

The Iron Wall Revisited: Utopian Paradigms in Jabotinsky's Conception of Zionism, Circa 1923¹

ABSTRACT

Jabotinsky's two Iron Wall essays of 1923–24 offered solutions to all sorts of problems: conflict with the Arabs of Palestine, refocusing Britain's government on attaining the goals in the Balfour Declaration (at least as Jabotinsky understood them), and energizing the pace of Jewish emigration. Above all, after the violence in 1920 and 1921, Jabotinsky articulated a way to achieve peace. Although the most people perceive the essays as a prediction of the future—only naked violence will work—I believe the essays have their main importance as windows onto Jabotinsky's present and especially on his past, i.e. his political development since the Helsingfors Conference in 1906. This is because Jabotinsky changed, having fashioned himself from a subaltern representative of a small minority in the Russian Empire into a leader of an independent political grouping with specific needs to gain popularity in the present.

Keywords: Israeli politics, Zionism, Vladimir Jabotinsky, European Imperialism, Right-Wing Militarism, Arab-Israeli Conflict

INTRODUCTION

MY GOAL IN THIS ARTICLE IS TO CONTRIBUTE TO AN UNDERSTANDING of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky's ideas, especially those in his famous essay, "On the Iron Wall" (1923).² From my perch as a scholar of Russian intellectual history it is clear that to better understand Jabotinsky it is necessary

to probe his intellectual origins in the Russian Empire and the pre-World War I contexts in which his Zionist views were formulated.³ This will add a telling perspective to a question that has baffled scholars: Was Jabotinsky a liberal or a radical rightist? And underlying that, two more usually tacit concerns: Was he a sympathetic thinker and an estimable contributor to the ongoing Zionist project?⁴

In this study of “On the Iron Wall,” Jabotinsky’s vigorous exposition of his mature ideas, I shall follow the intertwining strands of liberal and illiberal argumentation to the circumstances that led to his dualistic and inconsistent thinking.⁵ More interestingly to me are the sources of his underlying beliefs and the transformation of his prewar ideas to accommodate a new ideology.

My claims are that Jabotinsky’s essay offers a utopian vision of Zionist Palestine and refashions arguments from Russia’s imperial past and Jewish experience under empire, to fit a League of Nations mandated British-ruled Palestine.

Jabotinsky’s vision does not describe reality. It is rather a scenario of what might be if certain conditions are met, “utopian” not in the sense of an unachievable fantasy, but as a projection of a future ideal requiring human navigation, action, and intervention in order to be realized.⁶ While offering a clear exposition of the status of Zionism in Palestine in 1923, Jabotinsky gave specific policy prescriptions: What must be done for Zionism to succeed? In answer, he offered a vigorous defense of a moral and militant Zionism.⁷ This way of thinking about Zionism—acknowledging an “Endziel,” German for “final goal”—became associated with Jabotinsky and his condemnation of those who opposed the espousal of an ultimate objective.⁸

At the same time, his portrayal of Palestine as a political entity governed by a Zionist majority (whether as a sovereign state or as an autonomous member of the British Commonwealth) springs from the historical ideology of Imperial Russia⁹ where Jabotinsky identified what I call third-party colonization: colonization by a major power that transfers political control to a different power. In other words, Palestine might remain under British military supervision, but could be turned over to Jews for political control. We encounter this paradigm often in nineteenth century Imperial Russia and its conquered lands to the north, east, and southwest¹⁰ where the government settled diverse ethnic groups—Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Tatars, and Baltic peoples—rather than ethnic Russians, who were sent in smaller numbers mainly to manage the military and state apparatus. Odessa, for example, was one-third Jewish, and Siberia was inhabited by various peoples transferred there by the state to colonize its mineral-rich lands.¹¹

Nor did Jabotinsky lose sight of the demands for minority rights Jews had envisioned in Russia after the Revolution of 1905. Jabotinsky promised Palestinian Arabs the same rights to a good life under its rule.

In his vision of a successful Zionist colonization project in Palestine, Jabotinsky assigned specific roles to the three main players, the British, the Palestinian Arabs, and the Jews. His paradigm incorporated the positions of Europe before World War II, Britain in World War I, and the Russian Empire, particularly during the 1905 Revolution. Because Jabotinsky adopted many of the ideas he articulates in “On the Iron Wall” for his Revisionist Party program two years later, one may assume that they were adopted by the Zionist right. An analysis of these ideas and their sources will allow us to judge whether he was liberal or conservative, charitable or cruel in attitude and whether he deserves to be labeled realistic, utopian, pragmatic or Quixotic.¹²

“The Iron Wall” actually features in two essays, “O zheleznoi stene” (“On the Iron Wall”) and “Ob etike zheleznoi steny” (“On the Ethics of the Iron Wall”) published a week apart in late November 1923, in the Russian-language Revisionist periodical, *Rassvet*, which had relocated from Saint Petersburg to Berlin and from there to Paris¹³ and which Jabotinsky edited from 1923 until the paper’s demise in 1932.¹⁴

“On the Iron Wall” presents a conception of a Jewish Palestine very different from others circulating at the time. Jabotinsky considered his version of Zionism superior to Constructivist Zionism, favored by socialists who sought legitimacy for Jewish politics in Palestine through successful agricultural labor. Jabotinsky for his part emphasized “colonization” as the goal of Jewish settlement in Palestine, with a majority population of Jews who would govern themselves and secure the right to unlimited Jewish immigration.¹⁵

