

## **Zionism and the Ethnic Cleansing of Europe**

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The Holocaust was by far the worst genocide in human history and has understandably attracted much scholarly interest. However, the Holocaust did not happen in isolation. As the term 'final solution' indicates, it was intended as the culmination of a broad effort to ethnically cleanse<sup>1</sup> Europe of its Jews – an effort that preceded the Holocaust and continued even after it ended. This paper argues that in a curious ideological relationship, Zionists<sup>2</sup> and their supporters embraced much of the ideological framework of European anti-Semitism, and, except for its most intense manifestation in the form of genocide, implicitly endorsed the effort to ethnically cleanse Jews from Europe and make Europe *judenrein* (free of Jews).

The horrors of the Holocaust are widely thought to have ended with the conclusion of World War II. However, while the worst was indeed over, anti-Semitism still prevailed in Europe. Far from assisting Jewish Holocaust survivors seeking to return home, post-war European society made it clear that Jews were unwanted and unwelcome. The number of Jewish displaced persons living in Displaced Person (D.P.) camps run by the United Nations and the U.S. Army actually increased in the months following the end of the war, peaking at about a quarter million in 1947 (Berkowitz and Brown-Fleming 169). In *Eichmann in*

*Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt records the testimony of a witness describing the plight of Holocaust survivors,

He also told how some of them “had wandered home from the DP camps,” only to come back to another camp, for “home” was, for instance, a small Polish town where of six thousand former Jewish inhabitants fifteen had survived, and where four of these survivors had been murdered upon their return. (Arendt 224-225)

There were many instances of attacks on Jewish displaced persons, one of them being an armed pogrom in the Polish city of Kielce in July 1946.

One of the few organizations assisting Jewish displaced persons seeking rehabilitation in post-war Europe was the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Its efforts, however, came under attack not only from anti-Semitic forces, but from Zionist organizations as well. David Ben-Gurion, one of the most important Zionist leaders, laid down rules that would determine the Zionist approach towards Jews in post-war Europe:

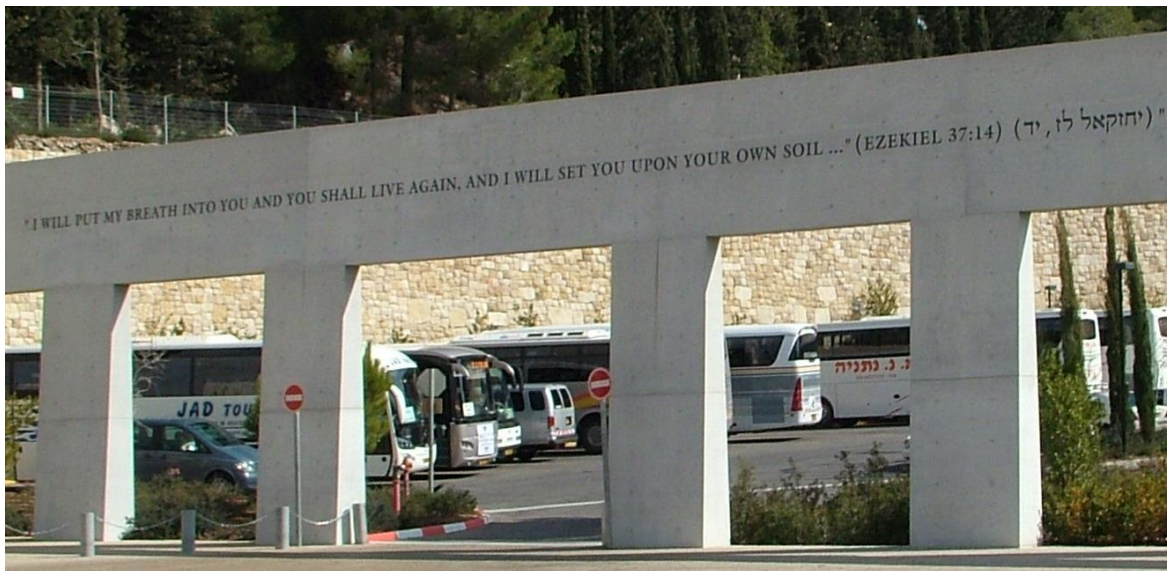
1. The Jewish Agency [an arm of the Zionist movement] does not deal in aid and reconstruction in the Diaspora; it works to strengthen the Zionist movement in Palestine.
2. We [i.e., Zionists] must, to the extent we can, keep the Joint [Distribution Committee] from taking over and prevent the reinforcement of anti-Zionist trends within Judaism by its sole control over the distribution of aid. (Segev 129)

