

The Unlikely Entente: Collaborations Between Zionism and National Socialism before the Second World War

History, for the most part, paints Jews and National Socialists as two groups completely at odds with one another. Accounts of the Second World War show that the Nazis were avowed anti-Semites, and that the Jews were helpless to the mass destruction of the Holocaust. While these statements are doubtlessly true, the years leading up to the war saw a number of collaborations between Zionist Jews and the Third Reich. As fascism swept Europe, the Zionists seized the opportunity to further their agenda of founding a Jewish homeland in the British colony of Palestine. While the left-wing Labour Zionists worked with Hitler's government to transfer Jews and funds into Palestine, the right-wing Revisionists were attracted to Mussolini's style of Italian fascism. In turn, the Nazis favoured Zionists over other Jews, citing their common nationalist ideals. While the Zionists were justified in their attempts to work with the various fascist countries in order to achieve their goals, the focus on collaboration arguably blinded Zionist leaders to the true outcome of Hitler's election. Due to the fact that Zionist leaders worked with, rather than rallied against the Axis countries, they were not able to rally against the sinister intentions of National Socialism. The failure of Zionism had many factors, including international politics, internal ideological differences, and a tragic lack of foresight. This is not to say that the Zionists were responsible for the Holocaust; on the contrary, many Jews were rescued through Zionist programs. Overall, however, the Zionists' continued attempts at collaboration with the Nazis and fascists failed in the face of the Final Solution. This paper will examine the relationship of Zionism with fascism and National Socialism during the years leading up to the Final Solution.

Zionism, at its very core, aims for "the redemption of the downtrodden Jewish people in their own land"¹. Early Zionist leaders such as Theodore Herzl faced the reality of a world hostile to Jews and sought a state of their own, which they thought would give them the power to defend themselves². Theodore Herzl, the first president of the World Zionist Organization founded in 1897, recognized the need for Zionism to be backed by a major world power, but the best offer he received was for Great Britain to offer the Jews land in Uganda. While Herzl tentatively backed this suggestion, it was officially rejected in 1905³. Herzl's early appeals to world leaders showed the conviction of some Jews that, "the future belonged to the Jew-haters, that anti-Semitism was inevitable, and natural"⁴. In a 1985 diary entry, Herzl wrote, "... I recognized the emptiness and futility of trying to 'combat' anti-Semitism"⁵. Rather, Herzl sought to use anti-Semitic feelings to his advantage, even telling the Sultan of Turkey that he was trying to take Jews away from the revolutionary parties⁶. Thirty years later, this promise would be all too true. Herzl, however, died in 1904 and was succeeded by Chaim Weizmann and Vladimir Jabotinsky. In 1914, Jabotinsky collaborated with the British to raise a Jewish Legion, which fought to liberate Palestine from Turkish rule. The Balfour Declaration in 1917 paved the way for the League of Nations to give Great Britain the Mandate for Palestine in 1922. The agreement recognized the Jewish historical and

¹ Brenner, L. (1983). *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*. Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Company. 1.

² Netanyahu, B. (2012). *The Founding Fathers of Zionism*. Noble, OK: Balfour Books. 8.

³ "Theodor (Binyamin Ze'ev) Herzl." Jewish Virtual Library.
<<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Herzl.html>>

⁴ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*. 1.

⁵ Theodore Herzl, quoted in Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*. 1.

⁶ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*. 5.

religious connection to Palestine, and allowed for Jewish autonomy in the state while preserving full powers of legislation and administration for the British⁷.