In the “Iron Wall” articles Jabotinsky takes issue with the Constructivist view that Jewish labor should benefit everyone, insuring that Zionism would ultimately benefit Palestinian Arabs as well.¹⁶ The Constructivist argument, according to him, would never convince Palestinian Arabs that the Jews did not aspire to gain control of the land. But sovereignty or something like it was precisely the goal Jabotinsky claimed, since no native population would ever voluntarily cede power. Since Jews did not have enough money to purchase the land, Jabotinsky announced that the land would have to be acquired by force. In “The Ethics of the Iron Wall,” he writes:

The conclusion: we can compensate neither the Palestinian nor any other Arabs for Palestine. Therefore, voluntary agreement is unthinkable. Thus people who consider an agreement a *conditio sine qua non* can say 'no' and reject Zionism. Our colonization either has to stop or must continue against the will of the indigenous population. And therefore it must continue and develop only by means of a defensive force independent of the local population, an iron wall; meaning violent opposition will not be tolerated."¹⁷

It might be noted here that Jabotinsky's vision of Jewish habitation in the region included not only the West Bank of the Jordan River, but the East Bank and Transjordan as well. He strongly opposed the partition of Palestine and the surrender of the East Bank to King Abdullah of the Hashemite Kingdom.

But how could the Arabs be disarmed if the Jews of Palestine were weak? Jabotinsky looked to Britain, since it had made a solemn commitment to make Palestine the Jewish homeland with the Balfour Declaration.¹⁸ The Iron Wall would consist of British military power. As Jabotinsky understood it, once the Arabs of Palestine realized that they could not stop the Zionists by force, they would resign themselves to a minority status and seek the best deal possible through negotiations. The deal would be a good one, Jabotinsky claimed with pride, as the Jewish victors would be magnanimous. The Arab minority would receive full citizenship and cultural rights, the entire set of rights to which Jabotinsky believed all national minorities were entitled.¹⁹

Jabotinsky's words at the outset of "On the Iron Wall" convey his lack of animus toward the Arabs of Palestine. As he maintains in what he calls his "personal" perspective on a structural conflict:

Contrary to the good rule of beginning an article with the crux of the matter, I begin this one with an introduction, and a personal one too. The author of these lines is considered an enemy of the Arabs, a proponent of driving them out, etc. This is not true. My emotional attitude toward the Arabs is the same as to any other peoples—respectful indifference. My political attitude is dictated by two principles. First, I consider driving the Arabs out of Palestine, in whatever form, absolutely impossible; there will always be two peoples in Palestine. Second, I am proud of belonging to the group that formulated the Helsingfors Program. We formulated it not for the Jews alone but for all peoples, and its basis is the equal rights of nations.²⁰

Two points stand out in this critical introduction: Palestine will always be a nation inhabited by two peoples, albeit one would constitute a majority,

and the other, a minority. However, the minority nation would acquire special cultural and national rights on the basis of the Helsingfors Conference in Russia of 1906.²¹

To understand why Jabotinsky wrote the articles it is necessary to appreciate the political context. In 1923, he was preoccupied by (what he considered to be) a “crisis” in Zionism.²² In his perception Zionism was failing due to local Arab resistance, British fecklessness, and Jewish indifference. For example, the Arab riots of 1920 and 1921 were frightening away potential Jewish immigrants. But that was not the only setback. In 1922, the League of Nations recognized the Transjordan Memorandum that permitted Britain to partition the land, granting the territory east of the Jordan River to King Abdullah for his Hashemite state. Jabotinsky saw this step as an unforgivable blow to Zionism. He had hoped the Jews would secure enough territory to accommodate both Jews and Arabs. But Britain was inclining its policies toward the Arabs, he realized. Jewish immigration had slowed down, and at this rate, the Zionists would never attain a Jewish majority.

To solve the problem, Jabotinsky conceived of what he thought would be a narrative advantageous to the Zionists, assigning more effective roles to the central players: Britain as militarily omnipotent, Jews as morally justified colonizers, friends of Britain, and the Arabs as holders of minority status sweetened with national cultural rights.

Jabotinsky’s impulse to cast Britain in the central role derived from his experience during World War I, as organizer and head of the Jewish Legion which had boosted his faith in British commitment to Zionism.²³

Jabotinsky was fixated on the Jewish Legion at the time because it had brought dignity both to the Jews and to Britain and had liberated Palestine from Turkish rule. This had made him a lifelong admirer of Britain, as evidenced by the hyperbolic statements he made in 1928 in his Russian book, *Story of the Jewish Legion*.²⁴ There he writes, for example, that a “good part of the Balfour Declaration belongs to the Jewish Legion.”²⁵ Elsewhere he is barely more realistic. “I dreamed of a great Jewish Army, no more than five thousand men, yet those five thousand ‘succeeded,’ the Legion played a part, a decisive one, in the history of Zionism. That is my opinion; and as sure as I am that the sun will rise tomorrow I am sure posterity will equally esteem the suffering and sacrifices of the Jewish Legion.” He continues:

England could have liberated Palestine without us; but she liberated it with us, and, moreover, stationed us at one of the most difficult posts. It is not much, nor little, it is as much as it is. The ancient regiment, Royal Fusiliers, whose name our battalions bore during the campaign, was throughout given the right to inscribe on its flag—on which are already inscribed in golden letters, Crimea, India, Sudan, South Africa—a new name: Palestine. And the old British regiment is proud of its achievement. So are Patterson and Margolin, and I.²⁶

In addition to everything else, Jabotinsky was keenly aware that he was credited with the establishment of the Legion; it had helped make him famous. He not only loved the Legion, but raved about its patriotic displays, visible flags, uniforms, and insignias.²⁷ Jabotinsky's portrayal of Britain in "On the Iron Wall" shows how fundamental he considered the Zionist-British alliance to the success of Zionism.

He had several precedents for his conception of Britain as a colonial power and Jews as a client people. One quickly recalls the Uganda Affair in 1903, when Britain offered Zionists a land in Uganda (present-day Kenya) on which to build a Jewish community.²⁸ That would surely be an example of third-party colonization.

