



## The Road to September 1939: Polish Jews, Zionists, and the Yishuv on the Eve of World War II

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***The Road to September 1939: Polish Jews, Zionists,  
and the Yishuv on the Eve of World War II***

by Yaacov Shavit and Jehuda Reinharz

translated by Michal Sapir

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The authors of this study are Jehuda Reinharz, Richard Koret Professor of Modern Jewish History at Brandeis University, and Yaacov Shavit, professor emeritus at the Department of Jewish History, Tel Aviv University. They have previously co-authored two books: *Darwin and His Circle* (2009) and *Glorious Accursed Europe: An Essay on Jewish Ambivalence* (2010). They and their translator, Michal Sapir, are to be commended for delivering a very absorbing account of one of the most fateful periods in modern history. Their book is a compendium of Jewish reactions to the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933 and to what followed, right up to the invasion of Poland that precipitated World War II in September 1939. It contains a treasure trove of information about this critical period in terms of the contemporaneous understanding and interpretations of some of the most important figures in modern Jewish history. The book is, in part, an answer to the question: Who among the great Jewish leaders “got it right” with respect to Hitler and the Nazis? Who foresaw the catastrophe and who did not?

As it turns out, David Ben-Gurion, who went on to become Israel’s first prime minister, demonstrated considerable, laudable early insight into Hitler and Nazism:

In August 1933, on his way from the eighteenth Zionist Congress in Prague, at Munich’s train station, Ben-Gurion bought *Mein Kampf* ... [and] was horrified by what he read ... [A]bout six months later ... Ben-Gurion said at a Histadrut Convention: “Hitler’s rule puts the entire Jewish people in danger ... .Who knows, perhaps only four or five years (if not less) stand between us and that terrible day ... (p. 106).

On the other hand, Chaim Weizmann, who is best known as Israel’s first president, seemed so struck with the crudity, and as he put it, “comi-manic” and “pseudo-scientific generalizations” of Hitler’s work, that he feared that the future German dictator might be taken less seriously than he ought to be (by British readers of the *Times*, which happened to be serializing *Mein Kampf* in 1933). As the authors write: “The book filled [Weizmann] with deep concern” (p. 107).

Upon reading *Mein Kampf*, Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, among the major Zionist leaders, appears to have grossly underestimated Hitler. The authors cite several of Jabotinsky's opinions, including:

[*Mein Kampf* was] simple, lacking talent, naïve [with] pedestrian ideas ... [Hitler] does not have one percent of Mussolini. He has no talent for governing and he does not understand what is going on around him ... [The] book was long and mostly boring and Hitler himself had no charisma ... Germany will not be able to achieve economic autarchy, will not be able to arm itself stealthily, and its army is no more than a large and strong police force (p. 108).

As the authors point out, this did not mean that Jabotinsky saw *Mein Kampf* as "good news" for the Jews of Germany, but it was still an astonishing misreading of Hitler and his woeful potential for evildoing.

Though Jabotinsky repeatedly and forcefully raised questions about the viability of Jewish life in East Central Europe, arguing that Jews were sitting on the base of a volcano and should evacuate, with respect to the Nazis he was consistently a very poor prophet. In May 1939, with a world war only about three months away, Jabotinsky was saying publicly that Poland's opposition to all of Hitler's new territorial demands demonstrated to the world that the "[Nazi] fist was not full of power, but full of air." At about the same time, Jabotinsky was also quoted as saying: "I do not believe in the possibility of war. The war jitters will disappear in two or three months" (p. 108).

To be sure, prophecy is a hazardous business, and those lucky enough to forecast one thing accurately may well stumble over another. And so, we find Ben-Gurion "in moments of optimism ... [pinning] his hopes on Britain, which he described as the most reliable supporter of the Jewish people and Zionism ... in the world" (pp. 92–93). As for possible unfavorable changes in British policy, Ben-Gurion was of the opinion that the British did not panic or "change their tune every day" (p. 93). Unfortunately, much of British behavior after the outbreak of the war was clearly reminiscent of that old phrase "with friends like these ..."

Winston Churchill opposed the Chamberlain White Paper of May 17, 1939, in a speech in the House of Commons on May 23 with what could be described as almost religious fervor. However, when Churchill became prime minister, and for the balance of World War II, his attitude toward Jewish refuge and rescue was abysmal. Specifically, with respect to sheltering Jews in Palestine, the record of his administration was actually far worse than the formula of the Chamberlain White Paper. His government publicly announced on December 17, 1942, that it knew precisely what the Nazi German policy toward the Jewish people was —total annihilation. Churchill was also the man who appointed Lord Moyne, his

close personal friend, minister for the Middle East, and was the individual constitutionally responsible for the tragedy of the refugee ship *Struma* in early 1942. If ever there were a case of betrayal, this would certainly qualify.

