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Shifting from Idealism to Realism, Desperation, and Acceptance: The Changing of Jewish Political Ideologies in the Early Twentieth Century.

The rise of Nazism, the triumph of anti-Semitic conservative parties in Poland, and the strict immigration quotas set by the British Mandate of Palestine darkened the prospects of a better life for the Jews of Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the heightened tensions between Jews and Palestinian Arabs created new problems for the Jewish settlements in Palestine. In light of these events, Jewish organized political culture and programs of action began to dramatically change and became more politicized and fractured. These shifts in political thinking greatly impacted the two most sustained efforts to solve the Jewish question, Zionism and socialism. Zionist thinkers were confronted with the reality of dealing with the discontented native Arab population. Thus, the Zionist ideology lost many of its utopian ideals as political thinkers proposed more realistic versions of Zionist politics. For Jews, many aspects of socialism retained their appeal, but socialism became a less viable solution to the Jewish problems after the rise of the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, socialist thinkers were no longer able to rely on just class conscious ideology, as they felt compelled to provide more practical programs of action for socialist ideals. Moreover, socialism became less driven by ideologues and more so by the desperation of Polish Jewry. In addition, amidst the growing discontent with Zionism and socialism as ideologies, several political thinkers argued that Zionism and socialism were flawed political ideologies. These thinkers felt that the best solution to the Jewish problems would be to accept the status quo of global Jewry. This paper will analyze the shift in the ideologies of Zionism and socialism throughout the twentieth century as well as the growing discontent with these ideas as political actions.

Zionism at the start of the twentieth century was a generally idealistic movement. Zionism, or the movement to push for the mass exodus of Jews from Europe to a land that would become the Jewish state, was one of the major proposed solutions to the main problems facing Jews. These problems were defined as the “Jewish Question.” Leo Pinsker in *Auto-Emancipation: An Appeal to his People by a Russian Jew* compares the Jewish people to ghosts and beggars to explain the origins of anti-Semitism. He argues that because the Jewish people don’t have their own homeland to host Europeans and thus must take refuge in various European countries, they are negatively viewed as beggars. (Pinsker, 187) Thus, Pinsker argues that the lack of a Jewish homeland is the root cause of anti-Semitism; only the existence of a Jewish state will solve the Jewish problem. Pinsker, however, doesn’t provide a concrete plan to his proposed solution to the “Jewish Question.” Theodore Herzl, writing at the very end of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was the first person to put forth a defined plan for the founding of a Jewish State. In his pamphlet, *The Jewish State,* he makes an appeal similar to Pinsker’s but also argues that Europeans will greatly benefit from this mass exodus. For example, the mass exodus of the Jewish people would allow Europeans to take jobs vacated by Jews. (Herzl, The Jewish State, 9) Herzl in his novel, *Altneuland* imagines a future utopian Jewish state, the New Society, a country located in Palestine. In this novel, a depressed Austrian Jew, Fredrich, finds inner peace with himself and his Jewish identity after arriving at this utopian land and exploring it. (Herzl, Altneuland, 220) Throughout this book, Herzl demonstrates that a Jewish state is the solution to the “Jewish Question” and anti-Semitism. In both his works, Herzl also promotes the idea that socialism can be tied to Zionism, as in *Altneuland* he casts capitalists in a negative light. However, Herzl portrays those who live modestly and cooperate in governing the new society as heroes. (Herzl, Altneuland, 16) Furthermore, in *The Jewish State* he suggests that the flag would be a **“**white banner, bearing seven golden stars. The white field symbolizing pure new life; the seven stars, the seven golden hours of [the] working day.” (Herzl, The Jewish State, 64) Thus, Herzl appealed to socialism to attract the interests of Jewish workers but in the process overlooked the fact that wealthy Jews who would fund this project wouldn’t agree to all of his proposals. Moreover, the utopian society portrayed in *Altneuland* did seem optimistic but revealed how naïve Herzl was. Herzl also mentions that the Jews “shall march into the promised land carrying a badge of labor,” (Herzl, The Jewish State, 64) and thus was implying that Zionism would be a left winged political movement. Herzl’s idealistic views later detached from the Zionist movement and were a large shortcoming of his proposal. However, the largest shortcoming of Pinsker’s and Herzl’s proposals is that they assumed that the native population of the land the Jews will inhabit would welcome the Jewish settlers**.** (Herzl, The Jewish State, 60)

