

Francis R. Nicosia. *Zionism and Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiv + 324 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88392-4.

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Grand Illusion? The Relationship between Zionism and Nazism in the 1930s

Forty years after the Second World War, a group of post-Zionist historians began to write a new vein of historiography sharply critical of the Yishuv in Palestine's instrumentalist view of European Jewry, its relationship with Nazism, and what they perceived as its failure to do more to rescue European Jewry during the Holocaust. Some reiterated 1930s' era critiques that accused Zionists of ideological identification with Nazism, working contacts with Nazis in defiance of the boycott, and a narrow focus on the needs of the Yishuv in building the "Jewish state" at the expense of a German Jewry suffering under Nazi rule.[1] Israeli scholars, like Tom Segev in *The Seventh Million*, have pointed to the *Ha'avara* (Transfer) agreement as a prime example of the Yishuv leadership sacrificing the interests of German and world Jewry for those of the Yishuv in seizing upon the "complementary interests of the German government and the Zionist movement." [2] Edwin Black, in *The Transfer Agreement: The Untold Story of the Secret Pact between the Third Reich and Jewish Palestine* (1984), alleged that German Zionists were responsible for the survival of the Nazi regime because of their naïve and partisan cooperation with the Nazis in the *Ha'avara* agreement, in defiance of the international Jewish boycott of Nazi Germany. Against the context of this debate over the relationship between Zionism and Nazism (one that of late has recently taken on even more sinister connotations in current anti-Zionist likening of Zionism to Nazism), Francis R. Nicosia's thorough examination of this relationship lays to rest such dubious charges of collaboration, while also uncovering new and unexamined areas of re-

search that contribute greatly to our understandings of both Nazism and Zionism. Most fundamentally, Nicosia reminds us that there were limits on Jewish power before (and during) the war, and that the relationship between the Zionists and the Nazi movement was inherently unequal; in every single step along the way, the range of options for the German Zionists and the Yishuv leadership was limited by this great power imbalance.

Rather than focus generally on the relationship between Germany and its Jews (something that Nicosia suggests has already been covered extensively), Nicosia examines the relationship between a specific conception of German nationalism (a *volkisch*, anti-Semitic one) and Zionism (a *volkisch*, Jewish nationalist ideology). In so doing, he adds a significantly new approach to the study of the relationship between Germany and the Jews in general and to the history of Zionism and Nazism in particular. Through a focus on early ideology, Nicosia also points to an irony: whereas Theodor Herzl thought that Zionism would ultimately succeed in eliminating anti-Semitism, the Nazis believed that Zionism could be used in their effort to ultimately eliminate the Jews from German soil. From its inception, he notes, the Zionist movement was always concerned over how it would be received by the non-Jewish world, and, for Herzl, by anti-Semites especially, even at a time when support for Zionism, and by extension, the departure of Jews from Europe, could in fact be perceived as an anti-Semitic viewpoint. This ironic disconnect between the aims of the Zionists, the perceptions of the anti-Semites, and the elimina-

tion of Jews from European society pointed to the limits of this working relationship. Still, as Nicosia suggests, “in the end, the relationship between Zionism and anti-Semitism in Germany helped to define what each was and, perhaps more importantly, what each was not during the period of about half a century before the onset of the final solution” (p. 9).