The World Zionist Organization in its brand-new homeland was headed by Chaim Weizmann, who advocated for patience and cooperation with the British. Jabotinsky, by contrast, had become frustrated with the British, who had dissolved the Jewish Legion and separated Trans-Jordan from the Jewish territory. By 1931, Jabotinsky's right-wing Zionist-Revisionists had become the third-largest faction in the party⁸. The Revisionists, unlike the mainstream Zionists, believed that a Jewish state with a Jewish majority was the final goal of Zionism, and advocated for a strong military to support their territory. While at this point Jabotinsky denounced fascism as a political system, he was an avowed anti-Socialist and saw some good qualities in fascism, such as the outlawing of strikes⁹. Indeed, Jabotinsky established a youth movement, the Betar, whose military discipline drew constant comparison to the Hitler Youth. In the early 1930s, Jabotinsky wrote several articles in support of Mussolini's brand of fascism, calling it, "an ideology of racial equality ... to hold that a regime maintaining that principle in a world turned cannibal does, partly, but considerably, atone for its other shortcomings"¹⁰. Having split from the WZO to form the NZO (New Zionist Organization), Jabotinsky and the Revisionists moved ever closer to Italian fascism, even establishing a Betar training camp in Italy which was visited by Mussolini himself. The Betar epitomized the Revisionist ideals: they were young, invigorated, militarized, and extremely disciplined. They embodied the virtue of *hadar*, meaning 'glory' or 'splendor,' which was intended as a means "to transform the Hebrew nation from a passive victim to a disciplined fighting machine"¹¹. The Revisionist movement, as symbolized by the Betar, was characterized above all else by its determination to make the Jewish people, so long the underdog, into the masters of their own destinies. To many Revisionists, a fascist style of governance was the best way to accomplish this goal.

By 1936, European fascism, including Mussolini, had moved to side with Hitler. Jabotinsky severed ties with Italy and withdrew the Betar training camp. However, while Jabotinsky had been trying to work with Italy, the WZO had been busy making agreements with Hitler in Germany. A rise in German Zionism mirrored Hitler's rise to power, hinging on the Zionists' fundamental acceptance of anti-Semitism. Mainstream Zionism encouraged 'dissimilation' rather than 'assimilation' without necessarily demanding relocation to Palestine; many German Jews thought that this would be enough to justify their continued coexistence in Germany¹². Demonstrating a renewed interest in Zionism in the first months of Hitler's regime, Hannah Arendt reported that circulation of the Zionist weekly paper *Die Jüdischer Rundschau* increased from five to seven thousand to nearly forty-thousand, and Zionist fund-raising operations received three times as much income in 1935-36 as they did in 1931-32¹³. At this point in time, the Nazis tolerated the Zionists and the two parties even agreed on certain points. Klaus Polkehn writes, "the fascists as well as the Zionists believed in unscientific racial theories, and both met on the same ground in their beliefs in such mystical generalizations as 'national character (*Volkstum*)' and 'race,' both were chauvinistic

⁷ "Text of The Palestine Mandate (July 24, 1922)." Jewish Virtual Library.

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Palestine_Mandate.html>

⁸ Brenner, L. (Autumn, 1983). "Zionist-Revisionism: The Years of Fascism and Terror." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1. 67.

⁹ Brenner, "Zionist-Revisionism," 72.

¹⁰ Jabotinsky, V. "Jews and Fascism -- Some Remarks -- and a Warning." Quoted in Brenner, "Zionist-Revisionism," 78.

¹¹ Kaplan, E. (2005). *The Jewish Radical Right: Revisionist Zionism and its Ideological Legacy*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press. 26.

¹² Arendt, H. (1964). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press. 59.

¹³ *ibid.*

and inclined towards 'racial exclusiveness'¹⁴. The objective of German Zionism at the time was to exploit the similarities between the National Socialist and Zionist doctrines: Zionists did not want to be assimilated, Germans did not want to associate with Jews. Zionists wanted their own land, Germans wanted their land to be free of Jews. To undermine the fact that many German Jews thought of themselves as mostly assimilated, the Nazi state encouraged the formation of a 'distinctive Jewish identity' by promoting separate Jewish schools and institutions¹⁵. These measures were intended to dissimilate the Jews from the German population, but also to potentially encourage Zionism. To the Nazis, the Zionists were "the 'decent' Jews since they too thought in 'national' terms"¹⁶.

