

The Essence of Revisionism

An analysis of a fascist tendency in Jewry.

Marie Syrkin

THE GREATER in interest in revisionism in the United States is not due solely to the recent arrival of Jabotinsky. Naturally the brilliance and great personal charm of the *Fuehrer* are compelling factors but there are profounder causes at work which should be faced openly. Psychologically, the moment is a propitious one for the man on a white horse. Precisely because Jews have never felt so desperate, so helpless, so terrified as today, the sound of sabre-rattling and trumpet-blasts is welcome. The sabre may not cut; the blast may frighten nothing more deadly than sheep, but the gesture is an emotional release and a defiance. We remember how in November, 1936 a few hundred Polish Jews, without passports, visas or money, began to march on foot from Warsaw to Palestine. Their sole equipment for the proposed pilgrimage through the lands of Europe and the Orient was a commander-in-chief, uniforms, flags, and a rallying-cry "Awaken Israel." The would-be redeemers of Zion were dispersed by the Polish police a few miles outside of Warsaw and no more has been heard of them or their enterprise. But who does not understand the anguish from which this fantastic "redemption-march" sprang? Who does not understand

their ultimate readiness to cease reckoning with reality entirely when its pressure became too intolerable? The over-burdened spirit takes refuge in illusion, a world of dreams which gives a kind of logic to the unbearable confusion of existence.

In a sense, it is a similar mood that revisionism can now capitalize. In a world-crisis which has engulfed not only the Jewish people but nation after small nation, when Zionism like every other liberal movement is fighting for its life, Jabotinsky appears in the gloom and brightens the air with slogans: A Jewish State on both sides of the Jordan; Jews to be shipped into Palestine at once not by the thousands, but by the millions; a Jewish army; and a few other trifles! Naturally there is no Zionist anywhere who does not desire the largest possible immigration into the largest possible area of the Jewish homeland. But those who have actually assumed the day-by-day struggle for the economic and political entrenchment of Zionism cannot afford the luxury of tumultuous and provocative battle-cries. Those who are engaged in the disheartening inch-by-inch labor of realizing the maximum attainable within given conditions, cannot indulge in sonorous maximalist demands. However, it is obvious that shouting for the im-

mediate admission of a "million" Jews has a greater romantic appeal than bleak negotiations about actual immigration certificates. The gentleman on the platform who bravely proclaims, "Let them all in," is bound to strike a sympathetic chord in even the most sober. The simulation even of non-existent might, may be a comfort when the sense of impotence grows too oppressive.

In the March issue of *Hadar* (Revisionist Youth monthly) are some verses which the Editors characterize as "a consummate expression of the spirit of *Betar*" (Revisionist Youth Organization.) This apparently definitive formulation of the *Betar* creed urges: "To your tents, oh Jews! To your guns, tanks, bombers." It also advises "Spit back with machine-guns, and they will respect you; Spit back with air-bombs and they will admire you." It closes with the exhortation, "Answer them with steel, answer them with fire, answer them with death—that is the language they understand."

Disregarding for the moment the ethical level of this utterance, one can readily see that in certain moods of despair and rebellion against repeated outrage, youth and perhaps its elders can be won by the counsel of despair to mythical "tanks" and "bombers." And it is not hard to understand the impulse which made the brown-shirted members of *Betar* stand in military formation before "Commander-in-chief" Jabotinsky, when he recently "inspected" his "troops" with all due soldierly precision in the Capitol Hotel in New York City. Not that the martial fanfare of *Brith Trumpeldor* is a novelty. In Poland, "dress reviews," "militia manoeuvres," uniforms complete in every detail from spurs to epaulettes, had long been the order of the day. There used to be only one hitch in the pomp and circumstance of Jabotinsky's "dress parades." The Polish government would permit the Revisionists to dress up in fancy uniforms, but it forbade the use of arms, so that even the redoubtable *Kazin* (Colonel) boasted neither sword nor pistol.

