

BOOKS

# Book Review: 'Jabotinsky' by Hillel Halkin

Denounced by David Ben-Gurion as 'Vladimir Hitler,' Jabotinsky is history's most misunderstood Zionist.

By **DOUGLAS J. FEITH**

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Vladimir Jabotinsky, the intellectual forebear of the secular Israeli right, is the most vilified and mischaracterized figure in Zionist history. Until his death in 1940, eight years before the state of Israel's birth, Jabotinsky was the principal political rival of David Ben-Gurion, the Labor Zionist leader who became the Jewish State's first prime minister. Ben-Gurion labeled him "Vladimir Hitler" and denounced him and his followers as extremists and militarists who "educate their youth to kill." Invented 80 years ago for intramural Zionist political purposes, these slanders have now become standard insults that anti-Zionists use to denigrate the Jewish state.

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JABOTINSKY

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*By Hillel Halkin*

Yale, 246 pages, \$25

The right has dominated Israel's democratic politics since 1977, when Likud's Menachem Begin, a disciple of Jabotinsky, became the country's first nonsocialist prime minister. But Jabotinsky's reputation still awaits general rehabilitation. The cloud that his

contemporary rivals cast over him and his political party, which evolved into today's Likud, has never fully dissipated. To understand contemporary Israel requires an appreciation of its conservative political thought that is deeper than name-calling. This



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means taking Jabotinsky seriously, which is a pleasure to do, not least because his many writings were prescient, humane, artful and often humorous.

In his engaging and intelligent biography, Hillel Halkin, himself a brilliant Zionist man of letters—translator, novelist and essayist—illuminates Jabotinsky’s multifaceted nature as a *littérateur* and polemicist, political thinker and activist, family man and frustrated politician. Mr. Halkin’s particular interest is the tension between Jabotinsky’s lifelong, passionate defense of individual

liberty and his staunch Jewish nationalism, exaltation of military discipline and tough line toward the Arabs.

Born in 1880 in cosmopolitan Odessa, the only large Russian city in which Jews lived freely, Jabotinsky was secular and sophisticated. Though his father died when he was six and his mother made a meager living running a stationery store, Jabotinsky had a happy childhood in which he played truant and mischief maker, though one with a talent for words. As a teenager, he was already a rising-star journalist, having won a newspaper job by impressing an editor with his translation of Poe’s “The Raven” into Russian.

Zionism was offering a new answer to the so-called Jewish question: what to do about

the Jews' status as unwelcome guests in other peoples' countries. Jabotinsky grasped that Jews in Eastern Europe lived wretched lives—"always in a state of war," as he put it in his memoirs—surrounded by neighbors who generally hated them and sporadically battered, raped and killed them in pogroms that government officials often tolerated and sometimes encouraged. He concluded that Jewish assimilationism would fail and that the Zionists were right: The Jews needed a state where they could be the majority and govern and secure themselves. And only the Jews' ancient homeland—that is, Zion—could attract enough Jews and inspire the exertions necessary to create this new state.

The vulnerability, false hopes and complacency of diaspora Jews enraged Jabotinsky. In a play he wrote in 1907, a Zionist warns: "You're in a lion's den. Have no illusions. Your dreams are nothing but a fool's effusions. At the volcano's edge, you're fireflies." The "cringing" of his fellow Jews in the face of danger, the Zionist says, has distressed him so he "couldn't breathe."

Jabotinsky, Mr. Halkin argues, could have prospered as a playwright, journalist, poet, novelist and public speaker. His language skills were astonishing. Though his mother tongue was Russian, he was eloquent in Yiddish, Hebrew, English and Italian. Mr. Halkin judges his book "The Five" to be "one of the finest twentieth-century Russian novels." When he lectured, Jabotinsky could "mesmerize an audience for three hours," according to the novelist Arthur Koestler. The Russian diplomat K.D. Nabokov (the novelist's uncle) called Jabotinsky Russia's finest orator. But Jabotinsky gave up his burgeoning literary career to devote his life to promoting a Jewish-majority state in the land of Israel, an area under Turkish rule since 1517.

Jabotinsky attended Zionist congresses, edited Zionist periodicals and, in 1908, visited the Holy Land for the first time. There he heard Jews predicting that the Arabs would someday accept Zionism. Why? Because Jewish immigration boosted the economy for all. Or, as many left-leaning Zionists believed, because Arab workers would, out of solidarity, support the Jews in building a socialist community. Jabotinsky dismissed this all as unrealistic. "Arab nationalism was still at an early stage, but future conflict with it, he was convinced, was inevitable," Mr. Halkin notes.

The Turks sided with the Germans in the Great War in 1914, and Jabotinsky felt confident that Britain would defeat Turkey and take control of Palestine. He resolved to form a Jewish military unit to aid Britain. His goal, as he wrote to a fellow Zionist in 1915 with impressive prescience, was to ensure the Jewish people a voice "when one day a peace conference is convened, [and] an item on the agenda will be the dismemberment of Turkey."

Simply conceiving of the Jewish Legion was an imaginative coup. The world hadn't seen

a Jewish military force for nearly 2,000 years. To bring it into being, Jabotinsky had to overcome British reluctance and rude opposition from Zionist movement leaders, who were not military-minded and in any event had resolved on neutrality in the war. It took more than two years of defiant persistence before Britain agreed to a Jewish Legion. Jabotinsky joined, along with some 5,000 others, and they helped liberate the Holy Land—87 legionnaires lost their lives. Mark Sykes and Leo Amery, two British officials who cooperated with and admired Jabotinsky's dogged efforts to aid Britain's war effort, would go on to help draft the Balfour Declaration, which committed Britain to supporting the creation of a Jewish "national home" in Palestine.

