

**COUNTER-STATE ZIONISM AND  
POLITICAL ZIONISM**

**Nation and History: Israeli  
Historiography between Zionism and  
Post-Zionism**, by Yoav Gelber. London:  
Valentine Mitchell, 2011. 352 pages.  
\$32.95 paper.

**Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn**, by Noam Pianko. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. x + 277 pages. \$25.95.

*Reviewed by Ephraim Nimni*

Zionism: One or many? Obsolete? Irreconcilably divided? Ethnocentric? Is there a Zionism compatible with nondiscrimination of Palestinians? These two books, *Nation and History: Israeli Historiography between Zionism and Post-Zionism* by Yoav Gelber and *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* by Noam Pianko, present opposite points of view, one backward looking and abortive, the other forward looking, expressing hope for change. Both are grounded in historical discussions with considerable relevance to the present. Both draw legitimacy by adhering to a Zionist dream. The two opposing dreams, however, negate each other.

*Yoav Gelber and the Disastrous Roads Taken*

Gelber presents a feeble defense of Zionist orthodoxy in a book riveted with hyperboles. The Hebrew version is "History, Memory and Propaganda" (*Historia, Zikaron v'Ta'amula*), a fitting title for the English version, too; the book is copiously adorned with slogans. Gelber's book was born out of the Teddy Katz thesis controversy, which seriously undermined the prestige of Haifa University. Gelber provides his interpretation of the disgusting affair under the suggestive subheading, "Prostituting History: The Tantura Blood Libel" (p. 257). Katz, whose findings Gelber refers to as a "blood libel," was a Haifa University

student who uncovered the massacre of Palestinians in the village on Tantura. The saga culminated in the cancellation of Katz's top-grade degree and a failed attempt to expel Professor Ilan Pappé from Haifa University (see *JPS* 30, no. 3 [2001], pp. 5–39).

Gelber sees post-Zionism as undermining the "scientific" character of Israeli scholarship. What is this contamination? "The postmodern and other post-theories that had swamped the campuses of Western Europe and the USA since the late 1970's" (p. xii). How do they contaminate Israel? "Israeli faculty staff who returned from sabbaticals or from their PhD or post-doctoral studies abroad imported these crazes to the Israeli academe" (p. xii). What follows is a long and amateurish discussion of epistemology and historical research, ending with the pedestrian axiom that historical research approximates "the truth" (p. 27). The second chapter, "The Impact of the Postmodern Gospel and Its Apostles on the History Discipline," is a long tirade of dubious value. Under the heading of "*Postism [sic]*," Gelber claims that after the enlightenment, people considering themselves enlightened "seek peace of mind in horoscopes, Indian worship cults and drugs" (p. 30). He argues that "like religious faith, postmodernism takes a deterministic view of the world. It is fatalist denying free will and offering absolutism" (p. 31).

The third chapter is a denunciation of oral history, an attack on methods that today are seen as uncontroversial. Gelber acknowledges that Palestinian refugees shaped their memories around their places of origin and make pilgrimages to what he calls "deserted" villages (p. 94). For Gelber, memory has a useful purpose, arguing that the past could also be a burden and drive people to expunge unpleasant memories, something that fits well with Israeli attempts to expunge the Nakba.

The chapter "Jewish, Zionist, and Israeli Historiography" shows the old, discredited survivalist interpretation of Jewish history, whose episteme and genealogy are oriented to Jewish national normalization in a Jewish state. Here nation, state, and security become the teleological *raison d'être* for Zionism.

---

**Ephraim Nimni** is Professor of Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict Resolution at Queen's University Belfast, and Professor of Comparative Nationalism at the University of the Basque Country. He is the author of *The Challenge of Post Zionism*, (Zed Books, London 2003), and *National Cultural Autonomy and its Contemporary Critics* (Routledge, London 2005). His new book, *Multicultural Nationalism* (Routledge) will be published next year.

This is the regime of truth that shapes Gelber's objectivity: historicizing Judaism articulates the aspiration of "normalizing" it, political Zionism is its latest advocate. Examples are drawn exclusively from Europe, rendering invisible and subsuming non-European Jewry into this master narrative. It further controls the plurality and diversity of Judaism in a disciplined notion of normality. Not only Arab and Sephardic Jews are absent, but so are other Jewish religious and national projects. Gelber explains how Baer and Dinur, builders of the Israeli state-oriented educational dogma, inherited a vision of "The Jewish People" as a living organism (p. 107). Through these arguments the indebtedness of political Zionism to Völkisch movements of Central Europe, from which Labor Zionism inherited its organic vision of the nation, becomes apparent (see Sternhell, 1998, pp. 55, 332). With statehood, all rival interpretations of Jewish history and Zionism became integrated into political Zionism.

