

Politics and Messianism: the Zionist Revisionist Movement and Polish Political Culture

Yaakov Shavit

Poland, your night and mine
have intertwined ¹

Poland has been revived and her White Eagle is
screaming from the shores of the Baltic to the Black
Sea ²

On September 2, 1939, one day following the Nazi invasion of Poland, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, leader of the Revisionist movement, rushed a telegram from France to the Polish President, Ignacy Mościcki. The telegram is tragic testimony to the end of an illusion and the beginning of a long dark night. Jabotinsky expressed faith that the Polish army would repulse the invader. A few days earlier, he had not believed that war was likely to break out; now that it had, he wrongly assessed the balance of forces:

In the name of the Movement which years ago was the first to realize Poland's mission as one of the world's greatest powers and conceived the Providential Connection between the renaissance of the Jewish Palestine state and the triumph of Poland, I humbly call God's blessing upon your country....³

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1 Aaron Zeitlin, *Esterke* (Yiddish), Warsaw, 1932.

2 Uri Zvi Greenberg, "The Time Will Come" (Hebrew), in *Sefer ha-Kitrug ve-ha-Emunah*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1936, p. 111. (Written in 1933-1934.)

3 The Jabotinsky Institute (henceforth J.I.), 2/29/2/1A. David Niv mentions the telegram in his study *The Battle for Freedom; The Irgun Zvai Leumi* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1967, p. 13, but he quotes an inconsequential line from it. Jabotinsky's biographer, Joseph B. Schechtman, does not mention it at all.

These pathetic phrases about the "Providential Connection" which existed between the "triumph of Poland" and the "renaissance of Jewish Palestine" expressed Jabotinsky's belief in Poland's status as a great European power and the expectations of the Revisionist movement from the Polish state after the rise to power of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski in May 1926.

These expectations stemmed from a deep and authentic Revisionist solidarity and sympathy with Poland, its history, national disappointments and historical aspirations. Poland was the place where Revisionism had crystallized as a mass political movement between the two world wars, the country in which Revisionist political culture had evolved and in which its central political struggles for hegemony within the Zionist movement had taken place. Paradoxically, the country in which such major political hopes had been invested, was ultimately the scene of the greatest catastrophe to befall the Jewish people.

The presence of a detachment of Polish soldiers in Palestine in 1941 inspired this observation by Abba Ahimeir, the radical nationalist ideologue:

The generation of the writer of these lines was educated in the lap of Russian or German culture. And it is a pity that this was the case. What Russian and German culture have in common is that they are both creations of peoples whose main concern was not the preservation of their national existence. When all is said and done, Russian culture is basically a philanthropic culture, while German culture is a culture of the individual, with all his joys and sorrows. Since both these peoples are sated in the national sense, the danger to their existence and the maintenance of their national character were of little concern to the progenitors of Russian and German cultures. And, by absorbing the cosmopolitan ideas of the Russians and German egoism, we [Zionists] absorbed a deadly poison. It is indeed a great error that our generation absorbed so little of nineteenth century Polish culture. This was not the culture of all mankind, or of the individual, but rather the culture of the nation. Goethe, Dostoyevski and Tolstoy poisoned us, the sons of a people fighting for its national survival, while the superb writers and poets of Polish literature could have invigorated us.⁴

Indeed, when the Revisionist movement and its youth group, Betar, appeared, they were immediately criticized by their rivals as being steeped in the spirit of Polish romanticism, medieval chivalry and romantic litera-

4 Abba Ahimeir, "Poland in Palestine" (Hebrew), *Hamashkif*, January 24, 1941.

ture. Revisionism was described as a movement that had borrowed models of ideology, ethos, rules of behavior and its repertoire of florid and grandiose rhetoric from Polish culture. Revisionist political style and spirit, "the Revisionist mentality," were described as being "Polish romanticism" to the core.

This article will briefly examine those public and unambiguous statements made within the Revisionist camp on the deep link between Zionism and Poland, and the need to borrow national and cultural models from the Polish heritage. Attempts to imitate and copy these models will also be examined.

The cultural assimilation of Polish Jewry deepened and widened between the world wars. Some Jews became thoroughly Polish, and saw Polish culture as the standard by which the reality of the Jewish condition should be measured and as the model which they longed to emulate.⁵ A motive for this attitude was the analogous fate of Poland and of the Jewish people, along with an awareness of Polish philosemitism (in certain circles) and of the direct and oblique influence of Jewish sources on Polish national messianism.⁶ There were two different but parallel tendencies at work: the first was an attempt to integrate into Polish society, while the second was an effort to transfer the Polish model to Jewish national society and to enrich Jewish national consciousness with Polish sources.

In this network of interactive influences, Polish national-political culture fulfilled the role of the donor, with Zionism, mainly in its Revisionist version, as the recipient.⁷ Nearly all the Zionist groups that developed in Poland, before and after World War I, had absorbed the atmosphere of Polish romanticism and its concomitant ideas and values such as "Legionism," "militarism" and "heroism." These groups were replete

5 For a general description of the process of Polonization, see Celia Heller, *On The Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars*, New York, 1980, pp. 211-232; Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland: The Formative Years, 1915-1926*, Yale, 1981, pp. 12-17, 345-346. In Mendelsohn's view, the history of the Jews in modern Poland is a history of modernization without assimilation.

