

The Mentor Who Shaped Begin's Thinking: Jabotinsky

By Mark Bruzonsky; Mark Bruzonsky is a Washington consultant on Mideast affairs and associate editor of Worldview magazine.

November 16, 1980

OF ALL THE PROBLEMS with U.S. policy in the Mideast, one of the most profound is the reluctance of many Americans -- including many Jews -- to understand the ideological convictions of Menachem Begin and the radically altered basis of Israeli policy under his stewardship. Symptomatic of this reluctance was the scant attention given to last week's Jabotinsky Centennial Dinner in New York.

For to understand Begin, you must understand Ze'ev Vladimir Jabotinsky, his mentor. A towering figure who broke with mainstream Zionism in the 1920s, Jabotinsky founded a movement called Revisionist Zionism and always insisted on total, unquestioning devotion to "the only and single idea of establishing a Jewish state" with "a Jewish majority on both sides of the Jordan."

The West Bank/Gaza Strip "autonomy plan" advanced by Begin since late 1977 -- a concept which lies at the heart of the long deadlock in the post-Camp David peace talks -- has been proudly attributed to Jabotinsky and Revisionism by Begin himself. "It was not the Americans who proposed this idea nor the Egyptians," Begin wrote recently to a critical American Jewish liberal. "It was we, the Jews, the Zionists, the disciples of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who proposed this humanitarian idea."

Begin's rise to power in 1977 after 30 years of political obscurity also started the resurrection of Jabotinsky. The campaign to enshrine Jabotinsky in the pantheon of world Zionism, of which Tuesday's New York celebration was a centerpiece, was mounted by the Begin government and its American supporters to ensure that even if Begin's party is ousted in next year's elections, the Jabotinsky tradition will remain a potent force in Zionist politics.

It is a militant tradition, embodying armed self-reliance and defiance of all who deviate from its professed goals and values. It was originally Jabotinsky who preached no compromise with the Palestinian Arabs and no partition of Palestine. It was Jabotinsky who insisted that the entire Jewish Diaspora must be liquidated, that the entire Jewish "race" must return to its rightful homeland in Eretz Yisrael. It was Jabotinsky who demanded that Israel become an outpost of western civilization rather than a conglomerate society taking its place within the geography of the Middle East.

Born in Odessa in 1880, Jabotinsky turned to Zionism while still a student in Bern. By his early 20s, he had become the foremost Zionist speaker and journalist in Russia. During World War I, Jabotinsky, by now in Palestine, singlehandedly promoted the idea of a Jewish Legion within the British Army. In 1920, he formed the first Jewish

self-defense units which he led against Arabs. For this he was sentenced by a British military court to 15 years at hard labor but was amnestied by the British high commissioner after worldwide protests.

In 1923, Jabotinsky broke with Zionist organizations by resigning from the Jewish Executive and by founding Betar, a militant youth organization dedicated to emigration to Israel and which Begin was later to head in Poland. By 1925 Jabotinsky had formally founded the Revisionist movement as a faction within the World Zionist Organization, demanding immediately a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan in all of Mandate Palestine and urging uncompromising militancy on the still embryonic Zionist organizations.

In 1930, while he was lecturing in South Africa, the British authorities canceled Jabotinsky's return visa. He was never able to return to Palestine. In 1935, to protest the allocation of 50 percent of the Jewish Agency seats to non-Zionists, the Revisionists seceded from the World Zionist Organization and founded the New Zionist Organization with Jabotinsky as president. He died in 1940 while visiting a Betar camp in the United States, his will stipulating that "my remains may not be transferred to Palestine except by order of a future Jewish government in that country."

Because of the long history of conflict between Jabotinsky and the mainstream Zionists led by Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, it was not until 1964, after Ben-Gurion's retirement from government, that Jabotinsky's remains were reburied on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Jabotinsky's personal magnetism; coupled with his dual conviction that Europe's Jews were headed for catastrophe and that the struggle with Palestine's Arabs could only be determined by force, combined to give him the aura of a visionary. His exile and death only expanded the Jabotinsky legend, which was furthered still as the Holocaust unfolded and Britain retreated from its commitment to a Jewish homeland.

"It was the summer of 1940," Begin wrote in a Jabotinsky centennial essay for the World Zionist Press Service this year. "A cry went up to heaven the likes of which had not been heard since God created man, and man created the devil: Why had we not hearkened to the call of Jabotinsky? For indeed, when the Jewish masses were standing on the brink of the abyss, it was he who appeared before them . . . as a man bearing the message of redemption, and pointing the way to rescue. . .

