

FROM UKRAINE TO ISRAEL - WHAT HAPPENED TO THE JEWS?

by Peter Brooke

Substance of a talk given in Brecon on the 17th October 2023 (in the wake of the Hamas breakout from Gaza and subsequent Israeli retaliation). Downloaded from <http://www.peterbrooke.org/politics-and-theology/>

Note: *The first, 'Ukrainian', part of this essay is drawn from the series of articles related one way or another to Alexander Solzhenitsyn I've been writing for the Irish journal Church and State. These appear on my website under the headings Two centuries together and Who are the Ukrainians? at <http://www.peterbrooke.org/politics-and-theology/solzhn/> They provide much more detail than was possible in the framework of a single talk.*

TRADITIONAL JUDAISM

For nearly two thousand years Judaism was a pacifist, or at least passive religion. I should perhaps say Judaism in Europe and the Middle East since there is the case of the 'Beta Israeli' Jews in Ethiopia and also the Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen. But Judaism as we know it in our own history refused in principle to respond, even to the worst oppression, with violence. They regarded themselves as a people with a special relationship to God - a 'Godbearing people', to use a phrase well-known to Orthodox Christianity - but who had displeased God and were living lives of penitence. When they were persecuted it was because they had displeased God further and the proper response was deeper penitence. Surrounded by people who, despite, in the case of Christians, the injunctions of Jesus ('I say unto you that ye resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also'), regarded military prowess as one of the highest signs of manhood, their passivity in the face of ill-treatment was regarded with contempt.

This of course is not the image of Jews we have at the present time. Something has changed and I suppose if you were to ask most people what brought about the change they would answer 'the Shoah' - the Nazi occupation of Europe which enabled them, under cover of war, to pursue a policy of destroying the Jewish presence in Europe, either by expelling them to some far-off part of Russia or, when that proved impossible, by killing them.

I'm going to suggest, however, that the psychological change within the Jewish community that rendered their present policy in Israel possible, occurred earlier, that it was already well-developed by the end of the nineteenth century and that one of the main places in which it occurred was what was called the 'Pale of Settlement' - the area of modern-day Moldova, Belarus, the Baltic States and, most importantly, Ukraine.

The Jews had been expelled from Russia proper (called at the time 'Great Russia') in the sixteenth century (they had been expelled from England in the thirteenth century and only allowed back under Cromwell in the seventeenth century) but they had been welcomed, and enjoyed a quite privileged position, in Poland. According to the account by the French Jewish historian Léon Poliakov:

'In a country with a rudimentary economy, whose population consisted only of nobles and serfs, the Jews soon gained a dominant role in all activities connected to the circulation of goods and money ... they formed a whole social class - that urban middle class that had taken so long to form in Poland'. In those circumstances 'the Jews in Poland enjoyed a very high degree of autonomy ... They more or less administered themselves ... At the

local level there was the community, or "kahal". At the national level the "Council of the Four Lands" ...¹

German laws relating to the Jews consisted of simple diktats imposed on them. In Poland they were contracts drawn up between the Polish aristocracy and the Jews as a collective body.² Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that Poland became a place of refuge for Jews and ended up hosting the largest Jewish population in Europe. But this Polish idyll came to an end in the seventeenth century with a series of Cossack uprisings culminating in the Khmelnitsky rising of 1648.

COSSACKS AND JEWS

The Cossacks were, in their origins at least, Orthodox Christian peasants, speaking the language that would later develop into Ukrainian. This was not, as Russians like to think, a dialect of Russian but, like Russian, it was a derivative of the language originally spoken in the Kiev-based 'Kingdom of Rus.' The Orthodox 'Ruthenians', as they were called, were those descendants of the Kingdom of Rus who had been absorbed into Lithuania or Poland while the 'Russians' were the descendants of those who moved Northwards and Eastwards at first to Vladimir and then to Moscow. The Ruthenian aristocracy had folded into the Polish Catholic aristocracy and their peasantry was left unprotected at the bottom of the social hierarchy. To escape both religious persecution and the condition of serfdom, some of them had gone east to join military fraternities which were forming in the borderlands between the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and the lands along the Black Sea coast which were occupied by the Tatars, a Muslim people protected by the Ottoman Empire. It was as a bulwark against the Tatars on the border (the word 'Ukraine' means borderland) that the Poles tolerated or encouraged the existence of the Cossacks. But the Orthodox Cossacks nonetheless defined themselves in increasingly violent opposition to the Catholic Poles.

Nikolai Gogol's novel *Taras Bulba* is rather unspecific as to which of the Cossack risings it is dealing with but it seems to me to correspond to the rising about 1630 which is also the subject of *The Night of Taras* by Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national poet. Gogol, himself a Ukrainian whose earliest publications (*Evenings on a farm near Dikienka*, 1831-2, and *Taras Bulba*, 1835) deal with Ukrainian themes, gives a vivid idea of the resentment occasioned by the privileged position of the Jews. The specific grievance referred to here is that Polish landlords, not wanting to burden themselves with the tedious business of administering their own estates, often delegated the job to Jewish agents who thereby could get a level of control over the churches on estate lands. Since Orthodox churches were regarded with contempt in Poland, the landlords and their Jewish agents had more or less uncontrolled power over them, though I couldn't say if they really did abuse it in the manner described, first in Shevchenko's poem:

*Unbaptised up to manhood grow
The children of our race,
For out of wedlock men must live;
Without a priest they die;
Our faith to Jewry has been sold*

¹ Léon Poliakov: *Histoire de l'antisémitisme. t.1. L'âge de la foi*, Calmann-Lévy, 1981, pp.388-394.

