

# Western Jewry and the Zionist project, 1914–1933

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# Introduction

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One may think what one will about Zionism, but it cannot be denied that it is generated by latent power and energy, and an awakened self-consciousness.  
Samuel Weissenberg (1900)<sup>1</sup>

Today Jewry lives a bifurcated life. As a result of emancipation in the diaspora and national sovereignty in Israel Jews have fully reentered the mainstream of history, yet their perception of how they got there and where they are is most often more mythical than real.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1982)<sup>2</sup>

This is a study of the historical construction and reception of Zionism between the world wars in Western Europe and the United States.<sup>3</sup> It is the first discussion of the movement outside Eastern Europe and Palestine which views Zionism in the Western nations as a distinct entity, as parts of an interwoven whole.<sup>4</sup> In taking this perspective I wish to underscore the notion that Zionism became a greater part of secular Jewish consciousness and a ground for charity and philanthropy among Western Jewry, as the movement sought to connect Western-aculturated Jews to an emerging Jewish sovereignty. It is not my objective to write a comprehensive history of Zionism;<sup>5</sup> or explore the travails of the movement in the wider worlds of politics and diplomacy;<sup>6</sup> or reconsider Zionist ideology, per se;<sup>7</sup> or examine how Zionism worked itself out in Palestine.<sup>8</sup> In certain respects, this book responds to questions raised in my first book, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry Before the First World War*,<sup>9</sup> namely: how did Zionist-nationalism function for those Jews not seen by the movement, or themselves, as the likely immigrants to Palestine, and how was knowledge about Zionism, directed toward Western Jews, produced by the movement?<sup>10</sup> This study begins, however, with the changes wrought by World War I; it incorporates developments in the United States, as its Jewish community became more crucial to Zionist efforts, and extends the analysis until the advent of Hitler. The first book recognized and analyzed the Zionists' creation

of a “supplemental nationality” for West European Jews. The current book builds on that assumption in looking at the period 1914–33; but the main argument is that as the nationalization of Western Jewry proceeded apace, the component parts of the movement took on a life of their own, and that the sustenance of the Zionist Organization – especially its fundraising mechanisms – came to dominate the practice of Zionism for Western-assimilated Jewry. Zionism as an institution, I maintain, was accepted as a supreme value in itself, rather than as a means to securing the aims of the movement.<sup>11</sup>

This book confronts a historically perplexing problem: what accounts for the cohesion of those European and American Jews who called themselves Zionists, despite their apparent insulation from the threat of anti-Semitism, and the weighty differences between national and class-based contingents? What attracted them to the movement? What was it about Zionism that interested them? What exhilarated them? What might have bored them, or left them uninterested in the movement? How might one explain the uniformity of Western Jewish perceptions of, and ways of identifying with, the Zionist project in Palestine? How and why did Western Zionism’s development influence its reception from the First World War until the early 1930s, resulting in a lackluster period for the movement? Obviously, Zionists in different countries acted and reacted differently; but the relationships and commonalties have commanded little attention. This book – encompassing popular culture, political symbolism, historical memories, imagery, fundraising, relief efforts, gender roles, militarism, education, politics, and charity – deals with the question of why Jews in Central and Western Europe and the United States, who were relatively assimilated and comfortable, bothered to bother with Zionism, which offered them little apparent advantage. Although I have included the experiences of individual men and women from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy, I have considered mainly Zionists and Zionism in the United States, Britain, and Germany, because the latter were the communities which Zionists usually perceived as the most formidable areas of the movement’s support, among Westernized Jews, before 1933. It was only in the mid-1930s, for example, that Zionism in France seemed worthy of mention for something other than its dearth of popularity.<sup>12</sup> In sum, the movement was molded to fit Western Jews’ demands for an ever more “platonic” type of Zionism.<sup>13</sup> Following the lead of Michael Brenner, Paula Hyman, and others, I wish to call into question the exaggerated image of patently “apolitical” Western Jewries, enthralled by delusions of hyperassimilation, which does little justice to the (broadly defined) Jewish political experiences of “emancipated” Jews in Europe and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