6 On the possibility of a Frankist influence on Mickiewicz and on Poland's nature and place in Jacob Frank's mystical thought, see A. G. Duker, "Polish Frankism's Duration, from Cabalistic Judaism to Roman Catholicism and from Jewishness to Polishness," *Jewish Social Studies* 25 (1963), pp. 287-333; and Meir Bosak, "Frankist Sources in the Works of Adam Mickiewicz" (Hebrew), *Davar*, July 9, 1954. On Mickiewicz's messianic approach, see Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland*, Oxford, 1982, pp. 239-291.

7 For these terms, see I. Even-Zohar, "Universals of Literary Contact," in: *Papers in Historical Poetics*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 45-53.

with what Jabotinsky called an "overabundance of spirit ... tragedy and romance."⁸

Nevertheless, from the 1920s onward, the influence of national Polish ideology diminished considerably, and Zionists became increasingly disenchanted with the nature and form nationalism adopted in independent Poland. Underlying influences certainly remained, but these are difficult to assess. What can be ascertained, however, is the fact that while most of the Zionist movement was moving away from the influence of Polish nationalism,⁹ and had deep reservations about its irrational aspects and its markedly crude anti-Semitism, a reverse process was taking place in the Revisionist camp. Revisionism continued to view Polish nationalism as a model and a source of inspiration.

Revisionists made much of their claim that the renaissance of a national Jewish culture was anchored in the ancient national Jewish heritage, in its values, symbols, heroes and exploits. If "the world of Polish ideas was living entirely in the sixteenth century,"¹⁰ then the Revisionist movement was living entirely in the days of the Second Temple, or more accurately in the period between the Hasmonean Revolt and the war of Bar Kochba.

The Polish experience taught the Revisionists that a national movement needs heroes, and appropriate figures from Jewish history were identified.¹¹ The Revisionist *Hebraismus militantis* crystallized in a Poland saturated with national romantic motifs, national heroism, and national eschatology, fluctuating between desperation and messianic expectation;

8 Ze'ev Jabotinsky, *The Story of My Life. Collected Writings* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1959, p. 60. In his 1919 article, following the appearance of the Hebrew translation of *With Fire and Sword* published by "Shtibl" in Warsaw, Jabotinsky posited an example of the "literature of action" for national Jewish youth. [Ze'ev Jabotinsky, *On Literature and Art* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1948, pp. 163-165.]

9 For an extensive treatment of this subject, see Yisrael Oppenheim, *The Pioneer Movement in Poland* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 12-14, 193-194. On the influence of the Legions, see p. 107, footnote 11. Cf. also Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in the Jewish Community of Poland During the Twenties*, Tel Aviv, 1982. Mendelsohn writes that the Jews of Poland thought in national terms rather than in terms of class, and that the national idea was deeper rooted and felt more intensively by them because of their abnormal existence and their severance from reality. His diagnosis is that Polish Jewry lived in a world of visions and delusions as a result of its abnormal situation.

10 Claude Backris, "Polish Tradition and the Concept of History in 'Irydion,'" *The Polish Review* 4, nos. 1-2 (winter-spring 1961), p. 135.

11 "We translated their national festivals, their heroes into our national figures, and everything that was good and noble in Polish history took on a Jewish form in our longing for salvation." (Alfred Nossig, in Ezra Mendelsohn, "Wilhelm Friedman and Alfred Nossig/ Assimilation and Zionism in Lwow" (Hebrew), in: *Gal'ed, An Historical Journal of Polish Jewry*, vol. 2, Tel Aviv, 1975, p. 101.

between realistic national policy and dreams of greatness and glory that might compensate for generations of humiliation, repression and suffering.¹² Polish historiography, literature and the educational system all nurtured the adoration of the Polish Legion and a more general cult of Polish militarism and its hero-leader. This hyperbolic heroism, radically disproportionate to Poland's real strength, developed a jingoistic liturgy ripe with rhetorical pathos. The Revisionist intelligentsia, who had been educated in Polish gymnasia, and some of whom had attended Polish universities, were more responsive to this atmosphere than any prior generation of Polish Jewry. They had encountered Polish nationalism first-hand and perceived in it a realization of the Jewish historical model found in the recesses of a dim historical and literary memory. Four aspects of this identification are especially noteworthy.

The Poet-Visionary and the Messianic People

Within the Labor Movement in Palestine, Hebrew literature sometimes acquired the status of "mobilized literature." Prose and poetry, it was felt, should express national and social values, and reflect the problems of the generation and society. However, only within the Revisionist movement did the poet assume the distinct status of prophet and visionary. As in Polish literary tradition, here too, the poet was regarded as a visionary, whose role and mission was to present a vision of redemption that was realistic and applicable. Moreover, according to this tradition, a national movement could not be whole and could not properly function unless it included such a poet-visionary.

Uri Zvi Greenberg's transition, in the late 1920s, from the journalism of the Labor Movement in Palestine to Revisionist journalism and political activities, provided Revisionist radicalism with such a visionary. It was not only his ideological drift away from the Labor Movement which led Greenberg into the Revisionist camp, but also, perhaps, the fact that the more realistic political culture of Labor could not accept a man who openly claimed the crown of poet-visionary.