Chapter 5, "Post-Zionism and Jewish Nationalism," returns to Gelber's obsessive topic, polemicizing on post-Zionism, repeating interminably the claim that Jewish nationalism is political Zionism and ignoring the impact of alternative forms of Jewish nationalism and Zionism. Gelber adds, for a change, an interesting reflection. To the existential distress of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, there were only two solutions: emigration to the United States or to Palestine. Disregarding that displaced Jews also migrated elsewhere, Gelber's dichotomy raises an interesting point, and the Achilles heel of political Zionism. From the 1920s, when alternatives existed, displaced Jews did not migrate to Palestine except for a small number of idealists. The majority of those who migrated to Palestine from the 1920s did so for lack of choice. This was the case of Soviet Jews with exit visas to Israel during the cold war; their actual destination was the United States as it granted refugee status to escapees from the Soviet Union. Most changed course on arrival to Vienna, the transit point. These refugees were vilified by the Zionist press and organizations, calling them dropouts (*Nosbrim*), creating a rift between the Zionist movement and

U.S. Jewish welfare organizations. This changed with the cancellation of preferred immigration status for escapees from Communism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Political Zionism was interested in persecuted Jews only insofar as they became laborers and troopers in the settlement of Palestine and Israel.

Gelber's work is not well known outside Israel, but his most significant citation in English relates directly to the above. In 1979, Gelber published in English an article with the title "Zionist Policy and the Fate of European Jewry" in the journal *Yad Vashem Studies*, which is dedicated to the memory of those who perished in the Nazi genocide. Here Gelber published what was hitherto an unknown statement of Israel's founder, David Ben Gurion, who said in 1938:

If I knew that it would be possible to save all the children in Germany by bringing them over to England, and only half of them by transporting them to *Eretz Yisrael*, then I would opt for the second alternative. For we must weigh not only the life of these children, but also the history of the People of Israel. (Ben Gurion, in Gelber, 1979, p. 199)

Gelber claims that the Zionist movement before World War II removed itself from rescue attempts of endangered Jews if these were not connected to Palestine, citing the refusal of Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, to attend the Evian Conference (Gelber, 1979, p. 199). President Roosevelt called the Evian Conference in 1938 to consider the resettlement of Jews persecuted by Nazis. The conference ended in failure, something that remains the curse and mark of Cain on Western democracies. BBC correspondent Christopher Sykes corroborates Gelber's argument, indicating that the attitude of Zionist organizations was one of hostile indifference, as they "did not want Jewish settlements outside Palestine to be successful" (Sykes, 1965, p. 228).

It sounds incredible that Gelber's *Yad Vashem* article was published in a journal devoted to commemorating victims of the Nazi genocide. He does not utter the mildest criticism of Ben Gurion's lack of compassion. On the contrary, Gelber's apologetic contextual

explanation that the Zionist project was in danger sinks even further the morality of political Zionism. It shows that it was more concerned with creating Israel than with the survival of endangered Jews. In his refutation of Idith Zertal's groundbreaking book, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (2005), which accused political Zionism of behaving inhumanely and cynically manipulating Jewish refugees for its own statist ends, Gelber replies, "Had the Zionist Leadership taken this course, it is likely that no Jewish state would have arisen" (p. 216). No Jewish state perhaps, but what about saving millions of Jewish and, indeed, Palestinian refugees instead? The negation of the Jewish Diaspora fits also into the Manichean model of political Zionism. Gelber writes, "Zionism could not expand without negating the Diaspora, as a revolutionary movement it had to rise up against the existing order it sought to change—and this order was the Diaspora" (p. 156).

#### *Noam Pianko and the Roads Not Taken*

For Pianko, the perception that Zionism builds a Jewish nation state and negates the Diaspora was not the inevitable outcome of Zionist ideals. After World War I, leading Jewish intellectuals attempted to redefine Zionism against the nation-state paradigm. Pianko's book is devoted to analyzing in light of contemporary events these roads not taken. If these roads had been taken, they would have obviated much suffering, displacement, and bloodshed of Jews and Palestinians. Thus Pianko's book is important, not because the roads were not taken but because these models could inspire a radical reconfiguration of Jewish Diaspora politics, as well as a reconfiguration of relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Following Pianko's terminology, I would call this the "Diasporization of Israel and Palestine," though Pianko limits himself to Jewish Diasporas.