The Uganda Affair, as it is known, consisted of Britain's offer and the split in the movement that resulted. Although nearly everyone at the time considered Britain's offer a generous one, especially in response to the Kishinev "massacre" of 1903, many Russian Jews, Jabotinsky included, voted against it. The so-called "Neinsagers" (nay-sayers to colonization in Uganda) felt Eretz Israel was the only possible goal, otherwise their program would not be Zionism but territorialism. Additionally, while some sympathized with the plan of a "Nachtsyl" (shelter for the night)—the term Max Nordau used to describe the purpose of a Jewish community in Uganda—the Neinsagers claimed that the movement was not strong enough to achieve two goals simultaneously. Thus, all efforts had to be concentrated on Eretz Israel.

Present at the World Zionist Congress of 1903 (his first), Jabotinsky wrote about his impressions for *Odesskie Novosti*. In a series of articles about Herzl, Jabotinsky made a prediction that might seem prophetic. He noted at that time that, "History has its own laws, but to us, observing from below, it will seem for a long time to come as a chain of chance events. The same event that gave Herzl East Africa today might give him Palestine tomorrow. Politics is a game of 'chance events' in which the strong and intelligent always have at least a 50 percent chance, if only he wants to win."²⁹ In other words, Britain

offered Uganda in 1903 and showed its commitment to a Jewish political entity yet what would stop it from giving Palestine to the Jews sometime in the future? Of course, Jabotinsky could not have known that the Balfour Declaration was a mere fourteen years in the future.³⁰

Notably, Jabotinsky had other models for his conception of Britain as a colonial power and the Jews as its client people. One was the above-mentioned re-settlement of Jews inside the Russian Empire. Moreover, while Jabotinsky was in Constantinople in 1909 as advisor and editor of Zionist-subsidized newspapers, he appealed to the newly formed Young Turk government with the claim that inviting Sephardic Jews to immigrate to Eretz Israel might yield incalculable advantages. Beyond all else, Jews could form a political wedge of patriotic pro-Turkish support in a region that was exclusively Arab and largely hostile to Turkish rule. As Jabotinsky wrote, “The interests of Zionism completely coincide in this regard with the interests of this part of Ottoman Jewry: the national politics of the Sephardim would clearly be staunchly Turkophilic, and the preservation of political dominance would surely be a leading principle.”³¹ The Young Turks quickly rejected the offer as they did not want to exacerbate the ethnic divisions they feared were growing.

Despite his failure in 1909, in the prewar era, Jabotinsky had clear ideas about Zionist development in Eretz Israel under the umbrella of a major power.³² As with Britain, he argued that Jews could offer many advantages to the Turkish government in exchange for its support of their colonization efforts. In retrospect an Ottoman-Zionist alliance of mutual benefit seems prescient. The basis for such a proposition was likely Herzl’s offer of economic aid to the Ottoman sultan to pay back loans in exchange for the sultan’s support of a Jewish colony in Eretz Israel.³³

Although Jabotinsky understood the need for military force to realize the Zionist project, he looked to universal morals for justification.³⁴ These moral arguments reflect an historical era and are a clear departure from past times when such justifications were generally deemed unnecessary.

While the imposition of international law in the form of a mandate given by an international political body to a superpower to rule a colony was of recent vintage—the British received their mandate to control Palestine from the newly formed League of Nations in 1920—the view that global powers may control territory and encourage colonization goes

back centuries. However, the idea that colonization could serve moral goals was only a few decades old. Here Rudyard Kipling or Theodor Herzl might come to mind. But 1923 was not 1899, when Kipling's poem, "White Man's Burden," was published, or even 1903, when Herzl presented Britain's offer of a piece of land in Uganda to the World Zionist Congress as a means of saving the Jewish people from the violence of pogroms. Both expressed a novel reconceptualization of colonialism as humane and moral and even redemptive.

Morality and social justice came to be regularly invoked as a reason for territorial exploration and acquisition. As individual nations were emerging on land abandoned by former empires, the idea of colonization without the consent of the local population was coming under scrutiny. In fact, the use of violence itself was approached with caution and in some places openly disdained. Throughout Europe, antiwar movements grew. In post-World War I Europe it was becoming rare to hear the argument that force could solve political problems.³⁵ As the only empire to survive World War I intact, Britain saw things differently, but it was measurably less confident about roughriding over the locals. Tellingly, Herbert Samuel, the first British High Commissioner for Palestine endeavored to treat Jews and Arabs both with impartiality.

In this context, Jabotinsky's efforts made sense. A colonizing project with a third-party beneficiary, such as the Jews in Palestine, required a reliable, dutiful, and capable ally. But as morality became more and more important to England's self-portrayal and political legitimacy, an appeal to force needed a different approach.

Jabotinsky justified Zionism in 1923 with an argument I characterize as proportional suffering. In "On the Ethics of the Iron Wall," Jabotinsky acknowledged that every nation would prefer sovereignty, but appealed to people of good will with a question: Is it too much to ask the Arab people, who have thousands of miles of land, to sacrifice a tiny bit to save a people that has nothing?³⁶ In "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," Jabotinsky drew attention to the huge Arab landmass, thousands of square miles with some of the least densely populated countries in the world. As he writes:

There are fifteen million of us in the world; half of them live the life literally of a homeless dog, chased from place to place. There are thirty-eight million Arabs; they occupy Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Tripoli, Egypt, Syria, Arabia and Mesopotamia—a space (not including desert) that is equivalent in size to half of Europe. In general, across that vast territory there are sixteen Arabs per square English mile; by comparison it is useful to remember that in Sicily

there are 352 people per square mile, and in England 669. It is even more useful to remember that Palestine consists of approximately one part of two-hundred parts of this territory. But when homeless Jews call for a homeland in Palestine, this is considered 'immoral' because it inconveniences the natives."³⁷ (Fairly or not, Jabotinsky does not regard the Arabs of Palestine here as a separate nation, but as part of the larger Arab world.)

