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Revolutionary Fascist or Fascist Revolutionary

Abba Ahimeir and the Success of Revolutionary Zionism

Introduction

In November 1927, the young journalist Abba Ahimeir (1897–1962) wrote an article for the *Yishuv* newspaper, *haAretz*, which took as its title the well-known quotation attributed to Hillel the Elder, “*Im Ein Ani Li – Mi Li?*” (If I am not for myself, who will be for me?)¹ In the article, Ahimeir bemoaned the fact that, in the ten years since the issuing of the Balfour Declaration, not even the minimum expectations of the Zionist project had been realized.² Not only had a Jewish national homeland not yet come into existence, but, indeed, the whole process towards statehood had become deadlocked in a political-bureaucratic quagmire; an unhappy reality for which Ahimeir blamed both the conservative style of British rule and the immaturity of the Zionist administration in Mandate Palestine. At this stage, for him, the only apparent viable way out of this complacency was offered through the politico-territorial solutions of the relatively new Revisionist Zionist movement, led by Ze’ev Jabotinsky, an unsurprising statement for anyone familiar with the historical trajectory of Revisionist Zionism during the interwar years.³ In the article, Ahimeir speaks out against the *Yishuv* leadership’s complicity with the British administration, and calls upon the Zionist movement to con-

1 Abba Ahimeir, “Im Ein Ani Li – Mi Li?” *haAretz*, November 15 1927. [All translations of Ahimeir’s articles are mine]. Hillel the Elder was a Jewish religious leader active in the first century BCE. See Pirkei Avot 1:14. *Yishuv* refers to the Jewish community in British Mandatory Palestine.

2 Ibid.

3 Ze’ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940) was a Russian journalist who founded the Revisionist Zionist Alliance in 1925. He had resigned from the Executive Council of the World Zionist Organisation in 1923, due to ideological differences over the organization’s reaction to the Churchill White Paper (1922), which appeared to renege on promises made in the Balfour Declaration for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The party sought a “revision” of General Zionist Policy that saw a return to the hope, and expectation, of establishing a Jewish national home on all of the biblical land of Israel, on both sides of the River Jordan. The establishment of the Revisionist Party represented the beginning of the Zionist Right as a political force, and its ideological trajectory leads to the present-day Likud Party in Israel.

sider Hillel's motto, and, like Sinn Féin in Ireland, to adopt both the attitude and means of other national liberation groups.⁴ He declares that the age of Zionist Pioneering is now over, and advocates, instead, an embrace of the ideology of Revolution. Again, for anyone familiar with Ahimeir's history as a leader of the radical Maximalist arm of the Revisionist Party in the *Yishuv*, such bellicosity comes with little shock. What might give pause for reflection is the fact that Ahimeir penned the article while still a member of the moderately-socialist Zionist party, *haPoel haTza'ir* (The Young Worker), a party that glorified the Zionist Pioneer "worker-intellectuals" who were determined to establish themselves in Palestine through agricultural enterprise, which sought to regenerate the Jews' attachment to both physical labor and working the land.⁵ Perhaps more notable still is the fact that Ahimeir had been engaging intellectually – and with increasingly positive conclusions – with not only the concept of revolution, but also those of dictatorship and Fascism, already from the time of his doctoral thesis and first publications, in 1923.⁶ By 1928 – and now as a staunch supporter of the Revisionists – he was calling on his party to model itself after Mussolini's National Fascist Party, and implored Jabotinsky to assume the mantle of its *Duce*.

This chapter examines the degree to which Ahimeir understood, utilized, and embraced the concepts of Fascism and revolution during the period that he was most politically – and notoriously – active, from 1924–1934. Ahimeir stood at the vanguard of Zionist anti-British resistance; he referred to the British Mandatory government as both "Perfidious Albion" and a "foreign occupier" in print, already in 1929.⁷ The following year, he founded the first anti-British resistance group in the *Yishuv*, *Brit haBiryonim*, and eventually went to prison, in 1934, for his involvement.⁸ The passage of time, and the particular unfolding of world events since 1934, have led to a perhaps undue amount of focus on Ahimeir as a Fascist. Indeed, within a year of Ahimeir joining the Revisionist Party, Jabotinsky himself had referred to his younger colleague as "talented but too much a fascist," and this is perhaps the way in which Ahimeir is most often re-

4 Ahimeir, "Im Ein Ani Li – Mi Li?"

5 "Worker-intellectual" is Gideon Shimoni's term. See Gideon Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover MA: Brandeis University Press, 1995), 207.

6 I use "Fascism" (capitalized) to denote, specifically, the phenomenon of Italian Fascism under Benito Mussolini (1883–1945). In the 1940s, similar ideological streams also developed within the Arab nationalist movement.

7 Abba Ahimeir, "Gesher haBarzel" (Bridge of Iron), *Doar Hayom*, September 10 1929.

8 *Brit haBiryonim* is given a wide range of translations, which usually reflect a particular author's political leanings: i.e. "Covenant of Brigands" (Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*, 250) or "Praetorian Guard" (the definition put forward by members of the group during their trial, in 1934 (National Archive (formerly, Public Record Office, Kew, henceforth PRO, London, CO733/266/1)).

membered, to this day.⁹ He was undoubtedly a controversial figure who espoused, at times, some highly controversial ideas. Nonetheless, Ahimeir's embrace of Fascism should be understood in its historical context, and not be analyzed with a disproportionate degree of historical hindsight. Indeed, my primary contention in this chapter is that we should view Ahimeir not as a "Fascist" who coined the rather innocuous term "Revolutionary Zionism," but rather as a Zionist revolutionary who saw Fascism as the most viable *modus operandi* for effecting his revolution. I further contend that this revision in the common perception of Ahimeir begs for deeper engagement with two key questions: specifically, what was the ideological nature and trajectory of Ahimeir's concept of Revolutionary Zionism; and, more generally, did anything resembling a *de facto* revolution occur in the *Yishuv*, on its way to Jewish statehood?

Ahimeir was born Abba Gaissinovitch on November 2 1897, in Belarus, and grew up in Bobruisk. In 1912, accompanied by his older sister, the fourteen-year-old travelled to Ottoman Palestine to study at the Herzliya Gymnasium, which had opened in 1905 as the first Hebrew high school in the *Yishuv*. He returned to Bobruisk in the summer of 1914, where the outbreak of the First World War forced him to remain for an extended sojourn. In 1921, he began studies at the University of Vienna, and received his doctorate in 1924, having written on the conception of Russia in Oswald Spengler's (1880–1936) *The Decline of the West*. He finally returned to what was now British Mandate Palestine in the summer of 1924, and – as Abba Ahimeir – began to make a name for himself as a teacher and journalist. From 1924–1928, he was a regular contributor to the party journal of *haPoel haTza'ir* and the newspapers *Davar* and *haAretz*.¹⁰ However, his increasing disillusionment with *haPoel haTza'ir* had become clear by May of 1926, and Ahimeir, along with his colleagues, the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981) and writer Yehoshua Yevin (1891–1970), eventually jumped ship, and joined Jabotinsky's Revisionist Party, in February 1928.

