In 1943, between June 6 and August 1, as the dimensions of the “Final Solution of the Jewish question” in Europe began to seep into the consciousness of the Jewish public in Palestine, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem arranged a series of twelve public lectures to deal with the historical impact of the annihilation of European Jewry and its major centers. Ben Zion Dinur delivered the inaugural lecture, and unquestionably the most important of the twelve talks, under the title “Galuyot v’Hurbanan”—“The Centers of Jewish Diaspora and their Destruction.” Dinur was then considered one of the preeminent figures in the field of Jewish history. A founder of the Israel Historical Society and of Zion, the most important journal for the study of Jewish history, he would become the first chairman of Yad Vashem and Israel’s Minister of Education.

Dinur began his lecture (which was subsequently published with many scholarly footnotes) with a quasi-paradoxical statement: We cannot at this time, he wrote, delve deeply into and investigate “the great disaster which in terms of its dimensions and atrocities is unexampled even in our blood-drenched chronicles of the past two thousand years.” To cope with the event that he is unable to confront directly, Dinur invokes the metaphors of an abyss that threatens to swallow the observer, or of flames of a great conflagration that engulfs the centers of Jewish Diaspora and force the historian to turn away. “However,” he adds, “if we have not the mental fortitude to gaze...”
directly into the abyss before us, we still have the possibility to look more clearly into the dark vistas behind us … Generations of past worlds of exile and destruction have suddenly been illuminated by the blinding light of the fires of the Diaspora which burn before our eyes.” Yet, it is not only the illumination of the historical past but, paradoxically, or closing a circle, the shining historical past, that “contains a reflecting light that illuminates the dark abyss we now confront.” Dinur goes on to develop an impressive historical construct that encompasses two millennia of Jewish Diaspora and a chain of destruction of all the “centers of exile,” nearly always at the peak of their flowering.4

Dinur’s basic thesis was that the very flourishing—culturally, economically, or otherwise—of every Jewish center in the Diaspora, bore within it the seeds of its destruction. He would ground the thesis and its conclusions at the end of the article. The body of the article, as noted, presents a sweeping historical construct. It opens with a description of the rise and destruction of the Jewish communities in the Hellenistic cities, particularly that of Alexandria in the lifetime of the great Jewish philosopher Philo, and goes on to recount the destruction of about a thousand Jewish communities in the Byzantine empire of the ninth century and the annihilation of the great Jewish centers in Babylon and Persia. The arena now shifts to the Jewish centers in Europe, where the same pattern is found in the expulsion of the Jews from England in the twelfth century and from France in the thirteenth century; the horrific devastation wrought upon the flourishing communities of Central Europe in the mid-fourteenth century during the “Black Death” and the expulsion of the magnificent Jewish community of Spain at the close of the Middle Ages in the late fifteenth century. At the conclusion of his historical survey, Dinur describes the crises and upheavals in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe as the background to the “great disaster” (ha-shoah hagdolah).

---

3 Ibid., p. 47.
4 Here he takes clear issue with the view of the well-known Jewish historian of the time, Shimon Dubnov, who put forward Jewish national autonomist views. According to Dubnov, the historical process of the rise and fall of the Diaspora centers was bound up with the “shifting of the centers” and not, as Dinur would have it, with their destruction. See the introduction to Dubnov’s Weltgeschichte des Jüdischen Volkes, Berlin 1925-1929.
At the end of the article, Dinur reiterates his basic belief that the flowering of the Diaspora centers contained the seed of their destruction, or, as he put it, “Destruction is merely the shadow of the exile.”\(^5\) Jewish existence in all parts of the Diaspora is likened to a house consisting of walls and a roof but lacking foundations in the earth. Hence, every wind, every outside shock, will leave it in ruins. It can be inferred, then, that the building of foundations on a ground that will remain stable is possible only in the Land of Israel. The conclusion is Dinur’s declaration of his credo of a secular, political messianism of “Aliya bachoma”—“storming the battlements.” This message is intended to defy those who abide by the halakhah (the Jewish traditional law) and prohibit attempts to revive Jewish national and political existence before the advent of the Messiah. Dinur bespeaks the unity of the Jewish people and the ingathering of the nation in its historic homeland. The annulment of the historic halakhic prohibition against “storming the battlements” is also, Dinur maintains, one consequence of the destruction of the Diaspora.