Jabotinsky's attitude toward Palestinian Arabs differed from Constructivist Zionism apparently intended to enlist local Arabs as collaborators in a joint effort to develop the land—even though early Zionist socialists of the 1920s put national goals before class interests. In contrast, Jabotinsky's point of departure was competition, in which Arabs and Jews alike would strive to become the dominant group in Palestine. But whereas most Mapai leaders conceived of a Jewish state over part of the land, i.e. they planned to share the land, Jabotinsky as we have seen, did not concede either Western Palestine or the East Bank of the Jordan River in Transjordan (present-day Jordan) to an Arab majority. He reiterated that, despite an appearance of hostility, he had no personal animus against Palestine's Arabs, though he was nonetheless convinced that they comprise part of the greater Arab nation spread across many lands, while the Jews do not form a majority anywhere in the world. Since such a situation was inherently unfair, it became a moral imperative for Jews to control Palestine and the surrounding area. Jabotinsky's conception of Palestine's Arabs influenced his conception of Jewish political identity in its broadest sense.

While emphasizing the modesty of Jewish territorial demands in the context of their penury and suffering, Jabotinsky offered compensation to the local Arabs in the form of national cultural, and certain political rights in a Jewish state. By national rights for the Arab minority, Jabotinsky had in mind the set of rights he helped formulate at the Helsingfors Zionist Congress in November 1906 for the Jews of the Russian empire.³⁸ At that meeting (also known as the Third Congress of Russian Zionists), Jabotinsky had insisted on national cultural autonomy for minorities in addition to more general democratic and civil rights for individual citizens in the Russian Empire.³⁹

In "The Ethics of the Iron Wall" he boasts with regard to the Helsingfors Program: "As one of its authors, I am of course less inclined to doubt its fairness. It guarantees both civic equality and national autonomy. I am strongly convinced that any rational judge will admit that it [offers]

an ideal foundation for the peaceful and neighborly cohabitation of two peoples.”⁴⁰

The resolutions at the Helsingfors Conference express the following demands:

The democratization of the state structure on the basis of a consistent parliamentary system, broad political freedoms, autonomy for national regions, and the conferral of rights for national minorities.

Full and unquestionable equality for the Jewish population.

The conferral for the minority of representation in all countrywide, regional, and local elections, carried out by means of a general, equal, direct secret ballot regardless of gender.

The acknowledgment of the Jewish nation in Russia as a single unit with the right to autonomy on the basis of national goals.

A conference of Russia’s Jews for deliberating the foundations of a national organization.

The right to one’s national language in schools, courts, and in public life.

The right to a rest day on Saturday instead of Sunday throughout the country.⁴¹

The context of the Helsingfors Conference belongs to the pre–World War I era, when Jabotinsky was occupied with the minority question in the context of Russian political life because Russia, while remaining a monarchy, leaned toward democracy after the 1905 Revolution.⁴² Moreover, Jabotinsky realized that Russia, a multinational empire, was not a nation-state. Most of its population belonged to different national identities, including Ukrainian, Polish, German, Lithuanian, and Jewish.⁴³ As a Jew and a Zionist, Jabotinsky wanted to promote Jewish national identity in Russia, so he insisted on cultural rights, such as those mentioned above.

Jabotinsky formulated minority rights based on the writings of Dubnov, but also those of Rudolph Springer (a.k.a. Karl Renner), the Austrian Marxist. In his conception minorities would have full national autonomy to develop their character through separate cultural, educational, and legal institutions.

This exposition of minority rights at the Helsingfors Conference inspired further study. In early 1907, Jabotinsky left Russia for Vienna where he spent a year in seclusion occupied with the study of nationalism and minority rights. It made sense to leave Russia after the Revolution of 1905 since it was dangerous to remain; government officials hunted individuals perceived as revolutionaries or even out of step with the forces

pulling the country into political reaction. Several thousand people were summarily hanged with “Stolypin neckties” (nickname for the hangman’s noose).

Jabotinsky’s perspective on minority rights are also well known from his long 1913 article entitled “The Self-Rule of a National Minority,” which appeared in the famous “thick” journal, *Vestnik Evropy* (Messenger of Europe), published in St. Petersburg.⁴⁴ The article was a truncated version of his diploma thesis at the University of Yaroslavl in 1913.⁴⁵ The diploma, equivalent to a Bachelor’s degree today entitled the receiver to greater privileges. Many Jews in Russia earned degrees through distance learning (correspondence courses) at Russian universities as they did not have the right to live outside the Pale for an extended period. Additionally, because regional universities were outside the capital cities, their quota on Jewish students was ten percent allowing more Jews to earn degrees. A Bachelor’s degree afforded Jews a key privilege: the right to live outside the Pale of Settlement and in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In Jabotinsky’s biography his degree at Yaroslavl might be compared with the university degree he had almost attained in Rome in 1900. In his autobiography he describes the courses, teachers, and ideological excitement in Rome, whereas his studies at Yaroslavl were merely a formality, a means for gaining important rights.

In the *Vestnik Evropy* article Jabotinsky examined various conceptions of minority rights, including territorial, national, cultural, civic, political, and juridical rights. He was intrigued by nonterritorial nations in which members had political self-rule even where inhabitants lived scattered and distant from co-nationals. However, he also recognized the need of majorities to dominate politically and set cultural goals to enhance their sense of national and linguistic unity.⁴⁶

Although the original context of his ideas was the multinational Russian Empire, Jabotinsky insisted that his conception of minority rights was independent of geography and could be applied to Arabs in a Jewish-led Palestine under British rule. While the Jews would make up the majority population, the minority Arabs would be showered with advantages of which few others could boast in other states.

