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Adam Rovner, *In the Shadow of Zionism: Promised Lands before Israel*, New York University Press, 2014, 352 pp., \$35.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781479817481.

There is a joke about a traditional Jew who walks into a travel agency in Belgium in 1939. He asks the travel agent if he can secure him passage to another country. The agent walks over to a globe, spins it around, and says, “Sir, there isn’t a place on this globe that will have you.” The Jew replies, “Maybe you have another globe?” The response to this joke, of course, is encapsulated in one word: Zionism. Or is it? Adam Rovner’s wonderful new book *In the Shadows of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel* challenges that one word response, not necessarily as an alternative in 2015 (today there are many countries where a Jew can immigrate), but as a matter of history.

Political Zionism revolved around two interlocking axes: the Jews in Europe *desire* to live autonomous collective lives—i.e. the Jewish adaptation of European nationalism—and the *need* for Jews to find a refuge from growing anti-Semitism in Europe. This desire and need began to merge into what has been called political Zionism (Zionism had many other iterations, cultural, spiritual, and religious but these are not relevant to Rovner’s book). Other competing ideologies included assimilationism, Diaspora nationalism, Bundism, Marxism, Yiddishism and any number of other “isms” that the Jews invented in their trek through the woods of modernity. Zionism was, in fact, the minority among these alternatives until at least the late 1930s and early 1940s when the clouds of war descended and the fate of European Jewry hung in the balance. On the other side of the ocean, American Zionism does not sign on fully to statist Zionism (the primary goal of Zionism being the establishments of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine) until the Biltmore Conference in May of 1942. American Jews had their own problems with advocating for an autonomous Jewish state in Palestine as they were engaged in a delicate process of acculturation and assimilation into American society that made the question of dual-loyalty a concern.

One of the missing “isms” in the above list is known as territorialism. Territorialism’s goals were quite similar to Zionism’s (and some territorialists considered themselves Zionists) with three important caveats: first, territorialism was primarily focused on the immediate extraction of Jews from an increasingly dangerous situation in Europe; second, it openly valued “people” over “land,” instead of seeing them as mutually dependent. Zionism’s symbiosis between people and land is captured well by the liberal Zionism of Martin Buber. “It is significant that this national concept [Zionism] was named after a place and not, like the others, after a people, which indicates that it is not so much a question of a

particular people as such, but of its association with a particular land...This reality [of Zionism] was the holy matrimony of a 'holy' people with a 'holy' land, the local point of which was named Zion."<sup>1</sup> Territorialism's position on this matter is captured quite well in Israel Zangwill's speech at the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903 in favor of exploring the "Uganda plan." "The soul is greater than the soil," Zangwill proclaimed, "and the Jewish soul can create its Palestine anywhere, without necessarily losing the historic aspiration for the Holy Land" (as quoted by Rovner, 56). Territorialists were not committed to the land of Israel as the place of that autonomous polity, at least not immediately. More strongly, many did not think the land of Israel was politically viable. Finally, third, territorialism felt it could avoid two pitfalls of Zionism: (1) the danger of messianism implied in the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, and (2) it claimed that given the large Arab population in Palestine, a Jewish state there would necessarily become militarist, engaged in a never-ending conflict in order to survive. "The territorialists, for all their utopianism, believed that Jewish settlement [in Palestine] would create an endless state of war with an Arab population who would never accept mass Jewish immigration" (210). The territorialists were much more realistic about "the Arab question" than the Zionists.

Those who know about territorialism at all likely know about it from the infamous "Uganda Plan" (it was actually territory in the East African Protectorate) that Herzl supported and brought up at the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903 where it was shot down by traditionalists and secularists, as well as by political Zionists and cultural ones. Herzl's motion was not to adopt the plan of creating an autonomous Jewish polity in Uganda but only to explore its viability. The Zionists knew what that meant and made sure the train never left the station. It was not until the summer of 1905 that Zionism's sole focus was the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine. By then, territorialism had been elbowed out of Zionist discourse. But Rovner shows us that territorialism remained not only viable but vibrant at least until the establishment of the state in 1948. Rovner tells the story of the "Uganda Plan" in Chapter 2 adding to it a territorialist perspective that we rarely see. Given that the likelihood of Palestine as the home of a Jewish nation-state that early on (1903-1905) was quite low, territorialism actually made a lot of sense in its historical context.

