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Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944 by Dalia Ofer; The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939-1945 by Dina Porat

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great dichotomy between modernity and orthodoxy. The study is somewhat imbalanced since the Sephardim, who constituted nearly half of the Jewish community, receive far less attention than the Ashkenazim, and are presented in a somewhat static manner.

While the themes of the book are clearly narrated, the methods and general contextual framework of the study are problematic. Halper, an anthropologist, purports to write a historical ethnography, distinguishing his study from social history by his simple statement that he interviewed people who were stilled to a world view of past times. How these interviews enter into his narrative is never revealed. The text reads not as a historical ethnography but as conventional social history. For the historian, the book is disappointing because archival sources are not used. In the introduction, Halper invokes various proponents of "new history," and Clifford Geertz's notion of social activities as "texts," but nowhere are these methodological or theoretical issues confronted in the book. The various anecdotes used in the narrative are often taken at face value, and the *mentalité* of the actors is often presented stereotypically rather than multileveled and nuanced, as in the Geertzian sense. The result is a history that remains parochial. The main contribution of this book is not in the originality of research, nor in its theoretical insights, but in bringing together in English material that would otherwise be inaccessible to a non-Hebrew reading audience.

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DALIA OFER. *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939–1944*. (Studies in Jewish History.) New York: Oxford University Press. 1990. Pp. xiii, 408. \$35.00.

DINA PORAT. *The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939–1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1990. Pp. x, 334. \$27.95.

The core of every historical account of Zionist policy and action in the years preceding World War II, and of Zionist activities during the course of war itself, seeks not only to give a full and accurate account of the historical events or an improved understanding of what really took place during this dark and monstrous period but also to pass historical and moral judgment, and to condemn the accused. Anyone judging events would indeed have to face a series of crucial questions, such as whether Zionist leadership could have foreseen the coming storm and its aftermath, or whether they could have more efficiently helped Jews reach the safety of their "national home" in Palestine.

Such issues are indeed some of the most important to have been raised in Jewish history. They loom over

the collective Jewish consciousness and existence, their ghosts lurking, reappearing and disappearing. It is small wonder, then, that these reflections of guilt and remorse are placed at the heart of a long and bitter controversy pertaining to the historiography of the Jewish people, and to the polemics of its collective memory. A continuing debate tries to clarify the answers to the most serious accusations, many of which reflect intensely emotional feelings and a priori ideological and political attitudes and beliefs. Any seriously critical or scholarly attempt to deal with these issues must therefore be welcomed as a major contribution. The two studies by Israeli scholars Dalia Ofer and Dina Porat are contributions that add considerable insight to our understanding of Jewish history during the period in question.

Some preliminary notes are required. Before reexamining a historical perspective, and prior to passing judgment, it is important to remember that an argument basic to Zionism was its declared commitment to the overall destiny of the Jewish people. At the same time, however, one must also remember that the Zionist movement was unable to acquire leadership of the Jewish people or to solve the so-called "Jewish Problem." As Porat rightly argues, Jews of the free world were never really prepared to accept Zionism as a leading movement, and before the war the Polish Jews were unable to amass a unified body to fight Polish anti-Semitism (see Emanuel Malzer's excellent study, *Political Strife in a Blind Alley: The Jews in Poland 1935–1939* [1982]). The idea that Zionism could act efficiently as the "Jewish Agent" involved in finding "real" territorial solutions to settling Jews in a land of their own, or organize Jewish immigration to one of the so-called "immigration states" (such as the United States), fails not only to see that doing so was to act against the basic *raison d'être* of Zionism but also overlooks the fact that no real territorial solution in fact existed. Furthermore, one must also remember that the majority of European Jewry was at best indifferent to declared Zionist objectives, and at worst anti-Zionist.

Those who blame Zionism are, to my mind, retroactively placing on its shoulders an unfair and altogether too heavy burden when they accuse it of not having provided for the safety of thousands of Jews; they conveniently forget that these multitudes never even believed in Zionism as a possible or even desirable solution. These same critics are also ignoring the inherent weakness of the *Yishuv*, its worldwide political demise during the 1930s (as today), and the fact that its existence was severely threatened at the time. Paradoxically, in the 1930s, there were many Zionists who believed that at this moment of desperation and crisis Zionism should have braced itself and sailed off into the storm, assuming political clout of its own in Europe, and ultimately using the international crisis to its own advantage by posing as an ally to what were in fact its staunch adversaries.

