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Author: Mirjam Limbrunner

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Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
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Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

**The Struggle between
Communism and Zionism:
Jewish Identity between
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Revolutionary Russia
and Historic Palestine**

by

MIRJAM LIMBRUNNER

ABSTRACT

Since the end of the 19th century, Jewish-Socialist Russians have played a major part in the development of Zionist thinking and the establishment of Israel. However, their idea of building a Jewish State in Palestine was fiercely opposed by non-Jewish Russian Socialist on the one hand and by anti-Socialist Zionists on the other. How did these Russian Jews reconcile their Socialist ideology with their Zionist identity? And, after many of them had emigrated to Palestine, how did it influence their relationship with the Arabs and the British during the early 20th century? To understand the Socialist-Zionist worldview of that time, the emergence of modern political parties in the Tsarist Empire and the question of Jewish alignments during the Bolshevik revolution will be examined in the first part. The second section analyses Ber Borochov's early writing "The National Question and the Class Struggle" which attempts to build a synthesis between Marxism and Zionism—two hitherto opposing ideologies. Lastly, the fate of the Socialist-Zionist Poale Zion party in Ottoman and later Mandatory Palestine will be traced, looking at how it coped with the realities on the ground and with the Third Communist International.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mirjam Limbrunner completed her Undergraduate Degree at the University of Erfurt, Germany, where she studied International Relations and History. Before and during her studies, she traveled to Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Jordan several times. Recently, she spent a semester abroad at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and completed a Junior Scholar term at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. She is now doing her MA studies in International Criminology at Hamburg University.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Ahdut HaAvoda

“Labour Union”, Jewish Labour Union (1919-1930)

Bund

General Jewish Labour Bund (1897-1920)

Comintern

Third Communist International (1919–1943)

Hagana

“defense”, Jewish defense organization and forerunner of the Israeli Defense Forces (1920-1948)

HaPoel Hatzair

“The Young Worker”, Jewish workers’ party (1905-1930)

Histadrut

Israeli General Federation of Trade Unions (1920 – present)

KPP

Komunistische Partey fun Palestine

PCP

Palestine Communist Party (1923-1943)

Poale Zion

“Workers of Zion”, Socialist-Zionist workers movement in Russia, Palestine and other places in the Jewish diaspora (1903-1919)

WZO

World Zionist Organization, non-governmental organization promoting Zionism (1897 – present)

JNF

Jewish National Fund, Zionist Organization to buy and develop land in historic Palestine and later Israel (1901 – present)

YKP (Yevseksiya)

anti-Zionist Jewish Section of the Soviet Communist Party (1918-1929)

Yishuv

Settlement”, Jewish Population of Palestine before the foundation of Israel

INTRODUCTION

Israel is considered a Western-democratic and “americanophil” State, quite in contrast to the Arab region at large, that has received support from the Soviet Union and later Russia since the beginning of the Cold War. Since the end of the Second World War and the polarization into East and West Israel has been a close U.S.-American ally.¹ Even before that, the British involvement in pre-State Palestine is remembered mainly for their support of a Jewish homeland—one only has to think of such powerful statements as the Balfour Declaration. The Arab population in Palestine, on the other hand, let down by the British and the West, had found its “natural” ally in the Soviets. However, the situation in Palestine before 1948 was much more ambiguous than that. Since having spent some time in a kibbutz a few years back I have been aware of the Socialist traces in Israeli society and have heard some stories from third-generation Russian and other Eastern European immigrants whose ancestors came to Palestine as Socialists. However, Israel’s rich Socialist Russian heritage seems to have been largely forgotten.

1 According to the latest Congressional Research Service Report, “Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of military assistance from the United States since World War II.” Jeremy M. Sharp, “U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel,” *Federation of American Scientists*, updated August 7, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>; for bilateral treaties see e.g. “Friendship, Commerce and Navigation Treaty” (1951) and “Agreement on industrial investment guaranty program” (1952).

Long before Jewish immigrants from Western Europe and the United States arrived in large numbers, several generations of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia laid the groundwork for building the Israeli State, founded its first agrarian settlements and many of its institutions such as the Histadrut, the Israeli Trade Union. Countless of its leaders, among them David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir or Moshe Sharett, were born in the Russian Empire and experienced to some extent the beginnings of the revolutionary period. They arrived in Palestine not only as Zionists but as fervent Socialists. How did they adopt and reconcile these two ideologies in the first place? How did their worldview evolve after having arrived in Palestine, more specifically vis-à-vis the Yishuv, the Arab population, and the Communist International? And does this Socialist-Zionist history still matter today?

In this paper, I aim to examine Socialist-Zionism’s ideological and political sustainability by answering the aforementioned questions. Therefore, the Socialist-Zionists’ founding text—Borochov’s *The National Question and the Class Struggle*—and the history of key organizations in both Tsarist Russia and Mandate Palestine, will be analyzed, ranging from the 1880s until the 1930s. I intend to draft a concise history of Socialist-Zionism both in Russia and Palestine by merging research from separate

scholarly fields² and including my own observations in order to contribute a new perspective to the debate about Zionism in the context of the current Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The paper is organized into three main sections:

The first and second parts deal with my first question, particularly how Zionist identities and Socialist ideologies came to be intertwined. The first section begins with describing the socio-economic situation as well as the

emergence of modern political parties among the Tsarist Empire's Jewish population and ends with a brief outline of Jewish alignments during the Bolshevik revolution. All this historical backdrop is needed to fully contextualize Ber Borochov's early writing *The National Question and the Class Struggle*, which will be analyzed as an intermezzo part, so to speak. Borochov attempted to build a synthesis between Marxism and Zionism—two hitherto opposing ideologies. His writings constitute the most orthodox ideological basis of the Socialist-Zionist worldview. The third section sets out to discuss my further resulting questions, namely what happened to the Socialist-Zionists' ideology when faced with the realities in Palestine. The fate of the Palestinian Socialist-Zionist *Poale Zion* party will be traced. From its founding in 1906, continuing through the years leading up to World War I and during the British Mandate, the original *Poale Zion* passed through many inner-party splits and ideological transformations triggered by developments within the Yishuv, in regard to the Arab population as well as by its affiliation with the Communist International. Eventually, my conclusion addresses the question of whether and to what extent this Socialist Zionist history still bears value today, despite the fact that it can be considered a failed history. I argue that Socialist-Zionism was an unsustainable ideology due to the clashes between its theoretical foundations and the socio- and geopolitical realities in Mandate

2 Existing literature on Communism and Zionism could be divided into two different groups: works that are concerned with the Soviet-Internationalist perspective and those that focus on the Jewish-Zionist one. While they all contribute to a more diverse understanding of Zionism and point out the existence of different, non-hegemonic types of Zionism, they otherwise differ from each other in terms of scholarly interest. The former is usually set within a wider geopolitical context of Soviet policy towards the Middle East conflict and covers the time period from 1918/19 until or transcending the founding of the State of Israel (see e.g. Walid Sharif, "Soviet Marxism and Zionism," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 77–97; Johan Franzén, "Communism versus Zionism: The Comintern, Yishuvism, and the Palestine Communist Party," in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 2 (Jan. 2007): 12-15). The latter, largely written by Western-Jewish historians, is set within a wider context of Jewish history, Antisemitism studies or the Jewish-Arab Conflict. It focuses either more or less exclusively on the pre-Palestine period in Russia until 1918/19 (see e.g. Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics. Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)) or it only discusses the post-revolutionary period in Palestine (see e.g. Jacob Hen-Tov, *Communism and Zionism in Palestine during the British Mandate* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2012); Mario Offenber, *Kommunismus in Palästina: Nation und Klasse in der antikolonialen Revolution* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1975)). Lastly, the language barrier should be mentioned. Since I am neither a Russian- nor fluent Hebrew-or Arabic-speaker, my literature research was confined to English-speaking works and translations.

Palestine. While Socialist-Zionism was maybe an idiosyncratic but still feasible identity project in Eastern Europe, it failed to provide a viable framework for action on the ground. Despite its utopian nature, the paper concludes that Socialist-Zionist history is still relevant today since it opens up a new perspective on the current debate about Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

THE ROOTS OF SOCIALIST ZIONIST IN RUSSIA

1. THE EMERGENCE OF JEWISH NATIONALISM AND SOCIALISM IN THE TSARIST EMPIRE

As the founding father of Communism, Karl Marx formulated the cornerstone of Socialist thinking about Zionism. Marx, who was himself born into a Jewish family, never identified as Jewish, neither in a religious nor a cultural sense, but still felt compelled to address the “Jewish Question” in his early writings. In line with his historic-materialist worldview he regarded as the cause for Anti-Semitism and Jewish isolation their economic attachment to capitalism and money. By giving up their bourgeois way of life, Marx proclaimed, Jews would be able to rid themselves of their minority status and would no longer be subjected to discrimination. From a communist point of view, being Jewish first and foremost represented a social class that was intimately linked to finance and

trading. Within a classless society, however, there would be no more discrimination against any social or religious group, since everyone would adopt the same universal proletarian identity.³

Even though Marx had in mind nineteenth-century Western European Jewry when formulating his theories, they were later adopted by the early Soviets without many alterations. They did not, however, represent the reality of Jewish life in Russia. To understand the social, cultural background of those Russian-Jewish thinkers who laid the groundwork for socialist-Zionist movements in Palestine, one has to look at the situation of the Eastern Jewish population during the 1880s.