Nazis and Zionists were in agreement that it was not possible for Jews to be both German and Jewish—the *volkisch* conception of national identity that both held to be at the core of their nationalisms made this impossible. By tracing the evolution of Nazi understandings of Zionism (from usefulness to irrelevance), Nicosia also provides crucial insight into the development of Nazi Jewish policy as well and refutes an intentionalist reading of such policy: “Thus, the policies of Hitler’s regime toward Zionism and the Zionist movement in Germany before 1941, as examples of the implementation of its anti-Semitic ideology, only diminish the likelihood that the ‘final solution’ was part of an earlier plan or intention to ultimately mass murder the Jews of Europe” (pp. 10-11). When viewed in context, at the time of its implementation, the *Ha’avara* agreement must be understood as part of the regime’s support for Jewish emigration, not as pre-viewing in some way steps leading to the Final Solution. “Throughout the 1930s, as part of the regime’s determination to force the Jews to leave Germany, there was almost unanimous support in German government and Nazi party circles for promoting Zionism among German Jews, and Jewish emigration from Germany to Palestine” (p. 79). Still, by making use of the Zionist movement when it was convenient for Nazi policy, “the regime, perhaps unwittingly, permitted the Zionists a significant role in shaping some important components of Nazi policy prior to the genocide. These components, already important aspects of Zionist policy prior to the Nazi ascent to power in 1933, included the *Ha’avara* Transfer agreement, Zionist occupational retraining programs, large-scale community education programs, and the process of illegal immigration into Palestine. These were all Zionist initiatives that became elements of Nazi Jewish policy prior to the ‘final solution’” (p. 284). The coalescing of Nazi and Zionist policy at key points around a shared goal of Jewish immigration from Germany gave preference to certain German Zionist objectives and, as Nicosia reminds us, regardless of whether such was the intent or not, by allowing thousands of Jews to reach Palestine in this way, saved their lives before WWII.

And while some German Zionists may have been cautiously optimistic that Nazi and Zionists goals might co-

alesce, Nicosia reminds us that in this uneven relationship, the Nazi regime did not afford German Zionists any special treatment as less Jewish than other German Jews, and continued to view Zionism as “an important instrument in addressing both parts of the process” of reversing Jewish emancipation and assimilation in Germany and ending Jewish life in the Reich through emigration (p. 105). This was never an even relationship; through a masterful use of sources representing both sides of this study—records of various Nazi and German state agencies from the period, as well as German and non-German Jewish and Zionist organizations—Nicosia demonstrates the manner in which Nazism and Zionism talked past, but not with, each other. Likewise, the structure of the book combines a focus on Nazi perceptions and manipulations of Zionism, with Zionist perceptions of Nazism and the possibilities for action within the framework. Importantly, Nicosia adds his chapter on Revisionist Zionism in Germany—an all too often overlooked element of this time period—and detail on the intriguing figure of Georg Kareski, president of the State Zionist Organization in Germany.

As Nicosia concludes, ultimately, there was absolutely no way in which they could actually “collaborate,” for “in the end, the Nazis maintained a contempt for Zionism as for all things Jewish, as representative of what they considered to be some of the most dangerous and abhorrent characteristics of the Jews as a people” (p. 290). The Zionists, in reinforcing the drive to promote a Jewish consciousness and identity, were just as Jewish as the non-Zionists and anti-Zionists, and thus, “inseparable from the object of Nazi hatred and intent” (*ibid.*). While Herzl might have originally believed that “the initial movement [of Jews out of Europe] will put an end to anti-Semitism,” little did he know that in under fifty years it would represent one step on the path to the almost complete victory of Germandom over Judaism.[3] In examining the inherently unequal relationship between these two nationalist movements, Nicosia has made an important contribution to both the history of Zionism and Nazism (and more broadly to the fields of German and Jewish history), while correcting misconceptions about the limits of actual Jewish and Zionist power.

Notes

[1]. See Hava Eshkoli-Wagman, “Yishuv Zionism: Its Attitude to Nazism and the Third Reich Reconsidered,” *Modern Judaism* 19, no. 1 (1999): 21-40 for an overview.

[2]. Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: Israelis and the*

Holocaust, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 20. The *Ha'avara* agreement, concluded in August 1933 between the German Zionist Organization and Third Reich officials, facilitated the passage of close to forty thousand German Jewish émigrés headed for Palestine by enabling them to retain sufficient assets to qualify for visas (most German Jewish émigrés surrendered nearly all their assets before departure from Germany),

while leaving some assets for the *Reichsvertretung* (the Reich Representation of German Jews) to perform relief work with German Jews. The agreement also provided a market for German exports, which were purchased in Palestine with the proceeds used to pay costs for new emigrants.

[3]. Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2006), 15.

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