In reality, the keys to Palestine were in the sole

possession of policy makers in London, not those in Warsaw, Bucharest, or Berlin. British policy was aimed at separating the Jewish question from the Palestinian question. After Great Britain retreated from the Partition Plan there was no way of swaying its interest in the Middle East nor its attitude toward Zionist self-fulfillment in Palestine by presenting Zionism as a solution to the internal problems of the Jews in Poland or Hungary. Indeed, Zionism was forced to act in keeping with "the Age of Dictators," struggling concurrently with anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish trends in Britain and the United States, as well as growing anti-Semitism throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

As there was no other alternative, Zionism was forced to seek the support of anti-Semitic or semi-anti-Semitic governments in order to secure its political status and freedom of activity. Ironically, therefore, it was anti-Semitism rather than philo-Semitism that became Zionism's ally. It is unfair to claim that Zionist leadership observed the flight of Europe's Jews from a cold and rational political viewpoint of self-interest, because the only viable mass-solution for Jewish immigration was not a humanitarian one but rather a political one. Zionist leaders could have objected to any existing non-Zionist solution but could not prevent the implementation of such a solution. Because no political solution was at hand, and Jews were trapped in Europe, Zionism could offer no more than partial solutions, effective for no more than a handful of people at a time. We should also not forget that there were not many people who predicted the advent of a world war before the end of 1939, and the Jews in Nazi Germany and Austria were subject to different conditions from those in Eastern Europe. The large population of Polish Jewry was assaulted by the Polish people and the government, yet no one foresaw the extent of this mass discrimination, let alone a Polish "final solution." The *Endlösung* could only have taken place as a result of Nazi occupation in Eastern Europe.

Ofer's book presents the best available account of the Illegal Immigration (*Aliya*) to Palestine during the years 1939–44. Between 1934 and 1944, sixty-nine ships carrying 38,542 Jewish immigrants and refugees arrived in Palestine. 1,399 were drowned or did not arrive (see the list on pages 323–25). One should distinguish between the period 1934–39 and the years of war itself. During the first period, illegal immigration was a means whereby Zionism could combat the stringent measures and restrictions imposed on the numbers of "certificates" distributed by the Mandatory Regime. It was, however, also a manifestation of inner strife and tension, and new active trends, emerging within the two major movements in Zionism: the labor movement and the revisionist movement. The main internal struggle took place between the active groups and the leadership of each movement. The leadership was anxious not to let illegal activities endanger its political endeavors and

saw illegal *Aliya* chiefly as a political instrument that might cause British policy to change. For activists in both parties, illegal *Aliya* became a manifestation of their desire for activism. It became an integral part of their struggle with the British Mandate, and because the war was still far off, this activity was primarily a result of growing Jewish pressure to leave Europe (mainly Poland). Illegal immigration was thus not a response to leadership initiatives but rather part of a modern Jewish Odyssey, an expression of boldness and small-mindedness, private enterprise and political interests, bitter conflicts between factions, human suffering, and deliverance.

Greater organization could possibly have brought more Jews to Palestine during this time, but illegal immigration was not to become a central aspect of Zionist groups until 1939. The war changed all this drastically, and illegal immigration became the *Yishuv's* main means of combatting both immigration restrictions and British policy. Britain did its best to stop this immigration both before and during the war (see Bernard Wasserstein's study, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939–1945* [1979]). Deteriorating war conditions in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and at sea eventually became insurmountable, bringing an end to more aggressive performances by the Mosad for *Aliya Bet*. Ofer rightly claims that more could have been done during 1941 and 1942, but the outcome would have been limited, and only a handful of people might have been spared. She also claims that "There was no all-about effort to combat the indifference of the Western democracies, even though all were agreed that without their active involvement there could be no large-scale rescue" (pp. 316–17), but one wonders if such an effort could have brought about a change in the attitude of Western democracies. Illegal *Aliya* did not therefore stem from a desire to take direct and independent action but happened simply because there was no other choice.

The history of illegal *Aliya* consists primarily of the history of each individual ship. She successfully gives the reader a reliable picture without foregoing the dramatic details of human interest. Despite bringing to safety but a handful of Jews, and not really being able to redirect British policy, illegal *Aliya* signified a major shift in the attitude of Zionism toward European Jewry and the ensuing structure of Zionist activities. Only when the war ended did *Aliya* become a major instrument in the Zionist struggle against British policy and a major force in the creation of the state of Israel.