By the 1930s, the Zionist movement became a lot more fractured and polarized. After Zionism won formal recognition in 1917, the Zionist movement gained major traction during the 1920s. Zionism was no longer a fringe ideology, but a global political idea embraced by many Jews. Jacob Glatstein in his novel, *The Glatstein Chronicles* depicts Herzl as a hero when the narrator has a conversation with a former participant of the Zionist movement. (Glatstein, 241) However, many new challenges to Zionism emerged. As Chaim Arlosoroff describes, the Arab Riots of the late 1920s demonstrated that the Jewish settlers could no longer ignore the native Arab population. (Arlosoroff, 233) And, as Loveh Levitah states in his article, “The Polish Diaspora,” the situation became dire in Poland after England temporarily closed off almost all immigration to Palestine. Therefore, many Polish Jews who were desperate to immigrate were not able to. (Levitah, 1) Meanwhile, the Zionist Movement was became more polarized, as it shifted away from Herzl’s view of a united labor movement. As described by Yehoshua Yevinin “Betar and the Zionist Revolution” around this time, the Zionist movement developed its own right wing, the Revisionist Zionists. Yevin states that “old Zionism, from its very inception, was inspired by liberalism.” (Yevin, 146) He argues that it is a deeply failed idea because it argues that the “world is, slowly but surely, advancing towards a reign of justice.” (Yevin, 146) In this statement, Yevin claims that left wing ideals were destroyed by World War I when the world witnessed the deaths of over 10 million soldiers and civilians. Furthermore, Yevin argues that contemporary Zionist leaders were too naïve to notice the attacks on Jewish settlers in Palestine. In light of these attacks, Yevin argues that the only option is to “either give up Zionism altogether, or seek a Zionism of Power … [and] justice accompanied by battalions: A Betar kind of Zionism.” (Yevin, 147) By arguing for justice through force and battalions, Yevin shows how much Zionism has changed from its origins as an entirely peaceful movement to a movement that is now becoming less idealistic and increasing militaristic. At the same time, liberal Zionists began to propose less militaristic alternatives to the problems in the Yeshuv. Arlosoroff writes in “The Future of Zionist Policy,” that in order for the Yeshuv to thrive, the Zionist Congress must aim for “a settlement of hundreds of thousands of Jews…so that a real equilibrium between the two races in Palestine might be established.” (Arlosoroff, 231) He argues that when the Arabs in Palestine lose their majority, they would be forced to negotiate with the Jews instead of rebelling against them. (Arlosoroff, 232) Through the disagreement on the key issue of how to confront the discontented Arabs, these authors show how the Zionist movement was becoming increasingly fractured.

Zionism as a proposed program of action lost some of the optimism it had at the start of the twentieth century. And Zionist thinkers began to focus on more realistic solutions to address Jewish problems going forward. While Jewish political thinkers during the nineteenth century accused Herzl of being an idealist, they didn’t offer any practical steps to a mass resettlement of Jews. However, as new challenges emerged, even the more traditional Zionist political thinkers were forced to move away from Herzl’s optimistic ideas and embrace more realistic ones.In response to the Arab riots and the influx of Jewish immigrants to the Yeshuv, avid political thinker Arthur Ruppin in “The Selection of the Fittest,”proposed that the Jewish state should only accept Jews who would in some way benefit the Jewish community in Palestine while denying admission to the sick and elderly. (Ruppin, 95) He states that eventually, the Yeshuv will run out of resources and space to accommodate new immigrants. (Ruppin, 96) Thus, when Ruppin states that the Jewish community should “abandon the policy of *laisser aller”* and instead admit Jews who “by occupation, health, and character, are best fitted to serve the Jewish community in Palestine, and a minimum percentage of those who are unfitted,” (Ruppin, 97) he implies that Jews shouldn’t be immigrating to Palestine for solely their own interests. Rather, according to Ruppin, settlers should keep the interests of the general Zionist movement in mind. Moreover, David Ben-Gurion addresses the issue of a confrontation between Jews and Palestinians and the militarization of the Yeshuv with a *realpolitik* outlook on the external affairs of the Jewish state. He states in “On the Partition of Palestine,” that having a “Jewish port and a Jewish navy” (Ben- Gurion, 241) would greatly benefit the Jews because it would put pressure on the local Arabs to agree to a partition of the land. In addition, he hints that a provoked military conflict might help the Jews expand their territory. (Ben- Gurion, 238) These statements greatly contrasts Herzl’s ideals, which stated that the Jewish state would only have “an army of volunteers.” (Herzl, The Jewish State, 64) Therefore, these statements convey that Zionism has become less idealistic.

