**Simon Dubnov and the *Jerusalem School***

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In a 1936 article to mark the 75th anniversary of Simon Dubnov, published in the first volume of *Zion*, the journal of the Historical Society of Israel, Israeli historian Ben-Zion Dinur (1884-1973) wrote:

Dubnov’s critique of Zionism does not stem from the foundations of his views; on the contrary, Dubnov’s fundamental assumptions support Zionism in all respects. It is clear: the “spiritual essence” of the nation of which Dubnov speaks is not some metaphysical “essence” […] it is a psychological backdrop that binds the shared lives of the people of the nation […]. This “spiritual essence” requires the existence of a real framework, where each member of the national collective can be “whole as he is;” that is, the “logical conclusion” of the “spiritual essence” is precisely the “Jewish state.”

How did the historiographical doctrine of the Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860-1941) develop and spread from St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Riga to the emerging center of the New Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael, gain a Zionist interpretation, and become part of the fabric of modern Hebrew culture? In the last decades of the nineteenth century, and at the start of the twentieth, hundreds of Jewish intellectuals settled in Palestine, then part of the Ottoman Empire. These men and women played an influential role in the development of modern Hebrew culture and in shaping the political, social, and organizational infrastructure of the New Yishuv. Writers, poets, painters, sculptors, philosophers, journalists, and educators—who, in the years prior to their migration, had been exposed to Western cultural influences via the imperial (Russian) language in the land of their birth—brought the tidings of Jewish modernism in its Eastern European incarnation from Tsarist Russia to the nascent cultural centers of Ottoman Palestine. Many of them had acquired their knowledge of Jewish history from studying Heinrich Graetz’s (1817-1891) landmark work *Geschichte der Juden* in its Hebrew translation by Saul Pinchas Rabbinowicz (alias ShePheR, 1845-1910) of Warsaw’s Hibbat Tsiyon movement. Graetz’s monumental history, in its Hebrew translation published in Imperial Russia, was a kind of textual mid-station *en route* from the German *Wissenschaft* of the nineteenth century to the Zionist historiography of Eretz Yisrael in the twentieth. This bibliographic work is well-suited to open a discussion of the story of the acceptance (*Rezeptiongeschichte*) of Jewish-Russian historian Simon Dubnov in Israeli culture in general and in the Jerusalem School in particular. The migration of Jewish national historiography from Eastern and Central Europe to Ottoman Palestine was part of a multicultural, transnational network that began to spread from the Berlin of the *Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* to Warsaw, St. Petersburg, and Odessa; and from there to London, New York, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv. Dubnov’s multi-faceted historiographical work played a founding role in this “historiographical migration.” It was a contemplative and scholarly masterpiece of writing Jewish history in a national spirit. Precisely because of their proximity to Zionist historiography, Dubnov’s works presented a challenging and fruitful non-Zionist antithesis to studies of the past to the historians of this new school, whose influence had spread in the early twentieth century from the small Hebrew University on Mount Scopus in British Mandate Palestine and was later accepted in academic institutions throughout the State of Israel.

The small scholarly community in Palestine, joined in the 1920s and 1930s by members of the National Zionist Division of the Eastern European *Wissenschaft* from the centers that were being liquidated in the Soviet Union, invited Dubnov to an intellectual-political extension of the Jewish Russian national culture from overseas. This was a continuation of the multilingual (Russian, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew) cultural-research environment from which he had been displaced after the 1917 Russian Revolution (he lived during those years in Berlin and Riga). One of the most prominent members of this group was Ben-Zion Dinaburg (Dinur), who studied history at the universities of Berlin and St. Petersburg before migrating to Palestine from Odessa in 1921. In Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Dubnov was seen as a great teacher and founding father of the national historiographic school, even though they did not accept either his positive attitude regarding the duration of the diasporic state of the Jewish nation, or his political support for the concept of Jewish autonomy in European countries. In Palestine, the years-long political disputes that arose between Dubnov and the Zionists could not be ignored. Neither could their differences in historical perception.

His historian colleagues in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, who would retroactively be dubbed the “Jerusalem School,” dealt with these issues in several ways. There were those who undertook a sort of “Zionization” of the texts. The author who translated his *Letters on Old and New Judaism* (1897-1907) determined, by comparing the versions of the two editions of the file of the *Letters,* that:

[W]hen we compare the letters **common** to both editions, we see a marked difference in the **editing and style** that testifies like a hundred witnesses to the internal shift that had taken place in his attitude toward Zionism. Of particular importance are the multiple erasures and omissions in the letters, which also serve as hugely significant material for assessing Dubnov’s spiritual development.

There were those who found in his writings statements that seemed absolutely “Zionist.” What could be more Zionist than the words Dubnov wrote **in Hebrew** in the introduction to his book *A History of Hassidism* (Tel Aviv, 1932)?:

I decided to write this whole book in Hebrew […] since I have long felt the need to write at least one book in our national language, in which I received my first literary education as a child.

