ZIONISM

Zionism is the umbrella term used to describe the various strains of Jewish nationalism that grew out of other nineteenth-century nationalist ideologies and movements. Zionist thought owes its genesis to several converging intellectual and political factors in the late modern period: the assimilation and urbanization of many European Jews during the *Haskalah* (the “Jewish Enlightenment”), which began in the 1770s; the French Revolution and the Declaration and the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789), followed by the Napoleonic Emancipation of the Jews (1806); the age of European imperialism; and, significantly, the resurgence of violent anti-Semitism in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Unabashedly secular in nature at the outset, Zionism as an ideology sought to correct what Joseph Stalin later (in)famously said the Jews lacked in order to be a coherent nation: a common language, territory, economy, and psycho-social make-up.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans and the exile of the Jews in 70 C.E., there had been several mass immigrations to Zion (the historical Land of Israel), but these had minimal impact on other groups in the Jewish diaspora, and were largely motivated by messianic fervor or expulsions from European lands. This changed when, in 1882, several tens of thousands of Jews from the Pale of Settlement (the limited area of Russian territory in which the Czar had allowed Jews to settle) fled persecution by moving to Ottoman-ruled Palestine, where they set up agricultural settlements. Other European Jews suffering from discrimination soon followed, influenced by works such as Leon Pinsker’s *Auto-Emancipation* (1882), by fallout from incidents such as the Dreyfus Affair (1892), and, later, by the urgings of the founding father of modern political Zionism, Theodor Herzl. With Max Nordau, Herzl founded the World Zionist Organization in Basel in 1897. Other leading Zionist thinkers who advocated a political solution to the “Jewish problem” included Ahad Ha’am, Moses Hess, and Perez Smolenskin. While these early Zionists toyed with the establishment of many different possible sites for a Jewish homeland (such as Madagascar, Ecuador, Suriname, or Crimea), the considerable number of Jews already residing in Palestine, and the idea that the ancient site of Jewish material culture would provide a necessary symbolic cohesion for the settlement of many dissimilar groups of people, convinced the majority of Zionists that Palestine was the location where full Jewish autonomy should be pursued. Britain formally took the same position on Jewish autonomy in Palestine in 1917, via the Balfour Declaration, sent to Baron Walter Rothschild by Arthur James Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary. The implementation of the plan was set aside during the period of the British Mandate (1922-1948), when Britain administered territory previously controlled by the Ottoman Empire. United Nations Resolution 181, which called for a partition plan to divide British-ruled Palestine into two separate Jewish and Arab states, was passed in 1947. Despite the United Nation’s adoption of the partition plan, it was never implemented, as civil war erupted between the Jewish and Arab populations in Palestine.

Before the victory of the Jewish forces and the eventual establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many disparate categories of Zionist thought developed. “Labor Zionism,” a fusion of socialist and nationalist thought with an emphasis on physical activity, was the reigning Zionist ideology for the first half of the twentieth century. Opposing this ideology was the movement of “Revisionist Zionism,” led by revolutionary Ze’ev Jabotinsky, which sought to put relentless military pressure on the authorities in then-British Mandate Palestine to withdraw. “Religious Zionism”—initially a contradiction in terms, since political Zionism had always been diametrically opposed to the idea of divine intervention—was a later philosophy inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook. Working to bridge between two worldviews, Kook saw the largely Marxist Zionists as part of a divine plan to hasten the Ingathering of the Exiles. His cooperation with them brought many aspects of religious Jewish life and law into the Zionist state bureaucracy, a legacy that persists until this day.

Bibliography

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