Even before the emergence of Herzl’s political Zionism, Russian Jews adopted the conviction that a large-scale exodus and the building of a Jewish State was the only way to free the Jewish people. In Western Europe at the time, many Jews still felt very strongly about their national identities.⁴ Jonathan Frankel and Walid Sharif both accentuate the fact that “the Jews in Russia [in contrast to the enlightened European Jewry] were still living in a quasi-feudal medieval society”⁵ when Marxist thinking spread towards the end of the nineteenth century.

3 See Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003); Walid Sharif, “Soviet Marxism and Zionism,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 77–97.

4 See Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*.

5 Sharif. “Soviet Marxism,” 81. See also for Jewish Life in Tsarist Russia: Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*.

The majority of Eastern Jews lived in the ghettos of western Russia, called the Pale of Settlement. Only a fraction of Jews with higher education were given permission to live outside the Pale in cities like St. Petersburg and Moscow. The numbers of Jews living in poverty, isolation, and unemployment within the Settlement grew immensely throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and constituted more than half of world Jewry; 5.2 million according to the Russian Empire's census of 1897.⁶ The Pale of Settlement was mostly made up of rural to town-sized communities, economically less developed and isolated from the Empire's cultural and political centers. With the population size grew the difficulty of finding employment, which was aggravated by the limited possibilities of geographical dispersion. The term *Luftmensch* was coined during this time, a Yiddish metaphor describing people living "on thin air"; mainly day laborers who did not have any steady means of income and were forced to move to wherever they could find a job for the day.⁷ Slightly more than eighty percent of those Jews that did have an occupation were working in commerce and manufacture as the two single most Jewish-dominated sectors. With only 3% of peasants, agriculture constituted the most underrepresented vocational field among the Jewish population,

whereas 56% of non-Jews were working in agriculture and only 16% in trading and manufacture.⁸ Considering the Jewish occupational and economic realities that differed so enormously from that of the non-Jewish populations, it doesn't surprise much that Jewish socialists would soon realize that the popular socialist movements did not address many of the challenges the Jewish masses were facing and therefore saw the need to come up with a Jewish version of Socialism.

Russian-Jewish political activities during most of the nineteenth century were mainly confined to a small elite circle of the Jewish intelligentsia in St. Petersburg and its members were mostly occupied with philanthropic issues and trying to gain a favorable position in the eyes of the Tsar. Inherent in the way that this Jewish elite did politics was the belief that one had to work and network within the system and that the government eventually would find a solution to the Jewish Question. In that regard, the pogroms of 1881 constituted a watershed.⁹ This unprecedented wave of overt anti-Semitic violence lasted for about a year and affected more than 200 towns and villages inside the Pale. When the Russian government, instead of taking political action against antisemitism, legitimized the violent outbreaks and issued a new series of discriminatory decrees against Jews, known as

6 Cited in Robert E. Mitchell, *Human Geographies Within the Pale of Settlement* (New York, NY: Springer, 2018), 52.

7 Mitchell, *Human geographies*, 47-69.

8 Cited in Mitchell, *Human geographies*, 153.

9 See Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 49ff.

the May Laws of 1882, ambitions for emancipation and autonomy came to the forefront of the already established Jewish political life and spread among the hitherto unpoliticized masses. The pogroms also triggered what is known in Israeli historiography as the *First Aliya*, the first—at least partly—organized wave of immigration into Ottoman Palestine, which was still considered small compared to the ones to come.

Mainly two political streams spread among Russian-Jewish communities: Socialism and Zionism. Both ideologies offered an alternative to waiting for change to be triggered from above or to retreat to traditional Judaism. Rather, they both promised radical social change through self-emancipation, a term that entered Russian-Jewish discourse through Leon Pinsker's pamphlet *Auto-Emancipation*, published in 1982.¹⁰ In the beginning, Zionist organizations in Russia were directed towards the middle-class whereas socialist ideas corresponded with the communities of the poor Jewish masses. When the first Zionist Conference in Basle convened in 1897, most Zionists "would have angrily rejected any attempt to adulterate Zionism with Socialist ideas."¹¹ In fact, Zionism was regarded as anti-revolutionary and did not challenge the Tsar or the prevailing social system. The last Tsarist government, despite its anti-Semite policies, granted it semi-legal status, since it "saw an overlap

between the objectives of Zionism and its own aspirations, such as keeping down the number of Jews"¹² and diverting their attention away from revolutionary anti-Tsarist movements. As for Jewish socialists, many of them became active in Russian Socialist movements and did not identify with Zionist ideas. To them, Zionism couldn't have been further away from their realities, something that was being brokered by the rich of Europe who were not concerned with the day-to-day struggles of the working class. Soon, however, many Jewish socialists felt that the Jewish masses faced difficulties that were not being addressed by the socialists' programs. Whereas the majority of populist Russian politics was directed towards the needs of workers and peasants, the Jewish communities struggled with high unemployment rates and anti-Semitism. Especially after Russian Socialist leaders failed to make a clear statement of solidarity with their Jewish comrades in the wake of the pogroms, Jewish socialists started to question their allegiances.¹³ Socialism and Jewish nationalism began to merge into political movements such as the General Jewish Labor Union, in short, the Bund, which was founded in 1897 in Vilna and which would have a profound impact on the Socialist Zionists in Palestine in later years.

10 Ibid., 2ff.

11 Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 270.

12 Joseph Goldstein, "The Attitude of the Jewish and the Russian Intelligentsia to Zionism in the Initial Period (1897-1904)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 64, no. 4 (Oct. 1986): 547.

13 Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics. Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews*.

2. INNER-JEWISH STRUGGLES IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA: THE BUND, THE SOCIALIST ZIONISTS, AND THE ASSIMILATIONISTS

With popular political parties spreading and gaining huge popularity within the Pale of Settlement, the Bundists did not remain uncontested for long. The Bund was mainly concerned with tending to the needs of the Jewish proletariat and mobilizing the Jewish masses against the oppressive Tsarist regime. Even though it demanded Jewish autonomy it fervently opposed the Zionists. There were instances when the Bundist press described Zionism as a fouling body “crawling toward the proletariat to get it to deviate from the path of the class struggle.”¹⁴ The Bund wanted its nationalist aspirations to be implemented on a federal basis within Russian territory, viewing Zionists as rejectionist, religious zealots.¹⁵ Its main political agitator became the Socialist Zionists, who argued that the politics of the Bund did not go far enough—neither on the socialist nor on the nationalist spectrum—and therefore was not able to bring about any change for the Jewish proletariat that could never come to its full potential while remaining in Russia. After the Socialist Zionist *Poale Zion* party was founded, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, a violent

inner-Jewish Socialist-Zionist battle broke out in which both parties struggled for majority votes from the Jewish masses in the Pale.¹⁶

It was to some extent due to the activities of the Bund as the more immediate danger to the Empire’s integrity that more radical Socialist Zionist movements could flourish almost unrestrictedly in their early stages among Russian-Jewish communities. The Russian Socialists, on the other hand, did not see a big difference between the goals of the Bund and the Zionist endeavor. For them, both were ethnic-nationalistic, rejectionist movements that by proclaiming a false idea of socialism diverted the Jewish masses away from true internationalist class struggle. The Bund, however, challenged the integrity of a centralized Soviet State. Thus, Marvin S. Zuckerberg remarks in the preface to Bernard Goldstein’s Memoir about life as a Bundist in Russian Poland: “As the great Russian early Social Democrat, Lenin’s teacher, Plekhanov, once wittily put it—‘Bundists?—Zionists who suffer from seasickness.’”¹⁷ In hindsight—and from a less ideologically ridden standpoint—it is safe to say that there were indeed more commonalities between the Bund and the Socialist Zionists than either movement would have wanted to admit. The Bund

14 Cited in Goldstein, “The Attitude of the Jewish and the Russian Intelligentsia,” 550.

15 See Sharif, “Soviet Marxism.”

16 See Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 270-277.

17 Bernard Goldstein, *Twenty years with the Jewish Labor Bund: A memoir of interwar Poland*, ed. Marvin Zuckermann (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2016), xix.

