist character of Revisionism resulted in the usual formula of the ranks being eager for extremism and their leader giving in to his

<sup>34</sup>Ronald Storrs, *Orientations* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1937), p. 405.

<sup>35</sup>Schechtman, p. 449.

maximalists. By November 1937, the Irgun was irrevocably committed to terrorism. Earlier, in September, 13 Arabs were killed supposedly in retaliation for the death of three Jews. Several Irgunists were determined to act on their own, but the Irgun Command headed them off by organizing a wave of operations, beginning on November 14, that resulted in 10 dead and numerous wounded.<sup>36</sup> The Irgun's campaign of attacks on purely civilian targets reached its high point in the summer of 1938. On July 6, a bomb in a milk can went off in the Arab market in Haifa, leaving 21 dead and 52 injured. On July 15, an electric mine in David Street in the old city of Jerusalem killed 10 and wounded 30. On July 25, another bomb in the Haifa market left 35 dead and 70 wounded. On August 26, a bomb in Jaffa's market killed 24 and injured 35.<sup>37</sup>

The Irgun's operations have been documented elsewhere, by friend and foe alike. Serious historians are in general agreement that, while these operations tell us much about Revisionism, their net effect on the outcome of the revolt was absolutely nil.<sup>38</sup> Although the Haganah played a much more important part in the counter-insurgency, its role was strictly auxiliary to the efforts of the British, who used classic colonial repression—bombing from the air, collective punishment, internment without trial, and executions—and resoundingly crushed the revolt.

### Diaspora Revisionism

If the Irgun's efforts were inconsequential on the ground in Palestine, the reports of Jewish violence had an appeal to elements of the Jewish middle-class in eastern Europe, who were reeling from the eruption of reinvigorated local anti-Semitic assaults in the wake of the Nazi takeover in Germany. The Polish right-wing, although apprehensive about Hitler's designs on the Corridor, saw its own anti-Semitism vindicated by the establishment of the new regime in their "highly cultured" neighbor, and anti-Semitic incidents became common, in the streets and particularly in the universities. As long as Marshall Jozef Pilsudski, Poland's gruff old semi-dictator, lived, the Jews were relatively safe from attacks. He had always seen anti-Semitism as a legacy of Tsarist backwardness and he

<sup>36</sup>J. Bowyer Bell, *Terror Out of Zion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 39.

<sup>37</sup>Israel Shahak, *Begin and Co. As They Really Are* (Jerusalem: Israel Shahak, 1977), p. 12.

<sup>38</sup>Daniel Levine, *David Raziell, The Man and His Times* (New York: Yeshiva University PhD., 1969), p. 229

would not tolerate pogroms or, for that matter, any kind of street disturbances. But he died in 1935, and his successors, the "Colonels," started pandering to the resurgent Jew-hatred, and the 3.3 million Polish Jews were confronted with both pogrom gangs and ever-increasing official discrimination. In the Baltic states, Austria, Hungary and Rumania, Jews faced similar campaigns designed to drive them out of their positions in the economy.

Many middle class Jews naturally backed a political current so solicitous of their class interests, but there were additional reasons why a significant portion of the eastern European Jewish middle class found Revisionism appealing. They had seen the German working class let Hitler walk right through them to power, and crush them without firing a single shot. If they looked east they were repelled by the Soviet Union, then in the throes of the great purges. With the Jewish situation in their own region turning desperate, and their class position even more hopeless, many middle class Jews irrevocably turned their backs on assimilation. Instead, they looked toward Palestine, but with the British sharply cutting the Jewish immigration quota to mollify the Arabs, official Zionism did not seem to offer a practical mass solution. While the majority of Polish Jewry started voting for the anti-Zionist Bund, the only Jewish movement which organized mass street defense against the pogromists, thousands joined the Betar. If Palestine was ever to become a Jewish state, it could only be accomplished by force, and the only force emphasizing both Palestine and militarism within the Jewish community was Revisionism.

Jabotinsky, hitherto a Zionist monist, began to cultivate the Orthodox middle class. He had always been a secularist, did not observe any of the tenets of the Jewish religion (except to say the prayer for his dead father), and had denounced Orthodoxy for its obscurantism and male chauvinism. But in 1935, he suddenly injected a "religious plank" into the NZO platform, calling for "implanting in Jewish life the sacred treasures of the Jewish tradition."<sup>39</sup> He claimed to profess that "My . . . generation . . . started by eliminating clericalism and wound up eliminating Godhead. . . . Now we see into what human nature can degenerate if deprived of Godhead."<sup>40</sup> The whole episode is a low point in his career, and even his shocked son felt that all of this was low demagoguery.<sup>41</sup>