Greenberg was not, however, unprecedented in the Revisionist ranks. He was viewed by radical circles within the movement as not unlike Polish poets of equal conviction. The Revisionist intelligentsia were

12 On Polish nationalism and Polish romantic messianism, see Norman Davies, *God's Playground, A History of Poland*, vol. II, Oxford, 1981; Jacob L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase*, London, 1960, pp. 264-277; and Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, New York, 1960.

acquainted, in varying degrees, with the works of the three visionary *Wieszcz* (prophet poets) — Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1885), Yuliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859). In their works, the Poles were described as a people without a territory, banished from their land, martyrs to its fate, and standing at the epicenter of the world. These poets portrayed Poland as yearning for a mystical link with its soil; it was a nation that would be renewed in the chaos of a worldwide cataclysm, a nation with the consciousness of a “messianic people” which constantly and longingly looked back to its glorious past.¹³ The same deep historical mold and the same motifs can be found in the national-messianic poetry of Greenberg, despite its uniqueness and special force.¹⁴

In December 1885, Shaul Pinchas Rabinowitz appealed to Judah Leib Gordon (one of the leading Hebrew poets and writers of the nineteenth century) to follow in the path of Adam Mickiewicz, and concern himself with the tragedy of the Jewish people.¹⁵ In the same spirit, Greenberg tells of a discussion he held one night in Warsaw with Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky admonished him, saying “As we have no empire, I do not ask for the literature of an empire; but rather literature which is, let us say, like that of a people which had a national liberation movement and messianic yearnings; something like Mickiewicz.”¹⁶

Greenberg was accepted as a visionary poet within the Revisionist camp only in the second half of the 1930s and then, mainly among its radically nationalist circles. As early as 1931, however, the Revisionist newspaper *Ha'am* had anointed Greenberg with the status of a poet-prophet,¹⁷ and during the 1930s the poet himself and his devotees fully endorsed the role. Greenberg regarded Zionism as a popular, messianic, historical movement which not only expressed abstract longings, but also an objective, concrete need which could be directed into a dynamic of liberation. This dynamic was to be realized by the visionary poet, the political leader and the political and spiritual elite. Visionary poetry had a central role to

13 Walicki, in *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism*, discusses at length the essential differences in approach between the great Polish poets, differences that those who turned them into a model did not always take into account (passim.)

14 Much has been written about the influence of Expressionist poetry on Greenberg; however, no exhaustive study has yet been published on the common motifs he shared with Polish national-romantic poetry.

15 Quoted by Shlomo Breiman, ed., *Letters of Moshe Leib Lilienblum to Judah Leib Gordon* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1968, p. 45, footnote 204.

16 “Five Years after the Death of Jabotinsky” (Hebrew), *Hamashkif*, July 20, 1945.

17 On May 25, 1931, following Greenberg’s election as second in the list of candidates of the Union of Zionist Revisionists to the Seventeenth Zionist Congress.

play in activating this process, because it constituted the most profound expression of the collective soul and provided the most clear-sighted vista of distant horizons. The task of poetry was “to arouse the hunger for the bread of the soul in the masses and to feed them by these means. Their attitude toward it should border on the religious.”¹⁸ The key to the full liberation of the People of Israel was, therefore, to be the poem.¹⁹

Mickiewicz and Słowacki were the poets with whom Greenberg identified, and it was to them that he was compared by his admirers. One of Greenberg’s first apostles, Yehoshua Heschel Yevin, wrote in 1932, “Uri Zvi Greenberg is the poet of the ‘Kingdom of Israel’ which rules over its own soil in just the same way as Słowacki was a poet living on his own soil, despite the fact that Poland was ruled by the Russian Czar.”²⁰ In the poetry of Hibbat-Zion (the Lovers of Zion movement), Yevin continued, the idea of national liberation appears only as a motif, but in the verse of Greenberg, as in that of Mickiewicz, the idea of national liberation becomes the content and the purpose of poetry.²¹

Leader-Statesman, Creator of a People

The figure who complements the poet-visionary and, in the case of Revisionism, also precedes him chronologically, is the statesman nation-builder or the “father of the nation.” The Revisionist movement found the model for its statesman not in the form of a revolutionary leader, but in a conservative leader who wanted to build an integrated nation after centuries in which it had existed without political sovereignty or defined territory. This was the figure of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, worshipped throughout his life as a hero. The style of this hero-worship was often imitated (both in prose and poetry) by Jabotinsky’s followers.²²

Pilsudski offered a complex model for leadership: a terrorist underground fighter who became the commander of “The Legions” and later the head of state. He was a socialist revolutionary who became a conserva-

18 “In the Light of the Great Assembly” (Hebrew), *Kontres* 246 (January 22, 1926); and *Sadan* 5 (November 1926).