In 1937, the historian, who was then 77 years old, told the author and translator Abraham Regelson (1896-1981) at his residence near Riga in Latvia, that:

[A]fter some thought I have decided to divide my archives between the university and YIVO. The section concerning Judaism in the Diaspora I shall give to YIVO, and the section concerning Zionism I shall give to the [Hebrew] University.

To Regelson, these words sounded like an acknowledgement of the victory of the Zionist enterprise in Eretz Yisrael.

Others have repeatedly reiterated that, although Dubnov was not *a priori* a Zionist in his outlook, he withdrew his opinions because his political prognoses were proven erroneous, and also in view of the worsening situation of European Jews in the interwar period. The best testimony can be found those who considered the updated editions of the ten Hebrew language volumes of the *World History of the Jewish People*, which appeared right before the outbreak of the Second World War. The final chapter of the tenth volume was signed with words written after Kristallnacht:

The people of Israel entered the nineteenth century numbering three million in Europe, with only about ten thousand in far-flung America and just a handful lamenting near the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Now, there are 16 million, of which about a third are in America and half a million are rebuilding Eretz Yisrael with a vision of a Jewish State or a large national center, and thus, **the chronicles of Israel are being renewed and go on**.

Dubnov’s acceptance into the new Hebrew culture in Eretz Yisrael did not end within the walls of the ivory tower on Jerusalem’s Mount Scopus. The Jerusalem School contributed in no small way to the popularization of his works. Those of his writings that were translated into Hebrew by his colleagues and students, or written in Hebrew by the historian himself, were among the canonical texts that, in the 1920s and 1930s, spread among the public a basic principle common to both Dubnov and Zionist thinkers: “the concept of **historical recognition as basis for the nation idea**” (as Dinur put it). Dinur actually participated in the Dubnov endowment initiative for the general public. Thus, a national historical doctrine born in the Russian Empire found a place for itself on the bookshelves of thousands of homes in Israel. In the introduction to the abridged edition distributed by Tel Aviv evening newspaper Yedioth Aharonoth, Baruch Karu (199-1972) wrote:

About two years before his death […] it occurred to Prof. **Simon Dubnov** […] to publish his book in an abridged edition for the people […] after the war, the Dvir publishing house set about fulfilling the wishes of the late author, and the plan was reexamined by the Committee of Three […] and the editor.

Three intellectuals, who had been known to Dubnov since his Odessa and St Petersburg days at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of whom was Dinur, built the textual bridge across which Dubnov’s teachings were able to cross to an Israeli readership in the early days of the State of Israel.

The Jerusalem historians accepted some of the basic assumptions inherent in Dubnov’s national historiography. However, they were unable to let pass anything they considered insufficiently “national” for their tastes. Dinur, one of the most senior members of the Jerusalem School, complained about the disproportionality between “external” and “internal” factors in Dubnov’s monumental historiographical project:

“[…] in the three parts of Dubnov’s work dealing with the period from the French Revolution to the First World War (1789-1914), only 40 of the 157 sections are given to domestic Jewish problems […] Three quarters of the whole book are devoted to an account of the position of the Jews in the Gentile world, principally from the legal and political standpoint.”

Dinur, his colleagues, and his students were convinced that their work was the link that completed Jewish national historiography, and that this continued on from Graetz, through Dubnov, to the Israeli historians of the second half of the twentieth century. However, they rejected Dubnov’s political conclusions: support for the idea of national autonomy in the Diaspora. Dubnov’s influence on Israeli historical research was particularly evident in the adoption of his vision of Eastern European Jewish society as the historical basis for the birth of modern nationalism. Dinur viewed Jewish nationalism as a primordial phenomenon—the product of the exposure of a centuries-old ethno-religious group with clear and distinctive national features to the changes that had taken place in modern times. He did not hesitate to explicitly point out that Dubnov had preceded him in this matter. This primordial approach was adopted by most of Eastern European Judaism scholars, including his students, among them Israel Halpern (1910-1970), the scholar of autonomous Jewish institutions, and the historian of Russian Jewish history at the end of the Tsarist period, Yehuda Slutsky (1915-1978).

During the first three decades of the State of Israel, the second generation of the “Jerusalem School” continued in Israeli historiography the heritage that came from Eastern Europe, with its ideological nuances and internal tensions. The dialectical tension between adherence to an ancient tradition and the strange and broken political radicalism that had been ingrained in the psyche of the Jewish intelligentsia of Eastern Europe since the days of the Enlightenment still existed in full force in the early days of the State. Like Dubnov at the end of the Tsarist period, and Dinur in Eretz Yisrael during the British Mandate period, scholars from this time believed that they had shaped the field in the State of Israel, since the politics of the Jews in the Israeli present is rooted in knowledge of Jewish history and nourished by consciousness of the nation’s persistence and unbroken existence from antiquity through the present day. At the same time, mainstream Israeli historians believed it was their duty to be politically involved out of historical awareness, and to actively impart knowledge of history, in its national version, to the wider public. The most prominent and influential successor to Dubnov and Dinur in the early days of the State of Israel was Shmuel Ettinger (1919-1988). Like Dubnov and his teacher Dinur, Ettinger too absorbed in his childhood and adolescence the contradictory and complex sources that shaped the cultural profile of Eastern European Jewry. On the one hand, he received a traditional-religious Jewish education, while on the other, he was exposed to Western culture in its radical Russian form. His historical thought and scholarship published in the first thirty years of the State of Israel focused on the interplay between integration and rejection in Jewish history, a trend that was adopted by the Jerusalem School, inspired by Dubnov. His dialectical approach to the continuation of pre-modern trends and phenomena in the new era fed his historical explanations regarding the ways in which “external” and “internal” factors acted simultaneously on Jewish processes of modernization. Like Dubnov before him, Ettinger also emphasized the preservative and unifying roles of the autonomous government frameworks in their modern national incarnations. According to Ettinger’s national view, the renewal of autonomous government frameworks in Eretz Yisrael played a crucial role in the growth of the New Yishuv there.