“It is the job of Zionism,” declared Ben Gurion, “not to save the remnant of Israel in Europe but rather to save the land of Israel for the Jewish people and the yishuv”<sup>3</sup> (Segev 129). The problem of Jewish displaced persons in Europe was eventually resolved to the satisfaction of both European anti-Semites as well as Zionists when most of them were shipped off to the newly established state of Israel after 1948. According to Rich Cohen, author of the book *Israel is Real: An Obsessive Quest to Understand the Jewish Nation and its History*,

When the Western nations voted to partition Palestine, it was not, as history books tell you, an act of altruism, nor was it about guilt. It was the best solution to the Jewish Problem. With the creation of Israel, the Europeans could finally ship off the refugees and close the DP camps. (Cohen 211)

The Zionist attitude towards the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Europe stands in sharp contrast to other ethnic genocides in the twentieth century, in which survivors tend to regard ethnic cleansing and genocide as being on the same continuum of evil. Most of these genocides have been followed by survivors demanding some variant of repatriation, ‘right of return’, or territorial compensation from the perpetrators, all of which require at least partial recognition of the victims’ right to live where they did prior to the genocide. One reason for Turkey’s reluctance to formally recognize the Armenian genocide appears to be a “conviction that the ultimate goal for those who are pressing for recognition of an Armenian genocide is to obtain territorial compensation

from Turkey" (Harutyunyan 68). Perhaps one reason why Germany has been relatively open about acknowledging the Holocaust is that the survivors, unlike survivors of other genocides, have never demanded any kind of territorial compensation from Germany (they have demanded, and received, financial compensation).



Gateway to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. The text reads, "I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil," hinting that perhaps one of the factors responsible for the Holocaust was the fact that Jews were *not* living on their own soil. (photograph by author)

The origins of anti-Semitism in Europe date back to at least the dawn of the Christian era. However, from around the latter half of the nineteenth

century, certain ideological developments, particularly in Germany,<sup>4</sup> gave anti-Semitism a new ominous impetus, grounding it in racial rather than religious considerations. Around this time, the notion of 'Volk' and völkisch nationalism became prominent<sup>5</sup>. The German word 'Volk' is usually translated into English as 'people', but it has deeper connotations. According to historian George Mosse,

'Volk' is one of those perplexing German terms which connoted far more than its specific meaning. 'Volk' is a much more comprehensive term than 'people'; for the German thinkers ever since the birth of German romanticism in the later eighteenth century 'Volk' signified the union of a group of people with a transcendental 'essence.' This 'essence' might be called 'nature' or 'cosmos' or 'mythos,' but in each instance it was fused to man's innermost nature, and represented the source of his creativity, his depth of feeling, his individuality, and his unity with other members of the Volk. (Mosse 4)

Thus, while 'Volk' does not mean exactly the same thing as race, tribe, or ethnic group, it is based on very similar notions regarding blood ties and shared 'essence.' In the völkisch conception, Jews could never become Germans since they were not linked by blood to the German Volk, a defect that could not be rectified even by assimilation, religious conversion, or generations-long domicile in Germany.

Völkisch nationalism in Germany had a naturalistic dimension to it. The bond between the German 'Volk' and the soil of its Fatherland was imbued with an organic quality, perhaps best captured by the slogan *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil). According to one author,

...the expression *Blut und Boden* ... derives from völkisch-nationalistic beliefs and attitudes... At the center of these preoccupations was a naturalistic vision of the national community as a cohesive organic entity, effectively a sort of Volk-organism. In its genuine state, the Volk was seen as an integral part of the ecology of the natural world, providing the conditions for the latter's existence while being dependent upon it in turn. (Bassin 206)

Jews were portrayed by völkisch ideologues as unalterably alien beings lacking any organic connection to the German soil. Devoid of this connection, Jews were deemed to be incapable of becoming farmers or other kinds of primary producers, relegating them to 'parasitic' activities that preyed on the native Volk. To use an ecological metaphor, Jews were seen as an alien invasive species destroying the native species, and playing havoc with the pristine ecosystem of the German völkisch homeland. In this ideological framework, the only way to fight the perceived Jewish pestilence was to cleanse the land of its Jewish inhabitants and make it *judenrein*.

