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## THE JEWISH ARMY THAT WASN'T

*Racing Against History: The 1940 Campaign for a Jewish Army to Fight Hitler,*  
by Rick Richman. Encounter Books, 288 pages, \$25.99

LIKE A GRUESOME CAR ACCIDENT unfolding in slow motion, Hitler's advance across Europe and subjugation of its Jews can appear in hindsight as somehow avoidable. If only Chamberlain hadn't buckled at Munich, or France hadn't relied on the Maginot Line, or Molotov hadn't trusted Ribbentrop, or the British hadn't closed Palestine's gates to Jewish immigration—calamity might have been avoided. In *Racing Against History*, Rick Richman, a lawyer and writer, explores a lesser-known missed opportunity: a plan to muster an all-Jewish international fighting force against the Nazis.

As Richman tells it, three Zionist leaders from what was then called Mandatory Palestine—Chaim Weizmann, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and David Ben-Gurion—traveled to the United States in succession in 1940. Each wanted “to alert American Jews to a European crisis even more dire than they realized; to rally support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine; and to form a Jewish army to join the fight against Hitler.”

Even before the Führer came to power, a fierce debate cleaved American Jews along the Zionist fault line, and that division deepened as the community confronted the intensifying Nazi depredations. “American Jews,” Richman observes, “were eager to be considered patriotic citizens, and they were exceedingly wary of taking positions at variance with the isolationist consensus of their fellow citizens.”

The head of the Zionist Organization and a high-society Briton, Weizmann arrived in January 1940 to garner American support for the Zionist enterprise and to prod President Franklin Roosevelt to lean on the British government, then in control of Palestine, to ease its restrictions on Jewish immigration. Despite cordial meetings with FDR and retired Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, and a warm reception during private lectures, Weizmann's trip was a “failure,” Richman concludes, because the American Jewish community didn't appreciate the urgency of his message.

The assertive, charismatic Jabotinsky, who founded and led the rightist Revisionist Zionists, took an entirely different tack during his visit stateside, consistent with his recently published book, *The Jewish War Front*, in

which he'd “argued that it was incumbent on the Jews of the world to form a Jewish army, take an active part in the struggle against Nazism, and persuade the Allies to make one of their war aims a Jewish state.”

JABOTINSKY HIMSELF HAD SERVED VALIANTLY during World War I on the side of Great Britain in his majesty's 38th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers—better known as the Jewish Legion—to help wrest Palestine from the Ottoman Turks. Jabotinsky passionately recalled his comrades' pre-deployment march through London “shoulder to shoulder, their bayonets dead level, each step like a single clap of thunder, clean, proud...with the sense of a holy mission, unexampled since the day of Bar-Kochba.”

He fervently sought to revive that mission, predicting to a crowd of thousands in Manhattan that “the allies will have to make room, on their various fronts, for a Jewish army, just as they have in the case of the Polish army.” Shortly after Hitler completed his conquest of France in June, Jabotinsky cabled newly installed Prime Minister Winston Churchill his offer to raise a force of 130,000 Jewish fighters, proclaiming in a subsequent speech that these armed Jews, “volunteering in large numbers to fight for truth and sacrifice their lives, will inspire humanity to ever greater sacrifices at the present critical hour.”

Jabotinsky contended that Palestinian Jews would form the core of his army along with their American, British, and French cousins, bolstered by Canadians and scattered refugees, but he never articulated how the force would coalesce or fight alongside Britain. He also faced fierce opposition from the American Jewish establishment, with the editor of the *Forward*, then the leading Jewish newspaper, labeling his scheme “a story out of *A Thousand and One Nights*.” As if these challenges weren't enough, Jabotinsky dropped dead suddenly in New York's Catskill Mountains in August, dealing a crippling blow to the plan.

Salvaging the Jewish army thus fell to Ben-Gurion, who spearheaded the Labor Zionist movement on the ground in Palestine and once fought in Jabotinsky's Jewish Legion. Ben-Gurion journeyed to the United States in late 1940 to ascertain, as he wrote his wife,

Paula, “the extent of the contribution America's Jews are prepared to make for the life of their own people.” And while others cautioned this contribution would be minimal, he stubbornly refused to believe it. “In everyone's opinion,” he wrote in his diary, which Richman has translated for the first time,

There is no hope in recruiting the young Jews in America to establish a Jewish Army. They are preoccupied with their own problems, they are afraid of what the Goyim are going to say, and the new American military leadership will also be in the way. *I cannot accept this verdict.*

YET WHILE BEN-GURION, A VERITABLE force of nature, barnstormed the United States and publicly addressed thousands of Jews and non-Jews alike, he curiously confined most of his Jewish army exhortations to his diary and to private conversations. Owing partly to the looming November 1940 presidential election and partly to his reluctant recognition that “the Jews of America are afraid,” he never openly gave voice to his private sentiments.

“The practical results of Ben-Gurion's trip,” Richman observes, “were no greater than Weizmann's.” He wouldn't “call publicly for a Jewish army before either the British or American governments gave their approval for the idea.” And as little enthusiasm as the Allies displayed in the 1940s for establishing a Jewish state in Palestine, they were even less inclined to field a ramshackle force of Jews cobbled together from multiple countries under siege.

Nevertheless, although neither Weizmann nor Jabotinsky nor Ben-Gurion succeeded in raising a Jewish army, they triumphed in the long run, as their missions “contributed to a dawning awareness on the part of American Jews that their own future was tied to that of the Jews in Europe and Palestine, and that awareness only deepened over time.” Eight years later, in 1948, the state of Israel arose from the ashes of the once unstoppable Shoah.

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