might have opposed nationalism but was nationalistic in many ways. And the Bundists' achievements in struggling for Jewish autonomy in different spheres of life laid the groundwork for many of the Socialist Zionists' later institutions in Palestine. Apart from full Jewish civil rights and a trade union, the Bund advocated a separate school system and laid the focus on the preservation of Jewish culture rather than religion when it came to educate its youth. First and foremost, it implemented for the first time Jewish self-defense units who evolved into well-organized militias during the revolutions in 1905 and 1918. Some leaders of Labor Zionist parties and youth movements such as Yitzhak Tabenkin and Simon Dubnow grew up inside Bundist structures in Tsarist Russia.¹⁸

As much as the Bundists and the left-wing Zionists struggled against each other, they both opposed the assimilationists which were mainly composed of the center and right-wing Jewish avant-garde, or—as the socialists would call them—the Jewish bourgeoisie. Their main argument against Zionism was that a Jewish national state and the estrangement from Russian nationality would only lead to further isolation of the Jews. In their eyes, Zionism was a religious-utopian, totally irrational endeavor that would only lead Jews away from Enlightenment and true progress in the civilized world. How could one build a Jewish autonomous

and democratic state in backward Turkey if Jews were still struggling for civil rights in Europe? These Assimilationists, despite being neither Zionists nor Socialists are being included here for two reasons: First—ironically enough—their assessment of Zionism reaches the same bottom-line as Marxist orthodoxy when stating that assimilation was “the only way to attain self-realization and social emancipation.”¹⁹ Second, the Jewish intelligentsia illustrates that even in the period following the pogroms of 1881-2 and lasting until the October Revolution, not all Jews could simply abandon their Russian-Jewish identities in exchange for radical socialist and/or Zionist ideals. Many Jews in this social stratum felt an emotional attachment to both their Jewish and Russian heritage and were still trying to reconcile both into a synthetic nationalist identity. Accounts of Leib Jaffe,²⁰ a very prominent Zionist leader who at the same time fostered many links into the Russian cultural elite throughout the revolutionary years, as well as Daniel Pasmanik,²¹ also a Zionist, but a fervent supporter of the counter-revolutionary White movement, show that sometimes Russian-Jewish identities clearly transcended

19 Goldstein, “the Jewish and the Russian Intelligentsia,” 554.

20 See Brian Horowitz, “Russian-Zionist Cultural Cooperation, 1916-18: Leib Jaffe and the Russian Intelligentsia,” *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 87–109.

21 See Taro Tsurumi, “Jewish Liberal, Russian Conservative: Daniel Pasmanik between Zionism and the Anti-Bolshevik White Movement,” *Jewish Social Studies* 21, no.1 (Fall 2015): 151-180.

18 See Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*. 40-84.

socio-ethnic camps. Soon after the revolution, such complex identities constructs dissolved. As Brian Horowitz argues in his essay “What is “Russian” in Russian Zionism?: Synthetic Zionism and the Fate of Avram Idel’son” that: “1917-18 represented a tragic watershed. The Bolshevik victory ended an era. To succeed in the post-war era, one either had to transform oneself entirely or leave the scene.”²²

3. JEWISH ALIGNMENTS DURING THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

Considering the fact that Jews made up only a small fragment of the general Russian population their actual impact on the October Revolution was perceived as disproportionately high. Demonstrations and violence against the revolutionaries would oftentimes turn into pogroms against Jews and therefore only exacerbated the Jewish problem.²³ This prevailing antisemitism among the “Whites” was an additional motivation for Jews to generally side with the Bolsheviks that were considered the least anti-Semitic among all of the political movements. It was a commonly held belief, not only among Jews in Russia

22 Brian Horowitz, “What is “Russian” in Russian Zionism?: Synthetic Zionism and the Fate of Avram Idel’son,” in *Russian idea - Jewish presence: essays on Russian-Jewish intellectual life*, (Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2013): 70.

23 See Oleg V. Budnitskiĭ, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites, 1917-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 34ff.

but among the Labour Zionists in Palestine and the West, that the Russian revolution would finally solve the Jewish Question, glorifying the revolutionists as the saviors of the Jews freeing them from the oppression and backwardness of the Tsarist Empire.²⁴ Chaim Weizmann, one of the leading Zionists of the first generation, proclaimed in an article for the *Zionist Review* in 1917:

The Russian Revolution is a landmark in Jewish history which promises a brighter future for our sorely-tried nation. Russia, which contains more than half of the Jewish population of the world within its borders, is passing from serfdom to freedom. The country in which a Jewish tradition—a complete Jewish life with its hopes and aspirations—has been built up is passing from a state of medieval reaction to that of extreme modern liberalism. Such, briefly, is the momentous change which is taking place.²⁵

Since the support of the Pale regions was considered a strategically important factor in the Bolsheviks’ war aims the military leadership played into these beliefs in order to recruit Jews into their ranks. A much smaller but still considerable number of middle-

24 See Anita Shapira, “Labour Zionism and the October Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 4 (Oct. 1989): 626f.

25 Chaim Weizmann, “The Russian Revolution and Zionism,” *The Zionist Review* 1, no. 1 (May 1917): 4.

class Jews feared the degeneration of Russian culture, morale, and economy under a revolutionary government which would, eventually, also threaten Jewishness and therefore sided with the White Movement. But also among the socialist Jewish movements, some remained critical of the Reds. As the Jewish socialist Bernard Goldstein describes in his memoir, many comrades felt drawn towards the Bolshevik ideology, which he saw as a rather concerning trend:

The Bundist comrade who became pro-Bolshevik did not simply change his opinion. He suddenly became unrecognizable, an altogether different person. In the factional fight, betrayal, trickery, and disloyalty became his weapons. Painfully we witnessed how the Bund spirit of comradeship, the feeling of belonging to one family, began to dissipate. In its place came distrust and suspicion.²⁶

Bolshevik ideology left no room for identities that comprised anything more or less than proletarian internationalism. As Budnitskii sums up the outcome of the revolution, “[t]he Jews finally achieved equality . . . having ceased to be Jews.”²⁷ Under the Bolshevik administration, Soviet Jews could

take up any profession and even work as state officials, as long as they gave up all of their Jewish religious or cultural practices and devoted themselves only to the Soviet State. With the publication of the Balfour Declaration, however, the Zionist dream of a Jewish State in Palestine did not seem so utopian anymore. In addition—and contrary to all expectations—Anti-Semite discrimination under the Reds did not suddenly cease to exist. In fact, a new series of Jewish pogroms occurred immediately after the Bolsheviks took power from the provisional government in October. With this turn of events, the left-wing Zionists in Russia rapidly gained popularity at the expense of the Bundists. While the Bund was still clinging onto the hope of a normalization of events, urging their voters “to keep faith in Russia’s future and in the Constituent Assembly,”²⁸ anti-Semitism by rampaging Bolshevik soldiers paired with worsening economic conditions and the prospect of a long hard winter impelled many former anti-Zionist socialist Jews to turn to the Zionists’ promise of a brighter future in Palestine. The *Zionist Review* reported that during the October 1917—elections for the newly established Jewish communal authority in Moscow the general Zionists had gained three times as much support as any other Jewish party.²⁹ All this translated into the hitherto highest

26 Goldstein, *Twenty years with the Jewish Labor Bund*, 10.

27 Budnitskii, *Russian Jews between the Reds and the Whites*, 412.

28 Michael Hickey, “Revolution on the Jewish Street: Smolensk, 1917,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 839.