With the striking exceptions of Claudia Prestel's work on Zionist women, which covers Europe and Palestine from 1897 to 1933,<sup>15</sup> Yigal Elam's wide-ranging history of the Jewish Agency for Palestine,<sup>16</sup> and Ezra Mendelsohn's *On Modern Jewish Politics*, which features a comparative analysis of American and Polish interwar Zionism, the prevailing interpretations of Zionism before the Second World War stress its discrete components, such as the diplomatic maneuvering resulting in the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate for Palestine, state and institution building in Palestine, biography and collective biography, and the unique character of the movement in Russia, Poland, Germany, Britain, South Africa, Argentina, the United States, and elsewhere. Over the past two decades, to be sure, there has been progress toward a more critical and synthetic body of historiography; important studies have appeared in Hebrew, English, and German.<sup>17</sup> But these works for the most part constitute an inner-group dialogue that rarely speaks to the non-Zionist community. Scholars of Zionism, with a few notable exceptions, neglect a rigorous comparative approach and confine themselves to a Zionist discourse.<sup>18</sup> Often the focus is on why and how Zionists differed and disagreed. Such tendencies reflect the concerns of an "in" group, and ignore modes of historical analysis that have proved fruitful in other settings. In particular cultural history and the "new" history have not had a great impact on Jewish scholarship in general.<sup>19</sup> My inclination (to borrow a phrase from Hobsbawm) is to see Zionism as an "invented tradition" which is remarkable for its adaptation to the circumstances of assimilated Jewries, and for devising diverse constituency-building strategies.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously, the Zionists blurred the boundaries between belonging to an incipient nation, a religious group, a national movement, a local organization, a national organization, a fraternal order, a voluntary association, and a community determined by history and birthright. It may prove helpful, then, to look at the history of the Zionist movement in relation to the development of symbols, institutions, organizations, publicity, and popular community building that have been neglected in favor of mainstream "high" politics.

To carry out this study I have read the contemporary periodical literature and examined archives in Israel and the United States. Although the recent scholarship on Zionism is typically well researched, surprisingly few historians of the movement have systematically read the Zionist organs from Germany, Britain, and the United States, let alone the respective "propaganda and agitation" materials in the archives. I suspect that the lack of familiarity with different national settings of Zionism has bolstered claims of the uniqueness of Zionism in these

countries. I base my analysis on the popular culture and perceptions of the movement, which along with the press includes consideration of promotional materials, graphic arts, iconography, and photography. I am particularly attuned to visual images, the manipulation of symbols, and the interpenetration of myth and reality, resulting in the processes by which certain perceptions became the common stock of Zionism.

In addition to filling a void in Zionist historiography, I wish to delve, as well, into some newer areas of inquiry. The first chapter focuses on the attempted appropriation of the First World War by the Zionist movement, showing that the Zionists reaped limited capital from the diverse war experiences of its constituents – despite the obvious political success represented by the Balfour Declaration. Chapter 2 is an excursion through the pantheon of heroic Zionist leaders in the West. My emphasis is on how the portrayal of these figures tended to produce an impression of harmony and consensus in the contentious movement. Above all, the organization seized on the image of Albert Einstein to highlight Zionism's professed affinity with the greatest hopes of human civilization and progress. Chapter 3, rather than clearing a new avenue of inquiry, instead turns to one of the better-trod paths in the history of interwar Zionism, that is, the “feud” between Chaim Weizmann and Louis Brandeis in the early 1920s, the creation of the Keren Hayesod (the Palestine Foundation Fund), and the reemergence of the opposition to Weizmann in the late 1920s. Although it was not my original intention to revise the judgments of Ben Halpern, Evyatar Friesel, and Jehuda Reinharz concerning what Halpern has termed “the clash of heroes,” I nevertheless offer a rereading of this controversial episode.<sup>21</sup> I am not as concerned with exposing the inner workings of Zionist administration as much as I desire to explain the impact of the movement's politics on popular sentiments. Part of Zionism's frustrations in the interwar period were closely tied to this story, the “negative consequences” of which ran deeper than the “disarray” recounted in the historiography.<sup>22</sup> I think that this controversy led to a widespread disaffection of Zionists, primarily among the women of Hadassah. Except for Ezra Mendelsohn's *Zionism in Poland*, there are few scholarly studies of pre-state Zionism that illuminate the culture of fundraising in the diaspora.<sup>23</sup> Most work in Zionist historiography concerning the role of money raised in the diaspora has dwelt on the “nationalization of capital” in the Yishuv,<sup>24</sup> and the general literature on philanthropy only mentions Jewish organizations in passing.<sup>25</sup> The formation and subsequent evolution of the Keren Hayesod, as the chief financial instrument and tool of Zionist nationalization, cannot be underestimated as a factor in the reception of Zionism in the West. Chapter 4 analyzes the drives to raise money for

Zionism which were connected to polemics about catastrophe; this discourse established patterns of Western Jewish perceptions of Zionism and the reception of Zionist appeals.