² François Guesnet: 'Agreements between neighbours. The 'ugody' as a source on Jewish-Christian relations in early modern Poland,' *Jewish History*, Vol 24, No 3/4, 2010, p.263.

*And locked our churches lie!
Like blackbirds covering a field,
The Poles and Uniates
Come swooping down.³*

(Uniates were Ruthenians who had converted to Catholicism but allowed to maintain those parts of the old Eastern rite deemed compatible with Catholic doctrine).

And then by Gogol:

"Such times have come that now even the holy churches are not ours."

"How do you mean, not ours?"

"Nowadays they are leased out to the Jews. If you don't pay a Jew beforehand, you cannot serve mass."

"What are you talking about?"

"And if a Jewish dog does not put a stamp with his unbaptised hand on the Holy Easter Cake, one cannot consecrate the cake."

"He is lying, comrades; it cannot be that an unbaptised Jew puts a stamp on the Holy Easter Cake."

"Listen! I've more to tell you: and the Catholic priests are driving now all over Ukraine in their two-wheeled cars. And the trouble is not that they ride in their carriages, but that the Orthodox Christians and not horses pull them. Listen! There's more to tell: they say the Jewesses are making themselves petticoats out of the priests' vestments. These are the things that are going on in the Ukraine, comrades!"

I don't suppose that piece of dialogue - or the assault on the local Jews accompanying the Cossacks as traders that follows - features in the Hollywood film version of *Taras Bulba*, starring Yul Brynner.

The second half of the seventeenth century was dominated by the rising led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky which had a huge, traumatic effect, not just on Jews in Poland but on Jews throughout the world, it was accompanied by such violence and spoliation and destruction of Jewish property. Poliakov (p.400) describes the consequences as follows:

'From the second half of the seventeenth century they were no longer the principal bankers of the country - this role passed to Christian capitalists, above all the religious communities, churches and monasteries, whose wealth, mainly in land, had remained intact. The Jews, both communities and individuals, were in debt to them; the chronic indebtedness of the kahals, through their desperate efforts to refloat the Jewish economy, became a major social problem for Poland and continued to get worse through to the end of the eighteenth century. In 1765, the Polish diet suppressed the 'Council of the Four Lands', the Jewish federating organisation ... So ended the Jewish semi-state autonomy ...'

Seeking the means of making a living, many Jews 'installed themselves in rural areas as innkeepers, tavern keepers, artisans or peddlers, most of them living in extreme poverty.'

From a Ukrainian nationalist point of view the Khmelnytsky rising is an ambiguous event. On the one hand it did establish for a period of time a semi-independent self-governing entity - the 'hetmanate' - which could be regarded as a fledgling Ukrainian state. On the other hand Khmelnytsky and his son and successor, in opposition to the Poles, had entered

³ Readable English translations of Shevchenko's poems can be found at <https://taras-shevchenko.storinka.org>

into an alliance with Russia which eventually resulted in the area East of the Dnieper being incorporated into Russia. Russians tend to regard Khmel'nitsky with unmixed favour as the man who began the process of reunification of the Russian people. In 1954, celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of the 'Pereiaslav Agreement' between Khmel'nitsky and the Muscovite government, the Central Committee of the CPSU issued a series of 'theses' which declared:

*'In the war of liberation, the Ukrainian people were led by an outstanding statesman and soldier. Bogdan Khmel'nitsky. The historic merit of Bogdan Khmel'nitsky lies in the fact that, while expressing the age old aspiration and hope of the Ukrainian people - close unity with the Russian people - and while giving leadership to the process of building Ukrainian statehood, he correctly understood its purposes and prospects, realised that the salvation of the Ukrainian people could be achieved only through unity with the great Russian people and worked perseveringly for the reunion of the Ukraine with Russia.'*⁴

Not much regard being paid here to the possible feelings of Poles or Jews.

The Cossack system was suppressed both in Poland and in the newly acquired Russian area in the eighteenth century but Poland was still subject to a series of Orthodox peasant uprisings culminating in the extremely violent 'Koliishchyna' revolt of 1768 which contributed to the collapse of Poland and its division between Austria, Prussia and Russia. The Koliishchyna revolt is celebrated in Shevchenko's most important, highly influential poem *Haidamaky*.