In the wake of the Arab Riots in August 1929, the trio established the Maximalist arm of the Revisionist party in the *Yishuv*. While they accepted the territorial maximalist demands of the general Revisionists, the Maximalists fought against the British government in Palestine. They rejected Jabotinsky's policy of *Havlagah* (defensive restraint) toward both Arab and British antagonism directed

⁹ Jabotinsky, in a letter to Shlomo Gepstein, December 10 1928, quoted in Colin Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism: Nationalism and the Origins of the Israeli Right* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 13.

¹⁰ Gaissinovitch changed his name in 1919, as a memorial to his brother Meir, a committed Bolshevik who had fallen at the hands of the Polish army that same year. "Ahi-meir" literally means "my brother Meir," in Hebrew.

against the *Yishuv*, and called instead for active paramilitary resistance to both groups. Finally, in addition to advocating Fascism as the ideological *modus operandi* for the Revisionists, the Maximalists, rather singularly, employed pointed quasi-messianic imagery as a rhetorical device in their articles and speeches.¹¹ Maximalist Revisionism enjoyed a short but intense period of relative popularity – from 1929–1934 it represented the dominant stream of Revisionist Zionism in the *Yishuv* – but was dealt a death blow in the wake of the murder of the Labor Zionist leader Chaim Arlosoroff, for which Ahimeir was arrested, but later acquitted.

Ahimeir and Fascism

What was the nature of Ahimeir's embrace of Fascism? Without a doubt, he foresaw Italian Fascism as an ideological cornerstone of Maximalist Revisionism, and Mussolini as an example of a strong, effective leader. Indeed, one of his first published articles, "Some Thoughts on Fascism," written in 1923, shows an Ahimeir already enthralled with the movement and its *Duce*, although perhaps, at this early stage of his journalistic career, only subconsciously so.¹² Ahimeir later admitted as much himself when in 1933 he wrote: "for ten years I am searching for a Jewish Mussolini."¹³ Furthermore, his articles in *haPoel haTza'ir* and *haAretz*, written between 1924 and 1927, focus again and again on the failure of socialism, liberalism, and parliamentarianism, and – increasingly – on the viability of Fascism as a political ideology.¹⁴ And finally, Ahimeir's nine articles written in the autumn of 1928, and which appeared in the newspaper *Doar Hayom* (The Daily Post) under the rubric, "From the Notebook of a Fascist," make it clear that he had embraced the ideology in a manner that went far beyond mere journalistic provocation. Thus, we should take Ahimeir at his word

11 I use "quasi messianism" as per Shimoni's definition, as "messianic rhetoric not predicated on traditionalist or orthodox understanding of the messianic belief (that does not, however,) deny its mythic potency also for nonorthodox or secular Jews". Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology*, 406, note 19.

12 Abba Ahimeir, "Ra'yonot Bodedim 'al haFashizm," (Some Thoughts on Fascism), *haToren*, August 1923, 150–155.

13 *Brit haBiryoni* member Yaacov Orenstein's testimony at the *Brit haBiryoni* trial. Exhibit Y.L. 27, B14/6/1, Jabotinsky Institute Archive.

14 See, i.e., Abba Ahimeir, "Lean Peniah shel haDemokratiah Muadot" (Where is Democracy Headed), *haPoel haTza'ir* 42 (1926), 8–9; "Sotzialismus uFashismus" (Socialism and Fascism), *haPoel haTza'ir*, 20 no. 9, (1926): 11–12; "HaOlam b'Rosh HaShanah 5688" (The World at Rosh HaShanah 5688), *HaAretz*, September 26 1927.

and accept his own contention, although, to be sure, he never provides us with any clear ideological fodder other than to state that he foresaw Jabotinsky as the Revisionist *Duce*. Yet Ahimeir himself certainly identified with Mussolini the journalist, and he was undoubtedly inspired by the non-conformist man of action who had also founded *Utopia*.¹⁵ Ze'ev Sternhell highlights the particular attractiveness of Fascism for many European intellectuals, as it reflected their own non-conformism while representing “a new ideal of the beautiful and the admirable” that at the same time sought to orient the individual within the greater community.¹⁶ Indeed, Ahimeir had made his own non-conformist position clear in one of the “Notebook of a Fascist” articles, when he likened himself to an “ancient pessimist [who] sometimes walks westward, sometimes eastward [and who] makes heard his Zionist ethic... without becoming interested... in the opinion of the crowd.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, acceptance of Ahimeir's Fascist leanings comes with several caveats. Above all, he differed from Mussolini and the Italian Fascists in one key ideological aspect. Mussolini viewed Fascism in the same way that Lenin viewed Marxist-socialism: in a teleological context that allowed each to see his particular politico-ideological movement, as historian Martin Malia has noted, “as a total project, aiming as it does at transcending present society completely and creating a whole new world and a new man.”¹⁸ This was never Ahimeir's intention for the embrace of Fascism in the *Yishuv*. Rather, it served merely as a viable *modus operandi* that would, in his eyes, bring about the creation of a Jewish-Zionist nation state in Palestine in the most expedient manner possible. Ahimeir advocated Fascism as the means to an end, not as the end, itself. In another “Notebook of a Fascist” article, he remarks that socialism was an option to be considered, but only after a Jewish state had come into being. Until then, the *Yishuv* should function as if under “siege mentality.”¹⁹

15 Mussolini founded *Utopia: The Fortnightly Magazine of Italian Revolutionary Socialism* in 1913.

16 Ze'ev Sternhell, “Fascism: Reflections on the fate of Ideas in Twentieth Century History,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 150.

17 Abba Ahimeir, “Amor leOman sheYitzarni” (Tell the Craftsman Who Produced Me), *Doar haYom*, November 4 1928 (All translations mine, unless otherwise indicated).

[פסימיסטן הקדמון...פעם הוא הולך מערבה ופעם מזרחה...הוא נשמע למוסר הציוני שלו...מבלי התעניין ב...דעת הקהל]

18 Martin Malia, *History's Locomotives: Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006), 226. Although Malia is speaking only of socialism, I suggest that his observation applies also to the aims of Mussolini's Fascist project.

19 Abba Ahimeir, “Be'Inyan haVizah leJabotinsky” (In the Matter of Jabotinsky's Visa), *Doar haYom*, September 21 1928.

Furthermore, despite Ahimeir's attempts to win Jabotinsky over to the ideological program of the Maximalists, the Revisionist Party never adopted a Fascist platform, neither ideologically nor practically. This fact should not, however, prevent us from noting some degree of ideological overlap between Jabotinsky's concept of "monism," or the ideal of serving one overriding principal – in this case the Political Zionist goal of establishing a Jewish nation state in Palestine – and Ahimeir's Fascism, which, in his eyes, represented nothing more than the practice of monism taken *ad extremum*. While perhaps radical, Ahimeir's ideological connection is certainly not illogical.²⁰ Nonetheless, Jabotinsky rejected outright the suggestion that he become the "Leader" of the party, in a Fascist understanding of the word.²¹ In addition, Jabotinsky and Ahimeir held differing views regarding the utility of the party's youth group, *Betar*. While Jabotinsky certainly emphasized military precision and ceremony, this was done only in the name of *Hadar*, "a Hebrew word that... comprehends some dozen different concepts: external beauty, pride, manners, loyalty."²² However, out of Jabotinsky's sight and especially in the *Yishuv*, the group could at times turn more obviously militaristic, and become rowdy, oppressive, and violent. Ahimeir doubtlessly saw the group fulfil the role of the *Fasci* in Italy when he described *Betar* as a "national guard [in which] Hebrew culture permeated... from the Zionist public, from the Jewish youth."²³