Zionism arose in Europe within the milieu of völkisch and ethnic nationalism and in reaction to the racist anti-Semitism that accompanied it<sup>6</sup>. Instead of directly challenging the core ideological assumptions and narratives of völkisch nationalism, mainstream Zionists<sup>7</sup> sought to find an accommodation that would carve out a secure niche for Jews within the overall framework of völkisch nationalism. In so doing, Zionists, whether out of genuine convictions or otherwise, seem to have accepted and even internalized some of the core values and assumptions of völkisch nationalism. Jews, claimed the Zionists, constituted a nation, or a 'Volk,' united by ties of blood, with its national homeland located in *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel). The solution to the 'Jewish problem,' they declared, lay in transferring the diaspora Jewish population to their national homeland, the only place where Jews could establish the organic blood-and-soil links necessary for any nation to flourish. Theodor Herzl, considered by many to be the father of the Jewish state, believed that European anti-Semites and Zionists would cooperate with each other to advance their mutually complementary goals of cleansing Europe of its Jews and transferring the Jewish population to *Eretz Israel*. Partly quoting Herzl, one author describes Herzl's reasoning,

[Herzl] predicted that the anti-Semites would be Zionism's best supporters: "the Government of all countries scourged by anti-Semitism will be keenly interested in assisting us to obtain [the] sovereignty we want." ... Furthermore, "honest anti-Semites ... will

combine with our officials in controlling the transfer of our estates.”

... He unapologetically affirmed: “The anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semitic countries our allies.”

(Massad 178)

In the early years of the Third Reich, Zionists were quite eager to cooperate with the Nazi regime, even though its anti-Semitic credentials were never in doubt. The most famous example of the Nazi-Zionist cooperation is the *Haavara* Agreement, which facilitated the transfer of German Jews to Palestine. There were many other avenues for cooperation as well. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt quotes Hans Lamm, a leading member of the German Jewish community, “it is indisputable that during the first stages of their Jewish policy the National socialists thought it proper to adopt a pro-Zionist attitude” (Arendt 58).

Arendt then goes on to explain why this was so:

It was in those years a fact of everyday life that only Zionists had any chance of negotiating the German authorities, for the simple reason that their chief Jewish adversary, the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith, to which ninety-five percent of organized Jews in Germany then belonged, specified in its bylaws that its chief task was the



“fight against anti-Semitism”; it had suddenly become by definition an organization “hostile to the State.” (Arendt 58)

What is unsaid, but implied in Arendt’s comments, is that the Zionists did not consider the “fight against anti-Semitism” their chief task, and perhaps, not their task at all.

According to the logic of Zionism, the root cause of Jewish suffering was not anti-Semitism *per se*, but the Jewish exile<sup>8</sup> from their national homeland. In this view, anti-Semitism was no more than the inevitable consequence of the Jewish exile, which had severed the organic bond between the Jewish people and their homeland, and had eroded the Jews’ moral fiber, reducing them to a ‘parasitic’ existence, thereby arousing the ill-will and hatred of their ‘host nations.’ The Zionists thus accepted and endorsed the notion, advanced by völkisch anti-Semites, that Jews in Europe were alien parasites. The Zionists then called upon Jews to rectify this dire situation by ‘returning’ to their homeland, shedding their ‘parasitic’ disposition, and becoming self-reliant and valorous farmers and warriors. David Ben-Gurion describes the task at hand:

The very realization of Zionism is nothing else than carrying out this deep historical transformation occurring in the life of the Hebrew people. This transformation does not limit itself to the geographical aspect, to the movement of Jewish masses from the countries of the Diaspora to the nascent homeland – but in a socioeconomic

transformation as well: it means taking masses of uprooted, impoverished, sterile Jews, living parasitically off an alien economic body and dependent on others – and introducing them to productive and creative life, implanting them on the land, integrating them into primary production in agriculture, in industry and handicraft... (Avineri, 200)

This transformation was not just limited to socioeconomic matters, but went into the deepest recesses of culture and identity. Yiddish and Ladino, centuries-old Jewish diaspora languages and rich repositories of Jewish culture, heritage and tradition, were jettisoned by the Zionists in favor of Modern Hebrew, a new and suitably nationalistic language. Even names were not spared. According to Rich Cohen,

