



ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF ZIONISM

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One of the key forces in shaping the history of Palestine was the Zionist movement. This movement emerged from and is rooted in political developments in Europe, but it changed and developed as it evolved from a political movement in Europe to a settlement and nation-building project in Palestine. Thus, we need to step outside the physical context of the Middle East to understand a force that ultimately changed the Middle East.

This article focuses on Jewish history and Jewish politics and thought; other texts in this collection complement and complicate the picture I give with perspectives from the Arab, Palestinian, and imperial perspectives. In what follows I will give an overview of the Jewish world at the time; will zoom in on the conditions in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe that eventually gave rise to the Zionist movement; will discuss the early evolution of the movement in Europe, before discussing how it evolved and changed as it focused on a settlement and nation-building project in Palestine. In addition, I'll look briefly at how local late Ottoman and then British trends enabled the movement's growth in Palestine despite local fear, concern, and growing opposition, and will finally turn to Zionist responses to increasingly evident local resistance.

Zionism is a form of Jewish nationalism that posits Jews are a nation and that Jews should receive national rights on the basis of this identity. What distinguishes Zionism from other forms of Jewish nationalism is that Zionists, after a brief period of uncertainty and alternative proposals, believed that the location for these rights or sovereignty should be the Land of Israel, which religious Jewish tradition regarded as Jews' ancient and ultimate homeland.

Overview of the Jewish World at the Time

Jews had originated in Palestine (ancient Canaan) but had begun to migrate outwards in ancient times, both because of expulsions and for economic reasons under the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. Under Roman rule, after the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD, they migrated farther, across North Africa and, particularly important for us, to Germany and France. In the late Middle Ages, in the wake of persecution and expulsions, many Ashkenazi Jews moved east from Germany to the lands of Poland and Russia.

Not all Jews migrated to Europe; when the Middle East came under the rule of Islam, some migrated across the Muslim

world, including a very important population who went to Spain and flourished there and retained their identity as Spanish Jews even after they were expelled after the Christian Reconquista in 1492. Many of those Spanish (or Sephardi) Jews lived in Turkey, Greece, the Balkans and North Africa. And still others, dating to the times of the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, the Mizrahim, lived in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, some of the longest lasting Jewish populations in the world.

A very small population of Jews remained in Palestine under Roman, Byzantine, and Muslim rule; their numbers grew after the Spanish expulsion of 1492 and again with migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to the holy land, often for religious reasons, or to study. By the end of the 19th century, Jews—nearly all religious—with a core of Mizrahi Jews, an influx of Sephardi Jews, and a later immigration of religious Ashkenazim, were about 5% of Palestine's population.

Back in Europe, with the expansion of the Russian Empire and the partition of Poland in the 1790s, much of Eastern Europe came under Russian rule. Catherine the Great established Russia's Western borderlands as the Pale of Settlement which, by the 19th century had, the highest concentration of Jews in the world. Most were religious, but increasingly were being influenced by the idea of learning secular sciences, alongside the maintenance of Jewish cultural identity. Much smaller, but often highly educated and influential populations of Jews lived in Western and central Europe, especially France, Germany, England, and Austria.

19TH Century Trends in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe

To understand the emergence of Zionism we need to look at key trends taking place in Europe: enlightenment and emancipation in Western and central Europe and state centralization and enlightened absolutism in Eastern Europe. Both of these would lead some Jews toward Zionism, though not always for the same reasons.

In Eastern Europe, the debate was not about citizenship, but rather about state centralization and integration of Jews and other minorities into state languages and state educational institutions. But unlike in the West, where collective identities were dissolved in favor of individual rights, the Russian empire in particular was full of ethnic groups understanding themselves as distinct entities. The idea that Jews could be fully modern and maintain ethnic identities and institutions of their own was consistent with broader national trends in Russia. Within a large commitment to modernization, Jewish cultural movements, based on Yiddish and Hebrew, emerged.

But confidence in integration and modernization stalled in 1882, with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, the rollback of his more inclusive laws, and the outbreak of pogroms. The 1880s then saw the emergence of a slew of Jewish political alternatives to liberalism, from socialism to nationalism to nationally organized forms of socialism. Zionism emerged in this mix as a particular form of nationalism: the idea that Jews could be fully realized culturally and politically only in a homeland of their own. This thinking took shape in particular in the work of Leon Pinsker in his 1882 text "Autoemancipation."