19 The poem “Beterem Kol” (Lwow, September–October 1933), *Hayarden*, January 24, 1937.

20 Y.H. Yevin, “To the Citizens of the Future State” (Hebrew), *Chazit Ha-am*, October 14, 1923.

21 Y.H. Yevin, *Uri Zvi Greenberg, Legislative Poet* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1938, p. 28.

22 See for example T. Witkowski’s poem “With You — To Ze’ev Jabotinsky” (Hebrew), *Hayarden*, April 16, 1937, as an example of the heroic poetry which was written about Jabotinsky during his lifetime.

tive nationalist statesman. He established Poland's standing in Europe and wanted to westernize it while embodying authentic "love of the motherland" and "life in service of the nation." With these words Jabotinsky described the Polish statesman at a memorial ceremony held for Pilsudski near the great cathedral in Cracow, before a parade of torch-bearing members of Betar and Brit Hachayal, the organization of Jewish veterans of the Polish army affiliated to the Revisionist movement. In the same speech he compared Pilsudski with Yosef Trumpeldor.²³

In a eulogy written to commemorate the first anniversary of Pilsudski's death, Jabotinsky observed that the Polish leader's superiority over all the other dictators who appeared in Europe after the Great War lay in the fact that he acted with humility and modesty, in a pragmatic manner, without making grandiose declarations and without formulating a theoretical doctrine that was impossible to carry out in practice.²⁴

To the Revisionists, Pilsudski was the apotheosis of several models of leadership. He was a model of the father-figure statesman. Having established an independent state for a stateless people, Pilsudski led it to political stability after generations of internal schisms and divisiveness. The Revisionists were not the only ones to regard Pilsudski in a positive light,²⁵ but only they saw him as a model and source of inspiration. Every member of Brit Hachayal studied Pilsudski and Jabotinsky equally. "What they [the Poles] have in Grandfather [*dziadek*, as Pilsudski was nicknamed by his Polish supporters] we have too," wrote Abba Ahimeir.²⁶

When Jabotinsky was asked to clarify the radical change that had taken place in his attitude toward Poland — from deep qualms over her aspirations for independence in the 1920s,²⁷ to deep admiration and a feeling of historical partnership — his explanation was direct and to the point: Pilsudski's Poland was not the anti-Semitic Poland of whose establishment he had been skeptical before World War I.²⁸ However, Jabotinsky's

23 "Jabotinsky Addresses the National Youth (a Letter from Cracow)" (Hebrew), *Hayarden*, August 16, 1935. Commemorative ceremonies for Pilsudski were also held in Palestine; among other groups, the Association of Polish Immigrants held such a ceremony at the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv (*Ha'aretz*, May 20, 1935).

24 Ze'ev Jabotinsky ('Altalena'), "Pilsudski" (Hebrew), *Hayarden*, May 22, 1936.

25 See, for example, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, "The Generation and Its Hero (After the Death of Pilsudski)" (Hebrew), *Ha'aretz*, May 1935, which appears in *The Wars of Polish Jewry* (Hebrew), Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1941, pp. 302-316.

26 Abba Ahimeir, "The Death of Yosef Katznelson" (Hebrew), in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, Tel Aviv, 1974, p. 91.

27 See Joseph B. Schechtman, *Rebel and Statesman* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1957, vol. I, pp. 134-136.

28 Jabotinsky, *The Story of My Life*, pp. 84-85.

most unequivocal statement of his change of heart was made in 1937 after the Marshal's death, when attempts were under way to create a basis for cooperation with his successors:

I know all the dark sides of this country but I also know the other side of the Polish nature; at age fourteen I knew the works of Mickiewicz by heart. And I say to you that there occurred among them an extraordinary and unparalleled phenomenon, and that is Pilsudski in 1926. Then, when the Polish people were on the verge of destruction, on the brink of the same abyss into which Germany fell a few years later, at that dark hour, Pilsudski arrived with a group of his followers, quietly and without rhetoric; a man who came not out of love for the Jews and not even for the Poles, but who loved, served and fought for one thing alone: fairness. And he saved his country, set it in order and planted the seed of fairness within it. Were I a Polish Jew I would say: "My friend, Marshal Pilsudski's group, his faithful followers, are your last hope of finding honest allies." I wander all over the world, from country to country, looking for allies for our cause. And I can tell you that I do not see allies more suitable and more realistic than this group of Pilsudski's followers....²⁹

This eulogy was intended for the ears of the new rulers of Poland. However, despite its tone, there are reasons to suggest that he was conscious that Poland in 1935 stood on the brink of fundamental political change. Several contradictions in his policies during this period stemmed from his feeling that Zionist and Jewish prospects in Poland were becoming ever more unpromising. Jabotinsky remained ambivalent toward Poland up to his last book, *The Jewish Front War*, written during the first months of World War II (January-February 1940) and published in England in July 1940. He described Poland as a "Polish ghetto" in which the distress of the Jews was not the result of planned and organized anti-Semitism but was rather the tragic outcome of an objective economic process. When he spoke of the possibility that "the Diaspora will destroy the Jews," he was not referring to physical destruction, to genocide, but rather to the continuous and powerful economic pressure which would leave the Jews with no basis for existence in Poland.³⁰

29 "The Evacuation Plan" (Yiddish), *Unzer Welt*, no. 3(63), Warsaw, October 1933, translated into Hebrew in *Speeches*, 1958, pp. 212-217. Davies writes on the policy of Pilsudski's successors: "The Ozon leadership saw little place for the Jews in their vision of Polish national unity" (Davies, *God's Playground*, vol. II, p. 263). ("Ozon" were the supporters of national unification, 1937-1939.)