JEWS AND UKRAINIANS IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

What I've been trying to do so far has been to set the scene for the territory Russia inherited from Poland at the end of the eighteenth century, the same time more or less that it defeated the Tatars and got control of the Black Sea and Azov coast, including Crimea. It was a society in which class divisions coincided almost exactly with religious and ethnic divisions - Polish Catholic landlords, Orthodox 'Ukrainian' (the term at this time may be a little anachronistic but I shall use it anyway) peasants, Jewish middlemen. Hans Rogger, a historian specialising in the pogroms, summarise the situation as follows:

'When the Russians in 1772, 1793 and 1795 took from Poland the provinces that were later to form the bulk of the Pale of Permanent Jewish Settlement, they found large numbers of Jews living as merchants and traders in the countryside, playing a part in nearly every transaction that peasant and lord had with the outside world and with one another. Only thirty per cent of Polish Jews in the eighteenth century were engaged primarily in trade and commerce, but nearly all retail trade was in their hands, as was buying up of agricultural produce and the sale of liquor in the countryside. They were the nobles' agents and sometimes the managers of their estates; and so frequently did landowners lease or farm out to them the subsidiary branches of the manorial economy - fish ponds and grain mills, distilleries and taverns, dairies and orchards, forests and

⁴ Quoted in Frank E. Sysyn: 'The Khmel'Nyts'kyi Uprising: A characterisation of the Ukrainian revolt', *Jewish History*, vol 17, No 2, 2003, p.117

*ferries, the sale of salt, vodka, and other gentry prerogatives - that in some regions the word leaseholder, arendator, had become synonymous with Jew.*⁵

Most Jews in the area were very poor but in the roles outlined by Rogger Jews still exercised immense power over the lives of the peasantry. Under these circumstances, and given the violence in the eighteenth century, one could almost be surprised that the pogroms which made such an impact on world opinion arrived so late, starting in Elizavetgrad on the Western bank of the Dnieper (modern day Kropyvnytskyi, formerly Kirovograd, formerly Zinovievsk) in 1881. Two conditions strike me as having prepared the way - the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the failed Polish rebellion of 1863. With emancipation the peasants were now better placed to fulfil the roles traditionally ascribed to the Jews and with the defeat of the Polish rebellion the Jews lost the support and protection they had had from the Polish landlords.

I'm not going to go into any sort of proper account of the pogroms - they weren't all attributable to the Ukrainian peasantry. Kishinev, probably the most notorious pogrom, is in Moldova, Gomel in Belarus. Odessa in 1905, with many more deaths than on previous occasions, was more like a war than a pogrom. The 'Christian' side was mainly made up of dockworkers.⁶

SECULAR JUDAISM

It has for a long time been almost universally believed that the policy of the Tsarist government was uniformly malevolent towards the Jews and that this culminated in covert support for the pogroms. I can't in the time available to me present the arguments but the modern consensus seems to be that the main thrust of government policy was to try to break down the separate existence of the Jews, to integrate them into the mainstream, with the complication that the mainstream in formerly Polish Ukraine was not the same as the mainstream in Great Russia.⁷ This was one of the factors that led in the nineteenth century to the breakdown of the traditional Jewish religious and community organisation and the emergence of secular elements. The question was whether or not they would define themselves as Jewish if they were no longer religiously Jewish. One of the effects of the upsurge of anti-Jewish feeling was to impress on secular Jews a sense of the importance of their Jewish identity, but it was a national, or ethnic identity rather than a religious one. And, liberated from the traditional religious order it was liberated from the traditional religious pacifism.

A symbolic moment occurred when, in the context of the 1881 pogroms, the synagogues called for a day of fasting and prayer, the traditional response to persecution seen as a sign of God's displeasure. On this occasion the synagogues were filled with young Jews wearing the quasi-military uniform of the Russian universities, a sign of their secular identity since the Rabbis had fought hard to keep them out of the Russian universities. On the one hand they were showing their solidarity with the Jewish community in the moment

⁵ Hans Rogger: 'Government, Jews, Peasants and Land in Post-Emancipation Russia: The Pre-Emancipation background: stirrings and limits of reform', *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, Vol 17, No 1 (Jan-Mar, 1976), p.5

⁶ Details on the pogroms will be found on my website at <http://www.peterbrooke.org/politics-and-theology/solzhn/centuries/>

⁷ I discuss the matter in eg <http://www.peterbrooke.org/politics-and-theology/solzhn/centuries/derzhavin/>

of its suffering. On the other hand they came armed with poems and manifestos calling for a spirit of resistance.⁸

The Jewish tradition of non-resistance was subject to withering criticism in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom in an enormously influential poem by Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *City of Slaughter*. The poem is framed as spoken by God:

*'Pause not upon this havoc; go thy way -
Unto the attic mount, upon thy feet and hands;
Behold the shadow of death among the shadows stands.
Crushed in their shame, they saw it all;
They did not pluck their eyes out; they
Beat not their brains against the wall!
Perhaps, perhaps, each watcher had it in his heart to pray:
A miracle, O Lord, and spare my skin this day!*

*'Come, now, and I will bring thee to their lairs
The privies, jakes and pigpens where the heirs
Of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees,
Concealed and cowering - the sons of the Maccabees!
The seed of saints, the scions of the lions!
Who, crammed by scores in all the sanctuaries of their shame
So sanctified My name!
It was the flight of mice they fled,
The scurrying of roaches was their flight;
They died like dogs, and they were dead!
And on the next morn, after the terrible night
The son who was not murdered found
The spurned cadaver of his father on the ground.
Now wherefore dost thou weep, O son of Man?'*

The poem was originally written in Hebrew but its influence was magnified when, in 1904, it was translated into Russian by Vladimir Jabotinsky, at the time a popular journalist who would later become the founder of 'Revisionist Zionism'. seen as the inspiration, whether Jabotinsky would have approved or not, behind the later formation of Likud and the right wing Zionism that came into the ascendant when Menachem Begin became President in 1977.