Finally, the Revisionists never came to political rule in the *Yishuv*. We thus have no way of determining how comprehensively either Jabotinsky's more liberal and the Maximalists' more extreme ideologies may have been realized in an applied political setting. But Ahimeir was able to implement certain facets of Fascist ideology in the *Betar* youth and the Maximalists. And if, in Walter Benjamin's assessment, Fascism is the result of introducing aesthetics into political life, then Ahimeir was certainly guilty of introducing Fascist aesthetics into Revisionist political life.²⁴

²⁰ See Eran Kaplan, *The Jewish Radical Right: Revisionist Zionism and its Ideological Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 31–32, for a discussion of fascist ideology as a result of "evolutionary monism." Kaplan, however, does not make the necessary distinction between Jabotinsky's and Ahimeir's understanding of "monism".

²¹ See, i. e., Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism*, 125.

²² Jabotinsky, quoted in Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology*, 245.

²³ Abba Ahimeir, "Betar keTefisat Olam" (*Betar as a Worldview*), *Massuot*, Issue 8–9, December 10, 1928, reprinted in *Ahimeir veBetar* (Ahimeir and *Betar*), ed. Joseph Kister (Tel Aviv: A. Oren Press, 1982), 49–51.

[גאורדיה הלאומית... [שבה] התרבות העברית חדורה... מן הציבוריות הציונית, מן הנער היהודי.]

²⁴ Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 234.

Ahimeir and Revolution

National liberation movements are imbued with the idea of revolution. As Michael Walzer recently noted:

Liberation is closer to revolutionary politics than to national aggrandizement. Like the liberationist militants, revolutionaries set themselves in opposition to established patterns of submission, accommodation, and (what Marxists call) ‘false consciousness.’ They aim at a radical transformation. Social revolution requires a struggle against the existing society; national liberation requires a struggle again, rather than an ‘exultation’ of, the existing nation.²⁵

Ahimeir’s revolution was one of political insurrection, which he believed to be a necessary step on the road to Jewish national liberation.²⁶ The fact that historians and social scientists have been unable to reach any scholarly consensus on how merely to define, let alone predict, revolution is a fact which Ahimeir – who again and again aggrandized men of “action” over “words” – would have noted with wry cynicism. The dictionary definition of “revolution” reads, simply, as “a forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system,”²⁷ and this is certainly how Ahimeir understood the term, fundamentally.

Interestingly, he dedicates a notable amount of attention to the idea of revolution already in his dissertation on Spengler, a fact that is perhaps unsurprising, as it was penned in the wake of a Russian Revolution that Ahimeir had not only experienced first-hand, but that had also claimed the life of his brother. Ahimeir arrives at three broad conclusions. First, he sees the Russian Revolution as a victory of Western over Eastern ideals, in both a specifically Spenglerian, and more generally historical-phenomenological, sense. Second, he sees all revolution as a direct consequence of centralism, a notable observation in light of the fact that a centralized British government had taken up its mandate for Palestine while Ahimeir was completing his doctoral dissertation. Third, and most notably, Ahimeir sees revolution as the deciding factor between the preservation of an ethnic culture, and its bastardization through assimilation with a more

²⁵ Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2015), 5.

²⁶ The use of “Zionist” and not “Jewish” is intentional. In the “Notebook of a Fascist” article quoted above, he also wrote: “We are not for free entrance of Jews to the land, but only for free entrance of Zionists. Only Zionists are necessary to us here.” Abba Ahimeir, “Be’Inyan ha-Vizah leJabotinsky.”

²⁷ Henry W. Fowler and Francis G. Fowler, eds., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1180.

dominant culture.²⁸ Although Ahimeir is speaking specifically of Russian vis à vis Western European culture, we need only consider the situation of the Jewish populations throughout Europe, and, indeed, in the *Yishuv* – where Ahimeir highlighted the danger of Zionist “assimilation” with other, negative, ideological influences, such as socialism and communism – to realize that he was in fact warning of a far greater danger in his dissertation.

The second important document for our understanding of Ahimeir’s concept of revolution is the article mentioned above, where he declares the age and ideology of Zionist Pioneering to be over, and implores the Zionists to adopt the ideology of revolution, in the name of national liberation.²⁹ Ahimeir’s concept of revolution, as spelled out in this article, is rather idiosyncratic. He sees revolution unfold in two stages. First, there must be a what he calls a “period of imperialism”³⁰; one that would, unlike in the socialist understanding of the term, carry some form of utopian promise. For Ahimeir, this “period of imperialism” represents a revolution of *Weltanschauung*, but he notes that this “conceptual” revolution would remain unfulfilled.³¹ The ideological dichotomy thus caused – between utopian promise, and imperialist self-interest – would lead, in turn, to a period of grave disillusionment that would finally – and necessarily – effect a literal, political-insurrectionary revolution. If such a description sounds familiar, it is perhaps because this is exactly the situation that the Zionists found themselves in vis à vis the British at the time that Ahimeir wrote the article, in 1927. Thus, Ahimeir’s call for a revolution in Zionism was catalyzed precisely during such a period of grave disillusionment with an imperialist – in this case, a “British-imperialist” – moment.

And while Ahimeir may have described himself simply as a Zionist Revolutionary, I believe that it is possible to better nuance our understanding of the nature of Ahimeir’s revolutionariness. Sternhell highlights the philosopher Thomas E. Hulme’s description of Georges Sorel as “a revolutionary who is also antide-mocratic, an absolutist in ethics, rejecting all rationalism and relativism, who gives great importance to the mystical element in religion which he knows

28 See Abba Gaissinovitch, “*Bemerkungen zu Spenglers Auffassung Russlands*” (Remarks on Spengler’s Conception of Russia) (PhD diss., University of Vienna 1924), 69–79.

29 Ahimeir, “Im Ein Ani Li – Mi Li?” Ahimeir contradicts himself somewhat, however. At first, he writes that the “period of imperialism” is preceded by a revolution “in the direct sense of the word” [במובן הישר של המלה].

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31 Ibid.

‘will never disappear’, and who speaks contemptuously of modernism and *progress*, and uses a concept like *honour* with no sense of unreality.”³² Sternhell sees both Sorel and Hulme – whom Thomas S. (T.S.) Eliot (1888–1965) described as “classical, reactionary and revolutionary, the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant and democratic mind of the last century” – as characteristic embodiments of the “classic definition of revolutionary conservatism, which in some cases is synonymous with fascism.”³³ And although Ahimeir was certainly not a conscious Sorelian, there is much in his journalistic output during the 1920s that points his ideological tenor in the direction of revolutionary conservatism.

