

Israel

Mythologizing a twentieth century accident

Gabriel Kolko

One of the many quirks of the nineteenth century's intellectual heritage was the great intensification of nationalism and – to quote one expert – the creation of 'nation-ness', the consequences of which have varied dramatically all the way from the negligible to the crucial (as in the case of Israel) to war and peace in a vast strategic region. There was, of course, often a basis for various nationalisms to build upon, but the essentially artificial function of forming nations from very little or nothing was common.

Wars were the most conducive to this enterprise, and the emergence of what was termed socialism after 1914 – which had a crucial nationalist basis in such places as China and Vietnam – was due to the fact that foreign invasions greatly magnified nationalism's ability to build on ephemeral foundations to merge socialism and patriotism. For a vital component of nationalism, often its sole one, was a hatred of foreigners – 'others' – giving it largely a negative function rather than an assertion of distinctive values and traits essential to a unique entity. Myths, often far-fetched and irrational, were built. Zionism is the focus of this discussion but it was scarcely alone.¹

Vienna was surely the most intellectually creative place in the world at the end of the nineteenth century. Economics, art, philosophy, political theories on the Right as well as Left, psychoanalysis – Vienna gave birth or influenced most of them. Ideas had to be very original to be noticed, and most were. We must understand the unique and rare innovative environment in which Theodore Herzl, an assimilated Hungarian Jew who became the founder of Zionism, functioned. For a time he was also a German nationalist, and went through phases admiring Richard Wagner and Martin Luther. Herzl was many things, including a very efficient organizer, but he was also very conservative and feared that Jews without a state – especially those in Russia – would become revolutionaries.

A state based on religion rather than the will

Gabriel Kolko's recent books include The Age of War (Lynne Rienner Publishers), an extract from which was featured in Spokesman 91.

of all of its inhabitants was at the end of the nineteenth century not only a medieval notion but also a very eccentric idea, one Herzl concocted in the rarified environment of cafés where ideas were produced with scant regard for reality. It was also full of countless contradictions, based not merely on the conflicts between theological dogmas and democracy but also vast cultural differences among Jews, all of which were to appear later. Europe's Jews have precious little in common, and their mores and languages are very distinct. But the gap between Jews from Europe and those from the Arab world was far, far greater. Moreover, there were many radically different kinds of Zionism within a small movement, ranging from the religiously motivated to Marxists who wanted to cease being Jews altogether and, as Ber Borochov would have it, become 'normal'. In the end, all that was to unite Israel was a military ethic premised on a hatred of those 'others' around them – and it was to become a warrior-state, a virtual Sparta dominated by its army. Initially, at least, Herzl had the fate of Russian and East European Jews in mind; the outcome was very different.

Zionism was original but at the turn of the century its following was close to non-existent. An important exception was the interest of Lord Rothschild. Moreover, from its inception Zionism was symbiotic on Great Powers – principally Great Britain – that saw it as a way of spreading their colonial ambitions to the Middle East. As early as 1902 Herzl met with Joseph Chamberlain, then British Colonial Secretary, to further Zionist claims in the region bordering Egypt, and the following year he hired David Lloyd George – later to become prime minister – to handle the Zionist case.² Herzl also unsuccessfully asked the sultan of the Ottoman Empire if he might obtain Palestine, after which he advocated establishing a state in Uganda – although his followers much preferred the Holy Land. Only the principle of a Jewish State, anywhere, appealed to him – but mainly for Jews in the Russian Empire. Herzl was only the first in the Zionist tradition of advocating a state for others; he was never in favour of all Jews moving there. Chaim Weizmann wrote to Herzl in 1903 that the large majority of the young Jews in Russia were anti-Zionist because they were revolutionaries – which only reinforced Herzl's convictions. In 1913, British Intelligence estimated that perhaps one per cent of the Jews had Zionist affiliations, a figure that rose in the Russian Pale – which contained about six million Jews – as the war became longer.

It was scarcely an accident that, in November 1917, Lord Arthur Balfour was to make Britain's historic endorsement of a Jewish homeland in their newly mandated territory of Palestine in a letter to Rothschild. Some of these Englishmen also shared the Biblical view that it was the destiny of Jews to return to their ancient soil. Others thought that this gesture would help keep Russia in the war, and that nefarious Jews had the influence to do so. Most saw a Jewish state as a means of consolidating British power in the vast Islamic region.³

Jewish migration: many promised lands

Migration has been one of the universal phenomena of world history since time immemorial, and we know a great deal about its causes and motives. People

migrate mainly out of necessity, generally economic, and they choose from existing options. They very rarely go someplace for the ‘blessings of liberty’, or ideology; if they do, such variable factors as economic deprivation or changes in laws should not exist. But in the case of Palestine and Zionism, Jews behaved like people everywhere and at most times.