The impossibility of the Jews continuing in their traditional role in Ukraine at the end of the nineteenth century was well expressed in the 1890s by Nahman Syrkin, who was later to become one of the most radical Socialist Zionists. This may be taken as a useful summary of everything I've said so far:

'The Jews had been permitted entry, or even invited, into backward and feudal societies in order to fulfil certain specific economic functions which at that time were out of bounds to the indigenous population, whether nobles, peasants or churchmen. They had acted as intermediaries between the warrior class and its serfs, between one branch of the society and another. Despised by the upper classes and hated by the lower, they had rarely lived anything but a precarious existence. The Khmel'nitsky massacres of 1648 were only an

⁸ See eg John Kier: *Russians, Jews and the pogroms of 1881-2*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp.257-260.

extreme example of a chronic peril, a process which "runs through the whole of Jewish history like a scarlet thread."

'So long as there was little or no competition from within the ranks of the host nation, the Jews had usually been able to count on a measure of official protection against the popular wrath. But as soon as the indigenous nationality produced a capitalist and middle class of its own, the presence of the Jews became an historical anachronism. Sooner or later the pressure to expel them from their positions in the economy and even from the country became irresistible. It was now the turn of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement, Galicia and Roumania to suffer the fate that had overtaken the Jews in England, France and Spain hundreds of years before. By means of legislation, boycott, discrimination and violence, the rival groups within the indigenous nationalities were squeezing them out of the economic lifestream, creating a "million-headed poverty-stricken Jewish mass."'⁹

But if the Jews could no longer be what they had been what were the options open to them? One option had opened for very rich Jews. In 1859 the richest Jews in the Pale - 'merchants of the first guild - were allowed to live in Great Russia. The result was the almost immediate transformation of Russian economic life - the introduction of something we would recognise as a money system, the opening of banks dominated by the Ginsberg family, the establishment of a railway system dominated by the Poliakov family. But this rapid modernisation of Russian economic life, encouraged by sections of the government, was creating its own opposition with advanced capitalism identified with Judaism by, for example, Dostoyevsky in his essay *The Jewish Question*, published in 1877. For most of the Jews still living in the Pale, of course, such respectability was out of reach but there was the possibility of abandoning a specific Jewish identity and joining with the politics of the Russian opposition. Although Jews involved in radical politics were only a very small proportion of the Jewish population they constituted a large proportion of the numbers engaged in radical politics and this did not go unnoticed by the police. Then there was the option of emigration and through the 1890s and early twentieth century the number of emigrants to America kept increasing (37,011 in 1900, 77,544 in 1904, 92,388 in 1905, and 125,234 in 1906¹⁰), creating in America a substantial body ready to publicise stories of persecution in what was still regarded as 'Russia'. For those who wished to stay in the Pale and maintain their connection with the Jewish people if not with the religion, there was the Socialist *Bund*. And, especially after Kishinev, there was the emergence of Nationalism. This took several different forms - a demand for cultural autonomy within the Russian Empire, perhaps analogous to the old self-governing *kahal* system in Poland; 'territorialism' which argued that the Jews needed their own sovereign state not necessarily in Palestine; and Zionism, both right wing (notably Jabotinsky) and left wing (notably the young Marxist theorist Ber Borochov). All these tendencies were active in setting up their own self defence units.

THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

But to go back to the Ukrainians. At the bottom of the heap there is still the peasantry speaking its distinct Ukrainian language. A Ukrainian intelligentsia with a lively interest in Ukrainian traditions and culture has emerged, largely inspired by the example of Taras Shevchenko and his glorification of the Cossack past. But they have great difficulty making

⁹ Account of Syrkin's thinking in Joseph Frankel: *Prophecy and Politics - Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp.298-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.135.

contact with the substance of the distinct Ukrainian people - the peasantry - because the government forbids the publication of popular educational material in the Ukrainian language. As a result the idea of a 'Ukrainian nation' has not struck root among the peasantry.¹¹ The peasantry, overpopulated, scratching a living out of ever diminishing plots of land, is still reliant on Jewish middlemen for essential supplies and selling their surplus grain and are often in debt to them in circumstances in which the Jews themselves are barely able to make a living. This all feeds into what was the climax of this particular cycle of attacks on Jews in Ukraine, in the aftermath of the February Revolution of 1917.