Porat's study touches on an even more sensitive subject, the attitude of the *Yishuv* and its activities during the war years. Here not only the issue of illegal immigration is at stake but also other matters such as historical interpretation, rescue operation funds, the Joint Rescue Committee, and rescue plans and operations such as the Ransom Plans and Military Plans. The stance of the *Yishuv* and its behavior should be considered in the light of the way the

Jewish community continued to live a normal life during the war, both before and after details concerning the mass-murder of Jews and the "final solution" became common knowledge, and in response to the fate of the Jews and rescue operation plans; and whether the *Yishuv* did all it could to employ its resources and authority in order to effect change in British policy and secure the rescue of as many Jews as possible. Moral judgment concerning ideological viewpoints should not be confused with the main issue at hand: could the *Yishuv* have done more had it been fully aware of the coming Holocaust and better equipped to deal with such a mission? As I have already claimed, it might perhaps have done a lot more for a few people, but hardly anything more for the masses. Porat has touched on an extremely sensitive chapter in Jewish history, fully aware of its being an open wound, and no less aware of her responsibility as a historian.

We should add that by concentrating on Zionism and the *Yishuv* we have neglected the role played by American Jewry during these years. This subject is also the focus of many studies and bitter debates. Nevertheless, these two studies present us with central aspects of the whole picture. It is altogether too easy to accuse them of being overly moderate in their critical stances and even in trying to justify or condone the *Yishuv* and its leadership. But being an Israeli scholar, whether writing in Hebrew or English, does not mean that one should be expected to be a revisionist historian, intent on revealing a strong but somewhat blind Zionist strength, with an interest in exposing the indifference, passivity, and politically insensitive guilt caused by a terrible and unforgivable crime. The historical truth is far more complicated, far more full of collective human helplessness in the face of the most heinous crimes committed at a most terrible time for any people's leadership. Recent historical events have taught us that a state can indeed act as a messenger of salvation, or as an agency for large-scale immigration, but even then it needs large-scale resources and the support and cooperation of other great powers. The so-called use and misuse of the "lesson of the Holocaust" should not blur the fact that some historical and national goals can be accomplished only by a sovereign state, and that often even a state is not enough.

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NANCY ELIZABETH GALLAGHER. *Egypt's Other Wars: Epidemics and the Politics of Public Health*. (Contemporary Issues in the Middle East.) Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press. 1990. Pp. xiii, 234. \$32.50.

This book by Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher describes the spread of malaria, cholera, and typhus in Egypt during the 1940s and the political implications and

decision making involved with questions of health. The author discusses the impact of the epidemics on Egypt's population, the various agencies involved in fighting the epidemics, the role of private and public American efforts in Egypt, and the role of the British in fighting the epidemics or hiding their existence, as the case may be. Altogether Gallagher demonstrates the significance of political interests to decisions regarding matters of health. Thus, she raises a number of significant questions and issues that are important for understanding the process of historical change. These include, for example, how health issues are manipulated by politicians; how political interests affect health policy; the nature of Egyptian interparty squabbles over power; the competition between the British and the Americans over influence in Egypt; and the persistent conflicts between the king, the British embassy, and the Egyptian government over who has paramount power in Egypt. Gallagher shows that the answers to these questions are never simple, and that the forgotten wars were more than a fight against the spread of epidemics and against poverty.

The sources used in this study are quite extensive and impressive. Through considerable research in American and British archives, Egyptian government and United Nations publications, as well as interviews, Gallagher succeeds in showing the intricacies of politics, thereby adding to our understanding of the relationship between state and society and the impact of one on the other. She also adds to our understanding of the way women have involved themselves in decision making and reveals the central role played by women in health politics in a society that is customarily portrayed as a patriarchy, where women are subjected to the power of men and where decision making is the prerogative of absolutist rulers.

One weakness of the work is the author's concentration on the contribution of elites, particularly elite women, to the treatment of epidemics. Epidemics such as typhus were not new for Egypt and local methods were relatively effective for centuries before the introduction of modern medicine. Besides, Gallagher does not appreciate the relative significance of health, disease, and class issues. Thus, the relationship between culture, social structure, and health is not sufficiently covered. For example, regarding cholera, since mosquitos do not discriminate, why is it that more of the poor died than the rich (if that was the real case)?

Notwithstanding these criticisms, this important book sets new directions for historical research, particularly regarding the Third World. It should be of general interest to social historians and required reading for those interested in the history of the Middle East, imperialism and dependency, history of medicine, and women's studies.

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