Something else to consider is the concept of counterrevolution, which, in historian Arno J. Mayer’s estimation, is inextricably bound to revolution, “both as phenomenon and process,” although not “recognized and theorized as such.”³⁴ For Mayer, counterrevolution is characterized by two major elements: reaction and conservatism.³⁵ It is a product of the anti-Enlightenment, and its “prophets of despair” are pessimistic, decadent, and rooted in a mythic past.³⁶ There is much apparent ideological overlap between Mayer’s “counterrevolutionary” and Sternhell’s “revolutionary conservative,” and I suggest that the two terms overlap enough, ideologically, to be used interchangeably. Consequently, we might better classify Ahimeir – the “ancient pessimist [who] sometimes walks westward, sometimes eastward [and who] makes his Zionist ethic heard [with no regard to] the opinion of the crowd,” as noted, above – as one of the first real counterrevolutionary figures in the *Yishuv*.³⁷ Indeed, the fact that Mayer sees the culmination of European counterrevolution in the phenomenon of Fascism would seem to only buttress this contention.³⁸

Walzer contradicts Mayer to a certain degree in his discussion of counterrevolution. For him, the conservatism and reaction in Mayer’s depiction of counterrevolution is traditional-religious. Indeed, it is clear from his context that when

32 Thomas E. Hulme, quoted in Ze’ev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 241. Hulme (1883–1917) was born in the same year as Mussolini, and one wonders how he might have viewed the development of the *Duce*, in light of his comments on Sorel, had he survived to experience the phenomenon of Fascism.

33 Ibid. Georges Sorel (1847–1922) was a philosopher and revolutionary syndicalist theoretician.

34 Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45.

35 Ibid., 52.

36 Ibid., 61–62.

37 Ahimeir, “Amor leOman sheYitzarni.”

38 Mayer, *The Furies*, 67.

Walzer speaks of “Jewish zealotry in Israel” as an example of Zionist counterrevolution, he is speaking about modern-day ultra-orthodoxy:

[T]heir first allegiance is not to the nation-state but to something more like the traditional, pre-state community. After a time, when national liberation has receded in memory, these traditionalists stage a counterrevolution; thus the rise of Islamic radicalism in Algeria (and in Palestine), of Hindutva in India and of Jewish zealotry in Israel. The religious resurgence is a shock to the national liberation elites, who had grown complacent about the victory of newness.³⁹

Walzer’s counterrevolutionary Jewish zealots are truly messianic, as opposed to those of Ahimeir and the Maximalists, for whom messianism was secular, rhetorical, and indeed, far more sophisticated. I wonder, however, if the main difference between Mayer and Walzer is merely generational: Mayer is discussing the French and Russian Revolutions, while Walzer focuses on post-Second World War Israel, Algeria, and India. Ideologically-speaking, Ahimeir falls somewhere between the cracks. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call him a “revolutionary counterrevolutionary,” or possibly a counterrevolutionary whose counterrevolution took the form of a *de facto* revolution? While the temptation to continue splitting hairs is great, it might serve us better, at this point, to take a step backwards, and undertake a more general discussion of the phenomenon of revolution, and how it might apply as an intellectual-historical term to both Zionism and the *Yishuv* during the British Mandate.

Zionism and Revolution

As noted above, there is little scholarly consensus on what constitutes revolution. While impossible to wade into the mire of revolutionary theory in any substantial manner in such a short study, it is nonetheless necessary to engage with the issue on some level, in order to make some salient, general observations.

The attempt at formulating a general theory of revolution is usually centered in the realms of the social sciences and history.⁴⁰ Theorists are more likely to measure the validity and success of a revolution by determining its “causes,” “preconditions,” “immediate incidental factors,” “historical crises,” etc., in

³⁹ Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation*, 55–56.

⁴⁰ Hobsbawm dedicates a paper to this very phenomenon. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Revolution”, in *Revolution in History*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986), 5–46.

Hobsbawm's opinion – and he was no minor player in the revolutionary leagues – to the detriment of examining a revolution's outcome as the primary determinant of its success.⁴¹ I share Hobsbawm's skepticism at the social scientist's need for a theory that will somehow function as a magic formula to be used to predict future revolutions. Indeed, it was the case that Theda Skocpol's now classic definition of "social revolution" – "basic, rapid transformation of a society's state and class structures, accompanied and in part carried out through class-based revolts from below" – was challenged almost immediately upon publication by the unfolding events of the Iranian Revolution, in 1979.⁴² Charles Tilley – rather vaguely, perhaps purposefully so – sees revolution as a "special case of collective action" in the fight for "ultimate political sovereignty... in which challengers succeed at least to some degree in displacing existing power-holders."⁴³ However, Tilley, an anomaly in this respect, sees violent political action as a mere by-product of such collective action, and not an "object of analysis" in its own right.⁴⁴ And Hannah Arendt adds the idea of a "pathos of novelty" that is connected with the "idea of freedom" that must coincide with the "experience of a new beginning," for a revolution in the modern age.⁴⁵

But, of course, the social scientists, in the attempt to arrive at a predictive theory of revolution, privilege the phenomenon – if not the necessity – of social, over political, change. For them, the political element is a by-product, even if a necessary one, of the social revolution, which is the focus of their analysis. Hobsbawm recognizes the tension inherent in such duality when he notes, from the historian's perspective, that:

Lengthy though these 'revolutionary eras' may be, they are to be distinguished from the historic macro-phenomena in which they are embedded, such as the change from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. The revolutions which interest historians lie at the intersection of

⁴¹ Ibid, 15.

⁴² Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 287. See also Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994). The fact that Hobsbawm sees the Iranian Revolution as "a 'great revolution' by any objective standards" (Hobsbawm, "Revolution" in *Revolution and History*, ed. Porter and Teich, 19), while Walzer would probably consider it – due to its radical Islamic element – as a "great counterrevolution," (Walzer, *Paradox of Liberation*, 54, etc.) highlights the array of scholarly discrepancy surrounding the intellectual-historiographical term.

⁴³ Charles Tilley, paraphrased in Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books: London, 2006), 18–25.

these two types of phenomena. We are unlikely to class them as revolution if they do not involve potential transfers of power in the characteristic manner.⁴⁶

Malia reaches a similar conclusion when he notes, as one of his seven considerations regarding revolution, that “a Western revolution is in the first instance a political and ideological transformation, not a social one.”⁴⁷

Hobsbawm defines “revolutionary eras” as “a series of events, generally associated with ‘revolt’ and capable of transferring power from an ‘old regime’ to a ‘new regime’.”⁴⁸ However, he notes that such a transformation does not necessarily always occur. Malia likewise sees, in what he calls a “European grand revolution,” a “generalized revolt against an Old Regime.”⁴⁹ For Malia, however, this can occur only once in a nation’s history, since it also represents the “founding event for the nation’s future ‘modernity’.”⁵⁰ Malia, in variance to Hobsbawm, implies a necessary transfer of power as a measure of a revolution’s success. Despite this apparent contradiction, I believe that both observations are noteworthy. Furthermore, Malia maintains that revolution is a European phenomenon that should be studied historically and in specifically Western terms, and that, moreover, nothing approximating a “European grand revolution” occurred outside the European cultural sphere before the twentieth century.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, the apparent Eurocentric smugness of Malia’s argument has been heftily criticized.⁵² However, before completely throwing his revolutionary baby out with the bathwater, and in Malia’s defense, we should note his term, “*European grand revolution*,” which I imagine to be, ideologically, not such a far cry from Hobsbawm’s “great revolution.”⁵³ Malia’s focus – rightly or wrongly – is on the ideological-historical revolutionary trajectory that looks back to the American and French Revolutions, which, in addition to the social changes they effected, were also responsible for the creation of “modern” nations that had the Westphalian model, in some form, as their ideal. Malia’s “European grand revolution”

⁴⁶ While nonetheless noting the importance of the “context of historical transformation as essential to the phenomenon.” Hobsbawm, *Revolution*, 10.