Socialism before WWI, like Zionism, was idealistic and lacked practical proposals for its programs of action. The Jewish Labor Bund, a socialist Jewish organization operating within the Russian Empire at the start of the twentieth century, was an example of a Jewish political organization that believed that Jewish problems could be solved within Europe. In their writing, *Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund*, the members of the Bund state that anti-Semitism is the direct result of capitalism. (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155) They state that capitalists, who are despised by ordinary men,“seek to save [themselves] by destroying [their] Jewish competition.” (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155)They then claimthatthe Russian Czar diverted hatred from himself by promoting pogroms against the Jews. (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 155) Furthermore, the members of the Bund don’t consider all Christians to be anti-Semites, as they believe the “intelligent, class-conscious Christian worker is [their] comrade…under the flag of international Socialism.” (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 156) In the opinion of the Central Committee of the Bund, the best way to solve the “Jewish Question” is by “answer[ing] violence with violence” (Proclamation of the Jewish Labor Bund, 156) and creating a workers socialist revolution. Thus, the Jewish Labor Bund represents the pre-WWI Jewish socialist political thought that only an overthrow of capitalist society would solve the problem of anti-Semitism.However, the Jewish Labor Bund fails to provide detailed steps towards their socialist program. They also do not address how a socialist society will function.

After the world witnessed the creation of the repressive Soviet Union, socialism was regarded as an option that had notable shortcomings and became less popular as a Jewish political ideology. Therefore, socialist ideologues had to invent some ways to make socialism a more applicable form of political action. Glatstein, in assessing the geopolitical situation at the start of the 1930s, alludes to the Soviet Union by creating an imaginary scenario where a group of Russians, some of which are Jewish, encounter Yash, the book’s protagonist and narrator. Khazhev, one of the Russians, brags about completing his four year plan to study in America in three, a clear reference to the Soviet Union’s Five Year Plan. (Glatstein, 47) Otherwise, Glatstein does not allude to the domestic politics of the Soviet Union. Instead, Glatstein focuses on the fact that in the Soviet Union there appears to be no “Jewish Question” and thus informs the reader that living in a socialist country still had some appeal to Jews. On the other hand, Fredrick Pollock alludes to the “economic failures” (Pollock, 110) of Soviet Russia in his writing, “State Capitalism.” Pollock argues that the Soviet Union failed because it wasn’t industrialized and thus believes that socialist policies are feasible in industrialized governments. (Pollock, 110) In his text, Pollock offers a more practical solution as to how a government should run its economy. He argues that if a state were to adopt socialist policies and have total control over all its trade and markets, then economic depression would end. (Pollock, 97) However, unlike the members of the Jewish Labor Bund, Pollock neither advocates for the overthrow of capitalism nor embraces ideological rhetoric.

By the 1930s, socialism in Eastern Europe evolved from being embraced by just enthusiasts of Marxist literature to being embraced by desperate young Polish Jews. Despite the dubiousness of socialism as a solution to the “Jewish Question,” many Polish young adults embraced socialism out of desperation. The worsening situation in the Polish Diaspora and the temporary ban on Jewish immigration to Palestine had the largest impact on socialism as a political solution to the “Jewish Question.” Max Weinreich states in *The Path to our Youth* how when some young Jews realize their sociopolitical state and their inability to change it, they “have the abstract illusion of living beyond themselves.” (Weinreich, 2) Weinreich in this statement implies that in the 1930s, many young Jews were attracted to radical ideals due to their desperate situation. As Yankev Leshtshinsky writes in his article, “Masses of Jewish Young People Are Escaping from Poland to wherever their eyes draw them,” many Jews tried to enter Palestine illegally. (Leshtshinsky, 3) He offers up an example of Jewish girls who would rather sit in a Palestinian prison than return to Poland. (Leshtshinsky, 3) In addition, many Polish Jews also attempted to get into the Soviet Union where the government promised to bring them to Birobidzhan, the Soviet Union’s own miniature Jewish settlement. However, as Leshtshinsky states, during the pre-depression times, Birobidzhan and the Soviet Union only interested people “who had a taste in Communist literature.” (Leshtshinsky, 3) On the other hand, when Leshtshinsky wrote his article, people were escaping to the Soviet Union because they “can no longer hold on and must save [themselves].” (Leshtshinsky, 3) Thus, Leshtshinsky implies that the socialist movement was shifting from a movement for ideologues, to a movement for the desperate. Loveh Levitah reaffirms this idea when he states that in the 1930s, Jewish socialist movements became less class conscious. (Levitah, 1) Furthermore he argues that “complete poverty, mass ignorance, poverty of thought and narrowness of horizon” (Levitah, 2) characterizes Polish Jewish youth and their political ideologies. Therefore, in contrast to the Jewish Labor Bund, the socialist movements within Polish Jewry weren’t as class conscious, nor did they care about viewing Christian workers as their comrades. Moreover, Polish Jews were not looking to socialism as a panacea to anti-Semitism, but as a means to escape their diaspora.

