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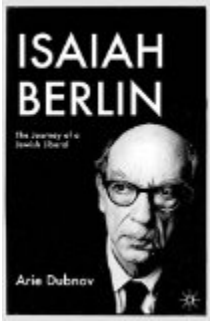
Arie M. Dubnov. *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 330 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-11070-0.



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From Periphery to Center: Jewishness, Zionism, and the Intellectual Formation of Isaiah Berlin

Fourteen years have passed since the publication of Michael Ignatieff's *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* and a new biography of Isaiah Berlin has appeared on the intellectual horizon: Arie M. Dubnov's *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal.* In contrast to Ignatieff, Dubnov's goal is not so much to provide a full account of Berlin's life and thought as to analyze the personal, political, and intellectual experiences that contributed to the development of Berlin's thought from his early childhood in Riga through his emergence as a historian of ideas, political philosopher, and "Cold War liberal" in the 1950s.

Dubnov provides important new perspectives on some of Berlin's most celebrated ideas. While not denying the significance of the ideological struggles of the Cold War, the author shows that the views of this famous antitotalitarian and anticommunist "Cold Warrior liberal" on monism, positive and negative liberty, nationalism, totalitarianism, and the history of ideas were also rooted in his encounters with Zionism and the Oxonian realist and idealist schools in the interwar period. Particularly insightful is Dubnov's presentation of Berlin's Jewish identity and Zionist convictions as central to his thought and intellectual development. Berlin's notions of liberalism, value pluralism, nationalism, and the "counter-Enlightenment," according to Dubnov, were all fashioned in response to Zionist discourse on assimilation, the need to belong, and the Jewish diaspora. Because of his Zionist sympathies, Berlin was able, Dubnov demonstrates, to take a more critical stance towards liberalism's focus upon the abstract, individual, and universal subject stripped of particularistic ties and to create a "thicker liberalism," which acknowledged the individual's need to belong. Moreover, Dubnov deftly shows that Berlin's attitudes towards nationalism and pluralism were deeply rooted in his ambivalence towards what he deemed to be Zionist extremism and terrorism. Berlin's decision to live outside of the state of Israel, while retaining his Jewish identity and Zionist convictions, Dubnov contends, helped burnish his ideas of value pluralism and the importance of choice as central to individual liberty. Dubnov further shows the significance of Berlin's "journey" as a "Jewish liberal" by demonstrating that not only the Spanish Civil War and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, but also Great Britain's shifting policy in Palestine politicized Berlin in the late 1930s.

Similarly, Dubnov's claim that German and Jewish culture prevailed over Russian in the multicultural Riga of Berlin's youth and that the Russian element of his identity has been overstated is a welcome corrective to uncritical views of Berlin's "Russianness." Far from being a central leitmotif in his life, Berlin's "Russianness," Dubnov suggests, was not so much a product of lived experience as the construct of a young man who felt pressed to classify and label his difference in his adoptive country of interwar England.

Dubnov uses a wide base of sources which includes not only many of Berlin's unpublished manuscripts and letters, but also those of his friends and associates. Particularly extensive is his use of primary and sec-

ondary sources to uncover those areas of Berlin's life and thought that have been least explored by Berlin scholars: Berlin's family background; the cultural matrix of Berlin's birthplace of Riga; philosophical and Zionist debates in the interwar period; the various Jewish communities of which Berlin was a part or with which he was familiar in Riga, London, Palestine, and the United States; interwar Oxford and Cambridge; Berlin's activities and communications when he worked for the British government during the war; and Berlin's involvement in the Zionist movement.

Despite the many strengths of this biography, it never quite succeeds in fully coming to grips with Berlin's multifaceted identity.Overlooking the impact of Russian thought and culture upon Berlin, Dubnov makes only passing reference to Berlin's stay in Russia in 1945, and particularly his meetings with Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, to which Berlin himself attributed so much importance. Nor is the influence of such Russian thinkers as Vissarion Belinskii, Alexander Herzen, Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, and IvanTurgenev explored by Dubnov. Although Dubnov rightly emphasizes Berlin's desire for acceptance in gentile society, he does not, as one might expect, explore the roots of this desire or its tension with Berlin's maintenance of a Jewish identity in a context of extreme anti-Semitism. Moreover Berlin's own avoidance of the topic of anti-Semitism and apparent contempt for his father's lifelong assimilationism on the one hand and late "sentimentality" towards his Hasidic lineage on the other, perhaps hint at a more complex psychological conflict than that for which Dubnov's distinction between "assimilation" and "acculturation" allows. Additionally, Dubnov's assertion that Berlin shifts from "performing" as a "good European" to a "wise Jew" under the influence of Zionist debate belies Berlin's lifelong commitment to Europeanism, which Dubnov himself underscores. Although Dubnov underscores Berlin's identity as a "homo Europaeus," he does not fully examine its meaning as reflected in such ideas as "civilization" and "Englishness," which are central to Berlin's work.

Dubnov is at his best when describing the political tensions and struggles within the Zionist movement. However, he tends to overlook the broader political maelstrom of the thirties, as when he asserts that "Berlin's [political] cautiousness" might be explained by "a certain lack of public schoolboy neurosis"; and that "He was not boiling with ancestor hatred, felt no urge to revolt against his parents, and was never motivated by loathing toward the bourgeoisie" (p. 85). His analysis could be enhanced by comparing Berlin's intellectual development to that of other Cold War liberals with somewhat similar backgrounds, such as Karl Popper, Lewis Namier, and J. L. Talmon. Is Berlin, for example, part of a cohort of postwar Jewish liberals? What factors in Berlin's life and intellectual development rendered his liberalism distinctive, as Dubnov suggests? Moreover Dubnov should have addressed the influence of the Cold War upon Berlin's thought, if only to underscore the particular contributions of the interwar period. Finally Dubnov's emphasis upon the ways in which the political vocabulary, intertextual dialogue, and "bridge-concepts" of the interwar period became central to Berlin's postwar thought causes him to overlook the influence of earlier ideas and thinkers as well as to divorce ideas from their broader social, political, and historical context–an approach that is perhaps least suited to a politically charged time like the interwar period. However overall Dubnov's meticulously researched and insightful biography adds an important new dimension to the scholarly debate on Isaiah Berlin. Dubnov has made a unique contribution by showing the centrality of Berlin's Zionism and Jewish identity to any understanding of both his intellectual development and seminal ideas.

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