The Nazi acceptance of the Jews could also be seen in a more sinister light, and many foreign Jews saw collaboration attempts as degrading and humiliating. One such example is a clause in the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws of 1935 which permitted only two flags to be flown in the Reich: the swastika and the blue-and-white Zionist banner¹⁷. This action singled Zionism out as being akin to National Socialism. However, Jewish discomfort still did not make the Zionists act against Hitler's regime. In his book *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, Lenni Brenner bemoans this period in Zionist-Nazi relations as the fatal flaw in judgement which prevented the Jews from preparing themselves for the horrors of the war to come. Tellingly, he writes, "Dante has false diviners walking backwards, their faces reversed on their necks, tears pouring from their eyes. For ever. So it is for all who misunderstood Hitler"¹⁸.

As Marrus and Paxton write in their examination of the three stages of Nazi policy towards the Jews, the first stage was characterized by an emigration policy: Jews were to leave the Reich and leave their property behind¹⁹. In the early days of the regime, sending the Jews to Palestine seemed like a reasonable solution. Arno Schickendanz, the Chief of Staff of the NSDAP foreign affairs bureau, summarized the issue in 1936:

Palestine is not able to absorb all the Jews in the world, entirely aside from the fact of increasing Arab opposition to Jewish infiltration. The Arabs are, after all, the undisputed owners of the land. But what other territory would be appropriate? And at the instant Palestine ceased to be the goal of Jewish emigration, political Zionism would collapse, since Palestine is seen as a means for the fulfillment of prophecy. Without that, the whole enterprise would lose its point. Jewry itself would make the most passionate and bitter attacks, and before long any undertaking that ignored Palestine would be crippled by Jewry itself.²⁰

At this point, both Zionists and Nazi officials were interested in finding 'mutually satisfactory' solutions to the Jewish problem. Sending the Jews to a single territory seemed to be a positive idea for the Nazis: they wouldn't have to bother with them until after they had won the war, at which point they would be surrounded on a tiny tract of land. At his trial, Adolf Eichmann presented the emigration project more charmingly, declaring that he: regarded the Jews as opponents with respect to whom a mutually acceptable, a mutually fair solution had to be found. ... That solution I envisaged as putting firm soil under their feet so that they would have a place of their own, soil of their own. And I was working in the direction of that solution joyfully. I cooperated in reaching such a solution, gladly and joyfully, because it was also the kind of solution that was

¹⁴ Polkehn, K. (Spring/Summer, 1976). "The Secret Contracts: Zionism and Nazi Germany, 1933-1941." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3/4. 57.

¹⁵ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 86.

¹⁶ Arendt, 60.

¹⁷ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 85.

¹⁸ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 36.

¹⁹ Marrus, M. R. and Paxton, R. (Dec., 1982). "The Nazis and the Jews in Occupied Western Europe, 1940-1944". *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 54, No. 4. 692.

²⁰ Schickendanz, A. (1936). "Zionism." *German Propaganda Archive*. ed. Randall Bytwerk, 2001. <<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/zionism.htm>>

approved by movements among the Jewish people themselves, and I regarded this as the most appropriate solution to this matter²¹.

Thanks, in part, to collaboration with the Third Reich, 164,267 Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine between 1933 and 1936²²