"However, led astray by their leaders, they refused to listen. . . And when he died -- there died with him the hope itself."

But, Begin continued, "During the days of the Holocaust and destruction and subjugation, we did as you commanded us: We rose, we revolted and we liberated. Even though the road may be long and difficult, we shall continue to carry out your teachings -- the integrity of the Homeland, the Return to Zion, the unity of the Jewish people, freedom for the individual, justice in society -- unto the last day of our life on earth, until, with God's help, we shall implement

them."

Jabotinsky's writing provides insights into how his teachings have shaped the thinking of his followers. He was an unabashed nationalist. "There is no value in the world higher than the nation and the fatherland," he wrote. "Every race possessing a definite uniqueness seeks to become a nation . . . because only in its own state will it feel comfortable."

His 1933 article, "On Militarism," has an eerily fascist-like tone in passages such as this:

"There is nothing in the world as impressive as the ability of the mass of human beings to feel and act, at certain moments, as one entity, imbued with one will, in one rhythm. This is the difference between a multitude, a mob -- and a nation."

He had nothing but scorn for liberal humanism:

"Stupid is the person who believes in his neighbor, good and loving as the neighbor may be. Justice exists only for those whose fists and stubbornness make it possible for them to realize it . . . Do not believe anyone, be always on guard, carry your stick always with you -- this is the only way of surviving in this wolfish battle of all against all."

Jabotinsky's writings inspired the Irgun, the revolutionary Jewish underground in Palestine which Begin headed after 1943 and which masterminded the bombing of Jerusalem's King David Hotel in 1946.

But for all of Jabotinsky's brilliance and prophetic power, he failed to foresee two crucial developments.

First, he saw the emigration to Israel coming mostly from the West. In fact, a majority of Israel's population today is of Asian and African backgrounds, and the tensions between this "Oriental" Jewry and the western-oriented political elite have been suppressed largely because for 30 years the external threat has been the overwhelming national priority. "The East," Jabotinsky once confided, "it is entirely foreign to me . . . Mine is a westerner's mentality!"

Second, even more threatening is Jabotinsky's failure to appreciate the depth and resiliency of Palestinian nationalism. While he understood that "it is utterly impossible to obtain the voluntary consent of the Palestinian Arabs for converting 'Palestine' from an Arab country into a country with a Jewish majority," he always assumed that Palestinian nationalism would become submerged within pan-Arabism and that the dominance of western power over the "backward nations" of the Arab East would continue unabated.

In his stunningly eloquent testimony before the British Peel Commission on Palestine in 1937, Jabotinsky stated his views with clarity:

"It is quite understandable that the Arabs of Palestine also prefer to be the Arab state No. 4, or No. 6 -- that I understand. But when the Arab claim is confronted with our Jewish demand to be saved, it is like the claims of appetite versus the claims of starvation."

"The idea," Jabotinsky continued, "is that Palestine on both sides of the Jordan should hold the Arabs, their progeny, and many millions of Jews. What I do not deny is that in that process the Arabs of Palestine will necessarily become a minority in the country. I do deny that that is a hardship. It is not a hardship on any race, any nation, possessing so many national states now and so many more national states in the future. One fraction, one branch of that race, and not a big one, will have to live in someone else's state: Well, that is the case with all the mightiest nations in the world."

Here, then, are the ideological roots for Begin's "autonomy" formula. Jabotinsky once put it much more succinctly: "To the Palestinian Arabs as individuals -- everything; to the Palestinian Arabs as a community -- nothing!"

It is a formula that many conclude denies today's political realities. And the current centennial campaign to portray Jabotinsky's dated ideas as a contemporary political Bible betrays the confusion of his disciples about how to approach a Jewish future that is still in serious doubt.

The Post Recommends

Scalia's death plunges court, national politics into turmoil

Obama gets a chance to appoint a third justice, but Republican-led Senate could refuse to fill the seat until after the election.

Odd teeth: A mother's Internet sleuthing led to her daughter's troubling diagnosis

'The teeth looked just like Erica's.' She immediately emailed the article to the pediatric neurologist.

Stunning photos show why S. Korea is the plastic surgery capital of the world

"As long as I can remember, I've wanted to be someone else"