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Book Review by Jeremy Rozansky

WARRIOR OF ZION

Jabotinsky: A Life, by Hillel Halkin.
Yale University Press, 256 pages, \$25



THE ZIONIST REVOLUTION, LED BY INTELLECTUALS, scientists, polemicists, and theologians, was as bookish and theorized as any in world history. But Zionism could not have triumphed—Israel would not exist—without vigor, fortitude, and disdain for comforting illusions. No one of its leaders directed every step from dream to statehood, especially not Vladimir Jabotinsky, who often advocated the road not taken. But Zionism, a movement conceived in political amateurs' utopian fantasies, received a forceful push from Jabotinsky toward its fulfillment: a sovereign Jewish nation.

It requires a subtle understanding of both letters and politics to assess Jabotinsky's moral imagination, literary core, and strategic vision. Fortunately, Hillel Halkin, the treasured essayist and preeminent translator of Yiddish and Hebrew, is equal to the task. In part because Jabotinsky was a hated rival of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and founding hero, his ideas and achievements have been unfairly disparaged and distorted. Nearly four decades have passed since the breakthrough 1977 electoral victory of Menachem Begin's Likud Party over the Labor

Party, which had governed Israel since its founding. With Halkin's biography of Jabotinsky, students of Zionism finally have a volume that illuminates the Israeli Right's progenitor.

Jabotinsky was born in Odessa in 1880. An international city on the Black Sea, planned by the French and Italians, cosmopolitan Odessa had too many small ethnic factions for any one to dominate. For a time, the Jews were the largest group.

Within Jabotinsky's Odessan household, the Jewish laws of diet, Sabbath rituals, and prayer customs were all observed. His outlook, therefore, combined that of David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, Zionist leaders who were born in the *shtetl*, with that of the assimilated Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism. Though the religiosity of his home did not dictate inner piety, Jabotinsky was always a Jew. In Odessa one could easily leave Judaism and assimilate. As a result, those who chose not to discard their Jewishness more deeply felt its conspicuousness.

Jabotinsky was drawn to journalism for reasons he could not explain, even to himself. Like many young Russian Jews he moved west, to Switzerland and then Italy, eventually be-

coming the Rome correspondent of Odessa's liberal daily, *Odesskaya Novosti*. Jabotinsky adored Italy, enjoying his bohemian life there while also admiring Garibaldi's fusion of nationalism and democratic humanism. Halkin theorizes that his late adolescent years in Italy left Jabotinsky with the image of a free, decent society's possibilities, and a desire to establish another one like it on the Mediterranean for his people.

Jabotinsky returned to Odessa in 1900, not expecting to stay. His editor at *Odesskaya Novosti* offered him a job as a columnist, however, and he was soon reading Zionist literature and defending it in his columns. (The First Zionist Congress had met in 1897). Soon he felt impelled to organize and petition on behalf of Zionism. Dozens of Jews were murdered, hundreds more wounded or raped, in a 1903 Easter Sunday pogrom a hundred miles from Odessa. The atrocity turned him into a firebrand.

THAT SUMMER, AFTER JOINING A JEWISH self-defense force, he represented Odessa at the Sixth Zionist Congress, where he voted against the famous Uganda



Proposal—the Herzl-backed plan to add to the British Empire a semi-independent Jewish colony near Lake Victoria. That plan raised a fundamental question about the meaning of Zionism and, therefore, of Jewish identity: Was Zionism the strategic quest for Jews’ safety and sovereignty? Or was it about realizing centuries of Jewish longing—for safety, yes, but also for Jerusalem? Jabotinsky contended for the second course as a practical imperative. How could Zionism succeed, he asked, if it did not channel the deep-seated yearnings of the Jewish psyche?

For the next decade, his journalistic work took him through Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, including Palestine. Traveling in the Balkans convinced Jabotinsky that every people was, in the last analysis, on its own. As he put it with Hobbesian clarity, “Justice exists for those with the physical power and persistence to appropriate it for themselves.”

When world war broke out in 1914, he saw an extraordinary opportunity for the Jews to secure a state. The formation of a Jewish army became his *idée fixe*. The Jews would put together a volunteer force to fight on behalf of the British, mainly in the division devoted to re-conquering Palestine, in exchange for “certain promises.” It was audacious but not crazy. Choosing sides might well be a better strategy

than being blamed as non-contributors by the eventual winners, and scapegoats by the losers. But Zionist leaders dismissed the idea. According to their assumptions—passive, trusting, and utopian—armies possessed all of gentile life’s most arrogant, brutal features. In *Altneuland*, Theodor Herzl’s novel describing the imagined Jewish state, the Jews had no army.