To support the emigration plan, the WZO collaborated with the Germans to create a transfer scheme to move Jewish capital out of Germany and into Palestine. Chaim Arlosoroff, the Labourite Political Secretary of the Jewish Agency, the executive arm of the WZO, went to Berlin in 1933 to negotiate a 'liquidation bank'²³. The resulting Ha'avara, or transfer arrangement, was finally approved in 1935. The scheme worked by establishing a company in Tel Aviv and a sister company in Berlin. Jewish emigrants paid their money (with a minimum limit of a thousand pounds sterling) into the German account. Jewish importers used this money to buy German goods for export to Palestine, paying the equivalent amount into the Palestinian account. When the emigrants arrived in Palestine, they received from this account the equivalent of the sum he had paid in Germany²⁴. At a time when many Jews worldwide were engaged in a boycott of German products, Hannah Arendt writes that Palestine was being flooded with German-made goods²⁵. The 139.6 million Reichmarks transferred in the Ha'avara scheme greatly boosted the Zionist economy in Palestine²⁶. The Germans, however, were presumably not providing transfers out of genuine goodwill to the Jews. On the contrary, Brenner believes that the Nazis gained the most from the Ha'avara, writing, "Not only did it help them push out a few extra Jews, but it was of immense value abroad, providing the perfect rationale for all those who still wanted to continue trading with the Germans"²⁷. Brenner quotes Oswald Mosley as having said that, "We are cutting off our nose to spite our face and refuse to trade with Germany in order to defend the poor Jews. The Jews ... are to continue making profitable dealings with Germany themselves. Fascists can't better counter the malicious propaganda to destroy friendly relations with Germany than by using this fact"²⁸. Furthermore, Brenner cites the Ha'avara as having "removed the million-strong Zionist movement from the front line of anti-Nazi resistance" and "demoralized non-Jews to know that a world-wide Jewish movement was prepared to come to terms with its enemy"²⁹. Seen in this light, the Ha'avara was overall a negative project for the Zionists despite its vital boosting of the Palestinian economy. The positive press it generated for Hitler was paralleled only by the unfavourable reaction the Zionists faced.

In the Ha'avara and the emigration project lies a fundamental failure of the WZO to recognize the true nature of National Socialism. Despite the collaborationist attitude of many Nazi officials, Hitler's true thoughts on the subject had been spelled out in *Mein Kampf* for years. He denied that the Jews had sufficient national character to create their own sovereign state, or that the Jews would be satisfied once they had their own homeland. Rather, he believed that the state would, "serve as a refuge for swindlers who have been found out and at the same time a high-school for the training of other swindlers"³⁰. It is understandable that the Zionists may have naively believed that Nazis such as Eichmann had some investment in the Jewish people or the Jewish state -- but this too constitutes a tragic failure to apprehend Nazism's true intentions. However, historic documents and testimony shows that, in the early years of the Third Reich, the Nazis tolerated and

²¹ Arendt, 56.

²² Brenner, "Zionist Revisionism." 80.

²³ Brenner, "Zionist Revisionism." 73.

²⁴ Polkehn, 64-65.

²⁵ Arendt, 60.

²⁶ Polkehn, 66.

²⁷ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 75.

²⁸ Oswald Mosely, quoted in Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 75.

²⁹ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 76.

³⁰ Hitler, *A. Mein Kampf*. (1939). trans. James Murphy. Project Gutenberg Australia, 2002. <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt>>

supported Zionism, at least nominally. Zionism, for its part, accepted that the Jewish people constituted a 'problem' for the Germans and didn't try to fight what they saw as a historical inevitability. Rather, they tried to use the ideology of National Socialism to their advantage. Because the WZO was trying to stay on Hitler's good side, they were not able to rally their forces against him.

On the other side of the Zionist spectrum were the Revisionists and Jabotinsky. In 1932, Jabotinsky assumed full dictatorial control of the group, a move he called 'democratic' since it had been decided upon in a putsch by a majority of Revisionists³¹. According to Ezra Kaplan, "Jabotinsky regarded himself as a biblical prophet -- burdened by his knowledge of the truth, forced to proclaim God's word to the unbelieving populace"³². Like many fascist leaders, he believed that the individual should be subsumed by the nation, and that national culture should be determined by race. While mainstream Labour Zionism had a socialist orientation, Jabotinsky favoured free-market economics and private property³³. Jabotinsky's associations with Mussolini ended in 1936 when Italian fascism aligned with the German racial ideology, and as such he never expressed his support for Hitler. While some of the Revisionist extremists called Nazism "a national liberation movement" through which "Hitler had saved Germany from Communism,"³⁴ they reversed their stance after a reprimand from Jabotinsky. Henceforth, the Revisionist newspaper attacked the collaboration attempts by the Labour Zionists, running a newspaper article entitled "The Alliance of Stalin-Ben Gurion-Hitler" (Ben Gurion being the leader of the Labour movement), accusing them of selling out the Jews to the Nazis and scheming to set up a pro-Communist Arab regime³⁵. The vehemence with which the Revisionists attacked the Labourites is telling of the highly fraught relationship between the two factions. Indeed, two members of the Revisionist party were charged in Arlosoroff's murder, although they were both acquitted. Jabotinsky continued to deepen the divide between the Revisionists and the WZO and exploited his 'fascistic' image, as when he marched into a Jewish convention surrounded by a bodyguard of Betar brownshirts³⁶. The split of the WZO and the Revisionists was finalized in 1935 when Jabotinsky formed the NZO, and the two factions continued in their opposite directions.