From the start of the 1970s, there was a decline in the influence of the national-radical spirit on Israeli historiography. A new generation of historians had begun their academic careers in Israel’s universities. I myself experienced this political cultural shift at the start of my career as a young lecturer in the Jewish History Department at the Hebrew University. There was a shift in discourse caused in part by the weaknesses of Labor Zionism in the political arena, a decline in the influence of Eastern European cultures in Israeli society, and the strengthening of the influence of contemporary historical research in Western European and North American universities. All these factors hastened the decline of Dubnov’s influence in Israeli academia. The rejection of Dubnov’s research methodology in Israeli historiography is evident in several historical phenomena. Dubnov had spent over fifty years researching the social and cultural aspects of the great religious movement that spread throughout Eastern Europe after the First Partition of Poland in 1772. He set out guidelines that would prevail for decades in academic scholarship on the Hassidic movement. Many people are familiar with the periodization that he proposed for the history of the movement, which was accepted as historical fact by scholars. As noted, Dubnov made a distinction between what he described as the period of the awakening and expansion of the Hassidic movement in the second half of the eighteenth century, and its institutionalization and degeneration in the nineteenth century. According to Dubnov, after 1815, Hassidism lost its original religious-spiritual fervor that had attracted the masses and became a bastion of social and cultural conservatism. Scholars of Hassidism in the spirit of modern nationalism accepted the Dubnovian periodization in its so-called “Zionist” version. In Israeli historiography, Hassidism was studied in a national neo-Romantic spirit mixed with influences from social radicalism.

The emergence of the movement was understood to be the result of a resurgence of immanent forces in Jewish society that battled successfully with trends of social disintegration of the old order and gave expression to the internal forces of the masses. In other words, the first generations of the movement underwent, in the writings of Zionist historians, among whom Dinur’s work is prominent, a kind of anachronistic “nationalization” in the spirit of national radicalism. The beginnings of this religious movement have been incorporated into national history, whether by attributing national ideas to its religious leaders, or by describing them as alternative autonomous Jewish frameworks that constituted a unifying national factor during the decline of the pre-modern corporation (the “*qahal*” [autonomous Jewish administrative body in Poland-Lithuania]). Scholars therefore gave too much weight to socio-economic factors in the history of the movement. Although since the 1970s, scholarly preoccupation with these aspects of the history of Hassidism has diminished, the study of religious, theological, and mystical aspects have developed and become greatly enriched. The Dubnovian “Model of Decline,” which pushed late Hassidism to the historical margins in the name of the national idea, was rejected by Hassidism scholars of the new generation. These new scholars exchanged the nationalist-minded scholarship of late Hassidism for a perspective that was not at all familiar to Dubnov: the view that Hassidism of the nineteenth and twentieth century was an essential part of the development of Orthodoxy. They too continued to discuss the movement in a modern context: no longer by seeking connections with the new nationalism, but by deciphering the ways in which the Hassidim dealt with the challenges of the new era and by understanding their adaptation to the extreme political, social, and cultural changes that Eastern European Jewry underwent.

The weakening of the influence of the national-religious currents in Israel and the Diaspora is felt, therefore, in the distancing of Israeli historical scholarship from the historiographical heritage of Eastern European Jewry. Jonathan Frankel (1935-2008) gives a good description of this change in Israel, Europe, and North America:

“When viewed retroactively, it is possible to discern a clear contrast between the historical tradition that leads back to Dubnov and the kind of historical studies which have become characteristic in recent decades […] The historical process is thus perceived in terms not of bipolarity but of multiplicity.”

And now, in the first decades of the twenty first century, several motifs that had been central to Dubnov’s doctrine are re-emerging in Israeli historiographical discourse. In my opinion, it was the discarding of the Eastern European scholarly tradition that we experienced in Israeli academia that, paradoxically, brought back to historians’ writings some (allegedly) “non-Zionist” insights from the Dubnovian tradition. Contemporary scholars are now returning to blurring the boundaries between Zionism and a variety of other Diaspora Jewish national movements. Moreover, they recognize the fact that autonomist ideas played a significant role in Zionist thought and politics. The primordial model of the birth of the modern Jewish nation as a dialectical incarnation of the pre-modern corporation—the autonomous *qahal*—that Dubnov presented at the turn of the twentieth century, has once again returned to the forefront of scholarship at the start of the twenty-first.