Of course, there is nothing humorous about Jewish weakness. The Revisionist mimicry of a force which it does not possess is tragic rather than funny. One might even go so far as to say that if the aping of military attitudes were eventually to lead to greater strength, Jews could well afford to appear temporarily ridiculous. Furthermore, one may grant that the instinctive liberal repugnance to everything that savors of militarism can in the present hour no longer be considered as an absolute criterion. If its magniloquent phrases contained either a record of achievement, or a promise of success, Revisionism would have the right to say to Zionism, to Jewry, that the era of Hitler is no time for a stubborn adherence to noble ideologies.

On the basis of the record, has Revisionism this right? What is the truth?

Revisionism began as an opposition group within the Zionist movement, being founded by Jabotinsky in 1923. In 1935, the Revisionists left the Zionist Organization and formed what they call the New Zionist Organization. Their program has varied little in these years. They started *cre-scendo* and have maintained their vocal pitch consistently. However, these years have provided an opportunity for discovering just what revisionism means when it proceeds to activities other than flag-waving.

First of all, what are revisionist political achievements? What have these clamorers for a "Jewish State on both sides of the Jordan," these fiery denouncers of Great Britain, done to aggrandize Jewish independence in Palestine? It is hardly necessary to dwell on the obvious fact that only a politically irresponsible group could permit itself the pleasure of 100% slogans, happen what may. The "maximalism" of the revisionists has not brought the Jewish State any nearer; it has, however, provided ample ammunition to the Arabs and opponents of Zionism in Great Britain. There has been more than one time in the tragic tension of the past decade, when political Zionism was seriously jeopardized by the uncontrolled vapourings of the revisionists.

At this point, it may be well again to remember that even Herzl—to whose Zionism there were certainly no bounds—substituted the tamer "publicly and legally assured home in Palestine" for "Jewish State," when he became a responsible political leader. And it might also be salutary to recall that a signature affixed to the Churchill White Paper of 1922, which separated Transjordan from Palestine, is that of Vladimir Jabotinsky.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Revisionist contributions to the political front have been solely an excess of zeal and lung-power. They have more substantial achievements to their credit.

In 1934, against the expressed will of the Jewish Agency, the Revisionists circulated a world petition on the question of Zionism.

This petition was presented to the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations. As at that time the revisionists were still theoretically within the Zionist Organization, they committed a flagrant breach of Zionist discipline by this act, but far worse was the "political" result that they achieved with their bold stroke. The Mandates Commission ruled that the Revisionist petition "does not fulfill the conditions of admissibility since it raises claims which are incompatible with the Mandate for Palestine." In other words, thanks to the revisionists, the world was explicitly informed that a

Jewish State was incompatible with the terms of the Mandate. This damaging interpretation had not been volunteered by the Commission. Responsible Zionist leaders had always cautiously refrained from any step likely to precipitate such a pronouncement. The Revisionists, however, managed to secure this signal political defeat by their passion for meaningless gestures.

Time and again, we have been treated to the extraordinary spectacle of these "uncompromising" opponents of the Mandatory Power running to the British Government with requests that Jewish self-government be diminished. In 1937, when Jabotinsky appeared at the session of the Royal Commission held in London, he did not hesitate to request the British Government to liquidate the Jewish Agency, which is the accredited representative of the Jewish people before Great Britain and the world. That is to say, in a crucial moment for Zionism, Jabotinsky's contribution to the Zionist case, carefully constructed and presented by the Jewish Agency, was to question the agency's competence as a representative body.

Nor is this the only evidence of Revisionist super-patriotism in action. As recently as a month ago (February 1940) the revisionists in Palestine presented a memorandum to the Government requesting the British to assume the task of regulating employment, and thus deprive the Jewish labor bureaus of this power. In the same memorandum they asked the Government to outlaw strikes. The question of the Revisionist attitude toward organized labor will be considered separately. In this connection, it is important to observe the readiness of the Revisionists to hand over basic Jewish rights, fundamental signs of Jewish autonomy, to the British Administration.

The *Kofer Ha Yishuv* (Self-Defense Fund), the tax assumed by the Jewish community of Palestine and one of the symbols of Jewish self-government in Palestine, has been savagely fought by the revisionists—again a paradoxical act for these perpetual praters about Jewish "independence."

Another plank in the Revisionist platform is a "Jewish army." Do they not strike heroic poses, and shout *Tel Hai*? Again, what is the actual record? Unfortunately, the three years of disturbances in Palestine have provided us with sufficient samples not only of revisionist statesmanship but of revisionist valor.

