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Israel Studies in Europe

Israel Studies is not an innovation at institutions of higher education in Europe. Modern Hebrew and the study of the Holy Land reach back certainly into the nineteenth century. At my own college, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, such academic interest began with the British Foreign Office's desire in 1916 to develop a cadre of experts which would help them understand and indeed control the Middle East. A year later Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild whereby the British promised "a national home for the Jewish people."

The smooth governance of the British Empire required trained administrators who understood the language, history, and culture of the governed. This was true of many other countries as well where it was felt in the depths of their collective soul that imperialism was beneficial for all. From the Belgian Congo to Italian Libya, there was a need for experts to assist in the making of policy and in the training of bureaucrats. The need for speakers of modern Hebrew was no different. Thus, in one sense, the advent of the Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate for Palestine, and the development of the Yishuv brought the precursor of Israel Studies to Western Europe.

Indeed the revival of Hebrew as a spoken and written language in the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe led to the development of a cultural nationalism which mirrored the emergence of the Jews as an ethnic group. After 1917, the British began to understand that the Jews were more than a marginalized religious group, more than the People of the Book. This was something new, connected with but distant from the teaching of Hebrew in departments of theology.

From the 1920s onwards, the espousal of Hebrew was later reflected in the development of courses on Hebrew literature and culture. Writers as Saul Tchernichowsky, Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, and Yosef Hayim Brenner, as well as poets such as Hayim Nahman Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg, became the objects of study in European institutions.

The evolution of the Jews in Eastern Europe into a national group under the influence of both the French Revolution and

the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) gave rise to a plethora of Jewish identities, ranging from the acculturated and assimilated, on one side, to the ultra-orthodox, on the other, who painstakingly rebuilt the ghetto walls. Indeed, with the emergence of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the early nineteenth century, "Jewishness" came to mean more than Judaism. Instead, it could mean all aspects of the millennia of Jewish civilization, including history, culture, literature, and language, as well as religion itself. This in turn led to evaluating the Jewish question. These developments in essence gave birth to modern Jewish studies – as opposed to Judaic studies in an academic context. With the emergence of the modern Zionist movement under Herzl's aegis, the precursors of Israel Studies also began to be taught as a subset of Jewish Studies.

Despite this, Israel Studies is perceived as a comparatively new discipline in Europe. Yet it has been taught under a plethora of labels – Jewish Studies, Middle East Studies, Mediterranean Studies etc. Moreover, it has been taught in universities and institutions of higher education for decades, from Iberia to Siberia. Indeed many different aspects of Israel are taught at the universities of Tomsk, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Tyumen, Kemerovo and Altai in Siberia.

The tortuous and seemingly intractable Israel-Palestine conflict, of course, attracts a wide student audience seeking to find some rational entry into understanding the quagmire. In one sense, students desire to go beyond the slogans and sound bites which permeate and surround the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is the perception that the conflict is not simple and clear cut, but exceedingly complex. In another sense, interest in the study of Israel is also a reaction to the popularity of postcolonial theory with its Foucaultian coloring and the teachings of luminaries such as Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. Outside the classroom, the demonization of Zionism and the satanization of Israel in the public arena, have reached surrealistic levels. Students in an academic environment sense this and wish to make up their own minds on such controversial and vexed subjects, not in the sense of advocacy, but in the sense that there is another narrative which needs to be explored intellectually.

At some institutions in the UK, undergraduate students can obtain a combined degree of which Hebrew and Israel Studies



Colin Shindler at the opening of the EAIS conference in Munich, Bayerische Akademie, 10 September 2012

are merely one component. As part of such four-year programs, many students choose to spend their third year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Master's programs in Israel Studies are also offered whereby students can select courses on language, religion, politics, history, literature, and culture, and write a thesis on a subject for which they have a passion. The Israel-Palestine conflict naturally attracts doctoral students. Recent research topics have included the Wall/Fence/Barrier; the role of the Swedes as facilitators in negotiations between the two sides; the utilization of Israeli law by Israeli Palestinians to secure their rights, and the attitude of British trade unions towards Israel.

Attitudes towards the Middle East tend to differ clearly between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe there is the legacy of colonialism. The framework of reference of the post-1945 intelligentsia was the anticolonial struggle in Vietnam, South Africa, Rhodesia, and a host of other places. It influenced myriad causes, from America's Black Panthers to, more recently, Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela. This allowed the adherents of these movements to identify much more closely with the Palestinian cause in the 1960s, align it within a template understanding of the anticolonial struggle.