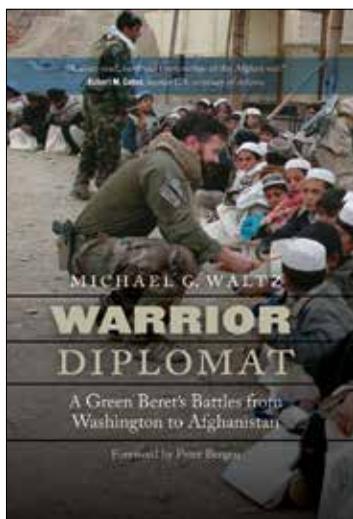
UNDETERRED, JABOTINSKY HEADED TO Palestine to recruit Yosef Trumpeldor, a renowned Russian-Jewish veteran of the war with Japan. Having lost an arm in combat, Trumpeldor was perhaps the most visible symbol of Jewish martial bravery since Judah Maccabee. Trumpeldor’s valor and enthusiasm fired the imagination of many Jews. It took two years, however, to establish the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, in which Jabotinsky served as second lieutenant. (That David Lloyd George, a philo-Semite, became Great Britain’s prime minister in December 1916 was a critical turning point.) Made up mostly of Jews from London’s East End, the 38th would be among those forces that broke the Ottoman lines after crossing the Jordan River in the Battle of Megiddo, a September 1918 victory that hastened the end of the war.

Despite the pledge to support a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, Brit-

ain’s postwar conduct did more to impede than further that goal. The desire to appease Palestine’s Arabs encouraged a policy of uniform evenhandedness: after a lethal Muslim riot in 1920 in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, several Jews were arrested for defending themselves with illegally possessed firearms. As leader of the defenders, Jabotinsky demanded that he too be arrested, and the British authorities were happy to comply. His protest, as well as the humane image of him translating Dante’s *Inferno* into Hebrew from his medieval cell in Acre, made him a hero.

Emboldened, he began to lead the oppositional faction within world Zionism. Never embracing the movement’s socialist aims, Jabotinsky was transformed into an insurgent by new events. First, he blamed the Zionist leaders for Yosef Trumpeldor’s death, after they refused to issue an order to withdraw from settlements under attack by Bedouins. Second, Zionist Executive leader Chaim Weizmann colluded with the British government to set quotas on Jewish immigration to Palestine. For Weizmann, Zionism was about “the transformation of values” of the Jews, “converting into peasant farmers an urbanized people.” Such a transformation had to be done slowly. Jabotinsky responded with the creed of “Zionist monism,” the insistence

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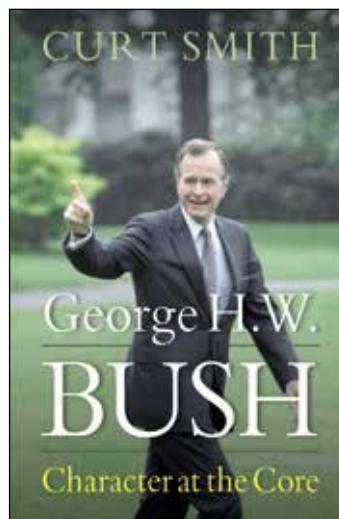
MICHAEL G. WALTZ

Foreword by Peter Bergen

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on severing the cause of resettling the Jews from any other ideology, such as Bolshevism:

I can vouch for there being a type of Zionist who doesn't care what kind of society our "state" will have; I'm that person. If I were to know that the only way to a state was via socialism, or even that this would hasten it by a generation, I'd welcome it. More than that: give me a religiously Orthodox state in which I would be forced to eat gefilte fish all day long (but only if there were no other way) and I'll take it.

HALKIN DOES NOT QUITE LET HIM GET away with the insistence that his Zionism was simply about statehood. Throughout the 1920s, Jabotinsky built up Betar, a Jewish paramilitary organization and youth group associated with his ideas. ("Be-TaR" is a Hebrew acronym for *B'rit Trumpeldor*, the Trumpeldor League.) Several years after its creation, Jabotinsky wrote a manifesto for Betar in which he, like Weizmann and his heroic peasant and like virtually every other intellectual in Europe, envisioned an ideal man. His, though, was aristocratic at best and fascist at worst, defined by severe dignity and discipline.