But if the Polish Jewish middle class was all dressed up with some place

<sup>39</sup>Schechtman, p. 287.

to go, the question still remained as to how they were going to get there. With Britain blocking mass immigration to Palestine, Jabotinsky looked to the anti-Semitic Polish government for patronage. Mainline Zionism had also sought its support: Weizmann met with Foreign Minister Jozef Beck, who assured him that if London ever implemented the partition proposed by the 1937 Royal Commission, Warsaw would work for the best possible frontiers for the Zionist statelet, in the interest of providing sufficient room for a large Jewish immigration. In 1937, the Polish army secretly sold to the Haganah machine guns and rifles, and some Haganah instructors were allowed into the country to train secretly some of their followers who would emigrate to Palestine.<sup>42</sup> But with the WZO tied to the British, who were abandoning partition and cutting immigration, the Revisionists became the prime protégés of the regime. On June 9, 1936, Jabotinsky met with Beck and on September 11, with Prime Minister Felicjan Slawoy-Skladkowski. In October 1937, he returned to meet Marshall Edward Smygly-Rydz, the new strongman. He worked out what he was pleased to call an “alliance” with the anti-Semitic regime.

Jabotinsky, using the Polish press as his vehicle, called for the “evacuation” of 1.5 million Jews from eastern Europe, most of them from Poland. In a 1937 article aimed at Jews, he described his thinking in terms so grotesque that the veneer of an “alliance” fairly peeled off:

I had first thought of “Exodus,” of a second “departure from Egypt.” But this will not do. We are engaged in politics, we must be able to approach other nations and demand the support of other states. And that being so, we cannot submit to them a term that is offensive, that recalls Pharaoh and his ten plagues. Besides, the word “Exodus” evokes a terrible picture of horrors, the picture of a whole nation-mass, like a disorganized mob, that flees panic stricken.<sup>43</sup>

Jabotinsky was, in fact, proposing an exodus. While the proposition was an instant success with the government, it was strenuously opposed by all of Polish Jewry beyond the Revisionist camp. But the Revisionists,

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 289

<sup>42</sup>Yehuda Slutsky, “Haganah,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), Vol. 7, Col. 1069.

<sup>43</sup>Jabotinsky, “Evacuation—Humanitarian Zionism,” *Selected Writings* (South Africa, np, nd), p. 75.

having lost Mussolini's support, were desperate for a patron. In 1939, they sent Robert Briscoe, then a member of the Irish parliament (later famous as the Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin), to make yet another proposition to Beck:

On behalf of the New Zionist Movement . . . I suggest that you ask Britain to turn over the Mandate for Palestine to you and make it in effect a Polish colony. You could then move all your unwanted Polish Jews into Palestine. This would bring great relief to your country, and you would have a rich and growing colony to aid your economy.<sup>44</sup>

The Poles did not bother to ask London for the Mandate; they did better. In the Spring of 1939, they set up a guerrilla training school for their Revisionist clients at Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains. Twenty-five Irgunists were brought from Palestine and taught the finer points of sabotage and insurrection by the Polish Army, which reportedly also provided weapons for 10,000 men for a proposed invasion of Palestine in April 1940.<sup>45</sup>

Poland is a long way from Palestine. How did the Revisionists think they were going to get there? Avraham Stern told the cadets at Zakopane that they were negotiating passage with Turkey and Italy, but there is no evidence that either the Turks or the Italians were in the slightest way involved. Did the Poles really believe in this fantastic plan? It is difficult to say, but remember that the world's greatest horse cavalry, led by graduates of Pilsudski's own "Polish Legion," was about to ride out to take on Hitler's Panzer Korp. Pilsudski and his Colonels had developed similar crack-brained schemes—Pilsudski backed Germany against Russia during World War I, figuring to then turn on the Germans and go over to the French. To the Colonels, Jabotinsky was the Jewish Pilsudski: if he could cook up such concatenated maneuvers and come to power, why not Jabotinsky?

But even if the invasion never took place, or failed, the Colonels stood to gain as the Revisionists had to stay on the good side of the regime domestically, if their patrons were to provide weapons and training. Thus, unless they were directly attacked, the Betar never directed their militarism against Polish anti-Semitism and they kept out of the street fighting against the pogromists. Schmuel Merlin, who spent the last pre-war

<sup>44</sup>Robert Briscoe, *For the Life of Me* (London: Longmans, 1959), p. 268.