⁴⁷ Martin Malia, *History’s Locomotives: Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

⁴⁸ Hobsbawm, *Revolution*, 9.

⁴⁹ Malia, *History’s Locomotives*, 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ For a more detailed account of Malia’s seven conditions for the study of revolution, see Malia, *History’s Locomotives*, 2–10.

⁵² See, for example, Charles Tilley, review of *History’s Locomotives: Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World*, by Martin Malia, *American Historical Review*, 112, no. 4 (2007): 1120–1122.

⁵³ Emphasis mine. See Malia, *History’s Locomotives*, 5.

is perhaps rather more specific a phenomenon than Hobsbawm's "great revolution," since it is not entirely clear from the latter's context whether he equates "old regime" with "ancien régime." Be that as it may, from the beginning of the twentieth century (in keeping with Malia's parameters), global political organization has been based increasingly on the modern Western nation state model, and therefore belongs, ideologically, to the European politico-cultural orbit. Thus, the Iranian Revolution of 1906, the Chinese Xinhai Revolution of 1911, and the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 would all qualify, to some degree, as "European grand revolutions" in Malia's understanding of the term.⁵⁴ Consequently, we might view Malia's Eurocentricity as precisely the factor that makes him interesting for this discussion, since the political end goal of Zionism was the creation of a modern "Western" nation state for the Jews. It should be remembered that Ahimeir, in his doctoral dissertation, as discussed above, saw the Russian Revolution as a victory of Western over Eastern ideals. Malia further mandates that "each revolution learns from its predecessor and escalates that pattern each time to a more intense level of radicalism," again, a not unimportant consideration for this discussion.⁵⁵ While I am well aware that these observations in no way form a comprehensive theory of revolution, I suggest, nonetheless, that they act as a springboard for the ensuing discussion, as we shift our gaze back to the question of revolution in Zionism and the *Yishuv*, and the role that Ahimeir played in each.

Before more specifically examining the question of revolution in the *Yishuv*, I want to first consider the idea of Zionism as revolution. Indeed, at every level, the very phenomenon of Zionism itself was nothing short of revolutionary for European, and eventually world, Jewry. Driven by ideology and hope, and increasingly spurred on by a "chaotic crowd" that aimed to supplant a quasi-dual ancien régime that was embodied on one hand by the Jews' host nations in *Galut* (exile), and on the other, the political, social, and religious institutions of European Jewish life, itself:

Zionism aimed to restore to the Jews a political body they could claim as their own; national independence was seen as the way to guard the individual against physical threats and economic want, and the collective against the menace of assimilation and disintegration... But Zionism meant more than political independence in Palestine. It promised both material and spiritual transformation... a modernized economy of and for the Jews... and the re-

⁵⁴ And therefore, do not "vanish from the main argument... through definitional fiat," as Tilley states (*Ibid.*, 1121).

⁵⁵ Malia, *History's Locomotives*, 5.

vival of the Hebrew language... Some even hoped to form a new Jew: natural assertive, self-reliant, productive, and so on.⁵⁶

Thus, the political success of Zionism first required Jewish – eventually Zionist – cultural, psychological, and physical regeneration; consequently, it was, *a priori*, a social revolution. Its “historical crisis” was the failure of emancipation and the rise of modern antisemitism in Europe; its “revolutionary situation” was the publication of Theodore Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat*, in 1896.⁵⁷ While the political element was central to its ideology, the *de facto* utopian political goal of Zionism remained unfulfilled until the Declaration of the State of Israel, in 1948. While there was, of course, much Zionist political organization in the intervening years, and while the necessary geographical shift from Europe to the *Yishuv* did occur on some level, none of these factors was sufficient to brand the Zionist project an “unqualified success” before any real political solution – i.e. statehood – was reached (and this is to say nothing of Zionism’s relative lack of popularity for the majority of European Jewry, until at least the 1930s). The phenomenon of a proto-state under a Mandate-administrator – its considerable institutional infrastructure and political organization notwithstanding – represented, without a state, nothing more than a pyrrhic victory for the Zionists. Doubtless, Zionist immigration from 1880–1948 represented the beginning of a “historical revolution” in its most literal sense – i.e. from the Latin *revolvere* (to revolve) – as Europe’s Jews began “to go back to the land of their fathers and regain their Statehood.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, without a political resolution, this “historical revolution” represented nothing more than a new pattern of Jewish migration.

It was to this politico-situational holding pattern – a semi-autonomous *Yishuv* proto-government that operated under the larger political and administrative umbrella of the British Mandate government – that Ahimeir returned, in 1924. The four years preceding his arrival had witnessed the foundation of some of

56 Eyal Chowers, *The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

57 See Hobsbawm, *Revolution*, 16, for a detailed discussion of the terms “historical crises” and “revolutionary situations.” He defines a “revolutionary situation” as “that variant of a short-term crisis within a system with long-term internal tensions, which offers good chances of a revolutionary outcome.” (Ibid., 19).

58 The wording used in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14 1948. Quoted in Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 72.

the most archetypical Zionist institutions: the *Haganah* (The Defence), a paramilitary organization that was established to guard the *Yishuv* population and interests; the *Va'ad Leumi* (Jewish National Council), which administered communal affairs in the *Yishuv*; and the *Histadrut* (General Organisation of Workers in the Land of Israel), a kind of “super union” that combined various trade unions, oversaw industrial enterprises, and provided health insurance, an immigration office, and a bank. All of these organizations, but especially the *Va'ad Leumi* and *Histadrut*, were, in effect, controlled by members of *Ahdut haAvodah* (The Labor Unity) or *haPoel haTza'ir*. Thus, the *Yishuv* and its institutions enjoyed a marked Labor-Left hegemony. The future first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, who, in 1930, would go on to lead *Mapai* – a party formed from a merge between *Ahdut haAvodah* and *haPoel haTza'ir* – was Secretary of the *Histadrut* at the time of Ahimeir's arrival. The *Histadrut*, in particular, was an almost closed club to anyone who was not a member of one of the four parties that had members on its council, and Ahimeir quickly noted this injustice, in spite of his membership in *haPoel haTza'ir*.

Indeed, Ahimeir's short marriage to the socialist party was an unhappy one, and he openly criticized what he saw as the hypocrisy in the hegemony of the Labor Left, especially within the *Histadrut*. His first appearance, in February 1928, as a member of the Revisionist Party (along with Greenberg and Yevin), was at the Conference of the Bloc for Revisionist Labor, which sought to disassociate itself from these institutions, and form an alternative “nationalist” (i.e. Revisionist) workers' bloc within the *Histadrut*. He was further frustrated with a *Yishuv* leadership that, in an effort to appease the British mandatory government, had increasingly compromised the Zionist political goal. By the time Ahimeir joined the Revisionist Party, he had eschewed any route of diplomacy with the British, and could foresee the attainment of Jewish statehood only through a necessary path of (political) revolution that used a Fascist *modus operandi*, with Jabotinsky as *Duce*.

