

Nations and Nationalism 16 (4), 2010, 774–787.

Book Reviews

Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (trans. Yael Lotan). New York: Verso, 2009. 332pp, £18.99 (pbk).

In the 1900s, many pro-Westernisation Jews argued that the Jews were a people (*volk*), but not a nation. Others maintained that the Jewish people was dead and only the Jewish spirit was left. Historically, the drive to “reinvent” the Jewish nation was engendered in reaction to the disintegration it had undergone in the nineteenth century, when Judaism was divided not only into different forms but also into German Jews, French Jews and so forth. Thus, a movement that sought to reconstruct the Jewish identity and experience by employing notions that had become intrinsic to the scholarly and popular dialogue in that century – culture and race – appeared.

Shlomo Sand’s book, which has become very popular (though certainly not for its scholarly merits), does not argue that the Jewish people died in the nineteenth century – it argues that it was never born. He claims that only in the 1900s was the Jewish people “invented” by Jewish historians and proto-Zionist and Zionist thinkers, and that this “invention” managed not only to propagate the myth, by various means, but also to establish a state on its basis. Sand does not have to deny the Jews the title nation, because in his counter-history of the Jews he takes a much more radical stand: not only are the Jews not a nation, they were never a people; they never constituted the platform upon which a nation is built, as other peoples created (or invented, as it were) their nationalities in the nineteenth century. To him, the Jews were, at best, an assortment of religious communities, ethnically and culturally diverse.

The very term people (*Am*, and often *Goy* for Gentiles, in Hebrew) occurs hundreds of times in the Old Testament. It is considered the main progenitor of the corresponding terms in European languages. (In German, for instance, the word *volk* had several different meanings; see Grimm’s dictionary, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 12, 2nd edn (Leipzig, 1951), col. 454 ff.) Only in the late 1800s did this word assume its modern sense in Europe, so the Jews’ use of it was nothing out of the ordinary. But all this does not concern Sand, nor does the fact that Christian literature had always regarded the Jews not as mere practitioners of a certain religion (Judaism) but as a separate group, distinguished by various attributes. Until the late 1900s, this literature is almost entirely devoid of proclamations that current Jewry is not the descendant of Second- or First-Temple Jews. The task, or perhaps the political mission, that Sand has undertaken is to prove that post-biblical Jews are pagans who converted to Judaism. He arbitrarily presupposes, apparently, that if modern Jews are not autochthonic or authentic (so to speak), the whole Jewish-national (Zionist) narrative of ancestral and historical right to the Land of Israel is undermined, and so is the legitimacy of this national-territorial restoration – namely the return of the Jews to their ancestral homeland, the place where the people of Israel came into being and where a Jewish national-political-territorial entity historically existed.

In other words, Sand is well aware that a population defined by religion can be transformed into, and can develop and nurture, a national culture. He knows that the Jewish existence, even before the nineteenth century, was a system based on historical memory as well as religious norms. Its holidays were of a religious and national substance. It had ingrained communal institutions. There was indeed a rich cultural

stock out of which Jews (or a significant portion thereof) could create new Jewish cultures, including a secular, national one. Therefore, true to his ignoring line, he must prove that the Jews were always just a religious sect and, moreover, that they are not even Jewish by origin. This line of reasoning alleges that various pagan peoples and tribes were assimilated into Judaism, hallowing the Old Testament and the Talmud as their holy scriptures and authoritative canons, but this just makes them Jews in spirit and does not entitle them, à la Sand, to any national claim over the Land of Israel.

Sand's next logical step is to prove the lack of ethnic (or "biological") continuity between the ancient Jews and those of the Roman-Hellenistic period and thereafter. A truly miraculous Jewish history ensues: without any missionary action or employment of ruler or conqueror powers (barring during the Hasmonean period), Judaism – the religion of a persecuted and demeaned minority – magnetically drew several peoples: the Himyars of southern Arabia, the Berbers of the Maghreb and the Khazars between the Volga and the Caucasus. The Khazars are purportedly the ancestors of Polish and Russian Jewry (whose demographics are erroneously stated by Sand). This miraculous history also suggests that the Jewish creed, allegedly forced upon these hordes of pagans by their sovereigns, was so deeply and sincerely instilled that they chose not to forsake it. To corroborate this description, Sand quotes sources whose credibility he is not qualified to evaluate, including, lo and behold, Jewish historians of the nineteenth century – the very ones he accuses of misrepresenting "historical truth" and of "inventing the Jewish people".