<sup>45</sup>Nathan Yalin-Mor, "Memories of Yair and Etzel," *Jewish Spectator* (Summer 1980), p. 33.

years in Warsaw as the Secretary-General of the NZO, explained:

It is absolutely correct to say that only the Bund waged an organized fight against the anti-Semites. We did not consider that we had to fight in Poland. We believed the way to ease the situation was to take the Jews out of Poland. We had no spirit of animosity.<sup>46</sup>

### **“The Useless Screeching of a Door”**

Menahem Begin, boy-orator of 1930s Revisionism, best expressed the increasingly feverish spirit of the Betar ranks in the face of the growing Nazi threat. Their desperation took the form of crying out for the immediate conquest of Palestine. At the September 11, 1938 Betar world conference in Warsaw, Begin rose to amend their oath. After the Arlosoroff assassination, Jabotinsky had inserted a clause, “I will raise my arm only for defense,” but now Begin insisted on adding, “and the conquest of my homeland.” Jabotinsky knew that there was not the slightest chance of beating the British, the Arabs and the Labor Zionists; the whole notion of invading Palestine had been only half serious in his mind (presumably immediate access to guns and training was what had interested him), and he tore into Begin. There were, he said, all manner of noises in the world, some the useful whirr of machinery and other such sounds. But Begin’s speech reminded him of nothing more than “the useless screeching of a door” on its hinges. To him, “military Zionism” was as one-sided as Weizmann’s “practical Zionism.” He had his own rewrite of the first line of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created—politics.” He dismissed Begin: “Sir, if you sir, have stopped believing in the conscience of the world, you’d best go to the Vistula and drown yourself in it. Your alternative would be to take up Communism!”<sup>47</sup>

Despite Jabotinsky’s polemic, Begin’s amendment passed. Revisionism was engulfed in a wave of maximalism, the Irgun was increasingly acting independently of Jabotinsky and, once again, he capitulated to his extremists. In August 1939, he informed the Irgun that he wanted to advance their proposed invasion of Palestine to October of that year. He would lead a boatload of the Betar, who would land on the beach at Tel Aviv, while the Irgun would seize Government House in Jerusalem, hold it for 24 hours, and declare a provisional government. After Jabotinsky’s arrest or death, the Revisionists in Europe and America would further

<sup>46</sup>Shmuel Merlin, interview with author, September 16, 1982.

<sup>47</sup>Levine, p. 80.

proclaim a government-in-exile. The adventure was clearly patterned after the 1916 Easter uprising in Ireland, where the leaders were duly executed after their surrender, but their gesture triggered a popular revolution which ultimately led to the British evacuation of the south of Ireland. But, in this case, such an exploit could only have led to the destruction of the Irgun, and would hardly have inspired the Labor Zionists, the most powerful Zionist force in the country, to follow their hated rivals into revolting against Britain. Nor would such a venture have had the slightest effect on the fate of European Jewry.

Jabotinsky updated the invasion plan in the light of a shift of the Irgun's attention from the Arabs to the British in the wake of the May 1939 White Paper, which marked a sharp change in British policy. Britain feared that a continued pro-Zionist policy would throw the Arab world into the Axis camp in the event of a war, so Britain curtailed Zionist land purchases, limited immigration to 75,000 for the next five years, and proposed an Arab-dominated state within ten years. The Irgun's response was to start a bombing campaign aimed at British installations. The British reaction was much more forceful to these attacks than it had ever been to the Irgun's assaults against the Arabs. Irgun commander David Raziel was arrested in May and, on the night of August 31, the rest of the high command was rounded up while they were discussing the merits—and demerits—of Jabotinsky's scheme.<sup>48</sup>

Later that same night, August 31-September 1, the Nazis invaded Poland, starting a war that Jabotinsky repeatedly insisted was out of the question. On March 31, he had written his sister that "there will be no war; the German insolence will soon subside . . . in five years we will have a Jewish state;" within the last week of August, he wrote that "there is not the remotest chance of war."<sup>49</sup> He was convinced that the capitalists would never allow themselves to be dragged into another war, which would mean the downfall of at least some of their regimes, as happened after World War I. He had also believed that the British, who his Irgun was bombing in Palestine, would come to realize that the only solution to the eastern European Jewish question was the adoption of his evacuation program, which they would implement so as to withdraw the Jewish question from Hitler's propaganda arsenal. When Mussolini went over to Hitler, Jabotinsky had returned to his earlier pro-British stance; the bombing

<sup>48</sup>Yalin-Mor, p. 36.

<sup>49</sup>Schechtman, p. 366.

campaign and the fantastic invasion plan, in his view, were little more than pressure to make London see the path it had to take.

