**Jabotinsky’s Children – Polish Jews and The Rise of Right-Wing Zionism**, By Daniel Kupfert Heller, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017, xiii +331 pp, ISBN 978-0-691-17475-4

The character of Ze’ev Jabotinsky has fascinated generations, not least due to the multifaceted nature of his thought. Unlike other Zionist leaders who have gradually been forgotten, in recent years – as the period of rule of the Likud, the modern-day incarnation of the Revisionist movement has continued – there has been growing academic and public interest in Jabotinsky as the founder of this movement. Left-wingers quote excerpts from his writings relating to the required liberal dimension of the state, while those on the right emphasize his militaristic approach. While it may be doubted whether the politicians who quote him have studied his writings in depth, both sides – as those who research Jabotinsky are aware – are simultaneously correct and mistaken. Jabotinsky was indeed a liberal who was concerned about minority rights, as Dmitry Shumsky shows in his new book.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, in the last year of his life, as Gil Rubin’s new study shows, this liberal also supported the deportation of Palestinians from Israel.[[2]](#footnote-2) As Yaacov Shavit commented in one of his studies, it indeed seems fair to suggest that “there were several Jabotinskies.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Dan Heller, a young researcher from McGill University, sought to answer the Jabotinsky riddle by illuminating a historical corner that has hitherto received relatively little attention: the cultural, political, and ideological developments among the younger generation of Betar members in Poland during the 1920s and 1930s.

Heller’s fascinating book “Jabotinsky’s Children” examines the processes of radicalization among the younger generation of Betar in Poland, showing how the leader’s positions, and the contradictions between some of these positions, were not solely the product of autonomous thought. Heller argues that, to a large extent, Jabotinsky should be understood in the context of the consideration he gave to the positions of the young members of Betar, since they constituted his political powerbase. During this period, Jabotinsky attempted to maneuver between the demands of the young members, some of who tended toward fascist positions, and his original liberal positions. In some cases, he was drawn toward the youth, in others he reprimanded and opposed them, and, on some occasions, he used them against his rivals inside and outside the movement.

The relations between Jabotinsky and the young members of Betar were thus symbiotic. Heller describes these relations in a careful, wide-ranging and picturesque study. The impact of Polish nationalism on Revisionist ideology is a familiar subject that has already been discussed by scholars, including Yaacov Shavit and David Engel, among others. However, Heller delves deeper into the subject, particularly regarding the influence of the young members of Betar. His book shows, for example, that these young members, who were strongly influenced by the approach of Józef Piłsudski and his party, contributed to Jabotinsky’s anti-Socialist tendency, in contrast to the sympathy he had shown for this movement in the 1920s. They also shaped the way he formulated his positions on authoritarianism and militarism (p 25). Even the concept of “Betarian splendor” should be understood against the background of Piłsudski’s aspiration to ensure “moral cleansing” (p. 56).

The book is unique in that it may be read in several ways. In some respects, this is a monograph about Jabotinsky. In others, it is a book about patterns of leadership. Heller’s emphasis on the positions of the younger generation in Betar as a tool for understanding Jabotinsky offers an important approach to the study of leadership. After all, even distinguished leaders marked by independent thought cannot survive – in either a democracy or a dictatorship – without popular support. Accordingly, it is important to focus on the leader’s supporters in order to understand the leader.

As an aside, Israel has, of course, been led for the past decade by a further scion of the original Revisionist movement, Benjamin Netanyahu, whose father Ben-Zion belonged to the radical wing of the movement. Accordingly, it is impossible not to wonder whether Netanyahu’s more extreme rhetoric during his current period of office may be connected to the fact that his inner circle of advisors has changed. In his early years in power, he was surrounded by neo-Conservative American Jews, national-religious Israelis of the old generation and members of the second generation of the “Fighting Family.” In recent years, however, his immediate circle has been dominated by young Israelis who are unfettered by the restraints of movement splendor and whose right-wing orientation was shaped against the backdrop of the suicide attacks of the Second Intifada. In this sense, the book also encourages fascinating reflections on the importance of the changing generations for the leader’s course.