To repeat, regarding the minority rights declared at the Helsingfors conference, Jabotinsky’s vision predates World War I.⁴⁷ However, here too Jabotinsky transforms, modernizes, and adapts the framework to his needs; in this case, as a sweetener to entice Palestinian Arabs to accept future Jewish control over Eretz Israel.

One might wonder why Jabotinsky was so pessimistic that the conflict was unresolvable. Of course, he had witnessed the Arab riots of 1920 and 1921 in Palestine. He participated in the defense of Jerusalem in 1920 and was arrested by the British for his actions. However, in "The Ethics of the Iron Wall" he gives a general philosophical answer via his description of a world without morality.

Along with the promise of national rights, Jabotinsky formulated a condition in which all rights would be withdrawn; for example, in the case of attempts to massacre Jews.

Human cohabitation is built on reciprocity; take away reciprocity, and a right will turn into a lie. The person who just walked past my window has a right to live only in so far as he recognizes my own right to live. If he wants to kill me, I do not recognize his right. This pertains to other nations as well. The world would become a furious race otherwise where both the weak and the small among us would perish. We can only survive in a world of mutual responsibility. We must live in a world marked by equality; when death comes, it comes to all equally. There is no ethics which allows the greedy satisfaction while the modest die under a fence.⁴⁸

Who could have imagined that the Arab-Israeli conflict would go on for so long? But we would be wrong to suppose that Jabotinsky predicted an endless conflict; he was referring a hypothetical situation and his judgment concerning it: if someone approaches with the intention of murdering me, I have the right to defend myself and an obligation to condemn an immoral world. Morality entails respect for another's right to live. Without such respect, we would live in a Hobbesian state of nature, unable to trust anyone or maintain a peaceful social fabric.

Since he borrowed building blocks for his political program from past experience, in "On the Iron Wall" it is possible to trace Jabotinsky's intellectual development back to his time in Russia. To understand what he accepted from the past, it is important to note what he rejected. Jabotinsky had an immense repertoire of subjects. He had been a star journalist with over five hundred articles in print. In Rome, he studied law for three years with such serious scholars as Antonio Labriola and Enrico Ferri.⁴⁹ The Zionist program he advocated in 1925 was tied to political alternatives he had explored but ignored. What were these alternatives?

It is worth noting that Jabotinsky criticized imperialism as early as the 1890s.⁵⁰ In an article called “Right and Force” written in 1912 Jabotinsky declared, “It is either one or the other: either thou shalt not steal or else go ahead and steal but only at the most propitious moment.” He goes on to explain, “Honestly, I do not understand why such scruples exist on this beautiful planet. Why do we keep up appearances? Would it not be much simpler to point to our neighbors—to England’s capturing Egypt, Aden, Persia, and Cyprus; to France’s swallowing Algiers, Tunisia and Morocco; not to mention Austria-Hungary, gobbling up Bosnia, and so on, and so forth—and come back with the Italian proverb: ‘*Così fan tutti*’. Everybody does it.”⁵¹

In addition to mocking the avarice of these empires, Jabotinsky wrote with sympathy about the native populations, especially victims of colonial expansion. For example, in 1912 he drew attention to the United States government’s atrocious treatment of Native Americans (the so-called Indians). He began by relating how the U.S. government had broken its promise to deliver critical supplies to the reservations because certain agents had stolen money from the Indians and poisoned them or left them to starve to death. He reported that several members of the Cheyenne tribe had stolen a few horses and in response President Grant had organized a posse that pretended to make peace with them and then “murdered 170 souls, among them women and children.” Jabotinsky wrote that “the corpses of the Indians were scalped and so horribly disfigured that the Indian commission, to their Anglo-Saxon shame, did not dare describe it.”⁵²

Several other examples, drawing attention to the order of 1862, published by the governor of the territory of Arizona, “to annihilate all the men of the Apache tribe and sell into slavery the women and children.”⁵³ Again, in December 1890, Jabotinsky recounted how government forces “acting on a report from the Bureau of Ethnography based on official denunciations, ‘operated’ against another branch of the Sioux, shooting 150 people, women and children, during their escape.”⁵⁴

Jabotinsky condemned the American government and mocked explanations that were surprisingly similar to those he would later use in “On the Iron Wall.” “Yankees,” he wrote,

instead of answering the reproach, simply point to the grandiose renaissance of their fatherland, the forty-story houses, monstrous factories, the prosperity of their working people, the districts where refugees live and one finds livelihood for hundreds of thousands of exiles thrown out of Europe, their wonderful schools, and Edgar Allen Poe and Edison. California’s agriculture

and much else. They laconically add, if we did not take the land by force there would only be prairie grass growing on it. And you cannot say anything back to him because the whole world regards these questions in the same way.⁵⁵

Jabotinsky's sympathy for underdogs may have had its origins in the feeling of kinship between Jews in Russia, victims of pogroms and unfair laws, and other oppressed peoples. I am not the first to detect contradictions in Jabotinsky's writings, although I recognize that the years before the World War I represented another era with a different set of political issues. Moreover, while identifying Jews with victims in general, it probably never occurred to him that the objectionable treatment of Native Americans might one day be compared not with the treatment of the Jews but with that of the Palestinians. For Jabotinsky in the post-World War I era, morality was on the side of the Jews.