### The Last Period

When the impact of the war finally sank in, Jabotinsky was quite contrite, but he did not think that an error of such colossal magnitude had disqualified him from political leadership, though he was concerned that his opponents “will now use this error of mine as proof that ‘Jabotinsky was again wrong because he was never able to reckon with reality’ . . . This damn reality! And one *has* to reckon with it!”<sup>50</sup> He immediately notified the British that he was shelving the Irgun’s conflict with their Palestine administration for the sake of the war effort, but a faction, under the leadership of Avraham Stern, split off and continued an increasingly isolated mini-war against Britain. In essence, Jabotinsky saw the new war as a rerun of World War I, and his focus became another Jewish Legion. He knew that the only place where he might recruit such a force was in the United States, but was unable to get there until March 1940. Meanwhile, he lobbied the London politicians for such an army, but with no success, as they were confident the Jews would support their war against Hitler, while such a force could only antagonize the Arab Middle East.

Jabotinsky wrote *The Jewish War Front* to propagate his call for a new Legion, but its subject was equally his solution to the post-war Jewish question in eastern Europe. His central thesis was that “equality for the Jews in that Zone of Distress—unless a great exodus relieves the situation—is doomed to remain a mirage.”<sup>51</sup> He rationalized away anti-Semitism:

A gross injustice! Of course; but mere disapproval is useless. The root of the trouble is not hatred of the Jews—that could be combatted, if not eradicated—but something much more elemental and primordial: sympathy with “one’s own people,” an instinct which cannot be criticized, because, after all, it is as natural as preferring one’s own children to one’s neighbor’s offspring.<sup>52</sup>

The book, with its curious arguments against the possibility of genuine Jewish equality, has a bizarre quality. “Urbanism,” he maintained, has “made the Jew, on the average if not on the summits where genius dwells,

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>51</sup>Jabotinsky, *The Jewish War Front* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1940), p. 12.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.



better equipped for most of the competitions of modern life." If Jews enter into the life of a country they shine, drawing the envy of the slower Gentiles. "This is the fateful inner contradiction of civic equality for Jews: it can be durable only if it is not enjoyed to the full; yet it is impossible to bring about a voluntary renunciation of such a privilege."<sup>53</sup> Thus, he concludes that hundreds of thousands of Jews from the region should move to Palestine, for their own good, the good of those who stay, and the benefit of the nations of eastern Europe. They will find the good life in the Jewish state, alongside their Arab neighbors, who would enjoy full equality with the Jews. However,

. . . whether the Arabs would find all this a sufficient inducement to remain in a Jewish country is another question. Even if they did not, the author would refuse to see a tragedy or a disaster in their willingness to emigrate. The Palestine Royal Commission did not shrink from the suggestion. Courage is infectious. Since we have this moral authority for calmly envisioning the exodus of 350,000 Arabs . . . we need not regard the possible departure of 900,000 with dismay . . . it would be undesirable from many points of view; but . . . the prospect can be discussed without any pretence of concern. . . . Herr Hitler, detested as he is, has recently been enhancing its [population transfer] popularity. . . . his critics . . . disapprove of . . . removing Germans from the Trentino and the Balticum and planting them in fields and houses robbed from the Poles: but it is the robbing of the Poles, not the moving of the Germans, which really elicits the censure. One cannot help feeling that if only Germans . . . Italians and Balts . . . were concerned, the operation might in the end prove not so bad . . . the idea of redistributing minorities *en masse* is becoming popular among "the best people."<sup>54</sup>

When Jabotinsky arrived in the United States in March 1940, Zionism was at a low ebb there. Palestine was far from the front, most Jews were numb with horror at what was being visited on their kin in Poland, and an unlikely Jewish army had little appeal when young men who wanted to fight with the British Empire had only to cross over to Canada. Jabotinsky was worn out physically and depressed by the war. Eastern Europe had been his stronghold and he could never hope to gain a similar popular following in the American Jewish community with its then strong left and liberal orientations. On August 2, he was examined by a doctor, who suspected heart trouble and told him to return for further tests after the intervening weekend.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 220-222.

Jabotinsky went to a Betar camp at Hunter, in Greene County in the Catskill Mountains, about 130 miles from New York City, arriving on Saturday evening, August 3. Utterly exhausted, he briefly reviewed an honor guard and was rushed to bed. A doctor was summoned and, as he was being undressed, he sighed, "I am so tired, I am so tired," which proved to be his last words. He died at 10:45 PM. He was buried in a Jewish cemetery on Long Island and left a will which categorically stated that "my remains (should I be buried outside of Palestine) may not be transferred to Palestine unless by order of that country's eventual Jewish Government."<sup>55</sup>

It was a sign of the bitter hostility of Labor Zionism to the man whom David Ben Gurion routinely referred to as "Vladimir Hitler" that the Israeli government did not issue such an order until July 1964, 16 years after the establishment of the Israeli state.