Many territorialists did not want to supplant Zion as the ultimate destination of Jewish nationalism. Many viewed their project as a temporary respite, a "safe-house" where Jews could continue to cultivate their national identity for an eventual "*aliyah*" to the land of Israel in the future. But Zionist maximalists such as Menachem Ussishkin and the socialist Ber Borochov were undeterred. They did not want precious resources sidetracked to some temporary Jewish home in Africa or South America. It would be Palestine or nothing. This illustrates perhaps the major rift between Zionism and territorialism: whether the responsibility is to first of all save as many lives as possible or to create a Jewish State in Palestine with all the implications therein. Rovner notes, "The intellectual history of territorialism reveals the first crisis of Zionism. Today Zionism remains the chief Jewish nationalist ideology, often to the point of rendering past and present alternative visions of nationhood invisible" (7).

Rovner does us a great service: he provides us with a narrative history of the loser. However, he also shows us that this viable option in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries actually made a lot of sense. And without as much as saying so, asks us to consider how many lives may have been saved if one of the territorial plans had succeeded in the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, "Zion and Other National Concepts," in *On Zion: The History of an Idea*, trans. Stanley Godman (London: Horovitz Publishing, 1973), xvii-xviii.

naughts, tens and even twenties when Zionism seemed hopelessly embroiled in a political morass, first with the Ottoman sultan and then the British Mandate. Rovner shows how we can see the rationale here when even such Palestineo-centric Zionists such as Jabotinsky, who was one of the first to warn the Jews of Poland to emigrate, considered territorialist plans. While territorialism and Zionism were perhaps the closest of all existing alternatives at the time, perhaps precisely because they were, each viewed the other as presenting a grave threat to the survival of the Jews. There is no doubt, Zionism won. In some way, though, it came too late, six million Jews perished in the Holocaust. And the fears the territorialists harbored in regards to Israel's militancy have largely been realized.

Rovner's book is part narrative, part documentary history, and part travel guide. He visited all the sites discussed in the book and offers detailed descriptions of topography and flora and fauna. *In the Shadow of Zion* devotes a chapter to six proposed sites for Jewish collective autonomy: Grand Island, NY, Kenya, Angola, Madagascar, Tasmania and Suriname. There were more, including the well-known ones such as Birobidzhan in Siberia and lesser-known ones such as a plan for a Jewish autonomous collective in eastern Texas. But the ones Rovner chose were all serious proposals and garnered considerable support not only from colonial powers but also in many cases indigenous tribal leaders who lived in the area.

Rovner begins by showing us how territorialism pre-dated Zionism by more than half a century. *In the Shadow of Zion* begins with the little-known story of Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851), an American Jew who was probably the most famous Jew in pre-civil-war New York. Noah was a Jew of Portuguese descent who believed America was a new promised land for the Jews, a place where they could live freely and practice their religion without persecution. In 1818 Noah proposed the idea of establishing a Jewish city-state on Grand Island, an island on the Niagara River near Niagara Falls. He called the proposed city-state Ararat (the place where Noah's boat makes land in Genesis, and an obvious ode to his name). The plan never came to fruition although it achieved considerable legislative support and in a way serves as the pre-history of territorialism because in 1818 Zionism did not yet exist to serve as its foil and the pogroms of the late nineteenth century that catapulted territorialism into view had not yet occurred. Nonetheless it is an early example of non-statist Jewish nationalism that Rovner argues sets in motion other similar movements throughout the next century.