Among important themes discussed by Reinharz and Shavit is the case of Polish–Jewish cooperation with respect to a potential resettlement of Polish Jews in Palestine, and the training of Zionist volunteers in the military arts by the Polish army. The authors here invoke both the title and theme of a 1993 work on the subject, *A Marriage of Convenience*, an extended illustration of the adage that converging political interests can, and sometimes do, produce “odd bedfellows” in terms of political alliances.<sup>1</sup>

Zionism revived the aspiration for a renewal of Jewish statehood in its ancient home through the League of Nations’ mandate in Palestine. In Poland, where Jews had been domiciled for many centuries, the forces of renascent Polish nationalism in the 1920s and ’30s viewed the Jewish population as an obstacle to the socioeconomic development of Poland by, and for the benefit of, its ethnic Polish majority. Even if not universally so, in the late 1930s, the idea of getting rid of the Jews was widely popular in Poland, particularly on the political right, and especially among the ruling so-called Camp of National Unity (OZN). It was this that lay at the core of the relationship between Jabotinsky’s New Zionist Organization and the Polish government.

Jews engaged in various economic activities were seen as competitors to ethnic Poles, and all manner of popular antisemitic prejudices rendered their situation on the eve of World War II extremely difficult and even precarious. That is precisely what brought ardent Zionists and Polish antisemites to a potential “deal.” If Britain had been willing to open the doors, many Polish Jews could presumably have escaped the discrimination, persecution, and marginalization they faced at home, while Poland could have reduced its Jewish population.

However, there were complications. Britain was actually closing the doors to Palestine with its 1939 White Paper, and Poland, threatened by Hitler’s Germany, was dependent on its British ally. There were also some basic questions about the absorptive capacities of Palestine and the realistic disposition toward emigration among the masses of Polish Jews.

The last part of the book deals largely with Jewish experiences and responses coincident with Poland’s rapid defeat in the so-called September Campaign of 1939, and features many interesting and little-known vignettes. It also includes an undocumented assertion that “Nazi Germany used terror attacks to encourage Jews to flee into Soviet territory [presumably after September 17, 1939] and in some cases even supplied them with freight cars” (p. 329). Much of the Jewish west-to-east exodus was voluntary and reasonably anticipatory.

There are some inconsistencies in this account, such as, for example, the claim on page 329 that “between 400,000 and 500,000 Jews were pushed out to the Soviet Union ...” when further on, the authors maintain that “250,000 Jews managed to flee to the Soviet occupied territory.”

One could also take exception to the authors’ epilogue: “No one could have known that on September 1 war would break out, much less imagine that Poland—which many saw as a strong European country—would collapse in a matter of weeks” (p. 351). Such a view might have been held by poorly informed observers or those with superficial knowledge. Unfortunately, that included, at least on this point, Jabotinsky, alongside quite a few such observers at that time in many parts of the world. Hitler had violated the 1938 Munich Agreement when his army occupied what remained of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. He was now making new territorial demands on Poland. Britain and France were rushing security guarantees to the Poles. In August 1939, Hitler concluded his ominous pact with Stalin. There was clearly a lot of menacing behavior there.

As for Polish power vis-à-vis that of Nazi Germany, we may recall the words of British military historian Cyril Falls, who wrote that “it is hard to recall any campaign in which the odds against the weaker belligerent were so heavy. Position, strength, armament, air support, numbers—in all these the Poles were hopelessly outmatched.”<sup>2</sup> The relative sizes of the populations as well as their levels of economic and technological development, in addition to the fact that Poland’s topography was ill suited to mounting a defensive campaign, all added to the precariousness of the defenders’ position. The country is basically a vast plain with no place to hide. Moreover, it did not enjoy the support of any great power with which it shared a common border. All this suggested great advantage for Nazi Germany. What was notable was the utter failure of France and Britain to deliver on their promises to the Poles to undertake military action in the west. This failure afforded Hitler a much easier and more spectacular victory than he might have otherwise enjoyed, and, ironically, made his great victories against France and Britain in 1940 much easier to achieve.

Stronger at the beginning and weaker at its end, this book is still a compelling, valuable contribution to the literature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience: The New Zionist Organization and the Polish Government 1956–1959* (New York, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Cyril Falls, *The Second World War, A Short History*, Second Edition (London, 1948), p. 14.