

**REVIEW:**

**Kenneth B. Moss, Benjamin Nathans, and Taro Tsurumi, eds. (2021). *From Europe's East to the Middle East Israel's Russian and Polish Lineages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.**

**Yakov M. Rabkin**

University of Montreal

This book aims to fill an important gap in scholarly literature. Most histories of Zionism and Zionist settlements in Palestine focus on the Jewish roots of this political phenomenon. This is understandable, as research in social sciences and the humanities often follows the structure and terminology of the object studied before approaching it from a different angle. It could also be a legitimation strategy, but that fails to explain the specific political culture that emerged in the Holy Land since the turn of the 20th century. One may often hear astonishment even from benign observers of Israel's treatment of the autochthonous Palestinians: "How could Jews who were persecuted for centuries behave in this manner?!" A different scope of study was therefore in order, and this book, indeed, shifts it to the larger environment in which the Zionist settlers were born and developed, namely the areas that are today considered Ukrainian, Belorussian and Polish but used to be part of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The book consists of four parts: "Imperial and National Crucibles", "Groups and Institutions", "Formations of Political Cultures" and "Soviet Interludes", and its authors hail from Israel, the United States, Japan, and Poland.

In their different ways, the authors draw clear distinctions between the imperial political cultures that admit pluralism and draw back from ethnic nationalism, and the anti-imperial cultures of ethnonationalism that abounded and continue to abound in these lands. "Zionists both reacted against and emulated such [...] nationalisms and violence" (Moss et al. 2021: 5). In other words, Zionists reacted against it in Europe and emulated it in Palestine. "Violence not only affected the material, physical, and external conditions of Jewish life, it also became an internal element of interwar Jewish political culture. Portions of Jewish youth internalized political violence in certain settings as part of the general pan-European drive toward radical transformative and coercive politics" (Moss et al. 2021: 12).

The dominant discourse for almost a century of the Zionist colonization was that of left-wing progressive internationalism that the settlers brought from the Russian Empire or, rather, from the revolutionary movements working against the empire. Arriving before 1917, and many even before 1905, they also brought with them deep reverence for Russian culture, music and literature. The doyenne of Zionist historians Anita Shapira is keenly insightful when she writes that "Russia became a myth, and admiration for it

increased precisely because the real Russia was inaccessible. Russian songs were translated and became Hebrew folk songs, and Russia was idolized” (Moss et al. 2021: 74). For example, Russian was the language in which Avraham Stern, the leader of a particularly violent Zionist terrorist organization (aka the Stern Gang) wrote and published his poetry and, days before his death, penned farewell letters to his mother and his beloved. I saw these on a recent visit to the museum opened in the house in which British security forces gunned him down in 1942.

Curiously, most of those who idolized Russian culture had imbibed it from afar, they had never lived in Russia proper, but in the Pale of Settlement surrounded by Ukrainians or Poles. For them, Russia was embodied in the novels of Chekhov, Chernyshevsky and Tolstoy. It was also a unifying language of communication: in 1911 the subscription to the Russian-language Zionist publication *Rassvet* was nearly three times higher than the number of subscribers to the *Ha-Olam* published in Hebrew by the World Zionist Organization (Moss et al. 2021: 50–51).

“Whereas the prototypical immigrant of the First Aliyah in the 1880s was vaguely influenced by the *Narodnik* (Populist) worldview and the ideals of “going to the people,” the immigrants of the Second Aliyah (1904–1914) responded to the ideologically charged politics of 1905 by gravitating, alternatively, to the Socialist Revolutionaries or the Russian Marxists ... The immigrants of the Third Aliyah who arrived a decade later (1919–1923) were deeply imprinted by the October Revolution and by Bolshevik radicalism” (p. 118). Quite a few Zionist settlers had acquired experience in revolutionary activities (including political terrorism) in Russian revolutionary groups, which abhorred ethnic nationalism that inspired violence against Jews.

This vicarious communion with Russia explains the internal inconsistency and the current demise of “the Israeli left”: it was brought up on noble ideals of justice and equality while participating in an eliminatory nationalist project that displaced, dispossessed and, later, deported hundreds of thousands of local Muslims and Christians. True, some of the more consistent Zionist leftists abandoned the Zionist colonies in Palestine in the mid-1920s and returned to their motherland to join the Soviet people in the edification of socialism. David Ben Gurion visited Moscow in 1923 and expressed enthusiastic admiration for Lenin and the October revolution (Moss et al. 2021: 123).

