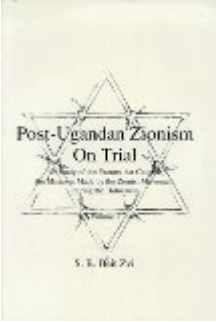
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

S.B. Beit-Zvi. *Post-Ugandan Zionism On Trial: A Study of the Factors that Caused the Mistakes Made by the Zionist Movement during the Holocaust.* Tel Aviv: Zahala, 1991. Translated by Ralph Mandel + 2 volumes. $50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9628843-0-6.



Reviewed by Boaz Cohen (Bar Ilan University)
Published on H-Holocaust (June, 2000)

S. B. BEIT ZVI'S WORK IN A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

S. B. BEIT ZVI'S WORK IN A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

These volumes, translations into English of a 1977 Hebrew edition, were at center stage of the debate about Zionist leadership policy and actions in the "Yishuv" (Palestine) on rescue and aid to European Jewries during the Holocaust. Recently, Beit Zvi's theses re-emerged in a passionate Israeli "new historians" debate. Proponents claimed that his work had been ignored by the Israeli historical establishment because of his critical views of mainstream Zionism and its leadership. On the other hand, important Israeli historians claimed that the volumes and their theses had received attention and responses off-and-on since their publication and that the claim of indifference had more to do with political issues than with historiography.

Post-Ugandan Zionism's_ current importance can also be judged by the fact that this 1977 work is the subject of a 1999 article published by eminent Israeli historian Anita Shapira. (Shapira, incidentally, labels the work a "cult book" of groups in Israeli society intent on destroying the moral base of the Israeli state by demonstrating that Zionists were disinterested in the fate of European Jewry.)

It is interesting to note that the work's actual point of departure is the author's distress at the inertia of the Israeli leadership and public vis-a-vis the plight of Russian Jewry in the 1950's. The irony is that this Zionist, nationalistically-oriented book should become part of the arsenal of post-Zionist academics in today's Israel.

THE STRUCTURE OF BEIT ZVI'S WORK

The two volumes are divided into four parts. Part One, "The Information Debacle," consists of two chapters whose content is clear from their titles, "The Truth Suppressed" and "What the Leaders Knew." In Part Two, "The War on Territorialism," the author puts forth his main argument, explaining the policy and inactions of the Zionist leadership as a logical outcome of its Uganda crisis (c. 1903). Part Three, "Without a Compass," deals with rescue attempts during the Holocaust and the failure of the Zionist leadership to partake in them. Part Four, "History Writing and Lessons," takes a critical view of Israeli Holocaust historiography in the first two decades following the Holocaust. Special emphasis is given to moral judgments and the place of Jewish resistance as a means to redeem "Jewish honor".

BEIT ZVI'S THESIS

Beit Zvi's thesis can be broken down into the following points:

(1) After the Uganda controversy (in which the Zionist Congress was riven apart by Herzel's motion of accepting Uganda as an interim haven for the Jewish nation), the Zionist movement adopted a "Palestino-centric" stance. The negation of the Diaspora (Heb.,Galut, lit., "exile") made for a lack of empathy with respect to European Jewries, which explains the absence of a meaningful and intensive Zionist effort on their be-

half;

(2) The Zionist stand against any rescue possibility other than Palestine led to the failure of the Evian Conference's (1938) decisions to promote the rescue of Jews to San Domingo. This can be explained only as a result of the Zionists' aforementioned "Palestino- centric" position;

(3) The Zionist leadership and Zionist newspapers in Palestine downplayed news concerning murders of Jews in Europe. As a result, there was no arousal of the public and no public pressure regarding these issues;

(4) The Zionists used the Holocaust to further the fulfillment of the Zionist ideal, i.e. the building of a Jewish State;

(5) The memory of the Holocaust was distorted by contrasting the Jewish masses going "as sheep to the slaughter" with ghetto fighters and partisans, described as entitled to honor.

On these points, Beit Zvi does not condemn the Zionist movement and its leadership for bad faith. Rather, he accuses it of not rising to the occasion. "The leadership sinned not by being unfaithful to its public, but in representing it instead of leading," (Vol. I, p. 2);

SHIRKING RESPONSIBILITY - POST-UGANDAN ZIONISM

Dwelling on Zionist passivity during the Holocaust, Beit Zvi says, "Manifestly, something happened to the Zionist tribe of the people of Israel. something that suppressed natural feelings and overrode plain common sense." (Vol. 1, p. 125) Beit Zvi explains Zionist inaction during the Holocaust as evolving from a despair regarding chances to rescue European Jewry. In explaining the problem of such an approach, Beit Zvi differentiates between a father and a friend. "When a son's life is in danger, his father does not cease to act." (Vol. I, p.150) Despite professional assessments that the situation is hopeless, the father will try to save his son by any help, but will "not cease thinking about the tangibility of the fatal result. He does not avoid thinking in terms of the post-tragedy period" (Vol. I, p. 150).