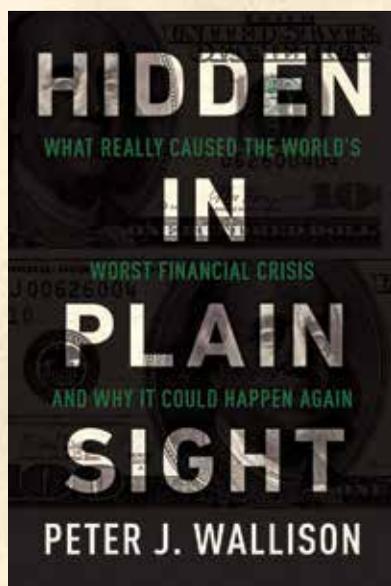
The 1920s were riven by discord among the three main Zionist factions—Weizmann's General Zionists, Ben-Gurion's Labor Zionists, and Jabotinsky's Revisionists. In 1929, Jabotinsky committed a political mistake with far-reaching consequences, though in hindsight his analysis seems far from mistaken. He told a rally that any rapprochement between the Jews and the Arabs was impossible: their interests were too opposite, their cultures too different. He did not call for expelling the Arabs, only for the Jews to achieve their own majority as soon as possible. Nonetheless, the British banned him from Palestine for incendiary speech. He would never return.

Soon after his exile, the British retracted earlier pledges to support a Jewish national home in favor of a policy of strictly containing Jewish settlement in Palestine. Weizmann resigned, his strategy of trusting the British a shambles. The General Zionists' majority collapsed, and Ben-Gurion and Jabotinsky fought over the scraps. Ben-Gurion would soon sweep into power, after a nasty campaign likening Betar—who wore brown shirts—to the rising Nazi Party. What's more, the Revisionists were blamed for the murder of a prominent Labor Zionist, and the Labor leaders allocated the limited immigration visas to

their own members. They also battled over whether to accept a British partition plan that would cordon off the Jews into an indefensible strip of coastal plain.

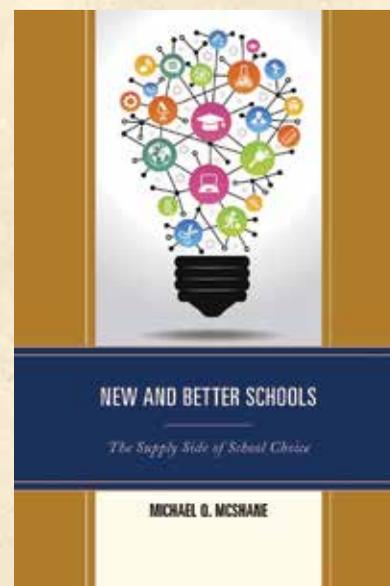
EVENTS IN THE 1930S, HOWEVER, MADE the Labor-Revisionist debates irrelevant. With a bloody Arab revolt threatening the Jewish settlement in Palestine, and Hitler's rise threatening millions of European Jews, Ben-Gurion elevated saving Jews over socializing them. Never to be outdone, Jabotinsky held diplomatic meetings with Eastern Europe's anti-Semitic rulers (but never with the Nazis, whom he regarded as singularly evil). He asked these dictators to assist the Zionist cause by pressuring the British government into allowing them to send their Jewish minorities to Palestine. This idea went nowhere. Nor did his next grand plan of raising a Jewish army to fight Hitler. It was in this frantic race against the clock—pursued with what now looks like prophetic urgency—that Jabotinsky would go to New York to raise money in 1940, only to die of a heart attack at age 59. His secretary on that final trip was a young scholar, Ben-Zion Netanyahu, who would later father three sons.

Today, Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel resembles Jabotinsky's Zion more than it does



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Ben-Gurion's or Weizmann's. More Israeli roads, squares, and parks are named after Jabotinsky than any other figure, even Herzl. Its economy is freer than either socialist envisioned. The heroic peasant ideal has largely been replaced by multiple ideals, each reflecting Israel's key subcultures—warrior, entrepreneur, cosmopolitan, and Talmudic master. Jabotinsky's Zion made much more room for religion than did his rivals', and modern Israel is more religious than pretty much every major Zionist expected. Most of all, though, Israel has (by necessity) inherited Jabotinsky's unflinching realism about the Arabs.