In Western and Central Europe our story begins earlier than the Eastern European story, though Zionism emerged there slightly later. The enlightenment had introduced a belief in citizenship and individual rights. Jews were an important test case: if such a unique and traditionally insular group could be integrated, the very principle of enlightenment would be supported. Many, however, were unsure whether Jews could or should be integrated.

But rising ethnic nationalism and growing economic pressures compromised this trend. Debates raged throughout the late 1700s-1800s about whether Jews could be fully integrated. This came to be called the Jewish Question. And indeed the more Jews were integrated, the more grew the perception that they were a potential fifth column, that they would weaken the state.

Most Jews in Central and Western Europe continued at that time to believe that integration was possible and the best solution to rising anti-Semitism. But some secular Jews, initially committed to the principles of liberalism and integrated, came to feel that Jews could not be accepted as members of a host nation, but instead should cultivate their own identity as a nation of their own. Theodor Herzl, a Viennese Jewish journalist from Budapest, who, watching rising anti-Semitism (culminating in 1890 with the accusation of Alfred Dreyfus in France of treason), concluded that anti-Semitism would not end and that the solution was Jewish statehood.

This is the political mix that spawned Zionism: disenchantment with liberalism in Western Europe, combined with political upheaval and violence in Eastern Europe, a setting more generally conducive to thinking about identity in ethno-nationalist terms.

Opposition to Zionism

Though Zionism has a particular logic that emerged from the events surrounding it, not all Jews subscribed to that logic and in fact a majority of Jews initially did not. Their opposition stemmed from a number of directions. Jewish liberals, committed to the idea of Jewish integration, thought that Zionism, by conceding to the permanence of anti-Semitism, would in turn lead to more anti-Semitism. Orthodox Jews believed that Jews had been exiled in ancient times because of their sins and would return only with God's will and in messianic times. They believed that taking action to return to Palestine en masse was nothing short of heresy. This religious opposition would change as religious streams of Zionism emerged, but it is important to recall that Orthodoxy was initially deeply opposed to Zionism. Another Jewish group, Autonomists, believed in the national and cultural specificity of Jews, but believed that the solution to Jewish problems would be found within the places they lived, by demanding cultural autonomy. Many of them promoted Yiddish (not Hebrew) as the Jewish national language. Meanwhile, some Jews thought that the division by nationality was highly inappropriate and joined socialist movements not organized in national terms.

To understand how this initially small movement evolved into a major political force, we need to look at it in stages, always understanding the tension between the national purpose Zionism would serve in Europe and the settlement project itself.

Evolution of the Zionist Movement

The earliest Zionist settlers, known as the first Aliyah (wave of immigration), emerge in Eastern Europe following the events of 1882. The "Lovers of Zion" sent tiny groups of Jews to purchase lands mostly in the Jaffa region and Galilee. But they were very disorganized. The major organization came from Central Europeans, and most importantly Theodor Herzl, who in 1897 convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. Still, though, they believed that the actual target population was those facing pogroms in Eastern Europe, most of them assumed they would not personally move.

If Central European Jews had provided the organizational impetus, and Eastern European Jews had provided the willing immigrants, the early Zionist settlements, places like Rehovot, Rishon LeZion, and Zikhron Yaakov, succeeded (after initial failures) only because of the investment of wealthy Western European Jews—most famously Baron Edmond de Rothschild of the noted banking family, who pumped capital into struggling wheat and grape plantations, which employed mainly native Arab labor.

With Central and Western European Jews providing much of the organizational backbone of the still tiny Jewish settlement movement, the ongoing tensions and violence in the Russian Empire—most notably the Kishinev Pogrom in 1903--drove further waves of Jews to Palestine. In the 10 years before World War I, this group, known as the second wave of Zionist immigration (Second Aliyah) arrived to find the plantation colonies of their predecessors. However, strongly influenced by the socialist trends and emphasis on labor of early 20th century Russia, they expressed concern at the tendency of Jewish colonists (so they called themselves at the time) to be uninvolved with physical labor, and to hire native Arab labor at a low cost.

They were convinced that this path was bad for Jews (who were not properly connected to the soil) and to Palestine in general (because plantation owners would be seen as exploitative). They pushed for the separation of Jewish and Arab agricultural economies, and founded all-Jewish farming cooperatives called Kibbutzim.