These and similar passages demonstrate that in 1923, Jabotinsky made use of the past he needed. It remains to be determined whether he actually changed his opinion of imperialism or viewed it as a necessary evil in order for Zionism to succeed.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

If the "Iron Wall" was an attempt to go backward in time, it was destined to fail. But it was not exclusively backward looking. Rather, Jabotinsky used the ideological paradigms of the past to describe a utopia, a better Palestine than that offered by other political alternatives. Here we might examine "On the Iron Wall" as the ideological backdrop to the political program of Ha-Zohar, the Revisionist party Jabotinsky formed in Paris in 1925.⁵⁶

Calling his party Revisionist Zionism reflected his desire to emphasize Herzl's political approach, in contrast to the policies of the Zionist labor parties (which advocated building up the Yishuv through philanthropy).⁵⁷ The Ha-Zohar program called for private property and investment, the control of both sides of the Jordan River (Western Palestine and Transjordan), a strong military (the Legion principle)⁵⁸ and a state based on the principle of a Jewish majority but granting cultural rights for the Arabs of Palestine. All these ideas found expression in the Iron Wall essays in 1923.

By the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Jabotinsky's political thinking had identified certain problems that needed to be solved, but the one thing he did not expect was Britain's complete turnabout.⁵⁹ He had pinned many hopes on Britain and was loath to give them up until he finally

did in 1938, when British authorities hanged Shlomo Ben-Yosef.⁶⁰ By that point, he had already begun negotiating with Eastern European leaders over the rights of Jews to emigrate from their countries to Palestine. These efforts were strongly opposed by Britain.⁶¹ And still, even when Britain disappointed him, Jabotinsky counseled that Britain was more than its government; that it was made up of people who would ultimately do right by Zionism.⁶²

Nevertheless, the admixture of dependence on Britain for military power and liberal rights for the Arab minority in “On the Iron Wall” did not sit well with many people at the time. Ben-Gurion and the Zionist left sharply criticized Jabotinsky as did his own supporters.⁶³

Notwithstanding the many twists and turns in his life, Jabotinsky never abandoned his inconsistent views about military dominance and liberalism. Even in his final book, *The War and the Jews* (published posthumously in 1942), he underscored his commitment to the Helsingfors program,⁶⁴ and reiterated that for the Arabs of Palestine, giving up the claim to sovereignty was a small price to pay for the creation of one little Jewish state that would grant them full civil and even collective national rights.

Likewise, in the last year of his life (Jabotinsky died in 1940), he considered the possibility of a population transfer. Like others, he had become discouraged after the Arab violence of 1929 and then 1936–38, but historians who have studied Jabotinsky’s thoughts on population transfer conclude that ultimately he rejected the idea.⁶⁵

Despite the fact that The Iron Wall is perhaps one of the best-known aspects of Jabotinsky’s legacy, he did not see himself as cruel or immoral. He was proud that his conception of minority rights was based on a generous liberal program and maintained that it would secure long-term peaceful relations with the Arab minority. Uncompromising commitment to military dominance, sweetened with liberalism, would, he believed, bring peace.

It is intriguing that Jabotinsky was silent about his earlier, pre-World War I views and experiences of colonialism, imperialism, and the sufferings of native peoples. Jabotinsky did not draw special attention to his earlier works, but he did not repudiate them either.

Jabotinsky was a liberal critic of liberalism, an assessment that is as true today as it was then. His statement that only those who respect our right to live deserve our respect for their right to live resonates eerily today. He did not expect an endless conflict in Palestine, but he was realistic enough to imagine it. His idealism allowed him to declare that the Jewish state would be a fine place for the Arabs to develop their own culture while retaining full citizenship; such had been the hope of the Jews in Russia at the Helsingfors Conference. There is much to admire in the Iron Wall

program, but whether it actually works is another question: walls may crumble, iron rusts, and hate grows apace.

The intellectual origins of Jabotinsky's Iron Wall derive at least in part from his experience in Russia and the Helsingfors program was formulated in its political context. The proposal for a third-party colonization of Palestine likewise has roots in Jabotinsky's experience in Russia, which often lacked a large enough population to colonize its conquered lands. As a practical matter, an imperial power may take military control of a country yet turn over its actual governing to capable and ambitious immigrants, consigning so-called natives to a secondary, or tertiary, status. As implied, Jabotinsky based his conception of legitimacy for a Jewish controlled Eretz Israel less on the Bible than on national longings and moral principles.⁶⁶

Although Jews did get their state in Palestine, Jabotinsky's vision did not anticipate the tangle of historical forces that would enable that to happen. However, while Jabotinsky did predict Palestinian violence, he also envisioned an end to that violence at some point. When the Arabs realized they could not win, he believed, they would be forced to negotiate and would then be surprised to discover the magnanimity of the Jews.

This essay shows that critics on the right and left are justified in picking bones with Jabotinsky. He does not satisfy either side. His vision is idiosyncratic and involves a return to the values of the age of imperialism, albeit with the sincere aim of establishing a moral and socially just society. Jabotinsky modifies, idealizes, and ideologizes colonialism in a postcolonial epoch by styling the Jews as suffering victims, underdogs, and thus, morally righteous. He could not have predicted the Holocaust (and he didn't), but until Israel's victory in 1967, its people were indeed viewed worldwide as the victims of Nazism. The situation has changed so much since 1923 that we would do well not to view the Iron-Wall essay as anything but a document of historical value—and certainly not as predictive.⁶⁷

NOTES

1. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their acute comments. They helped me improve the paper. I want to thank Arie Saposnik for his contribution. All errors of fact and judgement belong to the author.