HALKIN INTERLACES JABOTINSKY'S thrilling life with a discussion of the ideas found in his speeches, essays, polemics, and especially his many novels, like 1927's *Samson the Nazarite*, a retelling of the biblical story in which Samson is portrayed as a free spirit who is called to refashion the Jews into a disciplined martial force. Although revisionism branded itself as correcting the course of Zionism by reverting to Herzl's original, Halkin shows that Jabotinsky brought new ideas.

The nation, according to the logic that held sway in the 19th century, is an organic form of social order, a mediating institution, in effect, between the individual and the world. The Jews, according to Jabotinsky (and, indeed, Judaism), are a nation. But Jabotinsky denied any moral uniqueness to the Jews' mission in the world. They were not to be a "kingdom of priests," but simply to take their rightful place among all the other nations.

Despite denying something so fundamental to the biblical account of Jewish national origins, he was not hostile to religion, which he regarded as imperative for the society he hoped to build. He sounded positively American in his simultaneous case for free exercise and against religious establishment:

Yes, religion must remain a private matter...but it cannot be a private matter whether there are temples of worship or not; whether Mount Sinai and the Prophets remain living spiritual forces or are embalmed behind glass in museums like mummified Pharaohs and Aztec relics.... It is imperative for a "state"—and for us as a nation—to keep the eternal flame from going out, so that...a space be maintained in the public arena for those who preach and contend in its name.

His case for religion is a mix of the utilitarian necessity of it to teach moral behavior *en*

masse and a decent respect for its own unique and compelling claims.

One can of course seek to formulate the noblest moral system without bringing the divine into it; this is what I've done all my life. Now, though, I'm convinced that it's more correct to treat ethical fundamentals as connected with superhuman mystery...I'll go even further: the pathos of religion, in and of itself, is needed. I'm not sure it can be rekindled in anyone's soul—perhaps, like musical pitch, it's an innate trait that few people are born with.

Most of Jabotinsky's rivals regarded religion as an utter relic. The role of Jewish belief in Israeli life today is often explained in terms of demographics, as a historical accident brought on by the mistake of subsidizing the religious populations. The reality is closer to Jabotinsky's. The Jews born to Israel's secular coast are seeking out religious knowledge and asking to incorporate traditional rites in their most consequential events, like births, marriages, and deaths. The "superhuman mystery," the "pathos," remains more miraculous and morally compelling than the gritty task of farming the desert soil.

JABOTINSKY DIFFERED FROM THE SOCIALISTS on political economics as well. He could well be called a capitalist, though he could just as easily be called a social democrat. More friendly during his time there to Italy's anarchists than to its Marxists, Jabotinsky commended an ideology of "individualism," which he described with all the exuberance of adolescence in a poem:

A single right is all I know:
The right to my own self. That's all—
and yet
It's great and has no bounds. No one
can owe
A thing to anyone.

Rebelling against the socialist reliance on hierarchy, he argued that free and "civilized men" have not leaders but "stewards, executives, simple trustees." Yet for all his musings about the limits of centralized authority, he advocated an extensive welfare state. Education, medical care, housing, food, and even clothing were to be provided.

Jabotinsky's anti-socialism was, in the first place, prudential. Socialism, at least in the form of the single labor union of the Jewish population in British Mandate Palestine, distracted from the ultimate goal of saving the

Jews of Europe, and deprived the Jewish settlement of immigrants, capital, and prosperity. Secondly, he favored capitalism due to his respect for the merchant class. He denied that agricultural labor was morally superior to the life of the urban businessman. "For generations, doing business was the pillar of Jewish life—why abandon it now?" As a narrator in one of his pamphlets exclaims, "Back to the shop counter! Back to the stores, the banks, the stock exchange—not only to buying and selling, but to industry, to manufacture, to everything 'practical.'"

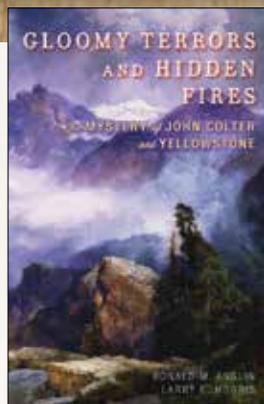
Everything practical included military preparedness and a martial spirit. Given Jabotinsky's understanding of geopolitics, he idealized the warrior as much as socialists idealized the swamp-drainer. "I would like to see military training become as common among Jews as lighting Sabbath candles once was," he wrote. Jabotinsky was virtually alone among Zionists in two predictions: that the Arabs, would fight for every inch of land; and that Hitler was indeed capable of monstrous, genocidal evil.