30 For an extensive treatment of this matter, see Emmanuel Melzer, *Political Struggle in a Trap: The Jews in Poland 1935-1939* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1982.

Jabotinsky characterized Pilsudski's successors as "the small and unlucky group" which tried to perpetuate Pilsudski's policy under impossible conditions. Jabotinsky's Pilsudski was a rational and balanced statesman who had attempted to repair basic defects in the Polish character, and who in particular fought against the "semi-Asian attributes" of "the Slavic soul" which had a tendency of attaching themselves to the "Polish soul." His successors, the colonels, were not anti-Semites but were forced to stand in the breach between the Jews and the latent anti-Semitic groups that came to the fore in the mid-1930s, demanding the implementation of brutal Nazi methods. Jabotinsky describes the anti-Semitism which demanded a crusade against the Jews and yet defines Polish anti-Semites as "hooligan elements" constituting only a small minority in a country in which there was no real hatred for the Jews. The Colonels' regime, however, was unable to change the "climate" of the "objective" anti-Semitism.

Jabotinsky tried to rehabilitate Poland's reputation with the argument that Polish anti-Semitism was "natural" and "a function of a determinist objective reality" and not the result of incitement, propaganda or deep religious tradition. In this respect, he certainly differed from Uri Zvi Greenberg for whom Poland embodied the Christian world's organic hatred of Judaism and the Jewish people.

Pilsudski was the archetype of an underground terrorist leader who became the commander of the Legions of the regular army.³¹ The use of this model of leadership, and the transformation of Pilsudski into its symbol, mainly served the radical circles within Betar and, later, the I.Z.L. (Irgun Zvai Leumi — National Military Organization), who sought to undermine Jabotinsky's political outlook through the use of historical allusion. Pilsudski became the image of the leader with two faces, who acted according to the internal law of national liberation, which necessitated radical changes of methods in accordance with changing circumstances. Jabotinsky, it was said, was wrong to argue that there was an irresolvable contradiction between terrorist action and the leadership of the Jewish Brigade; these were two planes of the same struggle, and Jabotinsky was now called upon to activate the other side of his character:

Pilsudski the terrorist ... became, without changing his personality, Pilsudski the great nation-builder of a liberated Poland and the legislator of its

31 Because of the inspiration of the Polish Legion, Revisionist national poetry was able to use the term "legions" so freely, despite the fact that in the historical model of the Second Temple, the legions were the Roman enemies of the Jews.

national constitution. However, then, as now, he was not a criminal but was rather loyal to the supreme law of his motherland.³²

It is not surprising that members of Brit Habirionim, a semi-secret Revisionist organization established in Palestine in 1929 that advocated revolt against the British, were the first to point out Pilsudski's dual personality: "The wars of liberation of the world's nations must serve as an example to us. Pilsudski's soldiers can be a symbol for us," Ahimeir said in 1936 speech in Warsaw.³³ The I.Z.L. journal in Palestine, *Bacherev* (With Sword), published a series on the life of Pilsudski entitled "From the Lives of the Great Revolutionaries," which described him as the model figure of a leader who knew both how to fight in the underground and how to use terror and then, later, how to go on to lead the regular Legion.³⁴ *Trybuna Narodowa* (The National Stage), the Zionist Revisionist newspaper edited by Dr. Jan (Menachem) Bader, published a large picture of Pilsudski on the front page of its August 8, 1939 issue, together with an article entitled "The Lesson of August Sixth," the day a contingent of Pilsudski's First Brigade set out for the earliest battle across the border with Russia.³⁵

On September 9, 1938, *Jeruzolima Wyzwolna* (Liberated Jerusalem), the I.Z.L.'s Polish-language organ, printed a collection of Pilsudski's sayings entitled "The Politics of the Practical War" (*Polityka Walki Czynnej*), which included the passage: "How to Educate for a National War of Liberation?":

The blood that is spilled today, the life that is extinguished today, will give their blessed yield in the future.... But let us pay attention to this fact: there was never a political ideal, there was never a slogan in the world, which at first was not greeted with denigration. We always see that those same approaches which at first were extremely unpopular are those which emerged victorious.... This will also be the destiny of the slogan of armed uprising. Today it seems like utopia, but when the war comes, and passes, then it will be remembered as a fact by those same people who reject the slogan today. No healthy public will be able to bear the rule of thieves

32 Yevin, *Uri Zvi Greenberg, Legislative Poet*, p. 76. In April 1908, at Bezdang (near Vilna) Pilsudski conducted a successful mail-train raid.

33 *Hamashkif*, August 12, 1936. Cf. also the article "Freedom Fighters" (Hebrew), *Massuot*, January 2, 1939, pp. 11-12.

34 *Bacherev*, undated broadsheet, postmarked August 1940, and also for January 1941, February 1941, March 1941.