Ahimeir's revolutionary goal was purely political. He was certainly not trying to affect a Malian “European grand revolution.” Nonetheless, there is some striking overlap with the “historical crisis” in the *Yishuv* under the British Mandate and that of other European revolutions. While the traditional *ancien régime* in Palestine had been weakened – although by no means completely crumbled, since the hierarchical infrastructure that ranged from a Palestinian Arab land-owning elite of notables to peasant *fellah* remained intact – through the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Ahimeir did view the British Mandatory government – whom, as noted earlier, he called “Perfidious Albion” and “foreign occupiers” – as a regime to be overthrown. Furthermore, the British governed in the manner of an imperial power, not least in their bureaucratic and political inefficiency

and ideology of “divide and conquer,” even if the latter policy was adapted to reflect their role as a Mandatory Government. Although Britain was mandated with the task of creating a modern nation state for the Jews, it carried out the administration of its mandate using imperialist methods. Not only was the form of administration and governance in Palestine determined by the Mandatory power, there was, outside of the various councils that acted as intermediaries (i.e. the *Va’ad Leumi*), no political representation through suffrage, neither for the Jewish nor Arab citizens in Palestine. All aspects of the British Mandate leadership were decided in either Whitehall or in the office of the High Commissioner for Palestine. Thus, for Ahimeir – from a political point of view – the British fulfilled the function of an *ancien régime*, if perhaps one that had been transposed from Europe to Palestine.

And, in addition, just as there had been a quasi-dual *ancien régime* to overthrow in the Zionist “social revolution,” so there was for Ahimeir’s “political revolution.” He doubtless saw the *Yishuv* leadership – with its Labor Left monopoly over all areas in the *Yishuv* – now fulfil the role of the traditional Jewish “Old Regime” that the Zionist “social revolution” had sought to supplant in Europe. Indeed, for Ahimeir, the *Yishuv* leadership – which had become entrenched in partisan nepotism and bureaucratic inefficiency in only a few short years – represented nothing better than a “Nouveau Ancien Régime in the *Altneuland*”: a double slap in the face for a “pure” Political Zionist like Ahimeir, and thus worthy of revolutionary supplantation. In his 1926 essay, “The Scroll of the *Sicarii*,” he is clear that he sees the “existing regime” as the focal point for the terror to be waged by the *sicarius*.⁵⁹ Indeed, he uses the term no less than nineteen times, and although he is never specific in the essay, which remained unpublished until it was used as evidence at the *Brit haBiryonim* trial in 1934, it is very likely that “existing regime” refers to both the British and *Yishuv* leaderships, *in toto*.

I keep returning to Malia’s contention, noted earlier, that “each revolution learns from the experience of its predecessor and escalates that pattern each time to a more intense level of radicalism,” and which I find noteworthy. All of European and *Yishuv* Jewry – Zionist and otherwise – had been affected by the last “European grand revolution,” the October Revolution, in 1917; some, like Ahimeir, negatively, others less so (cf. *Ahdut haAvodah*’s ultimate rejection of Marxism, in spite of the party’s socialist character), and some positively (cf. the Marxist Zionist party, *haShomer haTzair* (The Young Guard)). Had this not

59 [המשטר הקיים] Abba Ahimeir, “Megillat HaSikrikin,” in *Brit haBiryonim* (Shamgar Press: Tel Aviv, 1972), 217–233. The historical *sicarii* were understood to be the extremists among the Zealots, active at the time of the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple, and named for the daggers – *sicae* – concealed beneath their clothing.

been the case (and again, in view of Malia's contention), it would have been *a priori*, "historically" impossible for *Ahdut HaAvodah* and the *Haganah*, in 1945, to join the Hebrew Resistance Movement, and to also eventually resort to violence against the British. It would also explain, theoretically at least, why Fascism, building as it did upon Marxism – whether positively, as per theoreticians like Ze'ev Sternhell, or negatively, as a revolt against Communism – was the most logical political ideology to serve as the *modus operandi* for what Ahimeir hoped would lead to a political revolution in Palestine. Not only was it more radical, but also – certainly in the eyes of its proponents – more ideologically evolved than Leninist-Marxism. Indeed, if we accept Malia's contention, then Ahimeir would have had no choice *but* to accept Fascism as the *modus operandi* for his revolution; as the most current of the political "isms," it could be his only choice if revolution does in fact evolve teleologically, and intensify in both means and execution, as Malia claims.

Malia's claim is further buttressed, from a different ideological perspective, by Ahimeir's embrace of Oswald Spengler. Like his mentor, Ahimeir viewed Bolshevism as the epitome of "Megalopolitan" *Über*-civilization, a status quo which, in Spenglerian theory, signified that a societal "culture" was in decline, and approaching the end of its life cycle. Thus, in Ahimeir's eyes, Bolshevism could not serve as a viable *modus operandi* for a successful Zionist revolution in Palestine. This observation may also explain some of Ahimeir's ideological inconsistencies, for example, the fact that he could speak of the need for "our own 1917" while, nonetheless, rejecting the ideological core of Bolshevism.⁶⁰ Furthermore – and rather notably, from an ideological perspective – it seems that Ahimeir, the Spenglerian, saw his Zionist political revolution as being "morphologically contemporaneous" with the Jewish Revolt, from 66–70 CE.⁶¹ Both the *Biryonim* and *Sicarii* hail from this period. Ahimeir's appropriation of both terms for his modern-day purposes suggests – again, if we remember that Ahimeir was a Spenglerian – a very specific identification with both the nature and function of each group, i.e.,

⁶⁰ Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism*, 156.

⁶¹ In Spenglerian theory, parallel events that occur during corresponding spiritual epochs in any particular (Spenglerian) "culture" are considered "morphologically contemporaneous." Thus, in Spenglerian analysis, Plato and Goethe were – morphologically-speaking – contemporaries, despite having lived 1,500 years apart. Each fulfilled a similar historic function in his particular culture (Classical/Apollonian and Western/Faustian, respectively, in the cases of Plato and Goethe). A Spenglerian "culture" has, like any other biological organism, a finite life cycle, which has four main periods that correspond roughly to childhood/youth/adulthood/old age. In the final period, a culture became a "civilization": ossified, in decline and at the end of its life.

revolutionaries who revolted against both the Roman regime and the Jewish moderates who were sympathetic to it. For Ahimeir the Spenglerian, the British Mandatory government was morphologically contemporaneous with the Roman regime in Judea, and the Labor Left *Yishuv* leadership with the ancient Pharisees. Of course, the Jewish Revolt had ultimately failed; Ahimeir as both Spenglerian and historian expected his revolution to learn from the past, and succeed.