The extraordinary courage of the *Yishuv* during these years, the evolution of the concept of *Havlaga*—self-restraint—which imposed on the population a policy of active defense against attack but forbade blind retaliation, has by now become legendary. It forms one of the great chapters in human, as well as Jewish history. What was the Revisionist offering to this period? They did not participate in the general self-defense.

But when the endurance of the population was strained, revisionists proceeded to commit a number of wanton terrorist acts. We need not dwell on the immorality of the indiscriminate slaughter of possibly guiltless Arabs. What the revisionists should have been able to realize, even if they were insensitive to the ethical considerations involved, was that the sole practical result of a Jewish counter-terror would be to inflame all sectors of the Arab population to active hostility and provide the British with legitimate excuses for suppressing the Jewish population as a lawless element. The consistent purity of the Jewish position as well as its energetic self-defense under every onslaught, was the strongest weapon which the *Yishuv* could forge. It is this weapon which the revisionists attempted to destroy. "*Break Havlaga*" became their slogan. They canonized Shlomo Ben Yossef, the young revisionist who was executed in 1938 for shooting at some passing Arabs from ambush. This same Ben Yossef was held up by Jabotinsky as a model of Jewish heroism to the Youth of Brith Trumpeldor, when he "reviewed" them recently in New York. In a sense, the young terrorist is a more suitable saint for revisionist veneration than the Socialist Trumpeldor whom they adopted, because the epic defense of Tel Hai by Trumpeldor was *opposed* by Jabotinsky. This apostle of action declared to the Vaad Leumi (1920) "If we shall, ourselves, rise to defend our settlements, we shall certainly fail!" But now characteristically enough the revisionist war-cry is *Tel Hai*.

To every critical period in Palestine, the revisionist contribution has been merely provocative demonstration. From 1929, when they precipitated Arab riots by their senseless March to the Wailing Wall, till 1939 when they imperilled *Havlaga*, their acts have consistently jeopardized the safety of the country. Yet who can compare the personal heroism or the national vision of the worker who built Hanita in the midst of the disturbances with that of the irresponsible element which shot at an Arab bus, or planted a bomb in an Arab market-place?

What else have the revisionists done to further the actual progress of Zionism? They roar for mass-immigration; their deeds, however, are of a character best calculated to render a large influx of Jews into Palestine impossible. It is a truism by now to point out that the absorptive capacity of Palestine depends on the continuing entrenchment of the population in the economic life of the country. If unemployed Jewish workers wander through the colonies, it is obvious that there will be less opportunity for other Jewish workers to enter. It is equally obvious that the most persuasive argument for maximal political elements is the

solidarity and extent of Jewish constructive achievement in Palestine. The 57 new settlements founded by Jewish workers in the past three terrible years have an infinitely greater political significance than a swash-buckling parade. Yet the revisionists have done their utmost to undermine the position of the Jewish worker in Palestine. "Breaking" organized labor has been as holy a revisionist purpose as breaking the *Havlagá*. Jabotinsky's notorious "Yes, destroy" has provided revisionism with one slogan by which it punctiliously abides. The revisionist explanation of its typically fascist attacks on organized labor is that as devoted nationalists they oppose the "class struggle." The miracles of national reconstruction wrought by the "class struggling" *chalutz* require no elaboration. It would be an impertinence to rehearse the *chalutz* history of sacrifice and martyrdom for the national ideal. But revisionist strike-breaking, revisionist alliances with the most reactionary elements among Jewish employers, bear examination. What happened in 1934 in Kfar Saba is an excellent illustration of the brilliance of revisionist tactics. Kfar Saba belonged to a group of colonists where the Histadrut had secured the employment of Jewish workers. Even though 18% of the workers of the colony were not members of the Histadrut, they abided by its decisions. Then there appeared on the scene the "super-nationalist" members of Brith Trumpeldor and concluded separate agreements with the employers. The first result of this strategy was the immediate "liberation" of the colony from "Marxian" workers. But this bit of social progress was followed by another act of liberation. It dawned on the colonists that Arabs were even cheaper than strike-breaking revisionists. Kfar Saba became free of Jewish workers till the riots. When their groves began to burn, the colonists re-discovered the merits of Jewish labor.