2. The essay is also referred to in English as "The Iron Wall." See en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf; accessed December 15, 2023. I have become aware of the vagaries in translations of this essay which appeared in a number of languages and with Jabotinsky's own sanction. An excellent study of the differences

in tonality and ideas could be done according to the model of Peter Kriksunov's wonderful introduction to his translation of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, *Shimshon*, (Jerusalem, 2007). I have relied here on the original first Russian publication as my source. A study of the changes in meaning through translation is not the object of this paper, but this tantalizing topic awaits a talented historian.

3. My research treats issues of empire, subalterns, and colonization and has a model in Dimitry Shumsky's book, *Between Prague and Jerusalem: Prague Zionism and the Bi-National State Idea* (Jerusalem: Zalmon Shazar, 2010) [In Hebrew] and in the work of Arie Dubnov, "On Vertical Alliances. 'Perfidious Albion,' and the Security Paradigm Reflections on the Balfour Declaration Centennial and the Winding Road to Israeli Independence," *European Judaism*, 52: 1 (Spring 2019): 68–110.

4. There is a large secondary literature on this question. For a summary of the arguments, see Israel Kolatt, "Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Place in the National Pantheon," *A Man in the Storm: Essays In the Study of Ze'ev Jabotinsky*, (Beer Sheva, 2004), 7–24 [in Hebrew].

5. "The Iron Wall" is often referenced in books and articles critical of Jabotinsky. There is a critical book about Israel with that title, Avi Shlaim's *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014). A discussion of the secondary literature on Jabotinsky both positive and negative can be found in Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin De Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (Berkeley, 2001), xiv.

6. Merriam-Webster defines utopia as "a place of ideal perfection in laws, government and social conditions." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia> (downloaded on December 8, 2023).

7. For a fine introduction to the various types of Zionism see: Scott Ury, "Zionism and Zionist Parties," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2 vols., ed. Gershon David Hundert (New Haven, 2008), 2: 2125–32.

8. The famous scene took place at the 1931 Zionist Congress: Jabotinsky might have been elected president there, but instead, tore up his membership card over the recognition of the "final goal" of Zionism. See Yechiam Weitz, "The Revisionist Movement and Democracy," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 10/2 (2011): 191.

9. Whether Jabotinsky favored a state or some other form of political governance with less than full sovereignty is the object of debate. See Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion* (New Haven, 2018), 124–171.

10. Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

11. *Ibid.*, 123–149.

12. The literature on Jabotinsky's thought is vast and includes works by Joseph Heller, Yaacov Shavit, Arye Naor, Shmuel Katz, and Joseph Schechtman.

13. "On the Iron Wall (The Arabs and Us)," *Rassvet*, 42/43 (1923): 2–4; "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," *Rassvet* 44/45 (1923): 2–4. [Russian]

14. *Rassvet* was a journal dominated by émigrés from the former tsarist empire, dedicated to Zionism and more generally to European cultural life. For more

on *Rassvet*, see the dissertation of Anna Balestrieri, “Russian Jewish Press in the Emigration: The Case of *Rassvet*, Berlin-Paris 1922–1934,” PhD diss., (Hebrew University, 2023)

15. Vladimir Jabotinsky, “Majority” *Rassvet*, 38–9 (October 21, 1923): 3. [Russian] Jabotinsky discussed statehood at length in many articles during these years and arrived at the conclusion that a state is less important or has no meaning without a majority population. The reasons for this claim have much to do with democracy and Jabotinsky’s concern with moral legitimacy.

16. Yehuda Slutzky, *Introduction to the History of the Israeli Labor Movement* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 156. [Hebrew]

17. Jabotinsky, “The Ethics of the Iron Wall,” 3. [Russian].

18. See an ingenious study about Zionism and Britain through the lens of Jabotinsky’s claims by Arie Dubnov: “On Vertical Alliances, ‘Perfidious Albion’ and the Security Paradigm: Reflections on the Balfour Declaration Centennial and the Winding Road to Israeli Independence,” *European Judaism*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 67–110.

19. Dimitry Shumsky discusses the meaning of rights in his essay, “‘The Iron Wall’ Is Not Supposed to Reach This Far,” *Haaretz* (November 3, 2018). [in Hebrew]

20. Jabotinsky, “On the Iron Wall,” 3. [Russian]

21. Yitzhak Maor, *The Zionist Movement in Russia* (Tel Aviv, 1977), 240–1. [Russian]

22. Vladimir Jabotinsky, “‘The Black Guest’ (From A Speech Given At the Opening Conference of the Revisionist Zionists),” *Rassvet* 18 (May 3, 1925): 4. [Russian]

23. Dubnov’s *Letters on Old and New Judaism*, his manifesto about Jewish nationalism, minority cultural and national rights appeared in book form in 1907, but serialized earlier, beginning in 1897.

24. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Story of the Jewish Legion* (Paris, 1928), 2nd ed. trans. Shmuel Katz (New York: B. Ackerman, 1945). There is a considerable literature about the Jewish Legion. See the bibliography in Michael Keren and Shlomit Keren, *We Are Coming Unafraid: The Jewish Legion and the Promised Land in the First World War* (Lanham, MD, 2010).

25. Jabotinsky, *Story of the Jewish Legion*, 181–82.

26. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Story of the Jewish Legion* 2nd ed. (New York, 1945), 104. Colonel Patterson was the Legion’s commander and Eliezer Margolin was an officer.

