CHAPTER 6
History Erased by the Victors: Israeli Academic and Popular Historiography on the Jewish Labour Movement

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History, as the commonplace goes, is written by the victors.¹ Two forces struggled for the hearts and minds of secular East European Jews in the early twentieth century: nationalism and socialism. The Zionist movement and the Jewish Labour Bund – the foremost party of the Jewish Labour Movement – were both founded one hundred and twenty years ago this year, in 1897. For the following half century, the story of the two movements was mostly one of competition and antagonism. Until the Holocaust and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel, mass support was not clearly greater for one side or the other, certainly not in Eastern Europe, where the largest number of Jews resided.² The struggle between Jewish nationalism and socialism was eventually determined by historical factors that were much more powerful than each of the two movements: only one side survived the upheavals of the Second World War. Zionism not only achieved its political goal—the creation of a Jewish nation-state in the historical homeland—but also succeeded in shaping Jewish consciousness and memory for subsequent generations. This article considers the role that the once massive Jewish Labour Movement plays in the Zionist historical narrative.

The Jewish Labour Bund was founded in Vilna, then part of the Czarist Empire, in 1897. During its existence as a mass party in Russia and later Poland, from 1897 to the Second World War, the Bund developed a particular understanding of Jewish national identity – or in fact, Eastern European Jewish national identity – not in terms of religion, territory or ethnicity but of Yiddish secular culture. The Bund was deeply committed to universal humanist values

¹ Parts of this article have been previously published as “Nationalizing the Bund? Zionist Historiography and the Jewish Labour Movement,” East European Jewish Affairs 43:3 (December 2013): 249–64.
² It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide detailed evidence about the relative strength of the two movements. It suffices to say that none of the two political tendencies had absolute hegemony over Jewish politics.
and to socialist politics. As an integral part of the socialist movement in the Czarist Russia, it consistently chose to support internationalism over national solidarity; for instance, Bundists made substantial efforts to collaborate and find political common ground with proletarian groups of other nationalities while rejecting any alliance with bourgeois, nationalist or religious organizations, Jewish or not. While proudly defending the interests of Jewish workers and promoting “national” Yiddish culture, Bundists rejected nationalism in all its forms, including Jewish nationalism.³

Bundists’ condemnation of nationalism in general and Zionism in particular was therefore principled and consistent. Bundists rejected the very idea that nation states are a desirable form of political organization. In the interwar period, for instance, they strongly opposed the transformation of Poland into a nation state that served and represented ethnic Poles but discriminated against the other third of its (non-Polish) citizens. Most important, they did not strive for a Jewish nation state either. In return, mainstream Zionism (though certainly not all Zionists) was equally hostile to Bundism, especially to those of its principles and ideals contrary to Zionism: Yiddish culture, the affirmation of Jewish life in the diaspora, and the rejection of the idea that Jews worldwide constitute a single nation. In early Zionist historiography, this hostility resulted in a widespread neglect of the study of the Bund, or at times a minimization of its historical role in Eastern Europe before the Second World War, an attitude that partially changed since the 1970s, with the publication of several scholarly works on the Bund by important Israeli historians.⁴

This article examines the academic historiography on the Bund produced in Israel or by Israeli historians. It explores how Israeli scholars have interpreted the Bund’s ideas and influence and shows how some of them have endeavored to incorporate the Yiddish-speaking labor movement in Eastern Europe into a coherent, Zionist narrative of the Jewish past. I argue that, as a result of ideological and methodological preconceptions, and with the goal of assimilating

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