Despite such demonstrations of the net "national" gains achieved through strike-breaking, the revisionists continue cheerfully in their attack on the Jewish worker. At present we have the example of *Gan Litvinsky*, one of the largest orange groves in Palestine. Till 1936, the Brothers Litvinsky had employed only Arabs. After the outbreaks, when work became dangerous, contracts were given to the agricultural department of the Histadrut. Recently, the Histadrut brought evidence showing that it was losing one cent every box of oranges. During the negotiations with the Brothers Litvinsky, revisionist strike-breakers stepped in and underbid the Histadrut by a considerable sum. Perhaps after a while the Brothers Litvinsky, with the able help of the revisionists, will be able to return to the idyllic, pre-1936 era, when the still more economical Arabs were at their disposal. Do the revisionists really believe that

by lowering the standard of living, by destroying the cardinal principle of Jewish labor without which Zionism is doomed, they are creating conditions conducive to "mass-immigration?"

The revisionists have always clamored for "arbitration" of labor disputes, yet when Rutenberg, as President of the Vaad Leumi, ruled in favor of the Histadrut workers in the *Gan Litvinsky* conflict, they refused to abide by his decision. This, despite their previously professed admiration for the "strong" figure of Rutenberg.

Since the war, a General Labor Bureau has been established in which all Zionist workers' groups are represented (Histadrut, Hapoel Hamizrachi, Poale Agudath Israel, General Zionist). The function of this Labor Bureau is to apportion work to applicants. The revisionists have refused to participate in the Bureau, but they clamor endlessly that they are wronged in the apportionment of working days.

The revisionist record is uniformly one of sabotage and destruction. These devotees of "unity" and "discipline" have repeatedly broken the discipline of the Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency by irresponsible, unauthorized action with invariably disastrous results. These would be builders of Zion have carried an active propaganda against the national funds; they have interfered with collections; they have broken Jewish National Fund boxes on the grounds that these were "socialist" because the land purchased belonged in perpetuity to the Jewish people. They have set up rival funds of their own, and then have had the consummate effrontery to complain that *Keren Kayemeth* and *Keren Hayesod* were not supplying them with enough cash. Their culpable mismanagement and shameful exploitation of *Aliya Bet* has already been discussed in a previous article (JEWISH FRONTIER, March).

"Breaking" Jewish labor; breaking *Havlagá*; breaking the Zionist Organization; breaking the National Funds; breaking "unity"—that is the sum total of the revisionist achievement. Even some revisionists have begun to rebel against this eternal chaos. The "National Federation of Workers," the Organization of Revisionist workers in Palestine has issued a bulletin in which it accuses the Revisionist officials of deliberately fostering labor disputes: "All their (Revisionist leaders') struggle has been limited to fostering competition and strife with regard to the working day."

However, in order to savor the full fragrance of revisionism one has to go to its chief spokesman. Did not Jabotinsky himself proclaim that a state must be built "on slavery, filth, and blood?" Did not Abba Achimair, hailed by Jabotinsky as "friend and teacher" urge: "We must create groups for action; to exterminate the Histadrut

physically; they are worse than Arabs," and still better: "It is by the amount of bloodshed that you can evaluate a revolution, and not by the beautiful ideas for which it is shed." And finally, did not Uri Zwi Greenberg, writing in the Revisionist paper *Hazit Haam*, give as his journalistic *credo*: "holy falsehood"; "smear it on thick"; "exaggerate as much as possible"; "Start scandals. Say they are thieves. This will reverberate both in Palestine and in the Diaspora."

With two editions of "Mein Kampf" in circulation it is hardly necessary to point out what spirit these quotations breathe. In method and ideology

Revisionism is viciously fascist lacking the sole asset of fascism—might. A movement which is both provocative and impotent is dangerous only to the cause it advocates. Despite its ambitious profession, there is only one field in which Revisionism has made an effective display of strength. It has shown a suicidal energy in attempting to destroy hard-won achievements of Zionism. This spirit must not be allowed to infect American Jewry. As long as actual work may be done in and for Palestine, spectacular or unspectacular, we must not retire to that asylum of illusion where spurious Napoleons brawl with each other.