It is a Zionist myth that there were many Jews who wished to go to a primitive, hot, dusty place and did so. They did not – and all of the available numbers prove this conclusively. After the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, the Pale was abolished and a very large number of the Jews in it moved to Russia’s cities; many of them saw the Bolsheviks as liberators and filled the ranks of the revolution at every level.⁴ If they emigrated, and here the numbers are very important, it was not – if they had a choice – to Palestine.

From 1890 to 1924, about two million of the 20 million immigrants to the United States were Jews – overwhelmingly from Eastern Europe. Other nations in the Western Hemisphere also attracted about a million Jews during this period, to which we must add Jewish migration to South Africa, Australia, Western Europe, and the like. This does not mean that Jews were not ‘Zionists’, but they had no intention whatsoever of embarking on *Aliyah* – of going to Palestine themselves. As Herzl believed, it was a project for others.

Jews in the Diaspora, like most ethnic groups, banded together in numerous organizations and nostalgia – and confusion – soon overwhelmed them. Organized Zionism grew in the United States, as it had not in Eastern Europe – but it demanded only money, thereby ultimately making Israel viable.

In 1893, there were an estimated 10,000 Jews in Palestine, 61,000 in 1920, and 122,000 in 1925. All of these figures are only the best-informed estimates; there were censuses in 1922 and 1931 only, and even the 1922 numbers are contested. But the general trend is beyond doubt and very clear. For every Jew who went to Palestine from 1890 to 1924, at least 27 went to the Western Hemisphere alone. Relatively, the Zionist project was the utopian dream of a tiny minority and it would have failed save for two factors: the Holocaust, and the much-overlooked fact that, in 1924, the United States passed a new immigration law based on quotas using the nationalities distribution in the 1890 census as a basis, effectively cutting off migration from Eastern and Southern Europe to a mere trickle of what it had been.

In 1924, Jewish population in Palestine increased 5.9 per cent, but in 1925 – the first year the American law went into effect – it leaped 28 per cent, and 23 per cent in 1926. This was still a small minority of the Jews who left Europe, but this sudden spurt was directly related to American policy. From 1927 to 1932 it never grew more than 5.3 per cent annually and, in 1927, it was a mere 0.2 per cent.⁵ Very few Jews went to Palestine, and a small proportion of them were ideologically motivated; the vast majority migrated elsewhere.

The British had always been in favour of Jewish migration and, after 1933, it grew greatly – Jews were six per cent of the Palestinian population in 1912 but 29 percent in 1935 – but now it was increasingly composed of Jews from Germany

rather than Poland. These Jews had to get out of Germany, where the Zionist movement had always been very weak, and they were scarcely ideological zealots. Had there been open migration to the United States they would have gone there. Arab riots after 1935 compelled the British to reduce the inflow and, in 1939, they adopted a White Paper enforcing strict restrictions on immigration.

What is certain is that Hitler's importance must always be set in a larger context. Without him there never would have been a flow of Jews out of Germany, and very probably no state of Israel, but also crucial was the US 1924 Immigration Act. Migrants went to Palestine out of necessity, in the vast majority of cases, not choice. Both of these factors were crucial, and to determine their relative importance is an abstract, futile enterprise. But without either, the Zionist project of creating a Jewish state in Palestine would have remained another exotic Viennese concoction, never to be realized, because while the Jews in the Diaspora were in favour of a Jewish state, virtually none living in safe nations were ever to uproot themselves and embark on *Aliyah* – the return to the ancient homeland. They had no reason to do so.

There were many promised lands and Herzl's exotic ruminations were scarcely the inspiration for the flow of Jews out of Europe. Israel's existence was an unpredictable accident of history. The past century has been full of them, everywhere. That is why the world is in such a perilous condition.

References

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3. William M. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History, 1848-1938*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972, pp. 357-61; Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton University Press, 2004, pp. 149-52; David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, *op. cit.*, pp. 272, 294.
4. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, *passim*.
5. Data on Palestine is from *Population of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine: Statistical and Demographic Considerations*, 2002-05, pp. 5, 6, 11 and *passim*. <http://www.mideastweb.org/palpop.htm>