The February (Julian calendar, March in the Gregorian calendar) Revolution opened up the possibility of a 'black repartition' in which the peasantry would at last be able to get the land they were working under their own control. So far as I can see there was a difference between the landholding system in Ukraine inherited from Poland and that in Great Russia. In Ukraine although the land was owned by the landlord, the peasant farmer had plots of land which they could regard as their own so long as they worked, say, three days a week on the land controlled by the landlord. It was in these conditions that the Jews as middlemen acquired such importance. In Great Russia the estates were organised as largely self managed and self sufficient communes providing for themselves most of the services provided in Ukraine by the Jews. This of course is a gross oversimplification but it helps explain why the Ukrainian peasantry were so much more committed than the Russian peasantry to the principle of private ownership. In Russia the lands worked by individual peasant-farmers were assigned by the commune and could be changed. And peasants could be assigned many of the other tasks which needed to be done. Hence 'Communism' seemed a less alien idea, even if many Russian peasants would have wanted to escape the commune.

A Ukrainian state was established in 1918 but it was a German protectorate and the Germans (and Austrians) were there in order to obtain grain to feed their own people, subject as they had been for four years to a British naval blockade. The result was an emerging state of war between the peasantry and the government over grain requisitions. The situation was hardly improved when the Germans left after their defeat in 1918 and the whole area became a war zone between the pro-Bolshevik Reds, the anti-Bolshevik whites and an army claiming to represent the Ukrainian national idea, led by Simon Petliura. The peasants, many of whom had only recently fought in the Russian army and had retained their weapons, formed into armed bands under the leadership of local 'atamans' - a term remembered from their Cossack days. There was a movement calling themselves 'Free Cossacks'. And these armed bands had scores to settle with the Jews. Petliura's Ukrainian nationalist army was hardly distinguishable from the peasant bands. Hence the pogroms - deaths on a much larger scale than anything that had gone before - that were associated with his name. It seems extremely unlikely that he personally would have wanted the pogroms. He can certainly be accused of weakness in failing to prevent them but he had huge difficulty scratching any sort of army together never mind enforcing discipline on the people he had managed to get.

That, incidentally, was also Jabotinsky's view. Jabotinsky was a longstanding supporter of Ukrainian cultural autonomy. When, after his defeat by the Red Army and expulsion to Poland, Petliura was planning to return supported by Pilsudski, he invited Jabotinsky to join him with a Jewish police force that would be charged with preventing attacks on Jews. Jabotinsky agreed and for this was heavily criticised by his fellow Zionists. Jabotinsky in his autobiography refers to 'the agreement for which I was cursed in every corner of the

¹¹ I discuss this and the difference in this respect between Galicia under the Austrians and Ukraine under the Russians at <http://www.peterbrooke.org/politics-and-theology/solzhn/ukraine/ukraine-3/class.html>

Jewish world, and which I am willing to sign again¹² though in the event Petliura's Polish supported return to Ukraine never took place.

But what under these circumstances were the Jews to do? The one element which had a firm ideological opposition to 'antisemitism' were the Bolsheviks and they had a highly visible Jewish leader in the person of Leon Trotsky. Were they not the most attractive proposition? And did that not reinforce in the minds of their enemies the identification of Judaism with Bolshevism which was to become the *leitmotiv* of antisemitic rhetoric in the years that followed?

'RUSSIAN' JEWS IN PALESTINE - 'THE IRON WALL'

But the events of 1917 and its aftermath bring us to the year of the Balfour Declaration and its aftermath when the British army seized control of Palestine. When this opened the door to large scale Jewish emigration to Palestine there was already a very small but ideologically highly motivated group of emigrés from the Pale of Settlement ready to assume political leadership. According to the account by Joseph Frankel (*Prophecy and Politics*, p.367), referring to the 'Second Aliyah' ('ascent') to Palestine which occurred in the wake of the 1905 revolution and the violence that followed:

'The hard core within the immigrant youth, perhaps no more than two or three hundred, were charged to an exceptional degree with political energy - an energy drawing its force from the Russian revolutionary experience, on the one hand, and from Jewish messianism, on the other. The revolution had provided them, first, with a heightened belief in themselves, the youth, as the natural source of political leadership. Increasingly, in the period between the Kishinev pogrom and the assembly of the First Duma [April 1903-March 1906 - PB], the very young had come to dominate Jewish politics in the Pale of Settlement. Those who had grown up in those tumultuous times took for granted that not only their future but also the present belonged to the youth. Second, they brought with them from this contact with the revolution and with radical thought in Russia generally a sharp cutting critical spirit, a profound urge to negate the existent, to damn every compromise or hypocrisy, every tradition as an obstacle to freedom and every sign of comfort as bourgeois.'

and according to Yakov Rabkin ('What is Modern Israel?'):

'The Russian dimension of Zionism cannot be overestimated. One telling indicator is the composition of the Knesset 12 years after the founding of the state. Despite the almost total prohibition of emigration from the Soviet Union for more than four decades, over 70 percent of the members of this political elite were Russian-born, while 13 percent were born in Palestine/Israel of Russian parents. The American Zionist elites, whose support was crucial for Zionism's success, were also composed primarily of Jews of Russian origin. The replacement of the Jewish elites of German origin with those originating in Russia also contributed to the shift, between the two world wars, of Jewish public opinion in the United States in favour of Zionism. The essentially Russian character of Zionism

¹² Vladimir Jabotinsky: *Story of my life*, translated from the Hebrew by Brian Horowitz and Leonid Katsis, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2016, p.138 in the Kindle version.