There are two different ways to look at this development, both of which have truth in them. On the one hand, the members of the Second Aliyah who, because of their socialist focus would be called Labor Zionists, were convinced that their path was enlightened, non-exploitative, and sensitive to the needs of local Palestinian Arab peasants, who they assumed were at a lower stage of development. They believed that their new economic structure would work better for Jews, for Palestinian Arabs, and for the land as a whole. On the other hand, the model of a separate economy eliminated Palestinian Arabs from the picture. With Arabs no longer essential as workers, the Zionist movement began to imagine a more fully Jewish project, which would build an all-Jewish model society from scratch. Some scholars have compared this mindset to that of American settler colonists, who imagined creating a "city on a hill" that would take shape without any direct engagement with the Native American population. This thinking, though rooted in progressive values, introduced new challenges and conflicts.

The Second and Third Aliyot, Zionists from the Russian empire, were strongly influenced by the idea that national identity was rooted in Hebrew. They were people who, a generation before, had been promoting Hebrew and Yiddish literature as tools of modernization within the Russian empire; and they brought this focus on culture to Zionism. Herzl's early Zionist Congresses did not emphasize culture, aiming instead for a political solution to a political problem of anti-semitism. They were conducted

wholly in German. A group of Eastern European Zionists, however, were already working in Palestine to promote Hebrew as the national language. Why Hebrew? Hebrew was the language of the Hebrew bible and of the period of Jewish autonomy in the ancient Holy Land. It was mainly spoken and written in religious contexts but had become a language of modern literature. These Zionists saw it as the link tying Jews back to their an essential and robust national existence. Many of them rejected Yiddish, the Germanic, but Hebrew-influenced language of most Eastern European Jews, as backwards.

In the early decades of the 20th century, advocates of Hebrew set up institutions to coin new words, built a complete Hebrew language school system, convened Jewish cultural performances, translated classic works of European literature into Hebrew and, increasingly, put social pressure on new immigrants to leave their mother tongues and adopt Hebrew. Those who grew up in the Hebrew school system were immensely proud of their fluency and policed the language use of their parents and other new immigrants. It should be noted that the pre-Zionist population of Palestine, that 5-8% I mentioned earlier, tended to be strongly opposed to this secular Hebrew program. Eventually the immigrants of the Second and Third Aliyot, created a kind of political and cultural hegemony around the idea of Jewish labor and separate economic markets, and around Hebrew as a national symbol.

You may have noticed that it is possible to talk about early Zionism as a process of ideological and cultural development among European Jews in Europe and Palestine without mentioning native Palestinians even once. This was largely the mindset of most early Zionists, who were far more concerned about real challenges and threats in Europe and about Jews' internal cultural development, than about any potential for conflict in Palestine.

Imperial Influence

But Zionism was not just about Jewish initiative; a set of local and regional circumstances were arraying themselves in Palestine that would both enable the continuation and growth of Zionist immigration and land purchasing efforts, and lead locals to be highly resistant to and suspicious of these very efforts.

The period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a period of imperial contest, contest that would lead ultimately to the First World War. As empires tried to strengthen themselves, they took actions that would be fateful for Palestine.¹

The Ottoman Empire, seeing itself growing economically weaker, passed a series of reforms in the mid-19th century. Some of these gave rights to Europeans to migrate to and set up economic (and in some cases) religious institutions in Palestine, with the hope of spurring investment. This move was initially influential more for European Christians, but it allowed European Jews to immigrate as citizens or subjects of their European countries. The Ottoman Empire also tried to centralize and enacted land reforms aimed at collecting taxes more efficiently. These reforms led to many smaller landowners to sell to large, absentee landlords because they couldn't afford to pay taxes. This led to a situation where the sellers of land to Jews did not live on the land they were selling.

The British Empire, in turn, seeing the Ottoman Empire's demise and plotting its own plan to control parts of the Middle East, began making deals with several interested parties. In addition to promising Sharif Husayn of Mecca an Arab state in exchange for help in the Arab revolt against the Ottomans, and making tentative land arrangements with France, they issued the famous (and for some, infamous) Balfour Declaration, which expressed support for the establishment of a "Jewish national home" in Palestine.

When the British did indeed conquer Palestine in late 1917 and were awarded a mandate by the League of Nations, they incorporated the text of the Balfour Declaration into the terms of the mandate. Though this promise was vaguely worded, the Zionist movement took this as indication that they were justified in demanding British support for immigration and land purchase. Though the British quickly understood that such allowances would foment opposition of the local population they did not make significant efforts to curb Zionist immigration until 1939, by which point events in Europe put this policy under immense pressure.