35 On October 6, a small Polish force encountered a Russian patrol which pushed it back into Galicia.

supported by a government, or a government supported by thieves, without being prepared for armed resistance....The quicker we come to the conclusion that there is no escape from the present situation other than armed war — the better it will be for us.... Nearly every popular rebellion movement has been preceded for a lengthy period of time by various manifestations in the form of demonstrations, skirmishes and conflicts, which at one and the same time were the reason for and the result of the creation of a special mood and atmosphere which prepares an ever larger group of people for the war.³⁶

Much later, Dr. Yisrael Sheib (Eldad), referring to the Poland-Palestine analogy, deeply internalized within his historical consciousness, criticized what he called the lack of initiative shown by the I.Z.L. and Lehi (Lohamei Herut Israel — Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) in failing to capture of the Old City during the War of Independence, even though the government of Israel was against it. "We the students of Pilsudski's Poland," he writes, "have forgotten this [lesson]." In other words they (the I.Z.L. and Lehi) had not been capable of acting in the same way as General Zeligowski when he took Vilna in 1920.³⁷

Pilsudski symbolized a leader who had moved from revolutionary socialism to the "patriotic national" camp. In this regard, he symbolized, for the Revisionists, a leader for whom national integration was more important than the ideology of class warfare or internationalism.

The Polish Legion, Armed Struggle, and the Terrorist Underground

The Revisionist movement was profoundly influenced by the tension between the ethos and myth of organized militarism, the ideas of conquest and the armed war for national liberation by the regular army, as against revolutionary terrorism and the praxis of a terrorist political underground.

Most of the Zionist movement was repelled by the cult of militarism in Pilsudski's Poland, and expressed profound reservations about the romantic and messianic elements in Polish nationalism and its concrete political manifestations. Much of this martial enthusiasm appeared superficial, showy, and most of all, unrealistic. The Labor Zionist movement did not

36 Omer Le'am, July 29, 1939 (a paper which appeared once only).

37 Yisrael Eldad, *First Tithe* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 341.

consider the army (or adoration of the army) as the future unifying and integrating factor of the new Jewish society. Moreover, although the Polish Jewish public had professed its admiration for the exploits of the legendary Polish Legion in the Napoleonic Wars and in the Polish revolts of 1830/1831 and 1863,³⁸ only the Revisionists, and in particular Betar, Brit Hachayal and later the I.Z.L., adopted this ethos as part of their ideology and politics, regarding it as worthy of emulation in the Zionist way of life.

Poland was the only territory in which Betar and Brit Hachayal were able to put Jabotinsky's idea of militarism into practice. This did not imply regular military organization and training, but rather the creation of para-military bodies which were mainly trained in the finer points of military ceremony. Jabotinsky regarded this militarism as part of a necessary process of education, whose main aim was to change the outer form and inner essence of the Diaspora Jew, with the goal of training him to be a member of a regular army in the future. Only in theory were these Betar cells supposed to be the basis for enlistment in the new Jewish fighting force, whenever that would come into being, to drive out Britain.

To the radical wing within Revisionism in the 1930s, this para-military activity was an indispensable manifestation of popular Jewish national vitality in Poland. The accumulation of military power was not perceived in pragmatic or functional terms, and a huge gap therefore grew up between the Revisionists' militaristic and eschatological rhetoric and their real power and potential for action. After a meeting of Brit Hachayal in Warsaw in 1938, Greenberg wrote:

We already have in the Zionist Revisionist movement, and in Betar, that same Trumpeldorian foundation that our messianic movement is in need of — an element such as this can be presented before an empire which might want us as a partner ... we can now appear before a forum of interested

38 David Cohen, *The Grace of Youth* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1956, pp. 182–183, describes the deep revulsion experienced through the encounter with the outward manifestations of militarism. See also in Davies's *Gods's Playground*, vol. II, the chapter entitled "Wojsko: The Military Tradition," n. 12, pp. 267–274. See also, Mendelsohn, "Wilhelm Friedman and Alfred Nossig"; A. Eisenbach, "The Jewish Legion Plan and the Poet Adam Mickiewicz," *Gal'ed, An Historical Journal of Polish Jewry*, vols. 4–5, Tel Aviv, 1979, pp. 78–79; N.M. Gelber, "The Jews and the Polish Revolt, 1830–1831" (Hebrew), *Metsuda*, Book 7, London, 1954, pp. 244–280. The literature of Betar included translations of short novels from a collection called *Gloria Victis* which dealt with the Polish Legion and its acts of valor.

kingdoms and speak and show clearly of what we are capable. A curse on him who stands at the head of the people and does not grasp this wondrous moment, who does not answer the logical call of the hour.³⁹

Unlike in his visionary poetry, he was not referring to "Bar Kochba's legions" setting out on their war of revolt against the "British conqueror," but rather to legions in the Polish sense who would fight alongside Poland or Britain (or any other interested power) in certain international circumstances, in order to attain the political goals of Zionism. Five years earlier, Greenberg had written of "the festival of the regiments" of Brit Hachayal embarking on "the path of dynasty" and emitting "the same whiff of heroism as was exuded by the ancient conquerors of Canaan."⁴⁰