Although some might be surprised by Pianko's understanding of Zionism, there is some justification for this. I have discussed in detail elsewhere (see Nimmi, 2003, pp. 119–21), that following 1948, all forms of Zionism were incorporated into the victorious faction

within it, political Zionism. As the victorious hegemon, political Zionism disarmed alternative interpretations, making the state model with a Jewish majority the only "realistic" one. For example, Ahad Ha'am is widely known in Israel because there is a street in his name in every city. Few realize that if his ideas succeeded, there would be no Jewish state.

Pianko's aim to revive nonterritorial understandings of Zionism becomes then a counter-hegemonic project as much as it is a counter-state project. Though some of post-Zionism's detractors (Hazony, 2000) argue the roots of contemporary post-Zionism rest with the early forms of counter-state Zionism, unfortunately Pianko did not connect with this important counter-hegemonic trend.

Pianko's first chapter, "Breaking the Sovereign Mold," goes directly to the point, using as a reference a speech of the Israeli Zionist novelist A. B. Yehoshua (a fellow-traveler of Gelber), who Pianko calls a "Zionist provocateur." Yehoshua, with characteristic "finesse," infuriated his U.S. Jewish audience by claiming that he would not cry if Jews were to disappear from the Diaspora (the inverted mirror image relation between political Zionism and anti-Semitism). Like Gelber, Yehoshua expressed a narrative of Jewish nationalism that elevated the state as the highest expression of Jewish life and the culmination of Jewish history. It seems that Pianko was sufficiently incensed to ask, "What would an alternative to Yehoshua's vision look like?" (p. 3). From his irritation, Pianko bequests to us an impressive tour de force of the ideas and projects of counter-state Zionists, one that—in sharp contrast to Gelber's tirade—is elegantly argued, meticulously researched, and situated in a contemporary context. Following Pianko's logic, the Jewish homeland could not be an ethnic state. This point was systematically explored by one of Pianko's counter-state Zionists, Hans Kohn, the prominent scholar and founding father of the academic study of nationalism.

The first counter-state Zionist discussed by Pianko is Simon Rawidowicz. He confronted Ben Gurion on naming

the state "Israel," arguing that term cannot belong exclusively to Palestine's Jews. Rawidowicz castigated Ben-Gurion for making the term "Israel" an arbitrary geographical entity devoid of cultural identity and advocated instead for a decentered Jewish national life. Rawidowicz argued, prophetically, that in ignoring the fundamental principles of Jewish thought, political Zionism was emulating the inequalities implemented by nations that victimized Jews in the name of national unity.

The second counter-state Zionist is Mordecai Kaplan, who argued that current concepts of nationalism are deceptive because they assume an identity between nation and state. This makes it impossible for stateless nations to be considered. Instead, Kaplan advocated a Zionism compatible with multinational states. The Balfour Declaration, Kaplan wrote in 1929, was like a foreign body in the system of Jewish revival, causing irritation and liable to set up a dangerous poison.

The third and most important of Pianko's counter-state Zionists was Hans Kohn, a prolific writer and renowned scholar of nationalism. After migrating to Palestine, Kohn grew disillusioned with mainstream Zionism and began to campaign for a binational state. He believed that Palestinians had no antipathy to Jewish settlers, only a (well-founded) fear that Jews would take over Palestine. He argued that Palestinians should be reassured on this by limiting immigration and recognizing Palestinian national rights: "Jews and Arabs would then build a binational federation with complete cultural autonomy" (Pianko, pp. 152–53).

Kohn opposed the idea that Jews had historical rights over Palestine and was not interested in establishing a Jewish majority in Palestine. Kohn was different from other Zionist leaders in that he dialogued with Palestinians and wrote for both Zionist newspapers and the Palestinian newspaper *Filastin*. Kohn was inspired by the model of National Cultural Autonomy of the Austrian socialists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner (see Nimni, 2005). He produced a blueprint for a model of non-territorial autonomy in a binational state, devolving significant power to the local level and building cantonal

and nonterritorial forms of community organization as well as autonomous institutions that could help build a binational state. Palestine's government would take the form of a multitier binational organization, recognizing cultural, religious, and linguistic differences and encouraging intergroup cooperation. His blueprint for Palestine invoked local elements resembling the Ottoman millet. On this, he went beyond many contemporary advocates of a one-state solution.