[the Zionists] changed their names - shed the *steins* and *bergs* of Europe, which were exile names, slave names, and took Hebrew names that suggested power, nature, or the land itself. The most popular included Peled (steel), Tzur (rock), Avni (another kind of rock), and Allon (oak), as in, *This New Jew is as solid as an oak!* ... The New Jew would behave less like his grandfather the ghetto Jew, than like his ancestor the Zealot ... Some spoke of retiring the word Jew altogether. A Jew is in the Diaspora. A Jew is cowering

and weak. "We are not Jews," said Shimon Peres. "We are Israelis."  
(Cohen 243)



Zionist image of a 'New Jew' on a collection box:  
having established the requisite organic connection  
with his national homeland, a Jewish 'parasite' from  
Europe has been transformed into a muscular farmer,  
busy 'making the desert bloom' (picture from  
<http://www.jnf.org/bluebox>)

An examination of some of the core beliefs and foundational narratives of the Zionist movement reveals that it shares much of the ideological framework of European völkisch and ethnic nationalism, which was deeply implicated in racist anti-Semitism. Both the Zionists as well as the anti-Semites broadly viewed Jews in Europe as fundamentally alien and the Jewish presence in Europe as immensely harmful: the anti-Semites because it harmed the non-Jews, and the Zionists because it harmed the Jews. Consequently, both groups broadly agreed on the desirability of ethnically cleansing Europe of its Jews. This broad ideological agreement broke down when the Nazis replaced their campaign of expulsion with a campaign of mass murder, but resumed after the end of World War II, until much of the surviving pre-war Jewish population had indeed left Europe, driven by force, fear, destitution or conviction.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Ethnic cleansing" is used here to mean the forced or induced removal of people belonging to a particular ethnic group from some territory, by virtue of their ethnicity.

<sup>2</sup> "Zionist" is used here to mean someone who actively supports the establishment of a Jewish national home in *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel) and endorses the notion that ethnic Jews should make *Aliyah*, i.e., move to this national homeland.

<sup>3</sup> Before the establishment of the state of Israel, "yishuv" was a term used to refer the body of Jews living in Palestine.

<sup>4</sup> Anti-semitism in other European countries was based on similar assumptions and narratives as in Germany, but nowhere was it as intense.

<sup>5</sup> While völkisch nationalism, as described here, was specific to Germany, it may be viewed as the most extreme expression of a broader phenomenon: ethnic nationalism. Many countries in

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Europe experienced their own versions of ethnic nationalism, which shared many features with German *völkisch* nationalism, such the glorification of a national folk culture. Like German *völkisch* nationalism, these other forms of ethnic nationalism were influenced, directly or indirectly, by German Romantic thinkers of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that the development of Zionism was an exclusively German phenomenon. Zionism, in its early stages, was greatly influenced by German *völkisch* nationalism and was dominated by German speaking Jews (the official language for the first few Zionist congresses was German). However, Zionism was also embraced by Jews in other places, particularly those living in Eastern Europe, where local versions of ethnic nationalism influenced early Zionists. It is interesting to note that Theodor Herzl's seminal book *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) received a much more enthusiastic reception in Eastern Europe than in German speaking areas. An example of an early Eastern European Zionist is Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who grew up in Odessa in Ukraine. Jabotinsky was an ardent admirer of Ukrainian ethnic nationalism, even though it promoted anti-Semitism, and praised Ukrainian ethnic nationalist leaders including Symon Petliura, though to have been involved in anti-Jewish pogroms. In a tribute to the Ukrainian nationalist poet Taras Shevchenko, Jabotinsky recognized that Shevchenko had "all the defects involved in nationalistic attitudes, including explosions of wild fury against the Poles, the Jews and other neighbors," but praised him nevertheless, for having "given to his people, as well as to the whole world, a clear and solid proof that the Ukrainian soul has been endowed with talent for independent cultural creativity, reaching into the highest and most sublime spheres" (Avineri 170-171).

<sup>7</sup> There were many varieties of Zionism. The term "mainstream Zionism," as used here, includes what are commonly known as Labor Zionism (David Ben-Gurion) and Revisionist Zionism (Ze'ev Jabotinsky).

<sup>8</sup> Many scholars have challenged the historical validity of notion that all modern Jews are closely related by descent to the Biblical Jews of *Eretz Israel*. For instance, Israeli historian Shlomo Sand has argued that today's Jews are much more closely related to non-Jewish Russians, Poles, etc., than to the Biblical Jews, and that Palestinian Arabs are likely to be much more closely related by descent to the Biblical Jews than most Israeli Jews.