*stands revealed in its concepts, its methods, and in the support it received from American Jews.*¹³

But I want to say a word about Jabotinsky, the most 'extreme' of the Zionists.

Jabotinsky came from a quite comfortable bourgeois family in cosmopolitan Odessa - his father was a grain merchant. His novel *The Five* is a wonderful and affectionate evocation of the Odessa of his youth prior to 1905. He himself had (to the surprise of his readers who knew him as an entertaining travel writer) been converted to Zionism through the events surrounding the Kishinev pogrom. During the war he had formed a 'Jewish Legion' which marched into Palestine together with the British army. In 1920 in the context of anti-immigrant riots that had broken out in Jerusalem, he led a Jewish self defence and was sentenced by the British military administration to fifteen years imprisonment. He was released after three months when the military administration was replaced by the civil administration of Sir Herbert Samuel. While in prison he spent his time translating Dante's *Inferno* into Hebrew (he had earlier translated Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven* into Hebrew). He formed a youth organisation - Betar, active throughout Eastern Europe as well as Palestine. Quoting from Hillel Halkin's biography of Zabolinsky (p.145):

*'Its members practised martial exercises, were taught callisthenics and techniques of self-defence, drilled at marching and parading, wore military-style uniforms on formal occasions, were organised by rank, company and battalion, had their own special salute, and were expected to carry out the orders of their "commanders"'*¹⁴

In 1923 Jabotinsky published his highly influential essay *The Iron Wall*, arguing that no attempt at agreements with the Arab population should be made. But his argument isn't based on contempt for the Arab population, of the type shown by the people who claim to be his successors. On the contrary, it was based on respect:

'Every native population, civilised or not, regards its lands as its national home, of which it is the sole master, and it wants to retain that mastery always; it will refuse to admit not only new masters but, even new partners or collaborators.

'This is equally true of the Arabs. Our Peace-mongers are trying to persuade us that the Arabs are either fools, whom we can deceive by masking our real aims, or that they are corrupt and can be bribed to abandon to us their claim to priority in Palestine, in return for cultural and economic advantages. I repudiate this conception of the Palestinian Arabs. Culturally they are five hundred years behind us, they have neither our endurance nor our determination; but they are just as good psychologists as we are, and their minds have been sharpened like ours by centuries of fine-spun logomachy. We may tell them whatever we like about the innocence of our aims, watering them down and sweetening them with honeyed words to make them palatable, but they know what we want, as well as we know what they do not want.

'They feel at least the same instinctive jealous love of Palestine, as the old Aztecs felt for ancient Mexico , and the Sioux for their rolling Prairies.

'To imagine, as our Arabophiles do, that they will voluntarily consent to the realisation of Zionism in return for the moral and material conveniences which the Jewish colonist brings

¹³ Yakov M. Rabkin: *What is modern Israel?*, English translation from the French by Fred A. Reed, London, Pluto Press, 2014, p.87 in the Kindle version.

¹⁴ Hillel Halkin: *Jabotinsky - a life*, Yale University Press, 2014, p.145.

*with him, is a childish notion, which has at bottom a kind of contempt for the Arab people; it means that they despise the Arab race, which they regard as a corrupt mob that can be bought and sold, and are willing to give up their fatherland for a good railway system.*¹⁵

Since this meant that the Arabs would oppose Jewish colonisation with all the means at their disposal, Zionist colonisation 'can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population - behind an iron wall which the native population cannot breach.' The difference between the supposedly moderate Zionists (represented by, for example, Chaim Weizmann) and his own 'extremist' tendency was that the moderates wanted the iron wall to be provided by the British while he insisted that it was to be provided by the Jews themselves.

That, laid out bluntly in the early stages of the Jewish colonisation of Palestine, is the logic of the establishment of the Jewish state, the logic which everyone who accepts the legitimacy of the Jewish state has to accept. It could be laid down as an iron law of politics that a colony cannot become a nation state without reducing the indigenous population to a state of powerlessness. That is what happened - on a much grander scale than in Israel - in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. It's what the Spanish and Portuguese did in South America where the indigenous population is only now beginning in very limited circumstances to approach the levers of power. It took well over a century before what was still the majority population in Ireland were able to assert themselves politically.

THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF PALESTINE

However, it may be that even Jabotinsky underestimated the difficulty. Jabotinsky believed that once the Jews had achieved a majority, a deal could be made. He prefaced his remarks by saying: 'There will always be two nations in Palestine – which is good enough for me, provided the Jews become the majority.' And he concluded by saying:

'this does not mean that there cannot be any agreement with the Palestine Arabs. What is impossible is a voluntary agreement. As long as the Arabs feel that there is the least hope of getting rid of us, they will refuse to give up this hope in return for either kind words or for bread and butter, because they are not a rabble, but a living people. And when a living people yields in matters of such a vital character it is only when there is no longer any hope of getting rid of us, because they can make no breach in the iron wall. Not till then will they drop their extremist leaders whose watchword is "Never!" And the leadership will pass to the moderate groups, who will approach us with a proposal that we should both agree to mutual concessions. Then we may expect them to discuss honestly practical questions, such as a guarantee against Arab displacement, or equal rights for Arab citizens, or Arab national integrity.

'And when that happens, I am convinced that we Jews will be found ready to give them satisfactory guarantees, so that both peoples can live together in peace, like good neighbours.'

But what happens if the Jews fail to achieve a majority? Jabotinsky's main activity during the 1930s was a desperate tour round Europe trying to organise Jewish emigration to Israel. To this extent he was willing to negotiate with antisemitic states - Poland and Romania for example - anxious to offload their Jews although (perhaps rather

¹⁵ Obtained off the internet at <http://en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf>

inconsistently) he couldn't bring himself to have dealings with the Nazis - other Zionist tendencies were less scrupulous. Nonetheless, after the war (Jabotinsky died in 1941), when United Nations Resolution 181 was passed creating two state on interwoven territories, the Arabs were still in a very decisive majority, perhaps twice as many Arabs as there were Jews in a territory that still included the west Bank. The Zionists solved the problem by ceding the West Bank to the only formidable military force they faced - the Jordanian Arab Legion - and expelling 7 or 800,000 of the Arabs in the territory that remained. A useful summary of what happened is given by Rabkin (p.61):

'Zionization of the land took a radical turn after 1948. Until then, the Zionists had not been able to assert control over more than 7 percent of the land of Mandate Palestine, while 10 percent was under the control of the state authority, in this case the British administration. A year after the unilateral declaration of independence, the state of Israel, in association with the JNF [Jewish National Fund], controlled 93 percent of these lands, an outcome achieved primarily by the expropriation of land belonging to the Palestinian refugees whose return was forbidden by the Israeli authorities. In addition, two-thirds of the lands belonging to the Arab citizens of Israel were also acquired and "Zionized," leaving to their former owners a meager 4 percent despite the fact that they constitute nowadays nearly 20 percent of all Israeli citizens. Zionization has been rendered irreversible as the JNF controls these lands "in the name of the Jewish people," a conceptually vague entity that covers, without their knowledge let alone consent, all those who consider themselves Jews, irrespective of their relation with Zionism and the state of Israel. As a result, Israel's Arab citizens cannot purchase, rent, or even use most of the land in the country of their citizenship. An estimated 500 Palestinian villages were obliterated after the dispossession of the native population following the creation of the Zionist state. Between 1949 and 1952, the ground on which some of those villages had stood was used to build 240 collective settlements (kibbutzim and moshavim).'

This account, however, rather neglects the West Bank. Presumably when he says 'the Zionists had not been able to assert control over more than 7 per cent of the land of mandate Palestine' he is referring to a territory that includes the West Bank, but when he says that a year after the unilateral declaration of independence the state of Israel controlled 93% 'of these lands' he's referring to a territory that excludes the West Bank. And when he says that the Arabs constitute nowadays nearly 20% of all Israeli citizens, well, that's probably accurate but only because the Palestinians in the 'occupied' West Bank (unlike the Jewish settlers) don't have citizenship, or the rights that go with it. If the West Bank and Gaza are included as part of the territory of Israel, then it's very doubtful if the Jews can be said to constitute a majority, certainly not a safe and secure majority.

I keep returning to the interview Benny Morris gave back in 2004. Morris was one of the Israeli 'new historians' together with Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim, who revealed the full extent of what had been done to the Palestinians in 1948 (Palestinian historians of course, such as Nur Masalha, had already revealed it but no-one paid any attention to them). In 2004, however, Morris gave an interview in which he defended the ethnic cleansing:

'That was the situation. That is what Zionism faced. A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians. Therefore it was necessary to uproot them. There was no choice but to expel that population. It was necessary to cleanse the hinterland and cleanse the border areas and cleanse the main roads. It was necessary to cleanse the villages from which our convoys and our settlements were fired on.'

In fact Morris argues that to be really secure in their borders Israel needed to expel more than the 700,000 Palestinians. Asked if that was what they should do now, he replied:

*'If you are asking me whether I support the transfer and expulsion of the Arabs from the West Bank, Gaza and perhaps even from Galilee and the Triangle, I say not at this moment. I am not willing to be a partner to that act. In the present circumstances it is neither moral nor realistic. The world would not allow it, the Arab world would not allow it, it would destroy the Jewish society from within. But I am ready to tell you that in other circumstances, apocalyptic ones, which are liable to be realized in five or ten years, I can see expulsions. If we find ourselves with atomic weapons around us, or if there is a general Arab attack on us and a situation of warfare on the front with Arabs in the rear shooting at convoys on their way to the front, acts of expulsion will be entirely reasonable. They may even be essential.'*¹⁶