Beit Zvi claims that since the Uganda controversy, "the World Zionist Organization (WZO) was a friend and not a father" (Vol. I, p.151) of the Jewish people in Europe. Having had to make the hard choice between alleviating the suffering of the Jewish masses in Europe and fulfilling the dream of a Jewish entity in Palestine, the WZO fully opted for Palestine. This choice meant that the Zionist program in Palestine was accepted as the organization's sole objective. It is actually since the Uganda Controversy, says Beit Zvi, that the WZO has not seen itself as responsible for solving problems of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. (The inherent problem of this thesis is, of course, that Beit Zvi does not accept that Zionists saw Palestine as the only viable answer to the plight of the Jewish masses.)

THE INFORMATION DEBACLE

Secrecy, declares Beit Zvi, was "The paramount means without which destruction on the scale that was perpetrated would have been inconceivable." (Vol. I, p. 4) Beit Zvi contends that if information about the murder of the Jews had been brought to Allied and neutral publics, there would have been more willingness to aid Jews, and more rescue possibilities would have been opened. Beit Zvi views the WZO as the only agency capable of organizing and disseminating such information. He claims, however, that the WZO and its leadership "succeeded astonishingly well in not knowing about the situation of European Jewry". (Vol. I, p.2)

Beit Zvi conducted a thorough survey of newspapers, speeches and memoirs to demonstrate the suppression and downplaying of information arriving from occupied Europe and the lack of action thereto. He further demonstrates the inattention of the Zionist leadership to such information.

ZIONISTS AND THE EVIAN CONGRESS

In his text and in an appended article (Vol. I, pp. 232-245), Beit Zvi challenges the Zionist historical assessment of Evian as "proof of the indifference and hypocrisy of the world towards the fate of the Jews". (Vol.I, p.199) The basic goal of the conference was to find havens for Jewish refugees elsewhere than in Palestine. Beit Zvi argues that the Zionist delegation went to Evian "not interested in the attainment of the goal the conference had set itself". (Vol. I, p.238) Beit Zvi sees this response in the matrix of the Uganda crisis. It was a result of that crisis, according to Beit Zvi, that the Zionist movement abandoned its overall responsibility to the Jewish People. From that time, the movement "would direct all its strength towards the goal of [the establishment of a national home for the Jewish People in Palestine]. In the future it would extend help to Jews only on condition that such activity was commensurate with its activities towards the attainment of Zionism's goal." (Vol. I, p.192)

ZIONIST AND OTHER RESCUE POSSIBILITIES

Part Three of Beit Zvi's work deals with Zionist attitudes towards rescue possibilities; amongst others, the refugee ships "Patria" and "Struma," the Bermuda Conference, and the "Goods for Blood" deal offered through Yoel Brand. The issues dealt with in these chapters deal with the WZO not assuming "the task of conducting rescue policy". (Vol. II, p. 4) as a result of its "arbitrary and alienated attitude toward European Jewry". (Vol.II p. 6)

THE WRITING OF HISTORY

Beit Zvi claims that the Israeli Holocaust Studies establishment has been shaped by the following guidelines (Vol. II, p.131):

(1) The assumption that Jews in the Holocaust should have saved their honor and the honor of the Jewish People by engaging in armed/physical resistance. Apologetic explanations would be given for their going like sheep to the slaughter;

(2) Ghetto-fighters and partisans saved the Jewish nation's honor and their actions were beyond criticism;

(3) The Yishuv and the Zionist movement did not act correctly towards Jews during the Holocaust. The nations of the world stood idly by while Jews were murdered. They paid only lip service to the need for rescue and aid.

Beit Zvi says that memoirs or articles arguing views which conflict with the above have been censored or suppressed. He places special emphasis on the historiography of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Going through available memoirs, Beit Zvi shows that in terms of fighting, the revolt was miniscule: three days of sporadic active fighting while during the rest of the time the fighters hid in the bunkers until they were either found or escaped. The only serious fighting recorded by the German commander Stroop in his report and post-war testimony was at the Beitar stronghold at Muranowska Square. That these resistors were from the wrong political group led to the suppression of their story. The fact that most of these fighters died in the battle also helped push it into obscurity. Finally, Beit Zvi suggests that the competition for the laurels of the ghetto uprising among Zionist factions and between Zionists and Bundists and Communists permeates much of the historical writing on the event.

EPILOGUE

Beit Zvi volumes were groundbreaking at the time of their publication. They formulated most of the questions pertinent to issues of Zionist leadership actions and inactions during the Holocaust. His was also the first work to draw a profile of Israeli Holocaust historiography and to question the predominance of armed resistance to it. In all, his work, although outdated and at times inaccurate, is nonetheless thought-provoking and stimulating. It is also important for its place in Israeli historiographic and political debates and for its impact on issues of history and memory in Israeli society.

Again, many of Beit Zvi's arguments have been refuted in the last twenty years. Beit Zvi's analysis of the Evian Conference, for example, has been researched extensively and the so-called "Zionist" assessment shown to be correct. In a voluminous book, *Arrow in the Dark*(1999), Israeli researcher Tuvia Friling demonstrates that Ben-Gurion and the Zionist leadership far from shirked their responsibility to European Jews. And their main (and covert) efforts and rescue projects existed side by side with the formal pathetic efforts derided in Beit Zvi's book.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-holocaust

Citation: Boaz Cohen. Review of Beit-Zvi, S.B., *Post-Ugandan Zionism On Trial: A Study of the Factors that Caused the Mistakes Made by the Zionist Movement during the Holocaust.* H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4289

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.