“The modern Hebrew term *moledet* (literally, “birthland”), signifying one’s native country, is a translation of the Russian *rodina*, in contrast to the Central and West European preference for “fatherland” or “motherland.” In the ideology and culture of Jewish Palestine, the term *ivri* (Hebrew) was also derived from the Russian *evrei*, a more respectful term for a Jew than *zhid*” (Moss et al. 2021: 71–72). *Ivri* stood for the new intrepid irreligious Jew presented as the opposite of the traditional religious Jew (*yehudi*, cognate of the Russian terms *zhid* and *yeudei*) disdained as meek and lowly.

“In the Zionist mindset Russia was and remained the land of great ideals, the source of Hebrew culture, birthplace of the literary and political Zionist center. In the collective memory [...], Russia was considered superior to Poland: it was the country in which Zionist idealism was formed and from which sprang the worldview of reforming a nation and the world... Thus Ben Gurion, a native of Plonsk, only forty miles from Warsaw,

where he grew up before immigrating to Palestine in 1906, always claimed that he did not speak Polish and chose to learn Russian because Polish was a superfluous and unnecessary language” (Moss et al. 2021: 72).

“The rich documentary record left from those early years is replete with examples of Russian- and Soviet-bred practices. These included the preponderance of Russian in their meetings and newspapers; the singing of “The Internationale” (rather than the national anthem “Hatikvah”) at the opening and closing of each gathering and celebration; the assembly held each January 21 to mark the anniversary of Lenin’s death; the staging of speaking and singing newsletters modeled on Soviet factory theaters...” (Moss et al. 2021: 125). While it is important to note that Russian and Soviet practices and ideas are not identical, both have had their impact on Zionism and Israel.

“Quite paradoxically”, writes Israel Bartal, “a cultural center developed in Palestine that, while encouraging innovative Jewish arts and endeavors, strengthened the influence of the Russian imperial culture in the New Yishuv [settlement]” (Moss et al. 2021: 30). This included attempts that the imperial authorities undertook for over a century to reform the Jews, turn small shopkeepers into farmers and make them thereby “productive”. This goal came to underpin the dominant Zionist ethos, with its stellar symbol—the kibbutz. For several generations, Russian Zionists and their descendants embraced this ethos and formed the elite of Israeli society.

This project of social engineering ultimately turned to be a sterile success; it came to an end after playing an important social and military role in the history of the Zionist state. Bartal also notices that “from the standpoint of traditional Ashkenazi society (which imperial agents and socialist Zionists wished to obliterate), one finds that the officials of the Yevseksiia (the Jewish section of the Communist Party in the USSR) differed little from the Zionists, the Bundists, or the secular Yiddishists” (Moss et al. 2021: 34). Indeed, one finds illuminating chapters on the evolution of traditional Ashkenazi institutions, including girls’ schools, in their transfer from Eastern Europe to Western Asia (Moss et al. 2021: 143–193).

And yet, Polish and Ukrainian nationalism ended up being formative for those varieties of Zionism that have triumphed in Palestine. “Polish nationalism shaped the political culture of the Right in Palestine and in Israel. Another Polish import is the ethnonationalist tradition in Israel of today, which is in a constant clash with the liberal Western European and American cultural traditions” (Moss et al. 2021: 83-84). It is noteworthy that in the current Eastern Europe, on the lands where most pogroms took place, Zionism and the state of Israel that incarnates it, continue to provoke admiration and emulation. More generally, right-wing, and extreme-right groups and parties, quite a few with recent and even current antisemitic tendencies, have become Israel’s most loyal fans.

While Polish nationalism inspired many, “Polish Zionists never reached the first ranks of the world Zionist leadership and never obtained a degree of power and influence within the world movement consistent with the numerical strength of the community that had made them its representatives” (Moss et al. 2021: 221). One might add that German Jews, who immigrated to Palestine mostly after 1933, never attained the political

influence commensurate with their role in building up universities and industries in the new country. For decades, the political echelon was firmly in the hands of Russian Jews. Symbolically, it was the Brest-born Polish Jew, Menahem Begin, whose electoral victory in 1977 put an end to that dominance. But one had to wait till 2021 to see, for the first time, a prime minister who would not be born in the Russian Empire or to parents born there. The long-term significance of the Russian roots of modern Israel is beyond the scope of this book but remains an important question that deserves further research.

The book under review covers a range of other interesting subjects such as the history of Jewish agricultural colonies in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and the relationship between human rights defenders and Zionists in the last decades of the USSR. It is meticulously produced and constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Zionist and Israeli history.

### **Bibliography:**

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