Opponents and critics of the Revisionist movement viewed this pseudo-military activity, with its ceremonials and pomp, as no more than "playing at militarism." The play-acting was seen as a concrete expression of the nature and content of Revisionism. While it expressed the authentic inner needs of a large sector of the Jewish population, it was divorced from reality. David Ben-Gurion, the movement's most stubborn and bitter opponent, set out on a "crusade" against it in Poland in 1933, and accused the members of Brit Hachayal of belonging to the "Jewish underworld ... thieves and pimps."⁴¹

Revisionism, it was held, created a fictitious militaristic world, a Zionist version of the imaginary world of Polish militarism. It was a symptom of the tragic situation of Polish Jewry, which clung to the fantasy of prowess and strength in desperation. As Nahum Sokolow observed, after his journey through Poland in 1934:

... nobody in his wildest imagination could conceive that this Legion could ever rise up and fight against Britain, the Arab World, Islam ... or anybody else. And it is this absurdity which is so attractive and stimulating: *Credo qua absurdum* [I believe it because it is absurd]. And this is where the faith of fools lends a hand; this is where the nonsensical and all-important personality cult comes into play. Most amazing and surprising tales are being spread about the genius-commander, about the Napoleonic strategic talents of a man who has almost definitely never spent a day on a battleground or

39 Uri Zvi Greenberg, "Eretz-Yisrael in Fire and in Our Bells of Elram" (Hebrew), *Hayarden*, November 5, 1938.

40 Uri Zvi Greenberg, "A State of War in Our Camp" (Hebrew), *Hazit Ha-am*, November 1, 1933.

41 David Ben-Gurion, *Letters* (Hebrew), vol. 3, Tel Aviv, 1974, p. 261.

knows the smell of gunpowder. A new Shabtai-Zviism has appeared in the world ... in the form of the conspiracy and its attributes which capture young hearts by means of militaristic mystery and its superior, inferior, and ultra-superior beings, and its discipline, which starts off in the form and dress of sport and ends in what looks more and more like a comic army.⁴²

Jabotinsky never believed that the historical circumstances were likely to come about whereby Polish Jewish "Legions" would march on Eretz-Yisrael. He saw militarism as being mainly of educational value. At the same time he viewed Revisionist quasi-military activity in Poland as part of the political and ideological struggle to conquer the Polish "Jewish-Zionist street." Radical Revisionism, which from 1936 had deepened and grown as the result of a combination of factors, principally the political events in Palestine and the policy changes of the Polish Government toward the Jews, also felt the growing gap between the myth and the real state of affairs, and tried to draw "revolutionary" conclusions from the situation.

In this context, Sokolow wrote:

A policy of friendship on the part of Poland and toward Poland is essential to us. However, the blatant admiration of Polish militaristic trends and tendencies, the attempt to exploit the Polish tradition of the Legions of the last generation (and even the tradition of the 1840s, with Mickiewicz and so forth) and the attempt to ingratiate ourselves in this manner, is no more than a cheap stunt, which is both morally improper and practically dangerous, an act taken from the archives of assimilation which leads this movement into total bankruptcy.⁴³

With greater frequency, Polish patriotic poetry appeared in the Yiddish, Polish and Hebrew Revisionist press, together with the increasingly intensive use of the slogans of "national war of liberation" and "armed struggle," and a national rhetoric which sought a Jewish parallel to Poland's national heroes.

Jabotinsky awaited the propitious international situation in which to renew the idea of the Brigades, and he saw the educational activity of Betar as a means of training and a way of keeping this idea alive until the time came to revitalize it. However, the "secret cells" of the I.Z.L. within

42 Nahum Sokolow, "Journey through Poland in 1934," in: *Watchman unto the House of Israel* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1961, p. 256.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Betar, which emerged after 1937, developed along different lines.⁴⁴

The I.Z.L. in Poland spoke of training regular army brigades which would be sent by sea to Palestine to participate in an armed liberation struggle. Various plans were formulated to implement this idea.⁴⁵ The I.Z.L. developed as a terrorist underground, and from 1937 onwards not only acted as a conspirative clandestine organization (which was becoming increasingly autonomous), but also acquired the values of the underground.

The poems of Avraham Stern, the ideologue of Lehi, made extensive use of the central motifs of Polish poetry and prose that glorified the revolutionary underground — “days of hunger, cold and wandering,” “the dog’s life of the underground fighter,” “men of the underground ... nameless men,” “noble slaves of liberty.”⁴⁶ These themes were later absorbed in Palestine of the 1940s, devoid of their background and context, as “original” motifs. They played an important role in the creation of the tightly restricted and exclusive world of the underground, which was able to compete with, and provide an alternative to the prevailing image of the model Zionist in Jewish Palestine — the hero-pioneer.

Identification with Poland of the Revisionists and the I.Z.L.

The deep emotional and cultural link with Poland served as a source of national-heroic values in the interim period before an independent Jewish cultural system could become self-sufficient. It also provided the basis for the Polish orientation of the Revisionist movement and the I.Z.L., and their unconditional support of Polish policy.