THE WARRIOR IDEAL—NOBLE, IRON-willed, self-mastered, austere—combined dignity with discipline. Jabotinsky urged Jews to form a "machine" or an "orchestra" that projected power with maximal effectiveness. He tried to finesse the conflict between this collectivism and his avid individualism by appealing to the principle of consent, a consenting cog being perfectly free. At other times Jabotinsky provides a different explanation: Individualism was for ordinary times. In dire moments, discipline and the disciplined use of power were essential. That the 1930s were dire for the Jews is incontrovertible.

Hillel Halkin's discussion of Jabotinsky's thought has the effect of heightening its contradictions. This is honest and intended. Though Jabotinsky devoted himself to the Jews, he had little use for Judaism. The Jews had no special role in the world, he said, but each one was "a prince." He secretly loathed living in the holy land and was content to be exiled. He wrote beautifully against the spilling of innocent blood, and later advocated it. He abhorred fascists, yet from time to time resembled them. He avowed individualism and yet demanded total subordination to the group. Perhaps Jabotinsky changed as the circumstances changed. More likely, he held conflicting convictions. Yet no one can deny his importance to the Zionist achievement, both as a geopolitical strategist and as an intellectual gadfly.

Jeremy Rozansky is research analyst at the *Tikvah Fund*.

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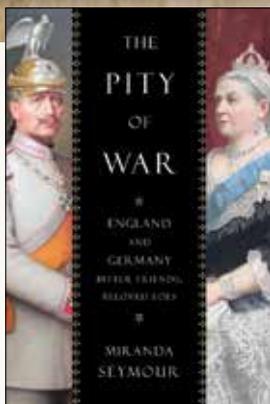
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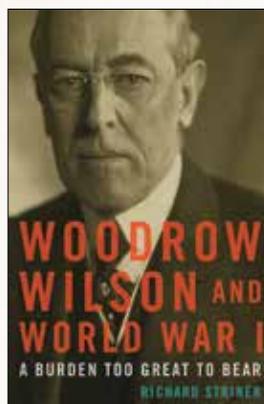
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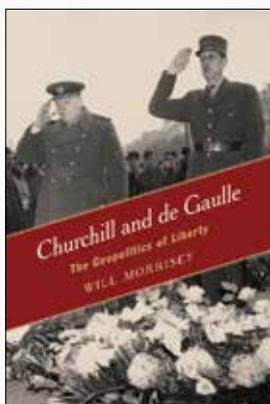
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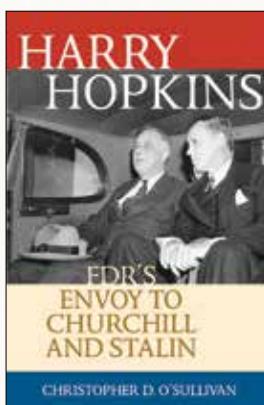
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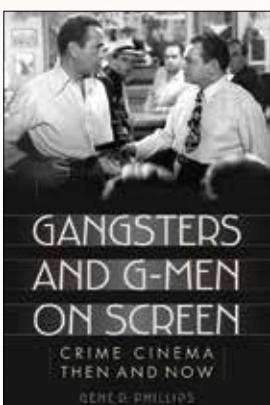
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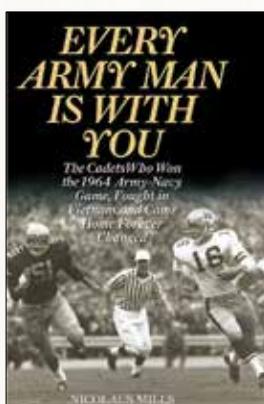
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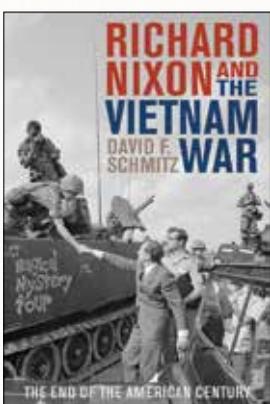
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