29 “Moscow Elections,” *The Zionist Review* 1, no. 7 (Nov. 1917): 167.

immigration numbers into Palestine by people that were hugely impacted by Socialist ideals— and highly motivated to put these ideals into practice. The “Third Alyia” came to be considered more radically left than the second immigration wave, at the turn of the century. Having experienced the turmoil and, eventually, the disappointment of the Russian revolution, these new immigrants wanted to finally bring their socialist vision of a Jewish state to life.³⁰

MARXIST RATIONALE AND ZIONIST PATHOS: BER BOROCHOV AND THE *POALE ZION* PARTY PROGRAM

After having discussed the beginnings of popular political parties in the Pale of Settlement during the 1880s, it is time to introduce the establishment of the socialist Bund and its many struggles against inner- and outer-Jewish political opponents leading up to the Russian Revolution. The Jewish Social Democratic Labour Party, called in short *Poale Zion* (Hebrew for “Workers of Zion”), was founded in 1906, about a decade after the General Jewish Labour Union (Bund). It only gained significance in Palestine when the third wave of immigrants arrived after the end of the Revolution and World War I—the same year that Ber Borochov, *Poale Zion*’s most prominent figure, died.³¹ It should

be mentioned, before dealing with Borochov and his theories in greater detail, that the ideological spearhead of Socialist Zionism was, in fact, Nahman Syrkin. Even before Ber Borochov and the 1905 revolution he stirred outrage at Zionist congresses by presenting his Marxist views and disdain for the bourgeois lifestyle. Syrkin, however, was not remotely as successful in establishing a cohesive party program or enough support for his cause. He might have simply been slightly ahead of his time, as Frankel argues.³²

Therefore, we are going to trace what could be considered the Socialist Zionist breakthrough thanks to “Borochovism” in the early nineteenth century. Just like the Bund came to be regarded in academic historiography as an eventual result of the “Haskala,” the Jewish enlightenment period after the pogroms of 1881, “Borochovism” emerged during the first revolution in 1905. Frankel points out in his book that Ber Borochov was exceptionally central to the socialist Zionists’ party doctrine and spirit, lending it his dynamism, charisma and ideological zeal, which stood in contrast to the other, more inclusive and collectively organized socialist groups. He further describes Borochov as “the peripatetic agitator and *referant*, the ever resourceful *teoretik* and indefatigable *praktik*, the party champion relentlessly exposing the doctrinal errors of

30 See Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 308-314.

31 See Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 329f.

32 See *ibid.*, 133f.

rival organizations”³³—hence the personified term “Borochovism” to describe the essence of orthodox Socialist Zionism. The first phase of Borochov’s political career began when he had barely graduated high school, after meeting Menachem Ussishkin, one of the most famous Russian Zionists, for whom he worked as a very gifted spokesperson for the pro-Palestinian Zionist cause. In those beginning years, Borochov was touring all across the Pale of Settlement, holding speeches among workers and giving lectures in Jewish intelligentsia circles, constantly moving from one place to the next. He soon had made himself a name among the lower class as a “man of the people” who could sway even the most critical anti-Zionist in his favor, as well as in well-educated conservative-Zionist circles where he was respected for his debating skills and his expertise in philosophy and Jewish history. He remained in constant correspondence with Ussishkin, keeping him updated about the conditions and political landscape of every place he visited, eagerly awaiting further instructions by his employer and mentor.³⁴ As one might wonder, Borochov’s Marxist ideology did not play a very dominant role during that early period in the public sphere. As Walter Laqueur implies, Borochov initially kept his socialist convictions separated from his work as a political agitator

for the Zionist cause.³⁵ Only after the revolution of 1905, he began to openly adopt a revolutionary ideology, advocating a synthesis between Marxism and Zionism. Borochov managed to walk the fine line between stirring debate and objection, while never alienating himself completely from either the general Zionist or the Communists’ camp. He made it his mission to prove with all his analytical might that Socialism and Zionism, hitherto considered as inherently opposing, were actually inherently intertwined and that one could not be reached without the other. To put it in other words, for him, Zionism was the Jewish pre-requisite for Socialism.

The National Question and the Class Struggle (1905) was published one year before Borochov formulated *Our Platform*, which was adopted as *Poale Zion’s* party program in Russia. Almost identical in their claims, Borochov’s earlier work spells out his argument for the synthesis of Marxism and nationalism the most thoroughly, hence why I chose his “Nation and Class” essay to trace his line of thought, which became so essential for the *Poale Zion’s* ideological struggle in Palestine.

The fact that Borochov starts out his whole argumentation with a quote from Marx couldn’t be more revealing. Large extracts of his essay could very easily be taken from a schoolbook on Marx’ *Historic Materialism*: All men are bound by

33 Ibid., 330.

34 Ibid., 329ff.

35 Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 275f.

the relations of production between them and the quality of these relations creates a division of society into different classes. Classes are determined by the ownership of and access to the means of production. Due to these inequalities, the societal split exists largely between the bourgeoisie that own all means of production and the proletariat, that has lost all ownership thereof. Borochof now transfers all that Marx said about class differences onto differences between societies. His first deviation from orthodox Marxist theory, therefore, is based upon the assumption that it can be considered “common knowledge” that several societies exist: “If this were not so, we could not speak of an English bourgeoisie, for example, and a German bourgeoisie or an American proletariat and a Russian proletariat. Then we would speak only of mankind as a whole, or at least of civilized humanity, and no more.”³⁶ He argues that there exists a two-fold split of humanity: the split along class lines and the split along societies, the latter of which has so far been largely ignored by Marxism. These differences between societies “give rise to the whole national question.” Just like class struggle, the national struggle aims at abolishing inequalities that arise not due to different *means*

of production between classes but due to unequal *conditions of production* between societies. Most importantly, Borochof postulates that “[t]he national struggle is waged not for the preservation of cultural values but for the control of material possessions, even though it is very often conducted under the banner of spiritual slogans. Nationalism is always related to the material possessions of the nation, despite the various masks, which it may assume outwardly.”

Borochof defines *conditions of production* as the material resources a society has at their disposal, namely territory, and deriving from that, the means to protect its territory, political institutions and so forth. However, he also remarks that over time the anthropological and historical distinctiveness of one social group influences these conditions of production as well. A society that is continuously subjected to the same conditions of production over time develops into a people. If peoples further acquire a group consciousness of their shared conditions of production they evolve into nations, being the more sophisticated version of peoples. According to Borochof, a feudal system cannot produce lasting national consciousness since it lacks “harmonious wholeness in the conditions of production.” Only within a capitalist system nationalism in its more permanent form can develop. In this sense, Borochof breaks with the idea that nations are ancient, mythical

36 This and the following citations are taken from an English translation of Borochof’s text: “The National Question and the Class Struggle by Ber Borochof 1905,” Marxists Internet Archive Library website, accessed July 6, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/borochof/1905/national-class.htm>.

entities that exist on their own, which traditional Zionism, and most national narratives for that matter, were based upon. He states that “[t]hose who berate nationalism in general as something obsolete and reactionary, as a traditional thing, are remarkably shallow and ignorant”³⁷—which is clearly aimed towards the Communist mainstream belief. To refute their most common argument against nationalism, he clearly distances himself and his idea of national consciousness from “nationalistic propaganda” of the oppressing ruling class. The difference is, he proclaims, that national thinking recognizes the disparities between classes within every social system, which nationalistic ideology tries to obscure. It is this entirely different concept of a nation which Borochoy and Socialist Zionism postulate that will make it so difficult for them to accept the Communists’ hostile attitude towards their efforts in Palestine. Borochoy attacks the ideology of the socialist Bund very bluntly, accusing it of inconsistency from a historical materialist point of view: “To be concerned, however, about the struggle without considering the conditions of the struggle-base and the workplace is stupidity.”

Lastly, in his essay, Borochoy elaborates on the connection between nationalism and the proletariat. Each class, according to him, attaches different significance onto its national territory. For the landlords, being part of a nation

means having a territorial property that translates into political power. For the great bourgeoisie the nation constitutes the “operating base” from which to struggle for domination of the world market and for the middle-class, a nation mainly provides a consumers’ market. For the proletariat, however, national territory provides a secure workplace. Therefore, “[n]o one is bound to accept the widely spread fallacy, which claims that the proletariat really bears no relationship to the territory, and consequently possesses neither a national sense nor national interests.” Consequently, the proletariat as the most vulnerable of the classes is especially concerned with the national question and the securing of sufficient conditions of production. Whenever “abnormal conditions of productions” prevail, such as the lack of a territory, the national question becomes more acute and the struggle between classes subsides. Only as long as “normal” conditions of production can be provided for, the class struggle will resume, therefore creating antagonisms between national and class struggle. Only “among the most progressive elements” of a nation, the organized proletariat, “genuine nationalism” develops and seeks “to restore to normal its conditions and relations of production.” Only then, the class struggle can be pursued and fully exercised.

To end this section about Borochoy’s theory on nation and class, I am going to touch upon a few inconsistencies that arise from

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his arguments and that already foreshadow the many challenges that the Socialist Zionists were confronted with in their struggle in Palestine.

Naturally, Borochov speaks of “the Jews” as one sufficiently coherent social group, a people with a national consciousness. Zionism, defined as the Jewish national struggle for material conditions of production requires a short-term allegiance between the bourgeoisie and the proletarian class against outside forces that deny them equal conditions of production. Only when the national struggle is solved can a nation be concerned with class struggle. At the same time, Borochov seeks the support of the Russian communists, which in his own wording, belong to a different people. Why would he expect them, in times of national struggle, to compromise on their material conditions of production by supporting large-scale emigration of workforce?

