MODERN ISRAEL STUDIES IN EUROPE

Introduction

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When the existence of a European Association of Israel Studies (EAIS) was first publicized a decade ago, many believed that it was merely a front for advocacy and that the discipline was an invented one. The last ten years have borne testimony instead to a profound intellectual endeavor that indicates Israel Studies is an area worthy of academic research. Hundreds of academics from all over Europe—and beyond—now participate in dynamic discourse on a regular basis. Moreover, there has been tremendous support from Israeli academics. Indeed, there is an interesting overlap between Israel Studies in Europe and European Studies in Israel.

The EAIS itself was founded at a meeting of interested academics on a rainy afternoon in November 2009 at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). The mere fact that several dozen academics bothered to attend indicated that there was both an interest and a need for a framework.

Yet while the EAIS is a rather recent innovation, Israel Studies in Europe per se is not. It has been taught under a plethora of labels—Jewish Studies, Middle East Studies, Mediterranean Studies—for decades from one end of Europe to the other. It has been taught in universities and institutions of higher education from Iberia to Siberia.

Historically, the components of contemporary Israel Studies in essence began to be taught in Europe after World War I due to the emergence of the modern Zionist movement and the advent of Modern Hebrew as a spoken language. In one sense, therefore, it was highly appropriate to stage this founding meeting at SOAS because the institution itself actually has a long, if hidden, history of embracing Israel Studies.

The Legacy of the British Mandate

The organization and governance of the British Empire in the late Victorian era required efficient and trained officials. Indeed, there were training courses for Indian Civil Service probationers at Oxford, Cambridge, and University College, London. There were language courses in Hausa and Swahili for colonial service officers at Kings College, London. There was also a growing awareness in government circles in Britain that the training of officials and administrators lagged far behind other European countries.

In 1905, a deputation from the Senate of the University of London met the Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, to urge the formation of a school of oriental studies. An official report subsequently recommended the study of the languages of the Near East, India, China, Japan, and West Africa. The first Lord Cromer, a former Consul-General in Egypt, was charged with implementing it. On 5 June 1916, the School of Oriental Studies received its royal charter as a college of the University of London and the first students were admitted on 18 January 1917.

All this coincided with a series of momentous events: the appointment of David Lloyd-George as prime minister and a general pro-Zionist sympathy within the British cabinet; the British military advance from Egypt to invade Palestine; the February revolution in Russia; the US declaration of war against Germany, and, of course, the Zionist diplomatic push that resulted in the Balfour Declaration in November 1917. But perhaps the most significant outcome of all these events was that Britain now held the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine.

The British presence in Palestine built upon the Anglican tradition of interest in the Holy Land, which went back to the English Reformation in the sixteenth century. Indeed during the reign of James I, Sir Henry Finch published his book *The World's Great Restauration or the Calling of the Jews* in 1621.

The Enthusiasm of the Zionists

By the mid-1920s, the British realized that they now needed an abundance of Hebrew speakers to ensure the efficient governance of Palestine. This was accentuated by the influx of Jews through the third and fourth aliyot. This awareness arose in parallel with the need to satisfy the enthusiasm of many Diaspora Jews, following the Balfour Declaration. The works of Hebrew writers such as Saul Tchernichowsky, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, and Yosef Hayim Brenner, as well as poets such as Hayim Nahman Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg, all became the objects of interest in European institutions.

A strong supporter of Zionism during this period was the son of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, the unconventional James. He understood the importance of teaching Hebrew in an academic institution in London and was supported in this endeavor by the Russian philanthropist, Michael Nassatisin—originally a flax exporter who had supplied linen goods to the Tsar’s army. Relocating to London in the aftermath of the Russian civil war and the triumph of Bolshevism, Nassatisin funded numerous Anglo-Jewish projects relating to the Zionist experiment in Palestine. He was the major shareholder in Pinhas Rutenberg’s Palestine Electric Company, which effected the electrification of the Yishuv, funded Moshe Novomeisky’s Palestine Potash Company, operating at the Dead Sea, and supported the Nesher Cement Company—still in existence today.

At SOAS, the one-year certificate and the two-year diploma included the teaching of Jewish history, religion, and customs; the history and geography of Palestine was taught as well. Modern Hebrew literature occupied an important place in these courses and a number of selected essays from Ahad Ha’am’s *Al Parashat Derakhim*, the works of Mendele Mokher Seforim, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, and I. L. Peretz, as well as selected poems from the works of several Modern Hebrew poets were included. Translations from the works of local writers, Benjamin Disraeli, George Eliot, and Israel Zangwill, into Modern Hebrew were expected from students. The curriculum also included the study of eight chapters of Maimonides on Ethics in Ibn Tibbon’s translation. In addition to Modern Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Rashi, and Aramaic were also taught.