27. Daniel Heller, *Jabotinsky’s Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton, 2017), 29.

28. Arie Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (Oxford, 2008), 41–64.

29. Vladimir Jabotinsky, “Impressions of Basel: Herzl and the Neinsagers,” *Odessa’s News* (August 23, 1903): 399. [Russian]

30. Michael Joseph Cohen, *Churchill and the Jews* (New York: F. Cass, 1985), 11–47.

31. Vladimir Jabotinsky, "The Sephardic Political Role," *Rassvet* 10 (March 8, 1909): 4. [Russian]
32. Dubnov, "On Vertical Alliances," 76–8.
33. Yoram Mayorek, "Herzl and the Ottoman Empire," *Studies in the East Mediterranean and Turkish-Iranian World* 28 (1999): 13–14. [French]
34. In his article, "State Patriotism and Jewish Nationalism in the Late Russian Empire: The Case of Vladimir Jabotinsky's Journalist Writing on the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905," Dimitry Shumsky describes Jabotinsky's criticism of individuals and groups who dismiss morality due to their hostility toward Japan in the war. See *Nationalities Papers*, 47: 5 (2019): 872.
35. On pacifism in Europe after World War I, see Telford Taylor, *Munich, The Price of Peace* (New York, 1979) and many other sources.
36. Jabotinsky, "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," 4. [Russian]
37. Ibid. Jabotinsky would use this argument many times in the future, most notably in his speech before the Peel Commission. See: "Evidence Submitted to the Palestine Royal Commission (1937)," in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York, 1984), 561–2.
38. See Jabotinsky's remarks about the conference in his autobiography. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Story of My Life*, ed. L. Katsis & B. Horowitz (Detroit, 2016), 86–92.
39. To understand Jabotinsky at Helsingfors and the program he helped formulate there, one has to know the context in the year preceding it. See Dimitry Shumsky, "State Patriotism and Jewish Nationalism in the Late Russian Empire: The Case of Vladimir Jabotinsky's Journalist Writing on the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905," *Nationalities Papers*, 47: 5 (2019): 868–78.
40. Jabotinsky, "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," 2. [Russian]
41. Maor, *The Zionist Movement in Russia*, 240–241. [Russian]
42. Brian Horowitz, *Vladimir Jabotinsky's Russian Years, 1900–1925* (Bloomington, 2020), 52–77. On the influence of the Revolution of 1905 on Jewish politics in the Russian Empire, see: Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Jews of Warsaw* (Palo Alto, 2012).
43. Vladimir Jabotinsky, "Four Articles on the Chirikov Incident," *Feuilletons* (St. Petersburg, 1913): 71–100. [Russian]
44. Vladimir Jabotinsky, "Self-Rule Of A National Minority," *Messenger of Europe* 9 (Sept. 1913): 117–138; 10 (October 1913): 131–58. [Russian]
45. Horowitz, *Vladimir Jabotinsky's*, 80.
46. Jabotinsky, "Self-Rule," 9 (1913): 125. [Russian]
47. Yossi Goldstein, *Between Political Zionism and Practical Zionism: The Zionist Movement in Russia* (Jerusalem, 1991), 112. [in Hebrew]
48. Jabotinsky, "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," 3. [Russian]
49. Jabotinsky, *Story of My Life*, 50. Antonio Labriola, Italian philosopher, 1843–1904; Enrico Ferri, Italian Criminologist, 1856–1929.
50. See for example, his article, "Rim, *Odessa's Sheet* 13 (March 1899): 2. [Russian]
51. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Feuilletons* St. Petersburg, 1912), 138. [Russian]

52. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Feuilletons*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, S. D. Zal'tsman, 1923), 131–2. [Russian]
53. *Ibid.*, 133.
54. *Ibid.*, 134.
55. *Ibid.*, 135.
56. Yehuda Benari & Joseph Schechtman, *History of the Revisionist Movement, 1925–1930* (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1970), 33–35. Yaacov Shavit, *The Majority of the State: The Revisionist Movement: The Plan of Settlement and the Social Idea, 1925–1935* (Tel Aviv, 1978), 16. [in Hebrew]
57. Zvi Even-Shoshan, *The History of the Workers' Movement in the Land of Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1963), 415–16. [in Hebrew]
58. Benari & Schechtman, 40–3.
59. Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat from the Mandate: The Making of British Policy, 1936–45* (New York, 1978), 10–6.
60. Amir Goldstein and Efi Huri, “The ‘Fires of Destruction’, Warsaw, August 1938? on the Posthumous Invention of Jabotinsky’s Well-known Annihilation Prophecy,” *Holocaust Studies* 10 (2023): 5.
61. Laurence Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience: The New Zionist Organization and the Polish Government, 1936–1939* (Boulder, CO., 1993), 84.
62. Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, New York, 1972, 365.
63. On criticism from the left, see Shavit, 15–17; for criticism from the right see, Horowitz, *Vladimir Jabotinsky*, 176–7.
64. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The War and the Jew* (New York: The Dial Press, 1942), 212.
65. Gil S. Rubin, “Vladimir Jabotinsky and Population Transfers Between Eastern Europe and Palestine,” *The Historical Journal*, 62/2 (2019): 495–517.
66. Early in his career, Jabotinsky conceived of Zionist political legitimacy by invoking Ahad Ha’am’s idea that Eretz Israel had provided the location for the formation of the Jewish people, but he seems to have moved away from that and adopted a conception based on nationalism—land, language, a people’s connection to a land. He never relied on God or religion as the exclusive or primary principle.
67. See Dimitry Shumsky’s “The Iron Wall,” in which the author discusses Bibi Netanyahu’s repudiation of Jabotinsky’s ideas, “The Iron Wall,” 2. [in Hebrew].

BRIAN (YOSSI) HOROWITZ holds the Sizeler Family Chair and is full professor of Jewish Studies at Tulane University. He is the author of six books that include, *Vladimir Jabotinsky’s Russian Years* (2020); *Russian Idea-Jewish Presence* (2013); *Empire Jews* (2009) and *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late-Tsarist Russia* (2009). In an earlier time, he was a scholar of the poet, Alexander Pushkin. In recent days he has published in popular newspapers, such as the *Jerusalem Post*, *Times of Israel*, *Mosaic*, and *Jewish Review of Books*.