Even though Borochov makes a strong point when formulating his concept of a nation as a construct of the modern capitalist system he remains inside the very confines that, as a Marxist, he eventually seeks to overthrow. A classless society means a nation-less society. Borochov does not disagree with this fundamental communist premise, which is why he talks of Zionism only as the “minimalist program”, a preliminary step concerned with the present needs of the Jewish workers. The “maximalist program” that is concerned with the ultimate goal of an internationalist proletarian

society, can only follow as a second step.³⁸ Nevertheless, the fact that he considers the creation of a Jewish state necessary to fulfill this eventual goal might not be so comprehensible for non-Jewish communists in Tsarist Russia for whom the national forces have hitherto always represented the enemy.

Following Borochovist rationale, the colonization of Palestine had to be taken upon by the Jewish proletariat and was rationalized as the historic materialist consequence of the Jewish people’s need for territory. His entire argument is based upon the idea of a Jewish workers proletariat as the central agitator for change. However, among the Jews of Tsarist Russia, as discussed in more detail in the first section, there was no Jewish proletariat in the Marxist sense. Most Jews were either working in the trade and manufacturing sectors, were simply poor and unemployed due to the situation in the Pale or were part of the educated intelligentsia. Borochov wanted to create a Jewish proletariat in Palestine by addressing a Jewish proletariat in Russia that not yet existed.

Borochov also denied any emotional attachment to Palestine or any other territory stemming from a historic or mythical connection to the land. This begs the question: Why Palestine? Borochov, for a very long time, does not provide any

³⁸ Ber Borochov, “Was wollen die Poale Zion? (1906),“ *Das Klasseninteresse und die nationale Frage*, (Berlin: Hechalutz, 1932), 46-61.

answers for this heatedly debated issue among Zionists. Over a decade later, in his last recorded speech titled *Palestine in our Program and Tactics*,³⁹ Borochov gives more substantial reasons why Palestine has always had his full support. In this speech, he also adopts a position that seems very much at odds with some of his earlier statements. He refers to the Jewish state as “Eretz Israel, the Jewish homeland” and overall speaks in more sentimental, emotional terms about the Zionist project. He argues that Palestine has a much-underrated population capacity—according to some alleged research undertaken by his party colleague Yitzhak Ben Zvi. Furthermore, he continues, the fact that the land would soon be without any native jurisdiction after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire meant that it would require assistance in developing a more productive agricultural economy from which the Arabs would profit as well. These arguments do not differ much from the official Zionist narrative of the time but seem quite detached from the communist standpoint that considered the Arab population as the victims of outside intervention rather than their beneficiaries. But even if following Borochov’s initial theory he never considered the Arab population in Palestine to be equal to the Jewish people, since the former still lived in a feudal system

39 Ber Borochov, “Palästina in unserem Programm und in unserer Taktik (1917),” *Das Klasseninteresse und die nationale Frage* (Berlin: Hechalutz), 99-103.

that neither granted them a strong enough national consciousness nor an exclusive territory.

Finally, how does Borochov legitimize his sentimental outlook on Palestine and Zionism in 1917, when a decade before he had warned his followers of too much bourgeois emotion? One could say he was adapting to new realities. As he mentions himself at the beginning of his speech, much had changed since the party’s founding. The “experiment of labor” in Palestine had matured and extended the party’s program from a minimalist approach to a maximal minimalist one, meaning that beyond securing the territory, the proletariat wanted to be actively involved in developing the Jewish homeland. Even though Borochov had become more emotionally attached to Palestine and Zionism, he continued to elaborate Marxist rationalizations, bending his theory over backward to best fit his growing Zionist pathos and the activities of the *Poale Zion* members in Palestine.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN COMMUNISM AND ZIONISM IN PRE-STATE PALESTINE

1. THEORY MEETS REALITY: POALE ZION’S EARLY YEARS IN PALESTINE

As the section above has shown Borochov’s greatest strength and at the same time greatest weakness was his fixation on theory and abstraction. His writings reflect his very analytical way of thinking, but

also reveal how naïve and detached from realities on the ground his drafts for a Jewish nation were. Towards the end of his career, Borochof felt compelled to renew the party's aims and tactics as could be seen in his last speech. Among Israel's Russian-born founding generation there were famous former *Poale Zion*-members such as David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Tabenkin, Moshe Sharett or Golda Meir. At some early stage in their careers, they all felt drawn towards Borochof's deterministic, revolutionary theories that rid Zionism of any Utopian elements.⁴⁰ However, these beliefs did not necessarily reappear in their later state-building policies. There was a time for theorizing and a time for taking action; or, as Ben-Gurion put it when describing an encounter with other newcomers at the Jaffa port:

Here I had come to build Eretz Israel and first thing, after a long journey, after turning my back on education and my father's hopes for me, after finally arriving in the land of my ancestors, I was being asked to pronounce on Marxism. I burst out: 'Got to hell with your historical materialism. I've come to Eretz Israel and you talk to me of theories. What sort of Jews can you be?'⁴¹

This somewhat flippant distancing from constant theorizing over Marxism rather than setting to work describes, in a nutshell, *Poale Zion*'s generational struggle that it had to face once having arrived in Palestine.

The *Ramle Platform* of 1906 constitutes the founding document of *Poale Zion*'s Palestine branch and coincided with the second Jewish immigration wave from Russia and Poland. It was set out to be the Palestinian counterpart to Borochof's *Our Platform*, mentioned in the earlier section of this paper. Even though there exists no translation of the Hebrew original, Rubenstein remarks that "[i]f one were to remove from the [*Ramle Platform*] document the adjective 'Jewish', one would be left with a clearly Marxist document [...]"⁴² Right from the start, the generational gap among the new immigrants between the older Marxist "theoreticians" and the younger party segments that wanted to hurl themselves into the construction of their homeland became evident and resulted in the founding of the *Hapoel Hatzair*, the "Young Worker"-movement. Whereas the *Hapoel Hatzair* group focused on dealing with daily life in Palestine and sparked to life the idea of the agricultural communal settlements, the old *Poale Zion* was still completely devoted to class struggle and building a strong proletariat as

40 See Shapira, "Labour Zionism and the October Revolution," 625f.

41 David Ben-Gurion, *Memoirs David Ben-Gurion*, ed. Thomas R. Branstein (New York City: The World Publishing Company, 1970), 48.

42 Sondra M. Rubenstein, *The communist movement in Palestine and Israel, 1919-1984* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1985), 37.

the basis of a Jewish state. However, realities on the ground soon led the Palestinian *Poale Zion* to divert away from total conformity with their Russian headquarters. The Ottoman authorities' strict stance against Socialism highly impaired their political activism in the urban centers, forcing them to retreat to the countryside, where they found soon found a lot more common ground with the *Hapoel Hatzair*.⁴³ Walter Laqueur describes the reasons for this drift away from the international union of *Poale Zion* movements led by their Russian "original" as follows:

Who needed yet another Bund? When the world association of Poale Zion, its parties embarrassed by its collaboration with the bourgeois elements, decided to leave the Zionist congress, the Palestinians did not follow suit. While the world organization continued to hold its meetings and to publish its literature in Yiddish, the language of the 'Jewish toiling masses', the Palestinians switched to Hebrew. When the Palestinians began to found cooperative agricultural settlements, they had to face bitter resistance from sections of the world movement, who argued that according to the teaching of Marxism, workers ought to fight for their class interests, and were not called on to establish economic enterprises within the framework of the capitalist system.⁴⁴

One might wonder why, in the beginning, the *Poale Zion* headquarters were so rejecting towards the idea of Jewish settlements that wanted to put the socialist communal spirit into practice on the basis of agricultural labor. The first truly communal "kvutza" (*Hebr.* "collective") established in 1910 by its twelve pioneering members became a success story and drew a lot of attention especially from the Socialist-Zionist youth movements in Palestine and abroad. What is often forgotten or hardly commented upon in Western/Jewish historiography at this point is that in order to establish such communities, the Jewish Socialists had to ask the Jewish National Fund to assign them land, the very same Zionist-imperialist institution they were supposed to defy. By entering into this dependent relationship, they were not only participating in the "capitalist system" as pointed out above. They were also supporting the expulsion of Arab-Palestinian peasants. More often than not these lands had long been sold under Ottoman land reform laws to wealthy Arab notables, turning the original owners into tenants, but at the same time developing sort of kinship bonds with the local communities who hitherto had been living in complete remoteness and political incapacitation.⁴⁵

43 See *ibid.*, 35-38.

44 Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, 284.

45 see James L. Gelvin, "The 'Politics of Notables' Forty Years After," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (June 2006): 19-29. See also Mario Offenberg, *Kommunismus in Palästina: Nation und Klasse in der anticolonialen Revolution* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1975), 17-25.