Europe in the Aftermath of Destruction

When Hitler came to power in 1933, Biblical Hebrew for theologians was taught at 15 British universities with Modern Hebrew lagging behind. However, the revelations of the Shoah and its interpretation by British Jews led to an understanding that Zionism now was the major solution to the Jewish problem—it was no longer a minority concern. This, in turn, further promoted the teaching of Modern Hebrew at British universities.

While academic interest in Israel took place under different guises after 1948—and perhaps mainly as a subset of Jewish studies—it was the founding of the Association of Israel Studies (AIS) in the 1980s that specifically focused on Israel Studies. This was a joint venture by Israeli and American academics—several of the latter of whom had lived in Israel. This was a natural evolution in the years after 1945, when the United States and Israel increasingly became the twin poles of Jewish life and scholarly endeavor. The emergence of the United States as a superpower

coincided with the refusal of its rival, the USSR, to permit the running of Jewish studies courses and the study of Hebrew at Soviet universities for primarily ideological reasons. Learning Hebrew was left instead to closed courses for Soviet diplomats and unofficial ones for unemployed refuse-niks waiting for an exit visa for Israel.

Europe, immediately after the Shoah and during the Cold War, was decimated in an intellectual and cultural sense and Jewish life reduced to a hitherto unimaginable minimum in countries that had been occupied by the Nazis. Jewish Studies was initially relegated to a minor position in academia—and for this reason Europe was a comparative latecomer to Israel Studies.

Why, therefore, has there been a deep interest in Israel Studies in more recent times? Perhaps the intractability of the Israel-Palestine conflict has proved absorbing for scholars and fascinating for students. Perhaps the resurrection of anti-Jewish stereotypes in an age of social media has persuaded young people to acquire knowledge. Perhaps the advent of populism and its political mouthpieces has propelled students to seek answers to profound questions.

During the last decade, EAIS conferences have tended to alternate between SOAS and other institutions on the European mainland. These have included Munich, Cagliari, Wrocław, and Prague, though suspended due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Israel Studies Centers have simultaneously opened in different parts of Europe—such as the Herzl Center, which opened in Prague in September 2019. Israel Studies has emerged spontaneously solely due to scholarly interest. In Siberia, there are courses on Israel taught at the universities of Tomsk, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Tyumen, Kemerovo, and Altai in Siberia.

Western and Eastern Europe

Attitudes toward the Middle East tend to differ clearly between Western and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe there is the legacy of colonialism. The political framework of reference for the post-1945 intelligentsia were the national liberation struggles in Vietnam, South Africa, Rhodesia, and a host of other places. It influenced myriad causes and allowed many to identify closely with the Palestinian cause in the 1960s, in alignment with a template understanding of the anti-colonial struggle.

Eastern Europe had neither this burden of colonialism nor a history of subjugating the developing world—and it can be argued that Russia confined its imperialism to its immediate neighbors. If attitudes in Eastern Europe and Russia toward Israel have been defined by the past, it is

a past often defined by discrimination and persecution. Israel Studies has attempted to broaden this perception to include the intellectual riches of the past and the societies that forged them.

Israel Studies as a stand-alone subject is popular in both halves of Europe, but for different reasons. In Poland, there is a shared history between Jews and Poles—and a great enthusiasm for reclaiming this in Polish universities. In Germany, the inheritance of the memory of the atrocities of the twentieth century often transcends the ideological division between Left and Right, and manifests itself in the proliferation of interest in both Jewish and Israel Studies. In Russia, the opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s led to investigations into early Zionist history. Leonid Katsis of the Moscow State University for the Humanities has uncovered many buried articles by Vladimir Jabotinsky, written in fin de siècle Rome and Odessa, and published them in several volumes. In post-Soviet Russia, the Department of Israel and Jewish Studies is an integral part of the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The Global Advance of Israel Studies

While English is the lingua franca of Israel Studies, many scholars often publish works in their own language. For example, Vladimir Rummyantsev at the University of Tomsk in Siberia has published a book in Russian on Suez and its aftermath. In 1991, Charles Enderlin's biography in French of Yitzhak Shamir offered important interviews with former members of Lehi. There are monographs on Herzl and Jabotinsky in Japanese. The books of scholars such as Benny Morris on the Palestinian refugee question have been translated into French, German, Italian, and Spanish. My own *History of Modern Israel* appears to be the first such history to have been translated into Estonian.

Institutions in the United States have been of great support in the blossoming of Israel Studies in Europe. The Israel Institute has generously endorsed all kinds of endeavors outside the borders of the United States while the Summer Institute for Israel Studies at Brandeis University each year has attracted curious academics from every sort of discipline from all over the world. The headquarters of the EAIS moved at the beginning of 2020 from SOAS in London to the Jagiellonian University in Kraków—a return to the heart of Jewish intellectual endeavors before 1939. Israel Studies is undoubtedly flourishing in Europe, but it is part and parcel of a larger phenomenon—deep academic interest in Israel internationally. The seed sown many years ago is in full bloom.

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