But if conditions globally and regionally allowed for the continuation of Zionist immigration, other conditions ensured that this immigration would not be welcomed. Zionists, though leaving Europe, both thought of themselves as Europeans and

¹ See Adam Garfinkle, "[The Origins of the Palestine Mandate](#)," *Footnotes*, November 2014, and Bernard Wasserstein, "[The Partition of Palestine](#)," *Footnotes*, December 2014. Both are write-ups of lectures presented at FPRI's History Institute on Teaching about Israel and Palestine.

were viewed as such. Growing nationalist sentiment in the Arab world, though initially anti-Ottoman, soon took the form of country-specific anticolonial advocacy. Zionist land purchase, though normally conducted legally, led to the dispossession of Palestinian peasants. This, combined with a broader trend of urbanization that already began under Ottoman Rule, led to a sense that the traditional moorings of Palestinian society were being upended.

Arab Question Becomes Jewish Question

The Zionist movement emerged as a proposed solution to “The Jewish Question,” the question of how and whether Jews could be integrated into their European host societies and, if not, what they should do. But with the shifting center of Zionism from Europe to Palestine, a new question, an Arab Question, loomed over the Zionist project: will Palestinian Arabs ever accept Zionist immigration and, if not, how should Zionists respond?

Internal disagreements about this question would define the political map of the Zionist movement, and later the Israeli government, until this day. The earliest Zionist stance on this issue was no stance at all: the First Aliyah colonists assumed that they would create jobs that natives would welcome. Second Aliyah colonists saw this employment as exploitation, and recommended separate economies, assuming that this change would eliminate any chance of conflict.

But with growing Palestinian Arab opposition and anti-British and anti-Zionist violence particularly in 1921, 1929, and 1936, Zionists split around how to respond to opposition. Labor Zionists for the most part believed the tension was based on a misunderstanding, that Palestinian peasants in particular did not understand the good that Zionism was bringing them, and were being influenced by bourgeois elites to oppose Zionism. The sincerely held belief that indeed Zionism was doing good (and that opposition was based either on misunderstanding or baseless hatred) would come to define a dominant strand of thinking.

A new group of Zionist right-wingers, who called themselves Revisionists, opposed the socialist stance of labor Zionists and emphasized national strength over socialist unity. Influenced by the early versions of Italian fascism, the Revisionists encouraged military training and a non-conciliatory stance toward the British. Their leader, Vladimir Jabotinsky, held that conflict was an inevitable outgrowth of foreigners coming to Palestine and held that the only possible response was to fight back and win. This belief in the inevitability of conflict and the justness of using force to win when necessary has influenced the Zionist right, and at present the ruling Likud party.

These divides remained influential into the 1930s, but the nature of Jewish immigration to Palestine changed. While some Jews were still invested in the idea of Zionism as the best solution to anti-Semitism in Europe, or held to the economic and social principles of the founders, others came to Palestine because it was their best or only immigration option. This was true of many immigrants from Poland during the economic crisis of the 1920s and immigrants from Germany and Austria in the early 1930s, as Hitler and the Nazis rose to power. Some of these were denigrated as insufficiently committed to labor and excessively bourgeois.

If Zionism was one ideological response among many to questions about pathways to Jewish integration (or lack thereof in Europe), the events of World War II placed Zionism on a different course, as it drew more and more immigrants (with a variety of political backgrounds) many of whom were refugees. As the devastation of the Holocaust became clearer, Western opinion started coalescing around the idea of a Jewish state, even while the British were well aware of the opposition this would provoke locally. These political developments gave those who had been ideologically Zionist all along a seeming confirmation that indeed Zionism was the only acceptable Jewish ideology. Tragedy and crisis made an ideological *choice* seem like an ideological imperative, and this sense of Zionism as the *only* sort of Jewish response became dominant among world Jews well into the late 20th century and indeed, for many, to this day.

But fundamentally, the same question that Jews asked about Zionism at its inception remained present as a pre-state nation-building ideology merged with pro-Israel nationalism after 1948: Can Jews truly integrate into the places they live, or are they always in danger of rejection and in need of a safe haven? Are Jews fundamentally a national group, or are they a religious group whose members can (and should) be part of multiple nations? Does separating Jews out into a separate unit or group reduce anti-Semitism or increase anti-Semitism? These questions are complex ones with multiple answers. They are ones that we, with our students, can ask, discuss and debate in light of the facts and details of the Jewish historical experience.

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