Consequently, when the Zionist World Organization began to purchase land in Palestine, the *de-jure* landowners were not the ones affected by the loss of property and displacement. When the WZO approached the landlords, desperately in search for acres to meet the hugely increasing demand among the new immigrants, the urban notables' only interest was selling their land in the most profitable way. Even though the history of Ottoman land reform and the Palestinian agricultural system before the large-scale Russian-Jewish immigration would far outreach the scope of this paper, it did play a pivotal role for Arab-Jewish relations in general, but also for Socialist-Zionist history in particular. The limited knowledge and ignorance towards such local conditions paired with total entrenchment in their theories could be considered one of the reasons why the attempt of the left-wing Zionists to establish friendly relations with the Arabs and to mobilize them for their socialist cause failed eventually.

Meanwhile in Russia, the *Poale Zion* had an increasingly hard time to focus on their Zionist efforts while coping with ongoing Jewish pogroms, the hostile atmosphere of inner-Jewish party politics and the growing radicalization of the general Left due to the emergence of the Bolsheviks. After the Bolshevik takeover, the *Poale Zion* splintered into a more extreme pro-Bolshevik section that called itself the Jewish

Communist Party (YKP) and the "leftover" *Poale Zion* who did not join the Bolsheviks and remained faithful to the Palestine cause.⁴⁶ The end of the First World War and the Russian Revolution not only triggered the third wave of immigration into Palestine but also ended the hitherto still significant influence of the Russian *Poale Zion* on its Palestinian branch. The World War and the issuance of the Balfour Declaration had brought the left-wing Zionist groups in Palestine closer together and in an effort to coordinate their activities they formed the *Ahdut haAvoda* (*Hebr.* Unity of Labour) in 1919. This was the beginning of the less ideological Labour Zionist movement, in whose ranks David Ben-Gurion and other important figures of Israeli state-building rose to prominence. Only two small factions chose not to join the party and remain devoted to their Marxist principles. They called themselves the Left *Poale Zion* and the *Mifleget Poalim Sotsialistim* (MPS, *Hebr.* Socialist Workers' Party).⁴⁷ These two splinter groups as the last remnants of Borochof's early orthodox Socialist Zionism remained on the outside of mainstream politics and when the British Mandate for Palestine took effect in 1923 they were faced by double opposition from the Jewish Yishuv and the British authorities. In the following section, we are going to trace the transformation of the MPS

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47 See Rubenstein, *The Communist Movement*, 38f.

⁴⁷ Idem.

into the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP), examine its role in the rising local Arab-Jewish tensions, and its relations with the Third International under Lenin's leadership.

2. BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: THE SOCIALIST WORKERS' PARTY IN PALESTINE AND THEIR STRUGGLE WITH THE COMINTERN, THE BRITISH, THE ARABS AND THE YISHUV

The dilemma of the Socialist Zionists was accelerated by the question of participation in the newly established Third International (Comintern) and the World Zionist Organization (WZO). These institutions constituted two opposing fronts between which there seemed to be no middle-ground. Even though none of the different sub-groups within the original *Poale Zion* wanted to give up their claim to be Socialists as well as Zionists, de-facto, becoming loyal to the Comintern meant cutting ties with the WZO and vice versa. These issues rose to the surface at the Conference of the World Union of the Poale Zion in Vienna in 1920, a conference described as "one of the most stormy in the history of the Jewish labor movement."⁴⁸ What emerged were two minuscule orthodox leftist groups now opposed by an overwhelming and more pragmatic "right-wing" *Poale Zion* led by David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. The left Left pledged to continue to put all their

efforts into applying for membership in the Third International while the majority of the Left-wing, the Labour movement, wanted to "conquer the Zionist movement from within."⁴⁹ In their opinion, the Comintern's demands for admission were too extreme and would merely turn them into a Palestinian adjunct to the Communist International. The Comintern itself further encouraged this split, stating in 1922:

That makes the situation clear. Since the third congress [of the Comintern] the petty-bourgeois, nationalist, and opportunist elements in the majority of the delegations of the [Poale Zion World] Federation have tried to sabotage and damp down the urge of the proletarian and communist elements for amalgamation with the Communist International...The theme of Palestine, the attempt to divert the Jewish working masses from the class struggle by propaganda in favor of large-scale Jewish settlement in Palestine, is not only nationalist and petty-bourgeois but counter-revolutionary in its effect, if the broad working masses are moved by this idea and so diverted from an effective struggle against their Jewish and non-Jewish capitalist exploiters...The only possible attitude of communists to the Poale Zion Federation after its rejection of the conditions of admission is one of complete hostility.⁵⁰

48 Cited in *ibid.*, 53.

49 Laqueur. *A History of Zionism*, 317.

50 "Extracts from an ECCI Statement on the

The MPS, emerging as the outsider among the Left-wing political spectrum, never actually managed to fulfill all the Comintern's conditions and was granted a very short lifespan in the Yishuv due to events to come. Against the party's refutations, it was considered to be anti-Zionist, while the Communist movement believed them to be too closely linked to Zionism to grant them membership. When during that same year the General Organization of Workers (Histadrut) emerged as the successor of the Ahdut haAvoda the MPS was denied seats and therefore shunned from legitimate political activity in the Yishuv. As Offenberg argues quite plausibly, denying the left stream of the former *Poale Zion* any Zionist legitimacy and painting them as outright anti-Zionists seems, quite frankly, absurd. A Jewish Socialist who did not believe in Zionism, instead of staying in the Yishuv, would have been significantly more likely to leave and join the Bolsheviks or the Communist movements of their respective nationality instead of taking a "detour" over Palestine.⁵¹ This was, however, the narrative of not only the British authorities but the majority of the Jewish Yishuv.

While the British Mandatory authorities had a very clear motive in marginalizing any Communist elements among the Jewish

immigrants, the Yishuv was more concerned about the extreme Left's policies towards the Arabs. After World War I, an economic depression had begun to spread across Palestine and had swept away much of the optimism and pioneering spirit of the early years. Unemployment rates soared with no financial assistance yet in place, the newly established Histadrut was close to bankruptcy and Arabs were considered a major threat on the job-market as they were often better trained for the scarce jobs that were available.⁵² Conversely, the continuing immigration rates during times of poor economic conditions heightened agitation among Arab communities. In Zionist historiography, the growing discontent among the Arab population is oftentimes painted as a somewhat jealous and spite reaction to the prospering of the Yishuv "that left the Arabs suspicious, frustrated, and deeply concerned about the future."⁵³ Such accounts seem to be oblivious to the fact that national aspirations in the Arab world had undergone a development of their own and that during the war Arab support for the British troops in their struggle against the Ottomans was based on the promise of Arab independence in Greater Syria.⁵⁴

Decision of the Poale Zion not to affiliate to the Third International," in *The Communist International 1919-1943 Documents I*, ed. Jane Degras (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 365-66.

51 See Offenberg, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 69-71.

52 Ssee Laqueur., *A History of Zionism*, 306f.

53 Jacob Hen-Tov, *Communism and Zionism in Palestine during the British Mandate* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 12.

54 For a concise overview see e.g. M.A. Aziz, "The Origins of Arab Nationalism," *Pakistan Horizon* 62, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 59-66.

Keeping this in mind, the violent outbursts in Jaffa on May Day 1921 as well as all other Arab-Jewish clashes that were to follow appear against a much broader backdrop than the recurring narrative of Arabs against Jews.

The MPS, in order to fulfill the Comintern's conditions of admission demanding "systematic and well-planned agitation" among the "rural proletariat and the poorest peasants,"⁵⁵ launched mobilizing campaigns to attract not only Jews but also Arab fellahin into their ranks. One such effort was conducted as part of a May Day demonstration in 1921. The protest turned into a scuffle with members of an authorized Labour movement demonstration and eventually ended up in anti-Jewish rampages by Arab villagers, resulting in a number of deaths. The official British investigative report on the incident concluded that the MPS, having been "the spark that set alight the explosive discontent of the Arabs,"⁵⁶ was to blame for the escalations. Other interpretations blamed the British police for provoking the Arabs into attacking Jewish demonstrators, using the MPS a scapegoat that had been at the wrong place at the wrong time.⁵⁷ Offenberg describes in great detail how the MPS in its

efforts to simultaneously attract Jews and Arabs into their ranks, greatly adapted the contents of their posters depending on whether they were written in Hebrew or Arabic.⁵⁸ Regardless of whether or not or to which degree the MPS can be blamed for the bloodbath that occurred that day, these May Day demonstration posters give a valuable insight into the radical Jewish Left's campaign strategy.