While the WZO was associating with the Nazis over the Ha'avara, the Revisionists were busily trying to support a boycott of German products. However, the party lacked the funds and manpower to support a boycott. Furthermore, there was little to no Jewish unity at the time, Jewish opinion having been shattered into disparate factions by the various attempts of Zionists to align themselves with National Socialism. While Jabotinsky's proposed boycott failed, the WZO's emigration scheme was problematized by the British White Paper of 1939, which severely cut the quota of Jewish immigration into Palestine. Citing the "bitterness between the Arab and Jewish populations" and wishing to avert a "fatal enmity between the two peoples," immigration was capped at 10,000 Jews per year for five years³⁷ -- a serious blow considering that over 160,000 had immigrated between 1933 and 1936. However, Dalia Ofer finds that immigration continued to illegally exceed the quotas: around 27,000 Jews emigrated to Palestine in 1939, of whom 17,000 would have been illegal³⁸.

During this period, Jabotinsky was attempting his own version of collaboration as he

³¹ Kaplan, 22.

³² Kaplan, 8.

³³ Kaplan, 60.

³⁴ Brenner, "Zionist Revisionism." 72.

³⁵ Brenner, "Zionist Revisionism." 73.

³⁶ Brenner, "Zionist Revisionism." 75

³⁷ "British White Paper of 1939." The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/brwh1939.asp>

³⁸ Ofer, D. (May, 1984) "The Rescue of European Jewry and Illegal Immigration to Palestine in 1940: Prospects and Reality: Berthold Storfer and the Assad le'Aliyah Bet." Modern Judaism, Vol. 4, No. 2. 161.

looked to Poland for support of his army, the Haganah. The Polish government was openly anti-Semitic, but the huge Jewish population had always made Poland a focal point for Revisionist attention. Brenner writes that the agreement with Poland was “strenuously opposed by all of Polish Jewry beyond the Zionist camp. But the Revisionists, having lost Mussolini’s support, were desperate for a patron”³⁹. In 1939, the Revisionists asked the Polish government to take over the Mandate for Palestine from Britain, and use the new Polish colony as a dumping ground for ‘unwanted Jews’⁴⁰. Rather than asking the League of Nations for the Mandate, the Polish were set to help the Revisionists take over Palestine by force. A guerrilla training school was established in the Tatra Mountains, where the Polish Army taught Revisionists about sabotage and insurrection. Weapons were provided for 10,000 men, and the invasion was planned for April 1940⁴¹. While the invasion was never carried out, it was an important episode nonetheless. Through their liaison with the Revisionists, the Polish government hoped to rid themselves of their Jews; while the Revisionists hoped to overthrow the British Mandatory whose new policies did not suit their goals or ideology. But above all, the collaboration prevented the active Polish branch of the Betar from fighting against Polish anti-Semitism and pogromists. Schmuël Merlin, the then-Secretary General of the NZO, admitted that Revisionism, too, lacked foresight: “We did not consider that we had to fight in Poland. We believed the way to ease the situation was to take the Jews out of Poland. We had no spirit of animosity”⁴².