Following the post war events, some political thinkers and many Jewish people began to view Zionism and socialism as ideological failures. For many European Jews, an alternative to Zionism and socialism in the 1930s was acceptance of their fate. As Weinreich states, when some young Jews realized that no political action could fix their minority status “their eyes [were] extinguished and [grew] dull from the long waiting and watching, and finally they [felt] the weakness and powerlessness.” (Weinreich, 2) Many Jews started to believe that Zionism and socialism as political movements were counterproductive and thus only created false hope. Such arguments were made by some members of the Polish Jewish Orthodoxy such as Elkhonen Wasserman, as well as by Jews who wished to completely assimilate into Christian society. Those who wanted to accept or ignore their current predicament viewed the Zionist and socialist ideologies with great contempt. Glatstein portrays this contempt through two of his narrator’s conversations. While on a boat on the way to Europe, the story’s narrator encounters a spiritual Jew who he refers to as the Jewish “Lao Tzu.” (Glatstein, 27)The narrator is shocked by this Jew’s tranquility given the unstable and tumultuous situation many Jews had found themselves in during that time. In addition, the narrator gets into an argument with a Dutch Jew. This Dutch Jew believes that he is a Dutchman first, and Jew second. In addition this Dutch Jew mentions that he cringes at the sight of Polish Jews simply because they try to look and act different from the average European. (Glatstein, 32) He also denounces Zionism because he feels as if it attempts to differentiate Jews from the rest of the community. In his opinion, the Dutch Jew believes that when Jews try to differentiate themselves through embracing ideologies such as Zionism and socialism, anti-Semitism increases. (Glatstein, 33) Wasserman feels similarly towards the Zionist movement. He states in “The Epoch of the Messiah” that it is important for Jews to maintain their faith in the Jewish religion and to stay away from politics. (Wasserman, 12) Wasserman argues that given the tumultuous events of the 1930s, the era of the Messiah must be approaching and Jews should wait patiently for him to arrive. (Wasserman, 16) Moreover, he compares the Jews to sheep and the Europeans to wolves and suggests that the best course of action for Jews going forward “is to endeavor to become forgotten by the wolves.” (Wasserman, 15) And that “No good can come to the Jews unless the nations of the world apply themselves to other matters and pay no attention to them.” (Wasserman, 15) Thus, he agrees with Gladstein’s imagined Dutch Jew that Jews shouldn’t take to political actions such as Zionism and socialism that would attract attention to them. Furthermore, Wasserman denounces socialism and Zionism as “fundamentally idol-worship.” (Wasserman, 19) He states that “the Jews have chosen two "idols" to which they offer up their sacrifices. They are Socialism and Nationalism….These two forms of idol worship have poisoned the minds and the hearts of Hebrew Youth. Each one has its tribe of false prophets in the shape of writers and speakers who do their work to perfection.” (Wasserman, 14) By comparing these two popular Jewish political ideologies and programs of action to the worst sin a Jew can make according to the Torah, Wasserman urges the young Polish Jews who are trying to escape the poverty of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe to stay true to their religion and to accept the way of the Torah. According to Wasserman, Jews can only achieve inner peace like Glatstein’s “Jewish Lao Tzu” if they accept their situation and turn to the torah. Therefore, Wasserman embodies the belief that some Jews held during the 1930s, to completely abandon Zionism and socialism.

Following the Great Arab revolt of 1936, and the growing strength of Nazi Germany, England shut down almost all Jewish immigration to Palestine. America still kept its very strict immigration policies, and millions of Jews felt uncertainty of their situation at the start of World War II. At the same time, the Zionist movement became a lot more politicized as it included its own right and left wings. In addition, Zionism embraced many realistic ideologies. Meanwhile, many Jews continued to turn to socialism more out of desperation than in the earnest attempt to save the Jewish people as whole. Other Jews realized that in light of the events of the past decade their best option was not involve themselves in either Zionism or socialism.

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