The Arab version of the poster texts played into Arab grievances of being denied freedom and independence on their own land blaming not the Zionists per se but the Jewish, British and Arab capitalists. The MPS wanted to get the Arab masses to distinguish between the "Jewish capitalists" colluding with the British and local Arab capitalists and the "Jewish worker who reaches out his hand as a comrade."⁵⁹ A distinction that, from the viewpoint of an Arab dispossessed peasant, might not have been so easy to make. When calling upon all Arab workers "to destroy their tormentors and exploiters"⁶⁰— an appeal that is missing from the Hebrew version— one feels inclined to blame the MPS at least in part for the violence that ensued. The hitherto still almost exclusively Jewish Socialist Workers' Party, so entrenched in their communist jargon, might not have realized the effect their campaigning

55 See "Conditions of admission to the Communist International approved by the Second Comintern Congress," in Degras, *The Communist International I*, 166-172.

56 Cited in Rubenstein, *The Communist Movement*, 61.

57 See *ibid.*, 60. See also Offenberg, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 221.

58 See Offenberg, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 211-219.

59 *Ibid.*, 218.

60 *Ibid.*, 217.

had among the local communities and the scope of blanket anti-Jewish hatred that had been spreading among Arabs, many of whom had lost their jobs and homes due to the Zionist expansion. Contrary to what the MPS wanted to believe the struggle that the Arab workers and peasants were fighting was not the same as that of the Socialist Zionist Jews. It was not the struggle against Arab, Jewish and British factory owners cutting their wages short, it was first and foremost a struggle against the Zionist movement very generally. Furthermore, the majority of Arabs did not at all identify with the International Communist movement, especially not at a time when Arab nationalist aspirations were on the rise. There was hardly any overlap between the Communists' and the Arab peasants' agendas, other than their aversion against Zionism and British colonialism. Ideologically, there was no common ground at all and the Arabs' impression of the Soviets and the Communist movement was one of suspicion rather than solidarity.⁶¹

The May Day unrests led to the MPS' complete ban and the expulsion of its leaders. The British authorities temporarily stopped all immigration into Palestine and stated the fear of "further Bolshevik infiltration"⁶² as one of the reasons for this rather extreme policy. The MPS, after its remaining members

had gone into hiding for a while, splintered once again and returned onto the political scene as the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) and the *Komunistische Partei Palestine* (KPP). And again, the bone of contention was the degree of solidarity with the Comintern and with the Poale Zion Left. The KPP as the more extreme faction, distanced itself entirely from Zionism, hence why the Yiddish name. To all the other left-wing Zionist factions they became known as "liquidationists," calling upon their Jewish workers to "leave the Zionist hell"⁶³ and emigrate back into their respective home countries. Considering that the party members themselves were Jewish immigrants in Palestine and therefore de-facto affiliated with the Zionist movement, even if they opposed it ideologically, their agenda seemed somewhat bizarre. Nevertheless, they gained some popularity among recent immigrants who, arriving at a time of economic depression, soon became disillusioned with Zionism and decided to emigrate back. In these cases, and for some of the most fervent communists, the party was regarded as a "transit camp on the way to the Soviet Union."⁶⁴ The PCP, on the other hand, tried to join the Third International without leaving its Zionist ground. At this point, they were the only group still holding on to the original "Borochovist" version

61 See Rubenstein, *The Communist Movement*, 105ff.

62 Offenber, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 225.

63 Cited in *ibid.*, 247.

64 Musa Budary, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948: Arab & Jew in the struggle for internationalism* (Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2010), 6.

of Socialist-Zionism.⁶⁵ Eventually, in 1923, both the remaining KPP members and the more moderate Palestinian Communists decided to merge into one big PCP and apply for Comintern membership as a united front. When one year after the merger the PCP admission to the Third International was finally granted, it was under the condition of transforming the PCP “from an organization of Jewish workers into a truly territorial party.”⁶⁶ This happened only a few weeks after Lenin’s death, when Stalin took power in Moscow, effecting major ideological and policy changes within the Comintern.

It should be mentioned here that since the Poale Zion’s split into a left- and a right-wing faction, the original idea of Socialist Zionism had seized to exist. There would never be a rapprochement between these factions. The Labour movement would soon gain political hegemony in the Yishuv and would have a decisive impact on the Israeli State, its institutions, policies, and society. It would still promote Socialist principles and try to find common ground with Arabs on the basis of class solidarity rather than brokering deals with their ruling elites. But they were Zionists first and willing to sacrifice as much of their Socialist ideology to the Zionist cause as necessary. In the following, I am only going to trace the evolution of the PCP, the former Poale Zion Left, whose story continues outside the

realms of Zionism, at the margins of the Yishuv, and in close collaboration with the Third International. For them, the struggle between Zionism and Communism still continued. Shuttling back and forth between Moscow and Palestine as Russia’s agents, persecuted by the British Mandatory authorities, under close watch by the Comintern for any “deviationist activities” and despised by Arab leaders and Zionists alike, they were willing to sacrifice their lives to this struggle.⁶⁷

3. ARABIZATION VS. YISHUVISM IN THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNIST PARTY

After having established an official link with the Communist movement and having received clear instructions from Moscow, the PCP was still divided in matters of how to best achieve their goal of becoming a “territorial party” and how to continue mobilizing Jewish workers in the Yishuv while cutting ties with Zionism.

In its initial period, the years leading up to the Arab rebellion in 1929, the PCP was working towards two parallel goals: Finding a way to separate the working class in the Yishuv from any Zionist affiliation and convincing them to join forces with the Arabs, while at the same time “Arabizing” the party’s ranks and forging links with the national

65 See *ibid.*, 244ff.

66 Cited in *ibid.*, 6.

67 For biographical accounts of Jewish members of the Palestinian Communist Party see Hentov, *Communism and Zionism*, 27-38 and Rubenstein, *The Communist Movement*, 121-146.

movements in Palestine, Syria and Egypt. According to the Comintern, collaboration with Arab nationalists was possible because they were revolutionary in character, meaning they opposed the British and their feudal ruling elite. Zionism, on the other hand, was seen as a thoroughly rejectionist and bourgeois nationalist movement because it was in collaboration with the British and behaving, in their eyes, like a colonizing power. The Comintern's directions were clear: Jewish communists had to give up the idea of a Jewish national home but support the Arab national struggle because it carried a lot of revolutionary potentials. The concept of Yishuvism could be considered the Jewish Communists' last effort in finding a synthesis between their communist ideology and their Jewish collective identity.

Yishuvism echoed very closely the original Borochovist doctrine when stating that Jewish immigration and the influx of Jewish capital followed an "objective" course of history, driven by conditions in Europe that forced the Jews to leave. This form of "natural" Jewish immigration was regarded to be in sync with the Communist project because it would disrupt the dominantly feudal structures in Palestine and create a joint Jewish-Arab proletarian society. The other, politically motivated form of Zionism that was promoted by the British and the Jewish capitalists had to be stopped. Nahman List, one of the former PCP members, describes this

Yishuvism doctrine in hindsight as some form of "antizionist Zionism", a choice of words that says a lot about its viability and conclusiveness as a party program.⁶⁸ Its proponents wanted to create a distinction between the Jewish community in Palestine that had evolved from "natural" immigration and the Zionist Jews that immigrated due to Zionist ideology—a distinction that was simply non-existent. All Jews that decided to immigrate to Palestine did so through some Zionist institution abroad, were therefore affiliated with the Zionist movement and, whether they wanted to or not, with the colonization of former Arab land.⁶⁹

While having gained some foothold within the Yishuv throughout the 1920s, the party was still overwhelmingly Jewish. Even though PCP members had taken a solidary public stand with the Arabs whenever land seizures and the subsequent expulsion of villagers turned violent, the party was struggling with recruiting Arabs into their ranks.⁷⁰ As long as this was the case, according to the leadership in Moscow, the PCP could never successfully struggle against Zionism and the British imperialists. Amongst scholars there seem to be different interpretations of the Comintern's Arabization agenda for the PCP:

According to Hen-Tov, many

⁶⁸ Cited in Offenber, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 289.

⁶⁹ for a more detailed critical analysis of Yishuvism see Offenber, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 289-298.

⁷⁰ see e.g. Afula-Affair: Offenber, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 334-345.

Jewish Communists suffered such tragic fates⁷¹ because they “failed to understand” that the Comintern was discriminating against them “by constantly demanding that they Arabize the Party’s leadership” and “that racist considerations, motivated by political expedience, were to prevail over the international principles of their revolutionary cause.”⁷² Drawing such a conclusion not only paints these Communist Jews as simply too naïve to grasp what or who they were supporting but also confirms the black-and-white notion that anything anti-Zionist must be stirred by anti-Semitic inclinations.