*In the Shadow of Zion* is also full of fascinating characters few of us know, for example Dr. Isaac Nahman Steinberg who Rovner calls "one of the most important Jewish figures of the twentieth century you probably never heard of" (154). Or, Critchley Parker, an Australian adventurer who sacrificed his life navigating the Tasmanian backcountry in search of suitable land for the Jews. Rovner calls him "the only non-Jewish Australian to die in the service of a Jewish cause" (177). One of the more fascinating portrayals in Rovner's book is the well-known Israel Zangwill. A British playwright and Zionist, Zangwill coined the phrase "A land without a people for a people without a land," an early clarion call of Zionism. He also wrote the play "Melting Pot" about intermarriage that Teddy Roosevelt saw in New York and then adopted as an American program of assimilation. What is less known about Zangwill is that he was a fervent territorialist, using his significant influence fending off Zionist maximalist protests to make his case for the need of emergency measures to save the Jews of Europe. His catch phrase, "A land without a people for a people without a land," belies a much more complicated figure who tried to convince the Zionists that territorialism was not the enemy. Rather, it was a necessity.

Rovner's book is a tour de force in terms of its meticulous research, its narrative arch, and its ability to be simultaneously substantive and entertaining. For one who is inclined, like myself, toward the more theoretical dimensions of Zionism and its competitors, I was sometimes disappointed that Rovner did not develop ideas mentioned in passing but to my mind crucial to his thesis. That is, the proximity between Zionism and territorialism as two competing Jewish nationalisms and the distance between them in terms of land versus lives. Another example is the role of messianism (religious and secular) that threads through much of Zionist discourse even implied in *Ha-Tikva*, Israel's national anthem. The fear of messianism and its implications was something that concerned many secular Zionists early on. Territorialism would avert that danger. Is there more to say about that? The notion of "the negation of the diaspora" (*sblilat ha-golah*) and all the problems therein is a central motif of Zionism that territorialism would have averted as it was a diasporic nationalism. A basic premise of "negation of the diaspora" thinking is the ultimate unviability of the Diaspora in terms of the survival of Jewish life and culture. Territorialism offered an alternative to that notion as it was precisely about creating a politically and culturally sovereign place for Jews in the Diaspora. Rovner does not deal with that idea. Finally, could territorialism exist today in lieu of the existence of the State of Israel? That is, does Israel make territorialism obsolete and if so, why? The problems with the Palestinian population and the wider region remain and, at least as late as 1967, Israel was under what it calls "an existential threat" that many in the country claim continues to exist with the threat of a nuclear Iran. I guess what I am asking is whether a post-Zionist territorialism would be possible, one that exists beside Israel and not in place of it. This of course is beyond the purview of Rovner's historical study but his excellent book evokes these kinds of questions.

Rovner ends his book with the following sentences: "Neither Africa, Australia, North America, nor South Africa were in the end acknowledged as Jewish homes. The mythopoesis of Israel ultimately proved more potent a national force than any other territory. Of all the many promised lands, only one today is real" (227). This is, of course, a truism that cannot easily be contested. Rovner notes in the Introduction, "Territorialism did not believe a viable Jewish state could arise in the land of Israel no matter what boundaries were established" (9). About that they were surely mistaken. But still a few questions remain. First, what was the price of this success? That is, what was the cost of waiting for the land of Israel in regards to human life (this is obviously 20/20 hindsight but a question nonetheless)? And what was the cost to the indigenous population (later known as Palestinians) who were in many cases displaced in order to create a Jewish nation-state? One needn't take a political side to recognize that they paid for the Zionist dream yet were largely not part of the reason for its necessity. Second, given the state of the American diaspora, can we say that America is a kind of Jewish home without the political autonomy of Israel but with the sense of security the territorialists were after? That is, is America a de-territorialized home of the Jews thus making the territorial project unnecessary yet also in a way a belated success? Be it God or history, the Jews were not granted their colony in Angola or Tasmania or Suriname. But they were given America as a place to exhale.

In 1818 Mordecai Manuel Noah could not have imagined the multicultural and even post-ethnic America of the twenty-first century. For him, security was still best assured through limited sovereignty. And David ben Gurion could not quite have imagined America as it is today either. The very notion that Israeli born Jews would *choose* to emigrate and make their (Jewish) lives in the Diaspora was not something he considered likely, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. But this is where we are. And trying to think about the territorialist movement from this station in history is an interesting exercise. In the end Rovner's well-

conceived and beautifully written book gives us a much wider lens through which to navigate these questions. A forgotten history resurrected. Not quite the return of the repressed but a significant contribution to our evolving understanding of Jews and Judaism in modernity.

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