The Nazis invaded Poland the night of August 31, 1939, starting a war that Jabotinsky refused to believe possible until it began. Earlier that month, he had written, “there is not the remotest chance of war”⁴³. In reality, though, the Nazis’ concern and tolerance for the Jews (including the Zionists) had ended with the Austrian *anschluss* in 1938, which brought so many Jews into the Third Reich that to continue to bother with emigration would have crippled their progress⁴⁴. The conquest of Poland was soon followed by a ban on Jewish emigration as the Nazis moved into the second stage of their policies towards the Jews⁴⁵. Despite the repeated efforts by Revisionist and Labour Zionists to use Nazism in their favour, the Nazis marched on towards their final solution. The Zionists as a body never organized any resistance against Hitler, and therefore any collaborations between the two groups ended up in Hitler’s favour. Brenner speculates that the Nazis did not mind moving Jews to Palestine because that area would eventually fall under the jurisdiction of the Thousand-Year Reich, where, “as a Gestapo agent told a Jewish leader, ‘we will catch up with you’”⁴⁶. Hannah Arendt recounts a relevant anecdote from Zindel Grynszpan’s testimony at Eichmann’s trial. Grynszpan was a Polish Jew living in Germany when the Polish government decided to renounce the citizenships of all Jews living outside of the country. So that Germany wouldn’t be stuck with thousands of stateless Jews, they were rounded up and deported to Poland. Grynszpan testified: “On the twenty-seventh of October, 1938 ... they took us in police trucks, in prisoners’ lorries, about twenty men in each truck, and they took us to the railroad station. The streets were black with people shouting: ‘Juden raus to Palestine!’”⁴⁷. To Brenner, the single statement ‘Juden raus to Palestine’ summarizes the most poignant problems with the Zionist-Nazi relations. While the Zionists believed that the emigration plan provided a mutually satisfactory solution to the Jewish problem, creating a *Judenfrei Reich* as well as a Jewish homeland, the Nazis saw it as being only satisfactory for themselves. Sequestering the Jews in Palestine would create a Jewish enclave that would

³⁹ Brenner, “Zionist Revisionism.” 85.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² 1982 interview with Shmuël Merlin, quoted in Brenner, “Zionist Revisionism.” 86.

⁴³ Brenner, “Zionist Revisionism.” 87.

⁴⁴ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 87.

⁴⁵ Marrus and Paxton, 697.

⁴⁶ Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*, 89.

⁴⁷ Arendt, 228.

eventually be surrounded by anti-Semitic forces. The Nazis had no interest in coexisting with the Jews in their own state; rather, they were sending them to Palestine to be dealt with later.

The study of Zionist collaboration with anti-Semitic regimes during the years leading up to the Second World War is a history of failure and mistakes, of poor foresight and naïveté. The Revisionists, headed by Jabotinsky, were themselves a quasi-fascist faction aligned with Mussolini. While Jabotinsky seemed to recognize the impossibility of collaboration with Italian fascism after it joined Hitler's camp of racial ideology, he moved on to collaborate with the openly anti-Semitic Polish government. On the other side of the spectrum, the World Zionist Organization's multiple alliances with the National Socialists showed a distressing lack of foresight into the regime's true intentions. In each of these attempts at collaboration, the true winner turned out to be the Nazis, who profited immensely from the positive press the schemes generated. While multiple sources have shown that Jews affiliated with Zionism were preferred over non-affiliated Jews in the Third Reich, and that for a time some Nazis seemed genuinely interested in aiding the Jews' emigration to Palestine, their true intentions were revealed in 1938. The moment that the Germans acquired more territory, and therefore more Jews, the emigration project was abandoned and more radical solutions were undertaken -- resulting in the horrors of the Final Solution and the murder of six million Jews, as well as millions of other 'enemies' of the state. While it cannot be said that the failure of the Zionists to present a greater challenge to Nazism was the cause of such destruction, it can certainly be considered to be a factor.