Malia further observes that it was due to “Communism’s pretension to be the culmination of human progress, beyond which there is nothing but counterrevolution and the ‘restoration of capitalism’” that led to the phenomenon of “revolution-as-regime.”⁶² I suggest that this observation may partially explain the unsatisfactory holding pattern of the *Yishuv* leadership vis à vis the British, regarding the formation of a Jewish state.⁶³ As proponents of socialism – to varying degrees, to be sure – they were simply unable to successfully affect the Zionist political end-goal since their ‘permanent revolution’ remained on the social level. Perhaps then, only a cynical and vehement opponent of Bolshevism and socialism, such as Ahimeir, could even entertain the thought of sparking a Zionist ‘political revolution’ that would achieve the political goals of the Zionist project. And of course, Fascist ideology espoused no less the concept of revolution, but did so, rather, in the name of national – and not international – socialism.⁶⁴

Thus, by the time of Ahimeir’s article in *haAretz*, in November 1927, in which he calls for the need for political revolution, the “historical crisis” in the *Yishuv* was represented by a British Mandatory government that was not fulfilling the conditions of its mandate: the unfulfilled “imperialist moment” that Ahimeir describes. The “revolutionary situation” in the *Yishuv* was equal to what Ahimeir calls a “period of disillusionment”, and which he saw as the necessary catalysis for a literal revolution. In Ahimeir’s case, this disillusionment stood on one hand with the Mandatory government, and, on the other, with the *Yishuv* leadership’s apparent policy of compromise in every direction: with the British and their inability or unwillingness to achieve the Zionist political end goal, and as socialists who sought to imbue Zionism with their own self-interests. In the wake of the 1929 Arab riots, both of these situations had only intensified, which led to more intense action on Ahimeir’s part: to push the ideology of Fascism in order to effectuate his political revolution.

Despite the cult status that he had achieved by the early 1930s – through his involvement with the Revisionist youth group *Betar* and teacher at the *Betar*

⁶² Malia, *History’s Locomotives*, 256.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Although the nationalist-socialist nature of Fascism rendered the Marxist need for “permanent revolution” obsolete. Indeed, Ahimeir never uses the term himself.

Leadership Training School, as an outspoken journalist and, not least, as a notorious political activist – Ahimeir's political life in the *Yishuv* was cut short, in June 1934, due to his arrest in connection with the Arlosoroff murder. Thus, Ahimeir played no active part in any political revolution in the *Yishuv*, other than as an ideologue and agitator. However, the question remains as to whether Ahimeir's call for revolution remained nothing more than empty rhetoric, or whether it found some form of political expression. At this point, I suggest we reconsider the traditional historiographical approach that is taken when tracing the trajectory that culminated with the founding of the State of Israel, on May 14 1948, and which may be summarized as follows. In the wake of increasing resistance and violence on the parts of both the Palestinian Arab and *Yishuv* populations, Britain decided that it could no longer fulfil its role as originally set out in the League of Nations Mandate, and turned to what was now the United Nations for counsel, in April 1947. The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which was convened specifically to deal with Britain's request, suggested – in UN Resolution 181 – the partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Palestinian states, with Jerusalem to be administered by an international body. The resolution was passed on November 29 1947, which led immediately to a period of civil war between the Palestinian and Jewish populations, and which the British sought to mediate less and less as time went on. On the day that Britain pulled out of Palestine – May 14 1948 – the *Yishuv* leader David Ben-Gurion declared the foundation of the State of Israel, with himself as Prime Minister. The ensuing war with an invading Arab army made up of fighters from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan – the Arabs had, unlike the Zionists, rejected the terms of Resolution 181 – led not only to victory for the new state, but also territorial and demographic gains that it had not foreseen. Although there is much debate, scholarly and otherwise, over details within this historiographical framework, historians nonetheless do not consider the succession of historical events that led to the Israeli War of Independence and Palestinian *Nakba* as constituting a political revolution. However, I would like to suggest that an application of the revolutionary filters discussed above to the events in the *Yishuv* from November 1927 to 1948 – i.e., from Ahimeir's first call for a revolution in the *Yishuv* and the end of the British Mandate to the subsequent Declaration of the State of Israel – may lead to some rather interesting conclusions.

The Big Picture

If we first consider the whole period before November 29 1947, we note that it began with the relatively moderate civil disobedience of *Brit haBiryonim*,

which Ahimeir founded in 1930, and eventually reached a climax that was characterized by anti-British violence on the parts of all three *Yishuv* paramilitary groups – *Lehi*, the *Irgun*, the *Haganah* (and its elite unit, the *Palmakh*) – in the form of the “Hebrew Resistance Movement.” Working in tandem, the groups waged campaigns of terror against the British, including the “Night of the Trains,” on November 1 1945, where the railway infrastructure was blown out at one hundred and fifty-three points, and the “Night of the Bridges,” in June 1946, when bridges that connected Palestine with its neighboring countries were destroyed. Although the *Haganah* and *Palmakh* discontinued their participation in terrorist acts in the wake of the King David Hotel bombing, on July 26 1946, they continued to work against the British by helping to secure illegal immigration and settlement for Jewish refugees from Europe.

During the period between the passing of UN Resolution 181, on November 29 1947, and the British withdrawal from Palestine, which was complete by May 14 1948, the intensity of both anti-British terrorist activity (by the *Irgun* and *Lehi*) and illegal immigration (aided by the *Haganah* and *Palmakh*) only intensified. Meanwhile, the beginning of the civil war with the Palestinian-Arab population and breakdown of British desire for controlling the increasing instances of violence between the two populations (unless these were directed against the British themselves) served only to spiral the situation out of control. Thus the events that occurred in the *Yishuv* were not only characterized by the “breakdown of sovereignty” and the chaotic element that Mayer sees as “the essential precondition for the escalation of revolt into revolution,”⁶⁵ but also – certainly by the end of the Second World War, in the wake of the Holocaust – by what Arendt called the “notion of irresistibility”: the cumulative, eventually exponentially-so, accrual of force that would render a revolt unstoppable “beyond human power... and hence a law unto itself,” that would transform it into a revolution.⁶⁶ Ahimeir himself recognized such a phenomenon when he noted that “the commencement of a revolution is like a small river and its end like [a] big ocean.”⁶⁷ In the case of the *Yishuv*, there was continual forward motion in this respect. It should be remembered that almost every inhabitant who was old enough belonged to one of the *Yishuv* paramilitary groups, certainly by the beginning of the period of the Hebrew Resistance Movement. The chaotic crowd element, with the cumulative accrual of force that was necessary for a political revolution, was absolutely present in the *Yishuv*.

⁶⁵ Mayer, *The Furies*, 35.

⁶⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 37–38.

⁶⁷ Abba Ahimeir, undated letter. Exhibit Y.T. 9, *Brit haBiryoni* Trial, B 14/6/1, Jabotinsky Institute Archive.

Finally, we should not forget the outcome of our hypothetical Zionist “political revolution,” which, in consideration of the fact that the British did pull out of Palestine, and that a Jewish nation state was, in fact, declared on the heel of their withdrawal, becomes less hypothetical, and suggests success. The fact that the civil war with the Palestinian-Arabs introduced a different dimension to the conflict, and that the British withdrawal was sanctioned by the UN, should not deter us from recognition of the fact that Britain pulled out of Palestine having not fulfilled the terms of its mandate, and indeed, with its tail between its legs.