While being more nuanced and less tendentious, Rubenstein’s accounts correspond in as much as they describe the PCP as a “Soviet anti-Zionist tool.” By giving “unqualified support for the Arab worker” while insisting on “unmitigated antagonism toward the Zionist movement” the Comintern led the party into complete and total demise.⁷³

Offenberg sheds more light on the regional developments in Palestine that were beyond the Comintern’s realm of influence. Quoting the PCP’s founding member Joseph Berger-Barzilai the party’s goal of Arabization was only partly due to the Comintern’s orders. There was also the genuine belief among its members that the anti-imperialist struggle had to be fought

on the basis of an international, not ethnically exclusive, party composition.⁷⁴ Offenberg points out that, against all odds, the PCP’s recruiting efforts were to some extent successful, however not in the way that the leadership in Moscow had anticipated. Sometimes, surprising connections were forged on the basis of a shared affinity towards Russia. This was especially the case for Orthodox-Christian Arabs. They felt drawn towards the Russian language and culture due to its large Orthodox-Christian community. Paradoxically, some of these Arabs saw the Communists as Russia’s agents, who represented some link to their religious faith, despite the fact that the Orthodox Church, just like any other religious institution, was suffering from great oppression and persecution under Bolshevik rule.

In 1928, the Communists’ agenda for Palestine shifted. After having experienced a devastating blow in China, where the Communists were toppled by their former nationalist ally, the party leadership was not willing to risk any more collaboration with Yishuvist “pseudo-revolutionary” elements in Palestine.⁷⁵ Borochovisism and any doctrine affiliated with it was officially declared anti-communist. The China debacle also led to a more cautious approach towards the Arab national movement. In line with their new policy which is

71 Hen-Tov, *Communism and Zionism*, 39.

72 Hen-Tov, *Communism and Zionism*, 39.

73 Rubenstein, *The communist movement*, 147.

74 Cited in Offenberg, *Kommunismus in Palästina*, 355.

75 See Rubenstein, *The communist movement*, 153f.

referred to as the “Third Period”⁷⁶, the Comintern reinforced its call for a widespread Agrarian Revolt among the Arab peasants against the British, the Zionists and their local effendis.

It was the Arab riots that occurred the following year that eventually revealed the discrepancy between the Comintern’s total entrenchment in their Communist ideology and the situation on the ground. The rebellion began as an agitated group of Muslims began protesting at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The protest soon spread and erupted into several violent attacks against Jews in Hebron, Jerusalem and other places. Reportedly, the British police did not intervene, which prompted the PCP to accuse the British of deliberately supporting and even instigating violence between Arabs and Jews as a “divide and rule” policy. The PCP’s official position, some of whom had witnessed the incidents first-hand, was one of unwavering solidarity with the Jewish victims. To them, the fault lay clearly with the Muslim clericals and the Mufti in Jerusalem that had incited the Arab masses into anti-Jewish violence. It called the Arab attacks “pogroms” that were entirely racially motivated rather than serving any revolutionary cause.⁷⁷ The Comintern, on the other hand, interpreted the events as a first success in mobilizing the Arab masses and as “an integral part of

the revolutionary wave which is sweeping over the whole of Asia.”⁷⁸ To them, the riots were of clear anti-imperialist character, directed against the Zionist oppressors and “[t]hose Jewish members of the party who opposed this reformulation were expelled as were those who had played an active role in the Jewish defense effort in Jerusalem.”⁷⁹

These two, so very obviously subjective narratives of events not only illustrate more than anything else that the Communist endeavor in Palestine had eventually fallen prey to the Jewish-Arab conflict. In a conflict in which differentiation between Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews was not recognized as such, neither by the Zionist nor by the Arab side, how could there still be an anti-Zionist Jewish force? In that sense, the Comintern and its leadership in Moscow aligned itself with the anti-communist narrative represented by the British, the Zionists and the Arab Higher Committee. Namely that all Jews were Zionist per definition and therefore could not lead a revolutionary struggle, while the Arab masses were the only true Anti-Imperialists and Anti-Zionists in Palestine. Any deviationists who did not align themselves with this nationalist divide were no longer able to remain in the PCP.

The official split of the Palestinian Communist Party into a Jewish and an Arab section

76 see *ibid.*, 165f.

77 see Budary, *The Palestine Communist Party*, 18-23.

78 cited in Rubenstein, *The communist movement*, 164.

79 Budary, *The Palestine Communist Party*, 29.

happened only in 1936 after another round of Arab riots had led to the same confrontation between the party's remaining Jewish members and the Comintern.⁸⁰ After the PCP's Arab leadership had been arrested by the British after the revolt, the idea of this exclusively Jewish PCP section was a very pragmatic one, trying to ensure the party's functioning in the absence of the majority of its high-rank members. However, it was not long until this divide within the party catapulted the Jewish section back into the Yishuvist path, becoming more and more affiliated with left-wing Zionist politics.⁸¹

When the Comintern lost its power and was dissolved by Stalin in 1943, Soviet policy toward Zionism had already softened. Due to the outbreak of World War II and the need for a united communist movement in the face of the Nazi crimes made formerly rejected ideological differences less preponderate. Especially since the "Great Patriotic War" with Germany, when the Soviet's priority lay on defending and consolidating their Union, "there was once again increased leeway for cooperation with previously 'suspect' organizations on the political left."⁸² Eventually, in 1947, the Soviet Union supported the partition of Palestine and the establishment of an Israeli

State, a decision that surely had more to do with (geo)political opportunism rather than ideology. After 1948, the PCP's Jewish and Arab section morphed into a Jordanian and an Israeli communist party and became emerged in their respective national politics.

CONCLUSION

Borochov's history and that of the Poale Zion and its many successors in Palestine could be considered a failed attempt at reconciling two irreconcilable ideologies. One could say that upon arriving in Palestine and being confronted with the realities on the ground and the overwhelming pull of the anti-Zionist Communists on the one hand and the anti-communist Zionists on the other, the movement failed to establish itself in the in-between. Poale Zion's vision of a Jewish State might not have become reality, but it can still serve as a reminder that there existed Zionist debates that go beyond the Western-democratic concept of a nation. Especially in the context of the Middle East Conflict, the largely forgotten history of Socialist Zionism might offer new impulse for solidarity-building between Jewish and Arab communities by putting class similarities over national differences.

In his preface to the 2003 edition of *A History of Zionism* Walter Laqueur addresses the post-Zionism

80 Ibid. 29

81 see Johan Franzén, "Communism versus Zionism: The Comintern, Yishuvism, and the Palestine Communist Party," in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 2 (Jan. 2007): 12-15.

82 See *ibid.*, 16.

controversy.⁸³ Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new generation of Israeli academics has come up with this term in an effort to re-narrate recent Jewish history from a post-colonial perspective. Their approach questions the very existence of Israel, asking whether the Zionist project was justified, or whether it was colonialism in disguise. Their work has been criticized, not only by Laqueur, for referring to the negation of Zionism as something “post”, even though there is very little modern or innovative about it. And indeed, one could say that post-Zionist rhetoric is reminiscent of that of former Communists who supported the Arab struggle against the British-Zionist “bourgeois plot”. However, I believe that there is still a difference between opposing Zionism from within one’s own Communist ideological confines rather than attempting to deconstruct it from a post-colonial perspective.

As this paper aimed to illustrate, one does not have to look “post” Zionism to criticize the current narrative that mainstream Zionism has established. Not all criticism of the Israeli State has to come from an “anti-Zionist” standpoint. Supporting the Palestinian cause does not make one “anti-Zionist” per definition. There used to be and there still is leeway for different interpretations of Zionism. Despite their many flaws, inconsistencies and deterministic view of history Socialist Zionists,

and even Communist Yishuvists, offered alternative concepts of a Jewish state in Palestine that are less defined through its exclusivity as a nation but rather through its class character and potential for building class solidarity. Back in 1969, in a preface to Borochov’s writings, the journalist Dany Diner argues that the solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict might not be “De-Zionisation”, but “Re-Zionisation”, since Zionism in a strictly socialist sense was only supposed to be the framework or “minimal program”, never the political core, of a Jewish State. By ending the discourse on whether or not Zionism has any legitimacy at all, but rather reviving alternative versions of Zionism, Israel would have to get out of its defensive state and would have to divert its policies away from trying to assert itself against the hostile “anti-Zionist Outside”. It goes without saying that mitigating the grievances between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs is not as simple as that. But there is still value in re-introducing some of the complexity and diversity that the Zionist debate has lost after the establishment of the Israeli State. There needs to be a greater awareness of what it meant back then and what it could still mean to be a Zionist since there is a wide political and ideological spectrum that it could encompass.

83 Walter Laqueur, “Preface to the 2003 Edition,” in *A History of Zionism. From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel* (New York City: Schocken Books, 2003).