That obviously brings to mind the present situation. In a 'hot' frame of mind all things are possible that would not be possible otherwise. But more recently, in an interview given in 2019, he said he thought the time had passed. It was now too late:

*'Already today there are more Arabs than Jews between the [Mediterranean] sea and the Jordan. The whole territory is unavoidably becoming one state with an Arab majority. Israel still calls itself a Jewish state, but a situation in which we rule an occupied people that has no rights cannot persist in the 21st century, in the modern world. And as soon as they do have rights, the state will no longer be Jewish ... The Arabs will demand the return of the refugees. The Jews will remain a small minority within a large Arab sea of Palestinians, a persecuted or slaughtered minority, as they were when they lived in Arab countries ... [The Palestinians] are bound to win. In another 30 to 50 years they will overcome us, come what may.'*¹⁷

If we assume that Morris is articulating something that might be widely felt instinctively among Israeli Jews though rarely expressed out loud, we might have some understanding of the apparent madness of current Israeli politics.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

So what is the present situation?

In a recent interview on BBC radio (October 2023, in the wake of the Hamas breakout from Gaza on 7th October), Ehud Barak, the Israeli Prime Minister who is supposed to have offered the best deal Israel ever offered to the Palestinians, spelled out, in rather awkward grammar, what he regards as the ideal two state solution:

'I will never lose eye contact with the ultimate objective which is to separate ourselves from the Palestinians and having Israel which have probably 80% of the settlers holding strategic assets on several [sic] percent of the West Bank side by side with the Palestinian demilitarised viable state.'

In this 'ultimate objective' the Palestinians are given a 'viable state' of their own without the means of self defence, with the Israeli settlers occupying all the positions of strategic importance, including the border with Jordan.

¹⁶ Ari Shavit: 'Survival of the Fittest? An Interview with Benny Morris', *Counterpunch*, January 16, 2004

¹⁷ Interview in *Haaretz*, 18th January, 2019.

That is not a state.

The first requirement of a state is the ability to defend its citizens. A state is not a state if it does not have its own army under full control of its sovereign government.

So what would a real 'two state solution' look like?

The Palestinians would have full control over Gaza and the West Bank, full access to the rest of the Arab world and the right to develop a military force capable of defending themselves against the neighbouring Israeli state.

Even after the current slaughter taking place in Gaza it is generally assumed that, if the Palestinians in the whole area from the river to the sea do not already outnumber the Jews, they soon will. This is of course not counting those living in refugee camps outside Israel. This population, with its free military capacity and its free relations with the rest of the Arab/Muslim world would be living in some 20% of the total area, beside a state which they knew was built on the spoliation of their land and expulsion of their people back in 1948. Does anyone seriously think such a state of affairs would be viable? That it would not simply serve as a springboard for a later, more equally matched, war?

The 'two state solution' was from the first based on the fiction that what happened in 1948 was 'legitimate'. It was only the land seizure of 1967 that needed to be rectified, only the West Bank that is 'occupied.' It might have been possible for some naïve souls to believe at the time that that was a viable solution to the problem but the Israeli government could never, in any of its manifestations, be accused of naïvety. They never had any intention of implementing it. From the start they set about colonising the parts of the West Bank that were under their control. Discreetly at first but the discretion didn't last very long. It was the steady advance of the colonisation project that provoked the second intifada and the rise of Hamas. It is now so solidly, so arrogantly implanted that talk of the 'two state solution' is now nothing but an empty cliché, a good example of what is called 'virtue signalling', an insult to the intelligence.

So what are the alternatives? If we define a state as an area under the control of a single government with a monopoly of effective force there is of course only one state in the area from the river to the sea. It is because there is only one state that the word 'apartheid' can be used to describe it - pre-1967 Israel isn't an apartheid state. It is an even worse version of pre-1967 Northern Ireland, a political entity in which there are two peoples living together, the majority people keeping the minority people in a state of subjection.

So what will become of this single state?

There are three possible outcomes:

1) The continuation of the status quo up to the point where the Israeli government succeeds in its ultimate aim - a single Jewish state with a hugely reduced Palestinian population, maybe with some tiny bantustans still allowed to live in its midst under constant surveillance. That is the most likely outcome, but it is impossible to imagine that such a state would ever be able to live at peace with its neighbours.

2) The radical overthrow of the Israeli state accompanied by mass slaughter of the Jews. That is the implication of the demand for a 'Free Palestine', assuming that we agree that the Palestinians couldn't be satisfied with a 'Free Palestine' confined to the West Bank without control of its border with Jordan and with no means of defending itself. This outcome is improbable but not impossible. It would require a regional - if not a world - war.

3) A single binational state in which everyone living in the area would have equal rights - a 'state for all its citizens' - perhaps analogous to what happened in South Africa. There are a variety of constitutional forms it could take to try to protect the rights of the different peoples. The Jews would very soon be a minority but they would still (like the white South Africans) possess many of the levers of economic and military power. This option is of course highly improbable. It presents many difficulties. But it is the only option anyone with a conscience not fully committed to total victory for one side or the other can support.