I cannot systematically discredit Sand's sources in this brief review. I will just mention that the legends about mass conversions are reminiscent of legends about the ten lost tribes of Israel rediscovered in remote regions. Jewish literature was fond of these legends, because incorporating tales of ancient kingdoms of warrior Jews added a new dimension to Jewish history (and to the Jews' self-image), which might have been of solace to some.

The third move in Sand's counter-history is to argue that the Zionist historiography and the predominant historic narrative of the Jewish population of modern Israel omitted the converters' pagan descent because it collided with the hegemonic narrative of an historic (rather than merely religious) continuity of the Jewish people. The contention that this was a deliberate enterprise of denial and suppression is typically unfounded and ludicrous, and the scene he depicts of Israeli geneticists toiling in their laboratories to come up with proof of the continuity and homogeneity of the Jewish gene pool can only be termed as Sand's Protocols of the Elders of Genetic Studies. In truth, Israeli society, although perhaps rife with ethnic stereotypes and prejudice, is quite liberal when it comes to racial origins (despite the fact that conversion to Judaism is officially governed by the Orthodox rabbinate). However, Sand, who wishes to purge all "myth" from the history taught in Israel so as to pave the way for a utopian "state of all citizens", essentially proposes replacing proper history with sheer legends.

In conclusion, Sand's book is a conspicuous example of dogmatic and distorted history that manipulates sources and makes them conform, a priori, to the arbitrary interpretation. This book offers no new valid insight into the phenomena of nationalism and of modern Jewish nationalism (which, of course, constitutes just part of Jewish history in modern times). Its staggering commercial success does not stem from any revelations about the history of the Jews or from enabling readers to better judge historic sources. Its "success" is probably because of the inherent popularity of superficial, quasi-historical literature that challenges common wisdom and purports to unearth the truth. In this case, it is the "truth" about the origins of the

Jewish national movement and the justifications for the existence of the State of Israel. One could scarcely imagine a book about the “invention” of another people and its national movement becoming such a sensational bestseller.

YAACOV SHAVIT
Tel Aviv University

Karl Cordell & Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: Causes, Consequences and Responses*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. 232pp, £16.99 (pbk), £55.00 (hbk).

Volumes on ethnic conflict have proliferated in recent years, with historians, journalists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, military scientists and others tackling the subject from the perspective of their respective disciplines; writing case studies, formulating theories and devising means of managing or ending ethnic conflict, especially of the violent variety. What has been lacking to date is a means of integrating the various theories on ethnic conflict into a larger framework that demonstrates their applicability, especially for the purposes of conflict prevention, management and settlement. Cordell and Wolff's new book fills this need even though, as the authors acknowledge, ethnic conflict is an incredibly complex phenomenon that defies easy, standardised solutions.

In their introduction, Cordell and Wolff define ethnic conflict as “a form of group conflict in which at least one of the parties interprets the conflict, its causes and potential remedies along an actually existing or perceived discriminating ethnic divide” (5), thus emphasising that the conflict itself is not ethnic; rather, one or more of the participants are. After this, they propose an analytical model that disaggregates the traditional two levels of analysis – global and nation-state – into four: (i) the local, or substate; (ii) the state, or national; (iii) the regional; and (iv) the global. These are also levels of governance, and the authors emphasise the role that institutions and structures play in guiding conflictual behaviour while also justifying their use of international relations theory in tackling ethnic conflict and its possible solutions.

The book is divided into two sections, the first exploring the causes and consequences of ethnic conflict and the second examining responses. Part one begins by summarising the extant theories that approach ethnic conflict from the perspective of insecurity, greed and social-psychological motivations, while also paying attention to the international dimension, for instance by examining how promises of humanitarian intervention may actually increase the likelihood of conflict by giving an inferior party the possibility of military and political success. Next, the authors apply their four-tiered approach to the motives, means and opportunities of ethnic conflict, drawing upon numerous examples but making particular reference to the internal conflict in Macedonia that led to the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001. In this case study, they touch upon: post-independence polarisation along ethnic lines at both local and state levels; regional challenges to Macedonia as a nation, especially from Greece, Bulgaria and Albania, which influenced how governmental elites responded to internal polarisation and motivated them to shore up a sense of Macedonian identity; and global initiatives to stabilise Macedonia as manifest in United Nations and European Union missions.

Part two concerns responses to ethnic conflict. Cordell and Wolff set aside a whole chapter for case studies on the mixed record of international intervention – Burma, the