The Revisionists perceived Poland in the same way as did Polish nationalists, as a strong and ambitious nation-state fighting for its rightful place in the European pantheon of powers, and even in the colonial world. A year before the outbreak of the World War II, Jabotinsky wrote:

Until two months ago the world believed that there was one huge fist of steel which could destroy everything and that no one could stop it. And

44 Cf. Yaakov Shavit, “Jabotinsky — Father of the Revolt” (Hebrew), *Milet*, Everyman’s University Studies in Jewish History and Culture, vol. II, pp. 387–407.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Cf. Avraham Stern’s poetry in the collection *You Will Live Forever in Your Blood* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1976, and Yisrael Eldad’s introduction, *ibid.*, pp. 7–13. Ze’ev Ivianski mentioned this deep link in his study, *Individual Terror, Theory and Deed* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1977, pp. 13–16, and see footnote no. 9, p. 282.

then one country stood up, and not the biggest of countries either, one country, and this will certainly be engraved to its credit and glory in the chronicles of history, and said: “We will fight back,” and by doing so it finally pierced a hole in that fist.⁴⁷

Only a month before the war, on July 29, 1939, *Omer La’am* confidently wrote that Hitler would have to take “Poland’s military strength” and its willingness to fight into account, and that Germany would therefore be prepared to make important concessions.

Jabotinsky was privately far more skeptical of Poland’s deterrent strength than he appeared to be on public platforms. In a February 28, 1939 letter to his friend Joseph B. Schechtman, following the visit of the Polish Foreign Minister Jozef Beck to London, Jabotinsky wrote that Britain indeed regarded Poland as a large and important power, and that Beck was likely to exert pressure on Britain for the sake of the Zionist cause. However, he cautioned, it was also clear that Poland was dependent on Britain, and not the other way round. Therefore, Polish pressure on London, if exerted, was liable to be nonproductive if it were to stand in contradiction to British interests.⁴⁸ In fact, such was the case.

In the late 1930s the majority of Poles believed that their country had been betrayed by the Great Powers. Following the Palestine partition plan of July 1937, and, to an even greater extent, after the publication of the White Paper of May 1939, the atmosphere within the Revisionist movement was similar. Both national movements complained that “perfidious Albion” had deceived them. Greenberg even contrasted Poland’s policy toward its various minorities with British policy toward the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine), arguing that Poland came out the better in the comparison.⁴⁹ The Revisionists assumed that Poland would promote Jewish emigration to Palestine in the framework of the League of Nations, despite Britain’s opposition. The Poles were to be the champions of Zionism and, it was fervently hoped, would tip the scales in favor of Zionism’s goals at the end of the 1930s.⁵⁰

47 See his 1939 article, “Zion Sejm” (Hebrew), in: *Speeches*, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 327–344.

48 Letter to Schechtman, J.I., 1/29/2/1A, and his letter on the same subject dated December 22, 1938, J.I., 2/18/2/1A.

49 Uri Zvi Greenberg, “The Last Chapter in the World Revolution” (Hebrew), *Hayarden*, October 23, 1934.

50 It is reasonable to assume that Jabotinsky’s willingness to speak openly of the transfer of Palestinian Arabs was directly connected with his willingness to take part in Poland’s emigration policy, thereby allaying fears that the talk of “transfer” might encourage supporters of the expulsion of the Jews from Poland. The boycott of German produce

As war approached in 1939, both Poles and Zionists believed that their causes had been forsaken.⁵¹ This atmosphere, which was born in Poland out of deep national and political frustration, helped prepare the ground for the radical circles within Betar and the I.Z.L. to challenge Jabotinsky's pro-British orientation.

When war engulfed Polish Jewry, Revisionist hopes were instantly crushed. The illusion of Poland's power and her ability to effect a revolutionary change in Zionist history was destroyed. Revisionist historiography describes the late 1930s as years of a tragically missed opportunity in which there was not enough time for the Revisionist movement, and its radical wing in particular, to complete "its preparations" for the campaign for the conquest of Palestine which was to have set out from Polish soil.⁵² Poland itself, as a model culture, was erased from Revisionist consciousness, and thrust deep into oblivion.

was also apparently aimed at proving to the Polish Government that the Jewish public would be a suitable ally in its fight against Nazi Germany. It is known that the leaders of the Union of Zionist Revisionists and of Betar expressed great willingness to mobilize Jewish brigades composed of Brit Hachayal members in order to defend the corridor between Pomerania in the west and Prussia in the east, which was the focal point of the German-Polish conflict. On this matter, see Ben-Gurion, letter to Levi Skolnick (Eshkol) of May 15, 1933, Ben-Gurion, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 261; and Sokolow, *ibid.*, p. 266.

51 See for example Menachem Begin, "Tertium non datur" (Hebrew), *Hamedina*, April 1936.

52 In his book *The Jewish Front War*, July 1940, Jabotinsky quotes an unidentified Polish Catholic: "The full renaissance of Poland involved therefore two separate steps: firstly — the renewed revival of Poland, and secondly — the establishment of the Jewish state." It is therefore clear that even in January–February 1940 — in other words even after the conquest of Poland — he still expected the quick defeat of the Nazis and the speedy revival of Poland, including all its Jews. Further evidence that Jabotinsky envisaged acute economic distress but not physical elimination, even during the first year of the war, can be found in this book (Chapter 7) in which he speaks of the Nazi policy of concentrating the Jews of Poland in the "reservation" of Lublin, and states that such a demographic concentration within a small area will make it very hard to rehabilitate the Jews of Poland following the victory over Nazi Germany.