In 1920, as Mr. Halkin relates, Jabotinsky, a Legion officer "with combat experience and reputation for resolve," drew on other Legion veterans to create the Hagana (Hebrew for "defense"), the first Jewish security force in Jerusalem. It would evolve into Palestine's main underground Jewish army during the British Mandate period (1923-48) and was the seed from which grew today's Israel Defense Forces.

By the 1920s, Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders approved of small Jewish militias but dismissed as militaristic Jabotinsky's proposals for a professional Jewish army. Many of them looked on fighting with horror, as something only non-Jews did. But Jabotinsky saw the world as a Hobbesian nightmare for those who couldn't defend themselves against their enemies. He determined to shock the Jews into appreciating the need for their young people to acquire military skills and discipline—to recover the fierce warrior culture of the armies of David, Solomon and the Maccabees. Hence he praised the Jewish soldier who spoke of being "hammered into whatever is needed for the machine of the nation" and who declared in the face of national danger: "I don't even have a name. I am the idea of pure service." It is such rhetoric, Mr. Halkin observes, that led critics to denounce Jabotinsky as a fascist. In 1933, soon after the Nazis' accession to power, Ben-Gurion said in a speech that he would not be surprised if Jabotinsky "tomorrow becomes the ally of Hitler."

Continually at odds with many of his fellow Zionists, Jabotinsky founded a new political party, the Zionist Revisionists. He opposed collectivism and preached personal freedom: "It is better that the individual sin against the public than that society sin against the individual; society was created for the good of individuals, and not the contrary," he wrote in a 1935 essay. Other leading Zionists wrestled with questions about the ideal character of the Jewish state: Would it be socialist? Western? Secular? But for Jabotinsky the paramount issue was simply bringing it into existence. "Haunted by what he called . . . 'the approaching catastrophe in our worldwide ghetto,' he had come to view Zionism as a race against the clock," Mr. Halkin writes. As the Nazis built their power, Jabotinsky wrote in a 1935 letter to Ben-Gurion:

I can vouch for there being a type of Zionist who doesn't care what kind of society our "state" will have; I'm that person. If I were to know that the only way to a state was via socialism, or even that this would hasten it by a generation, I'd welcome it. More than that: give me a religiously Orthodox state in which I would be forced to eat gefillte fish all day long (but only if there were no other way) and I'll take it. More than that: make it a Yiddish-speaking state, which for me would mean the loss of all the magic in the thing—if there's no other way, I'll take that, too.

In his most famous essay, "The Iron Wall" (1923), he warned against assuming that the Arabs "are either fools, whom we can deceive by masking our real aims, or that they are corrupt and can be bribed to abandon to us their claim to priority in Palestine, in return for cultural and economic advantages." Jews should respect the seriousness of the Arabs' nationalism, he argued, and should recognize that they would never make peace with Zionism if they retained any hope at all of eliminating the Jews from the land.

Jabotinsky was committed to upholding the individual rights of Arabs in the Jewish-majority state. Indeed, when British officials in the late 1930s proposed partitioning Palestine and transferring the Arabs out of the Jewish portion, leading Zionists on the left consented, but Jabotinsky said that "forcing the Arabs out of Palestine is totally out of the question." He rejected the proposal as an unconscionable violation of the Arabs' individual rights. The Arabs enjoy majority rights in many countries, he noted, and would of course prefer to remain the majority in Palestine. But they will have to live as a minority in that one country, he said, or the Jews would have to live as a minority everywhere in the world.

The most difficult challenge to Jabotinsky's liberal principles, Mr. Halkin notes, occurred during the Palestinian Arab Revolt in the late 1930s, which included a series of terrorist attacks on Jews. His followers in Palestine had formed a new underground military group known as the Irgun and wondered whether they should fight terrorism with terrorism. Jabotinsky repeatedly said no. "I see nothing heroic about shooting an Arab peasant in the back for bringing vegetables on his donkey to Tel Aviv," Mr. Halkin quotes him saying. Jabotinsky eventually concluded, however, that, under the awful circumstances of the persistent Arab terrorism that was threatening the region's Jews, he couldn't deny his people the right to strike back to try to defeat or deter the enemy. Mr. Halkin highlights the harrowing implications of this shift. But recognizing that one of terrorism's worst effects is to create philosophical chaos, he refrains from rendering judgment and writes: "The moral calculus has yet to be invented that can deal with such equations."

There are two other superb biographies of Jabotinsky, one by Joseph B. Schechtman, "The Jabotinsky Story" (1956, 1961), and the other by Shmuel Katz, "Lone Wolf" (1996);

the former fills 1,000 pages, the latter 1,800. Mr. Halkin's book paints a rich portrait in 230 pages. Showing Jabotinsky as a farsighted and profound moral thinker, Mr. Halkin places him at the intersection of philosophy and practical political action. He helps us understand why Jabotinsky was feared by his Zionist socialist opponents but also why their attacks on him as an extremist and militarist were reprehensibly off the mark.

Jabotinsky died in 1940 in America, where he was hoping, in the days before the U.S. entry into the war, to form a Jewish combat force to aid Britain against the Nazis. In Israel, his thought remains influential to this day, though most Israelis have only a vague notion of what he actually stood for. Leftists still revile him as a right-wing extremist, which he wasn't. And some rightists who revere him think that he would support annexing the West Bank but not granting its Arabs citizenship. He wouldn't. As is true of America also, Israel has many people whose own good-heartedness seems to interfere with their ability to see evil in the world clearly. And it has many who are so alive to threats that their outlook on the world becomes selfish and brutal. Jabotinsky is the antidote to both of these ills. Mr. Halkin's book presents him in all his hardheaded but humane complexity.

—Mr. Feith, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (2001-05), is writing a history of the Arab-Israeli conflict.