The book also extends beyond the personal domain. Heller essentially describes the roots of the Revisionist movement, which defined itself as liberal-nationalist, but which also developed an affinity to fascism, a phenomenon and concept that Heller insists cannot easily be defined (p. 10). In this context, the book can also be read as a proposal to refocus scholarship on the Zionist right: did it emerge in Mandate Palestine, or had it actually already been shaped in Poland? (Many Polish Jews, and particularly Revisionists, supported Piłsudski’s right-wing government and his policy of Sanacja (purification), in part due to their concern that the over-democratization of Poland would serve only to amplify anti-Semitic manifestations (p. 57).

This historical question also has a contemporary context given that the right-wing governments of Poland and Israel have maintained warm diplomatic ties in recent years, to the point that Netanyahu has even been willing to downplay the significance of Polish involvement in the murder of Jews in the Holocaust. Is this partnership motivated solely by shared interests in the contemporary context, or does it have roots in the historical bond between the Revisionists and the Polish government? This point invites serious consideration.

Heller notes that “During Polish national holidays, Betar was the only Zionist youth movement whose leaders routinely searched for opportunities to march in parades alongside Polish scouts and soldiers, sing patriotic songs, and deliver speeches pledging to defend Poland from attack” (p. 13). He illustrates his claim powerfully. However, it is reasonable to ask how this bond was eliminated after the Revisionist movement relocated its center of action to Israel following the Holocaust. In his book “White Nights,” Menachem Begin emphasized that after he was released from Soviet jail in order to join the Polish Anders’ Army, he was asked whether he was a Pole. Although he was required to answer in the affirmative in order to leave prison and join the army, he firmly replied, “I am a Jew.” This anecdote illustrates the manner in which the leaders of the movement denied their affinity to Polish nationalism after they arrived in Israel. However, this denial cannot in itself explain how the Revisionist-Polish bond was broken. Heller does not offer a definitive answer to this question. In this context, my impression is that he sometimes attaches excessive importance to the influence of Polish nationalism and the positions of the European right wing on those of Jabotinsky and the Revisionists.

Thus, for example, Heller suggests that Jabotinsky exacerbated his attacks on Socialist-Zionists under the influence of the European right wing (p. 101). However, it should be taken into account that in the internal Zionist context, this also constituted a reaction by Jabotinsky to the increasingly extreme attacks against the Revisionists by Ben-Gurion.

Heller also analyzes the Betar anthem, with its self-definition as “proud, noble, and cruel,” in terms of the influence of fascism, noting the contradiction between the different concepts it promotes (pp. 104-105). In my opinion, however, it would be more apposite to analyze the anthem in terms of its affinity to the concept of the New Jew and the perception of splendor. In this sense, “cruel” describes a Jewish fighter who also takes no mercy on himself, contrary to the image of Jewish self-preservation.

Heller concludes his study by noting that Jabotinsky’s political writings remain elusive (p. 252). He sees this as the key to his survival in a position of power, in part due to his response to the radicalization of the younger generation. This is true, but it is important to note that the evasive and contradictory character of his positions was due also, and perhaps most importantly, to the fact that Jabotinsky was not only a politician. He was also an artist, a playwright, an author, a thinker, and a poet. This is what makes him unique, and it also contributes to his complexity and to his strengths and weaknesses as a politician. Heller’s captivating and important book adds an important dimension to our understanding of Jabotinsky, though it would seem that his character will continue to be open to further interpretation in the future.

1. Shumsky**,** Dmitry. *Beyond**the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion.* New Haven: Yale University Press (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rubin S, Gil. "Minority Rights, Population Transfers and the Predicament of the 1940S: Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s Last Year", *The Historical Journal* (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shavit, Yaacov. “Mishnato haLe’umit shel Jabotinsky beino uvein Tenu‘ato,” *HaMitologiyah shel haYamin* [The mythologies of the Zionist Right-Wing]. Beit Berl, 1986, p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)