The fifth chapter examines the interwar representations of Jewish Palestine. Images of the Jews' newfound preeminence in agriculture was a major part of this effort, while the Zionists' success in creating a new urban style also was triumphantly expressed. Chapter 6 discusses the unfolding of one of the most enduring dimensions of the Western-oriented Zionist project – the appropriation of Jewish tourism to Palestine. Primarily through improvising changes to existing tours, the organization engendered a secularized pilgrimage ritual to the Holy Land; many of its essential elements would not be fundamentally altered for more than fifty years. Chapter 7 deals with one of the most significant segments of world Zionism, its youth divisions in the West. Although important differences did exist from one nation to another, I argue that many characteristics were shared, and that there was a certain symmetry in Zionist youth groups in relatively acculturated societies. Organized Zionist youth not only reflected the world of its Zionist elders, but found its own means to adapt Zionism to life outside Palestine. British Zionist youth, for instance, was apparently the first section of diaspora Zionists to accommodate large numbers of Jewish returnees from Palestine into Zionist ideology and practice. Chapter 8 explores organized women in Zionism, focusing on the place of the German Kulturverband, Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), and Hadassah in the context of the history of women in Zionism. Particularly with regard to Zionism in the United States, my aim is not simply to add an account of women's "contributions," but to show how the integration of women affects the entire movement's history, and to consider the impact of the resistance to organized women in diaspora Zionism.

My main hypothesis is that, between 1914 and 1933, Zionism came to be styled increasingly as a rescue mission and object of philanthropy, and that the Zionist Organization and its preeminent institutions – especially its fundraising instruments – were held up by the movement as sacrosanct bodies. Given the Zionist goals of unifying Jews in support of the national home in Palestine and radically changing the modern Jewish condition, I wish to call into question the degree to which this kind of institutional development was propitious. While Zionism was creative and successful at making its aims and view of the world a part of Western Jewish life, Jews also lost faith in the movement due to its apparent mismanagement and obsession with fundraising. Yet however much Zionism may have declined in this period, it nevertheless assumed

much of its principal shape with regard to Western Jewish integration in the movement – that is, before the birth of the State of Israel. The main questions with which I am concerned are: how did Western Jews, especially in Germany, Britain, and the United States perceive the Zionist movement? How did this perception change during the First World War, and from the war years until the rise of Hitler? What was the role of philanthropy and charity in the movement? How was it possible, with the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine) assuming more and more a life of its own, to be a Zionist outside Zion? How might one evaluate the values, ethics, intellectual standards, and behavior of the organization in relation to its professed mission? I wish to illuminate the background of what Alain Finkielkraut perceives as “the apparent inconsistency of Western Jews” in the post-1945 world: “they’re all Zionists, but they all stay settled right where they are . . . They see no contradiction between life in the Diaspora and love for Israel.”<sup>26</sup> My study has led me to explore how diaspora Zionism – which might have been more widely interpreted as a contradiction in terms – was rationalized in the middle-class Jewish mind, and the processes by which it was made concrete in the lives of Western Jews from 1914 to 1933.

While the movement obviously gained power in the diaspora and disseminated a bold language of revolutionary, Jewish national transformation, Zionism also can be seen as inheriting many of the tendencies of pre-Zionist Jewish communal organizations and charities, which it had pronounced as a blight on Jewish self-help, and pointedly vowed not to replicate.<sup>27</sup> Many of the successors of the interwar Zionists vehemently denied that Zionism was a charity, yet they continued to rely on the charitable instincts of the Western Jewish middle class to explicitly or implicitly support the movement. A question to be raised, then, is whether or not there might have been any other means to rally Western Jewry under the banner of Zionism, or perhaps whether there should have been an attempt to redirect the course of the movement, or reformulate the original aims of Zionism. This was, in fact, the period in which the Jewish masses were approaching their most serious and ultimately fatal challenge.