According to Pianko, Kohn believed that the presence of two national groups was a blessing, because it would allow building a state that would avoid the destructive failures of European nationalism. For Kohn, a binational state in Palestine was not a compromise dictated by circumstances. It was an exemplary model to usher the transition from nation states to multinational states; counter-state nationalism was, for Kohn, an important protection against the exclusivist threat of ethno-national sovereignty. This has contemporary relevance and needs to be explored in detail. Kohn finally grew disillusioned with Zionism, migrated to the United States, and became a leading international academic.

#### *Can Counter-State Zionism Diasporize Israel-Palestine?*

The concluding chapter of Pianko's book is pregnant with thought-provoking ideas. He claims, with some justification, that counter-state Zionists opted for subverting mainstream political thought on the link between nation and state through the specific lens of Judaism. This included the subversion of mainstream political Zionism's goal of a sovereign Jewish nation state, but the implications of this remain ambiguous in Pianko's argument. However, he notes that counter-state Zionists wanted to replace, not emulate, post-1948 Zionism.

But post-1948 Zionism was contaminated by the Nakba. Counter-state Zionists opposed political Zionism because they had the foresight to realize, following the painful Central European Jewish experience, that political Zionism's goal of an ethnic state would ineluctably lead to the Nakba. The process of destroying

Palestinian communities and building an ethnocentric state in its place echoed events in Central Europe and severely tarnished the morality of political Zionism. Michael Mann's bestseller, the *Dark Side of Democracy* (2005), vindicates counter-state Zionism, showing that the conflation between *ethnos* and *demos* is a powerful trigger of ethnic cleansing. However, Pianko falls short of seeing this with regard to the State of Israel. He does understand that state nationalist rhetoric has led to expansionism, aggressive homogenization, and ethnic cleansing, yet the connection to Israel remains unclear. This must be addressed if Pianko's argument is to avoid falling into contradictions. His plea for a renewal of counter-state Zionism and a decentering politics of recognition of minority communities is refreshing, but oriented to reinvigorating counter-state Diaspora Zionism. While this is an important goal, it is partial and insufficient. Pianko must take his argument forward to "diasporize" the state that claims to be the state of all Jews, and decenter its constituent communities, as earlier counter-state Zionists demanded. A reinvigorated counter-state Zionism must explore its synergies with Israeli post-Zionism and with other historical non-Zionist forms of Jewish autonomism such as the Jewish Bund, which Pianko has neglected.

Zionism has unleashed its artillery against Pianko. In his 2011 article, Aviel Roshwald disingenuously argues that Palestine's binational state would be "a Belgium with bazookas" (p. 105). It is mystifying that a scholar of nationalism does not understand that these "bazookas" are the corollary of promoting ethnic cleansing. Contrary to Roshwald's dubious assertions, the counter-state diasporization of Israel could bring constructive hope where there is despair. Through the colonial encounter, Zionism is now inextricably linked to the question of Palestine. As Joseph Massad

(2006) argues, the negation of (political) Zionism is the negation of anti-Semitism, and a key ingredient in the persistence of the Palestinian question, counter-state Zionism, has the potential to break the vicious circuit.

#### REFERENCES:

- Gelber, Yoav. "Zionist Policy and the Fate of European Jewry (1939–42)." *Yad Vashem Studies* XIII (1979): 169–211.
- Hazon, Yoram. *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Mann, Michael. *The Dark Side of Democracy, Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Massad, Joseph A. *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Nimni, Ephraim. "From *Galut* to *T'fusoth*: Post-Zionism and the Dislocation of Jewish Diasporas." In E. Nimni, ed., *The Challenge of Post-Zionism*. London: Zed Books, 2003.
- Nimni, Ephraim. *National Cultural Autonomy and Its Contemporary Critics*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Roshwald, Aviel. "Review of Noam Pianko's Zionism and the Roads Not Taken." *Journal of Israeli History* 30 (2011): 104–106.
- Sternhell, Zeev. *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Sykes, Christopher. *Cross Roads to Israel: Palestine from Balfour to Bevin*. London: Collins, 1965.
- Zertal, Idith. *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. (See review in *JPS* 35, no. 3 [2006]: 123–124.)