

ZE'EV JABOTINSKY VS MENACHEM BEGIN

By COLIN SHINDLER Feb. 4, 2006

Inevitably, therefore, the question must arise of 'transferring' those Arabs elsewhere so as to make at least some room for Jewish newcomers. But it must be hateful for any Jew to think that the rebirth of a Jewish state should ever be linked with such an odious suggestion as the removal of non-Jewish citizens.

So wrote Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist Zionist movement, in his preparatory notes for his speech in Dublin in January 1938. Such a categorical opinion would surprise many in Israel today - from the belligerent far Right, who quote Jabotinsky at their rallies, to those on the unthinking section of the Left, who believe that Jabotinsky was a dyed-in-the-wool fascist. He was a far more sophisticated and complex figure than such imagery conveys.

In part, the vision of Jabotinsky that comes down to us 65 years after his death was constructed by both David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, a product of the internecine war between the Right and the Left in Israel.

But it was undoubtedly the product of Begin's determined attempt to seek and maintain the leadership of the national camp in Israel in 1948. It was also part of a wider desire to retroactively reinterpret Revisionist Zionism through the prism of the Irgun and its political successors.

Begin always regarded himself as a disciple of Jabotinsky, but this was based on a selective reading of Jabotinsky's canon of writings. It is significant that Begin always referred to the Jabotinsky movement, but rarely to the Revisionist movement. Both men were influenced by 19th-century romantic nationalism, the Italian Risorgimento and the Polish struggle for independence. Yet Jabotinsky condemned the Easter Uprising, whereas the Irgun enthusiastically embraced Irish Republicanism. Although undoubtedly inspired by Jabotinsky, Begin was also profoundly influenced by intellectuals in the Yishuv such as Abba Achimeir from the Maximalist camp of the Revisionists.

ABBA ACHIMEIR taught at the school for the Betar madrichim (leaders). In part, this was deliberately established to define the evolving identity of Betar. Was it a pioneering youth movement similar to those in other Zionist parties? Or was it an embryonic military organization?

The school followed an increasingly radical line. Military training was seen not as preparation for a new Jewish Legion, as Jabotinsky had envisaged, but as the means of establishing the military wing of a national liberation movement. The preference of the school's cadets for direct action provided the nucleus for the maximalist tendency in the Revisionist movement.

Achimeir truly believed that "whoever has the youth - has the state" and thereby directed all his intellectual and organizational energies toward influencing the youth.

Achimeir joined the Revisionists from the labor movement in 1927. His revolutionary zeal was an implant from the Left. He spoke about preparing and training for "our own 1917" and facilitating an "October Revolution" in Zionism. He was highly influenced by the writings of Oswald Spengler and by the work of Robert Michels, a German sociologist and socialist who had followed Mussolini into fascism.

Abba Achimeir's nom de plume in Revisionist publications was often Abba Sikra, whom the Babylonian Talmud refers to as the head of the zealots, the biryoni. Assassination of public figures could therefore be justified for national reasons.

THROUGHOUT 1932 Jabotinsky attempted in several articles to apply "corrections" to the growing exuberance of the Maximalists and their adherents in Betar in the Diaspora ("when to press the accelerator, when to use the brake").

The electoral breakthrough of Hitler in July 1932 convinced Jabotinsky that it was important that his movement not be contaminated by acts and accusations of extremism. The maximalists initially viewed the wave of idealism that swept through German youth with a certain sense of vindication. Germany, they reasoned, now had a direction and a determined leadership.

It was a return to the era of Bismarck and Prussian values.

The pernicious influence of the Marxists had been halted. In the eyes of the Maximalists, Nazi anti-Semitism was deemed unreal, and thereby assumed a secondary importance.

Jabotinsky's fury, however, knew no limits. He angrily complained that such articles about Hitler were "a stab in the back for me personally and for all of us." He ridiculed those who found elements of "a national liberation" movement in Nazism.

Events in Germany quickly educated Achimeir and his supporters, yet Maximalism was not extinguished; instead it became increasingly influential and dominant within Betar. While pro-fascist inclinations declined, this did not alter the general approach of the Maximalists. In Poland in the early 1930s many members of Betar supported the Maximalists, including the local commander in Brest-Litovsk, Menachem Begin.

In *A Legend in His Lifetime*, Begin praised Achimeir as "a brilliant journalist" whose articles came from within the genre of "spiritual literature that incites the blood." Begin significantly wrote this article in August 1935, on the eve of the founding conference of the New Zionist Organization. It was an implicit criticism that Revisionism had not evolved into a body embracing direct action - and ultimately the armed struggle.

Jabotinsky faced the impossible task of bridging the gap between Maximalists with their reliance on direct action, fuelled by neo-Bolshevik ardor, and his colleagues on the Revisionist Executive who wished to remain within the Zionist Organization and pursue diplomatic initiatives with Britain. He was no longer able to maintain the distinction between encouraging youth to be militant and defiant with their increasing desire to take up arms and retaliate.

Maximalism therefore found its time and place because events - the rise of Nazism, the Arab Revolt, increasing Polish anti-Semitism and Jewish degradation, the inability of the British to live up to Zionist aspirations, the powerlessness of the mainstream Zionist organization - proceeded to overwhelm normative Jewish responses.

FOLLOWING THE Irgun's retaliation against Arab targets in November 1937, Begin and others in Poland published the manifesto of the "Activist-Revisionist Front," an unequivocal attack on Jabotinsky's policies. Yet Jabotinsky was not disavowed, but selectively endorsed. His inspiration rather than his policies was embraced.

In September 1938, the famous confrontation between Begin and Jabotinsky took place at a Betar conference in Warsaw. Begin proposed an amendment to the Betar oath, which Jabotinsky had formulated in 1934. Instead of "I will train to fight in the defense of my people, and I will only use my strength for defense" - Begin proposed: "I will train to fight in the defense of my people and to conquer the homeland."

This change displaced the interpretation from a primarily defensive understanding to one which entertained the idea of offensive action.

Although this effectively reversed Jabotinsky's understanding of the Iron Wall, Begin's speech was greeted by tumultuous applause. Jabotinsky, however, was considerably irritated; he had interrupted Begin several times during his speech. He said that "there is no place in Betar for this kind of nonsense" and compared Begin's speech and its reception to the sound of a squeaking door.

The Betar leadership still voted for the change and thereby moved away from the Revisionists toward the Irgun, from diplomacy to armed struggle, from belief in England to fighting her. As prime minister of Israel in 1980, Begin denied that he was ever in any serious dispute with Jabotinsky and that there had been a misunderstanding.

WOULD JABOTINSKY have embraced military Zionism if he had lived? That remains in the realm of speculation, but his determination to outmaneuver his radical acolytes, including Abba Achimeir and Menachem Begin, is a matter of recorded fact. As the Begin era recedes, a more rounded appreciation of Jabotinsky will certainly emerge, to the benefit of all students of Zionist history.

The writer's latest book *The Triumph of Military Zionism: Nationalism and the Origins of the Israeli Right* has just been published by I. B. Tauris.