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1848–1918

Rybak, Jan. Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation-Building in War and Revolution, 1914–1920

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv + 351.

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"What do we need Palestine for?" commented a socialist Zionist in 1919 who preferred to throw his energies into the world revolution (273). Jan Rybak's book, *Everyday Zionism in East-Central Europe: Nation-Building in War and Revolution, 1914–1920*, offers important new research on Zionism during and after World War I, suggesting that the movement's whole wartime experience —even punctuated by the Balfour Declaration in November 1917—was relatively little concerned with Palestine. Joshua Shanes, in *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia* (Cambridge, 2012), clearly showed that Jewish nationalism was as much concerned with national aspirations within the multinational Habsburg monarchy as with Herzl's semi-messianic conjuring of a homeland in the Holy Land. Rybak, covering both the Cisleithanian Habsburg monarchy and the Polish and Lithuanian lands, begins from the premise that Palestine-focused work was no longer practical or meaningful during the war, and that Zionists devoted their attention to war relief work which brought them new social and political importance in Jewish communities across Eastern Europe.

Using archives in Vienna, Berlin, Jerusalem, New York, and all over Poland, and drawing on a great number of Jewish newspapers and journals principally from the Habsburg and Polish lands, Rybak recovers the fascinating details and perspectives of Zionist activists in wartime: running soup kitchens and orphanages, establishing schools and summer camps, and apparently not thinking very much about Palestine. Zionist relief efforts were partly aimed at the Jews of Warsaw and Vilnius who had endured Russian rule for a century before falling to the German army in August and September 1915, but also the Jews of Habsburg Galicia who had suffered temporarily under Russian military occupation between August 1914 and June 1915. Furthermore, relief had to be provided for the great number of Jews who fled from the Russian occupation in Galicia and came to Vienna as refugees.

The progress, and then recession, of the Russian armies created the circumstances in which Zionist groups could undertake relief work on behalf of hungry, unemployed, dispossessed, and displaced Jews, work that had the additional political benefit of making Zionism seem socially purposeful for Jewish communities. The German Zionist Julius Berger discovered in Warsaw in 1917 "the Jewish masses who spend their lives in squalor in the basements of Warsaw"; he regretted that "our Zionists know nothing of the conditions and opinions of the Jewish masses" and noted the reciprocal ignorance, and even indifference, of the Jewish masses concerning Zionism (49). Berger concluded: "the masses demand bread and social welfare. They want opportunities to earn a living and one cannot ask them to concern themselves with hopes for Palestine" (93).

With Galician refugees arriving in Vienna in 1914, Zionist women (at a time when men were likely to be in uniform) worked in soup kitchens, hospitals, and kindergartens. It was both humane work and at the same time politically advantageous work, for, as one source commented, "whoever can open another soup kitchen gets thousands more followers" (60). Zionists were competing with other Jewish movements—on the one hand the traditionally religious, on the other hand the modern assimilationists—for influence within the Jewish community. Kindergartens were particularly important, as

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237823000413 Published online by Cambridge University Press

well as schools, summer camps, and orphanages, for Zionists appreciated that intervening on behalf of children meant shaping the future generation as Jewish nationalists. Here, Rybak takes inspiration from Tara Zahra's book *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands 1900–1948* (Ithaca, 2008).

In a militant spirit, Zionists also participated in the formation of Jewish self-defense groups, working on behalf of Jews in the Polish lands who faced pogroms at the end of the war, culminating in the Lviv pogrom of November 1918 that was instigated by Polish soldiers when Jews were accused of sympathizing with Ukrainians in the Polish–Ukrainian war. Zionists were determined to establish Jews as a nation with national rights of its own, alongside Poles and Ukrainians, rather than simply caught between them, and one of Rybak's important points is that Zionism was not a unique national movement but, rather, was modeled on and related to the many other national movements that emerged from the crucible of the Habsburg monarchy:

> Like German nationalists, German Zionists were convinced that they would bring modernity and civilization to the East. Like Ukrainian nationalists, Galician Zionists tried to prove themselves a loyal nation amongst the nations of the Habsburg Empire. Like German, Czech, and Polish nationalists, Zionists worked to save the children of their people and to raise them to become proud sons and daughters of the nation (296).

While the Balfour Declaration by the British government, supporting a Jewish homeland in Palestine, may be viewed retrospectively as a major milestone on the path to the statehood of Israel in 1948, Rybak sees it as one among many strategic national endorsements that took place during the wartime period (like the German creation of the "Kingdom of Poland" in 1916). Since the Balfour Declaration came from England, its influence in the German areas of occupation was inevitably less significant. Rybak does not find the declaration to have made a profound impression on the Zionist press: "the impact on the ground seems to have been very short-lived, and from early 1918 onwards, reports and letters from the region hardly ever mention the declaration" (254).

It was thanks to their wartime relief efforts, Rybak argues, that Zionists found themselves in a strong position of local influence at the end of the war, such that they could competitively claim (against other Jewish groups) to represent the Jewish populations of the newly emerging national states. "We have seen the complete victory of the Jewish national idea over assimilationism, and we are part of a development that is more fantastic than we could have ever hoped for," exulted the Prague Zionist Max Brod in November 1918. In the Wilsonian moment of 1919, Zionists made the case at the Paris Peace Conference for a homeland in Palestine, but they were equally keen to establish national minority rights in the new states of Eastern Europe and even, if possible, some form of national autonomy. Though a Palestine Office was established in Vienna and registered potential emigrants, there was no immediate possibility of emigrating, and Zionism found itself in the difficult situation of having raised expectations that could not be promptly satisfied.

In the 1950s, the study *When Prophecy Fails* examined the social psychology of an American religious cult whose members believed that they were about to be rescued from the apocalypse by a fleet of flying saucers—and were, of course, ultimately disappointed. Rybak describes Zionist expectations in 1919 in similar social psychological terms: "complete cities ready to depart" was the telegraphic message from eastern Galicia in December 1918, following the pogroms. "Containment impossible. Waiting for statement by organization. Total silence creates suspicion and panic" (266). Yet, as Rybak has shown in this important new book, even though large-scale emigration to Palestine had to be deferred, Zionists were prepared by their wartime experiences to pay attention to a wide variety of concrete needs and national rights on behalf of the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe in the postwar political world.

doi:10.1017/S0067237823000413

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