Of course, the Labor-Left *Yishuv* leadership – the other half of Ahimeir’s “existing regime” – was not only *not* supplanted by revolution, but became the *de facto* regime that took power in the new state. This fact should not concern us too greatly. The measure of success for such a protracted struggle for national liberation should be its finality, not its ideological perfection. For Ahimeir, who was above all an ardent Zionist, the overriding goal of his political revolution had been achieved. Indeed, the fact that all groups in the *Yishuv* eventually worked together to supplant the British, and to protect the new state against foreign invasion, is perhaps the best proof of the success of the revolution that Ahimeir first called for, in 1927. There was no attempt at Jewish civil war in the *Yishuv* once the new state was declared, and the majority of the *Yishuv* community accepted the new government if perhaps only begrudgingly so. While the Revisionists, under Begin, continued to oppose the Labor Left, they did so now as the official opposition party in the new state. The political revolution in the *Yishuv* spanned twenty years of increasing “general crisis” with the British. It was a slow process that occurred in fits and starts, and that changed its character throughout its long life. As Hobsbawm suggests, “the concept of ‘general crisis’ is useful as a reminder that particular revolutions or other ruptures occur within systems, which pass through periods of breakdown and restructuring.”⁶⁸ The “general crisis” in the *Yishuv* spanned the whole period under discussion here, and ended only on May 14 1948, with the Declaration of Independence of the new state of Israel.

Conclusion

If a Zionist political revolution did, in fact, occur in the *Yishuv* – and let us assume for the sake of this argument that one did – we should further seek to determine the magnitude of its success. Hobsbawm notes that very rarely are the

⁶⁸ Hobsbawm, *Revolution*, 17.

“system-carrying forces” in place at the beginning of most “protracted revolutions.”⁶⁹ In this respect, the Zionists enjoyed a distinct advantage to other national liberation groups. A proto-state, with all its requisite political and civil institutions, had been carefully cultivated by the Zionists in the *Yishuv* since the 1920s. Once statehood was declared, they needed only to “convert” this already existing infrastructure into an official state apparatus. There was not even a need to physically supplant the British from their administrative institutions: the Zionists had their own, waiting in the wings, so to speak, and were thus able to circumvent such action that is so common to other political revolutions.

The Zionist “social revolution,” discussed above, only really flourished after the foundation of the State of Israel. With the legitimacy of a new state – now recognized by the UN and riding on a crest of victory in the face of Arab invasion – the Zionist social project now had not only a spiritual-geographical, but also an official-political focal point. Arguably, no other single aspect of the Zionist “social revolution” did more to regenerate and heal the damaged Jewish psyche than the *de facto* situation of having a modern democratic nation state that was recognized by the majority of the international community. The ensuing decades have witnessed Jewish immigration to Israel from all corners of the globe, and approximately fifty percent of world Jewry now resides there. The “Zionist” has become “Israeli,” and the “social revolution” has taken on a cultural dimension, as we speak now of music, art, food, literature, cinema, scholarship, research, etc. that is no longer merely “Jewish,” but distinctly “Israeli.”

Likewise, the Zionist “historical revolution” flourished only after the foundation of the State of Israel. Not only did a large portion of the world’s Jewish population “return” to a modern Israel that was situated in part of “ancient” Israel, but Judaism itself – in various modern and political forms, to be sure – returned to become the dominant religion in the land from where it had originated.

Thus, Zionism was an amalgam of a tripartite revolution: a social revolution within Judaism, a political revolution in the *Yishuv*, and a historical revolution that reached out globally. While there was a symbiotic relationship between the three, the ultimate successes of both the social and historical revolutions could be measured only against the success of the political revolution. We need only to measure the “success” of the policy of “Practical” Zionist settlement in the *Yishuv*, before 1948 – which privileged “historical” over “political” revolution – to support this claim. Zionism was, at once, a revolution “backwards” to an ancient historical homeland and “forwards” to nation state modernity; it harked back to an ancient “Hebrew” cultural past, but used modern

⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.

methods to do so. The social revolution within Zionism was, on its own, not enough to render the whole project a “great revolution.” A clear political goal was also necessary. The “political revolution” in the *Yishuv*, which catalyzed the foundation of the Jewish political state, and the accompanying “historical revolution” that it effected, were both necessary components for a Zionist “great revolution.” We need merely to consider a counter-factual scenario that would see a territorial polity created for the Jews anywhere else but in their “ancient homeland,” and without the concomitant “social revolution” – i.e. if *shtetl* borders were merely politically demarcated, or the *shtetl* itself transplanted to its own neutral territorial polity – to see that the social regenerative element was a necessary component of the Zionist revolution. The synergy of the “social,” “political,” and “historical” revolutions was necessary, and I would even cautiously suggest that the retrospective success of all three revolutionary components *in toto* is sufficient to render the revolution that occurred in Zionism a Malian “European grand revolution.” Indeed, the Jews’ “hunger” for their own national polity was as acute as the French hunger for bread in the riots that preceded the French Revolution.⁷⁰

Of course, I am not suggesting that Ahimeir was responsible for leading, executing, or even effecting, a revolution in British Mandate Palestine. Nonetheless, what did occur in the *Yishuv*, from the time of Ahimeir’s article in 1927 until the British pulled out of Palestine on May 14 1948, was certainly a revolution by Ahimeir’s understanding of the term. Indeed, the cynic might see Menachem Begin’s (1913–1992) call, at the Third World Convention of *Betar* in 1938, to usher in a new period of “Military Zionism” as nothing more than an opportunistic repackaging of Ahimeir’s concept of “Revolutionary Zionism” from ten years earlier.⁷¹ Hobsbawm cites the relevance of the “date when the first adult generation of ‘children of the revolution’ emerge on the public scene, those whose education and careers belong entirely to the new era.”⁷² The original “children” of Ahimeir’s revolution came of age with the eventual

⁷⁰ In his testimony to the Peel Commission, Jabotinsky spoke in terms of Jewish “starvation” for national sovereignty. See Joseph Heller, “Weizmann, Jabotinsky and the Arab Question: The Peel Affair,” *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 26 (1983): 109–126. Weizmann had threatened the Commission that if the Jews felt they were “about to be sacrificed,” they would either seek to leave, or “they would revolt.” *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷¹ See Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism*, 7–8, 17, and 205–212. Begin’s “Military Zionism” was meant to supplant the earlier periods in Zionist history, “Practical Zionism” and “Political Zionism”. See also Joseph Heller, *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics and Terror, 1940–1949* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 41.

⁷² Hobsbawm, *Revolution*, 32.

election of Begin as Prime Minister of Israel, in 1977. Yet, by the time of Begin's speech in 1938, Ahimeir's political revolution had been gaining ground for almost a decade, even if it was not yet recognized as such. The fact that the first ideological proponent of political revolution in the *Yishuv* was neither its leader nor executor should not mitigate the fact that Abba Ahimeir played a decisive role in the genesis of what we should well consider to be a political revolution in Palestine, and which was responsible for the end of the British Mandate and foundation of the State of Israel.

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