### Jabotinsky's Legacy

Upon hearing that he had won the May 17, 1977 election for Prime Minister, Menahem Begin declared it

. . . a historic turning point in the annals of the Jewish people and of the Zionist movement—one such as we have not seen since the 17th Zionist Congress, in 1931, when Zeev Jabotinsky suggested that the objective of Zionism should be the establishment of a Jewish state in our time. . . . His students, who in the name of his doctrine and for its realization . . . continued patiently and with absolute faith in democracy to aspire to change the shape of things in our country by means of the ballot slip—and the ballot slip alone—have arrived thus far.<sup>56</sup>

Even allowing for the excitement of victory, the statement is nonsense, even monstrous. Six million Jews were murdered between the 1931 Congress and his election. Fourteen thousand Jews—to say nothing of tens of thousands of Arabs—have died in Israel's wars, yet Begin would have us believe that his election was the most important event in modern Jewish history! Nor can anyone studying the chronicles of Zionist-Revisionism seriously think of them as paladins of democracy.

To this day, Begin has not dealt honestly with his pre-World War II political career. His two books translated into English, *The Revolt* and *White Nights*, effectively begin in 1939, with his flight from Poland. In *The Revolt* he airily dismissed the charge that his hero was a fascist.

<sup>55</sup>Schechtman, p. 400.

<sup>56</sup>Eitan Haber, *Menachem Begin* (New York: Delacorte, 1978), p. 8.

The official Zionist leaders, especially those of the Left, were fanatically opposed to its [the Haganah] developing a military nature, something which in their minds could only be associated with reaction and the Right. Hence, when Jabotinsky called for a Jewish Army he was denounced by the Left as a “militarist” and a “Fascist” for daring to utter such a naughty thought.<sup>57</sup>

In *White Nights* Begin again brushes off the charge that the Revisionists collaborated with anti-Semites:

... the Jewish people could not wait. Jabotinsky ... had this feeling. We all had it. ... A fire breaks out in a house, and you happen to pass by. What do you do? Naturally, you hasten to telephone the fire brigade, but if you hear the voice of a woman or a child screaming in the flames, will you wait for the fire brigade to get there? Of course you won't. You will try immediately to save the woman or child from the burning house. ... Let us suppose that the Revolution was a sort of fire brigade for the Jews who were being persecuted by anti-Semitism in Poland or in Germany, or in any other place. ... What if it came too late, as often happened with fire brigades? We had to try to save them.<sup>58</sup>

Israel's Prime Minister also claims that Jabotinsky foresaw the Holocaust. In 1977, Begin told an interviewer that

... prophetically, he proclaimed that if such a [Jewish] state were not created, the Jews in the Galuth [exile] faced a danger of annihilation—of their very survival ... although ... [Jabotinsky] ... could never have envisioned the ghastliness of the Holocaust.<sup>59</sup>

Jabotinsky and everyone else—Mussolini, the Left, even the majority of his own followers—were in complete agreement as to the fascist nature of 1930s Revisionism. Nor can Jabotinsky's collaboration with the Polish anti-Semites be justified: a movement that would not resist anti-Semitism in Poland could never mobilize the Jewish people to resist Hitler. Begin is hardly unique in the political world in his inability to come to grips with history; the destruction of six million Jews was the end-product of the general crisis of the political world. Where he is unique is that most of the other surviving ideological contenders of that epoch—as with the churches, the Democrats, the British Tories, the Soviets—say their *mea culpas* for at least some of their follies and crimes of the 1930s.

<sup>57</sup>Menachem Begin, *The Revolt* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1972), p. 34.

<sup>58</sup>Begin, *White Nights* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 71-72.

<sup>59</sup>Hyman Frank, “The World of Menachem Begin,” *Jewish Press*, November 25, 1977.

Jabotinsky's doctrine of the Iron Wall ultimately led Revisionism into the Fascist camp. With his undemocratic ambition to take a country from its inhabitants, how could he raise any principled objection to Mussolini's dictatorial pretensions? Jabotinsky was a prophet of Zionism as a latter-day form of colonialism: he understood that their goal could only be achieved by an intense military effort. Fascism's hyper-militarism and terrorism made it fatally attractive to Jabotinsky's followers.

Today's Israel under Jabotinsky's legacy of Revisionism is not a fascist state, at least for Jews, despite attacks by Begin's more zealous supporters on Labor Party election rallies and Peace Now demonstrations. In his daily use of state terrorism against the Palestinians, however, the "democrat" Begin is a vivid reminder of the fascist Begin of the 1930s.