Eastern Europe has neither this burden of colonialism nor a history of subjugating the developing world. Russia confined its imperialism to its immediate neighbors. If attitudes in Eastern Europe and Russia towards Israel have been defined by the past, it is a past defined by discrimination and extermination of Jews.

Israel Studies as a stand-alone subject is therefore popular in both halves of Europe, but for different reasons.

In Germany, the inheritance of the memory of the atrocities of the twentieth century is often translated into sympathy. This transcends the ideological division of Left and Right. For example, Joschka Fischer, former foreign minister and leader of the Green Party, often demonstrated his understanding of Israel's dilemmas and choices.

Although English is the lingua franca of Israel Studies, many scholars often publish works in their own language. These publications are comparatively unknown in the English speaking world. For example, Vladimir Rumyantsev at the University of Tomsk in Siberia has published a book in Russian on Suez and its aftermath. Charles Enderlin's 1991 biography of Yitzhak Shamir, written in French, contains important interviews with

many members of the clandestine organization Lehi, which was defined by the British Mandate government as a terror group. In addition, the books of well-known scholars such as Benny Morris have been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish etc.¹ My own "History of Modern Israel" appears to be the first such history to have been translated into Estonian.²

In Western Europe, Israel Studies is soundly established at universities in Britain, France, Germany and Italy. At the first gathering of British scholars in November 2009, approximately 40 academics attended. Since then, national networks have been established in Paris, Milan and Munich. There will be three chairs of Israel Studies in England by next summer, whereas none existed at the beginning of 2008. Heidelberg boasts the only permanent visiting chair of Israel Studies in Germany.

In Eastern Europe, there is a profound interest in Israel studies. In Poland, for example, more than 60 people from 10 Polish universities attended a talk at the University of Warsaw on the work of the European Association of Israel Studies in November 2011. In Rumania, the Research Centre for Israel Studies at the Political Sciences Department of the University of Bucharest was established in October 2012.

In 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. This department, the only one in Russia, employs 15 research fellows, whose fields of interest cover such subjects as Israeli domestic and foreign policies, the Israel-Palestine conflict and more generally the Middle East. With its nine time zones, Russia is definitely unknown territory. Israel Studies is reputedly taught in 30 institutions – from the far East to Nizhni Novgorod to St. Petersburg.

At the moment, there appear to be few people in Spain, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia, and the Baltic states who teach courses dealing with Israel. Yet there is concerted interest in Hungary and Romania. Quite often the presence of a burgeoning program of Israel studies is related to the enthusiasm and determination of an individual.

¹ Benny Morris' most influential work is Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

² Colin Shindler, *A History of Modern Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

All this has necessitated the evolution of the European Association of Israel Studies, an organization devoted to the scholarly study of Israel. Politically neutral, it is not involved in advocacy. Its individual members, of course, have differing and often strong views on issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. Some prefer the solitude of academia and shy away from the public gaze. Others feel a need to fulfill the role of an *intellectual engagé* and to take part in debates and broadcasts in the public arena.

A network of Israel Studies scholars did not originate in Europe. Perhaps this was a legacy of the Shoah. It instead emerged in Israel and North America in the 1980s. The Association of Israel Studies (AIS) held gatherings of academics in the field each year alternatively in Israel and in the United States. Indeed, the 29th annual conference of the Association of Israel Studies will take place at UCLA later this year. In general, European scholars of Israel Studies were few and with little or no contact with their colleagues on the continent. Compared to the hundreds of academics that attended the annual AIS conference, the number of European scholars who participated could usually be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The European Association of Israel Studies held its first academic conference at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, in September 2012. This was attended by scholars from almost 20 countries. The expectation was the submission of about 60 proposals for presentations. Twice as many were submitted, and around 100 were selected for presentation. More than 200 people attended the opening session at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. Moreover, at Munich the vast majority of attendees were young scholars. A doctoral network was being initiated and one for post-doctoral fellows discussed.

In addition, there are European scholars in other disciplines who wish to add the teaching of Israel Studies to their list of expertise. The Summer Institute for Israel Studies at Brandeis University each year attracts academics from all over the world. The course provides a program of discussion and debate, led by leaders in the field, which provides the solid groundwork for future lecturers in this area.

So all in all, there has been a veritable explosion in Israel studies during the last couple of years alone. Moreover the story is far from over. This testifies to the reality that Israel studies is not an artificial creation which serves the megaphone war between Israel and Palestine, but is undoubtedly a genuine and fascinating area of research and discourse.

PHOTO CREDITS
Thomas Hauzenberger,
München.

HEFT 1 • 2013
MÜNCHNER BEITRÄGE
ZUR JÜDISCHEN
GESCHICHTE UND KULTUR