There is no doubt that this bold, towering construct of the course of Jewish history through 2000 years of exile, erected in the light of the great conflagration that consumed the centers of exile in Europe, was written in a radical Zionist spirit. It is indeed a fusion of ideology and historiography at the most sensitive and painful point, the beginning of the attempt in the Land of Israel to cope with what today is known as ha-Shoah or the Holocaust.\(^6\)

Clearly, it is not very difficult to undermine and shatter various specific elements of the great construction, and indeed to call into question the basis of Dinur’s beliefs. This, however, can also be said of bold, towering historical constructs such as those propounded by Marx or Hegel. Yet even though it would not take much today to undermine or shatter various elements of their doctrines, or even to call into question their central theses, they remain historical constructs of visionary force which constantly intrigue students of historical

\(^6\) Dinur’s coinage of the term “ha-shoah hagdolah” and “shoah” in this paper and its printed version in 1943 is probably the first time it appears in historiography comprehending its full historical dimension.
thought, and more especially in our context, of ideology and historiography.

It is quite surprising to compare Dinur’s article with an essay published in January 1939 in the *Jüdische Weltrundschau* in Paris, written in the light of the flames that two months earlier had ravaged the synagogues in Germany. I refer to Martin Buber’s article, “The End of the German–Jewish Symbiosis” (“Das Ende der deutsch–jüdischen Symbiose”). This article opens by adducing the central assumption that every cultural symbiosis and flowering in the Diaspora, such as had occurred in Greek, Spanish, or German culture, bears within it the seed of its destruction (“Keim der Zerstörung”). Only by striking roots in the soil of the nation (in the Land of Israel) is it possible to ensure a stable, constant existence and cultural flowering, such as other nations and cultures experience. The rest of the article is devoted largely to the examination and definition of the essence of the German–Jewish symbiosis as a phenomenon of authentic distinctive values and mutual cross-fertilization. Now, however, that symbiosis has reached its irrevocable end.

Buber’s opening thesis, in which he attempts to sketch the historical outlines of the centers of exile, their periods of flowering in cultural symbiosis, and their destruction, puts forward a Zionist ideological conception (or conclusion). It is here presented in the light of the flames of *Kristallnacht* in Germany. Dinur, who maintained close relations with Buber, certainly knew his article. He erected his great edifice of Jewish history in the light generated by the flames of the physical annihilation of European Jewry, against the backdrop of the attempt at the “Final Solution” of Jewish existence and the elimination of the Jewish heritage in Western culture.

The next stage, and in fact the concrete beginnings of Zionist historiography dealing with the history of the Jews under the Nazi regime, begins after the war, with the arrival in Israel of Jews who had personally experienced the cataclysmic events in Europe. The literature

---

produced by or under the influence of these arrivals consists of descriptions based on direct testimonies and personal memories.

Most of these publications display a fierce polemic among the different Zionist streams. They impute guilt to both the official Jewish leadership of the ghettos and to Jewish leaders elsewhere, as well as to the Jewish underground groups. The same phenomenon is discernible in non-Zionist Jewish publications of testimonies and memoirs in Israel and elsewhere (coming from, e.g., the Jewish Labor Bund and the ultra-Orthodox community). A similar critical approach toward both Jewish and non-Jewish leaders appears at the same time in non-Jewish accusatory polemical literature, especially in the former Nazi-occupied countries; the exception to this phenomenon was German historiography on the “Final Solution,” which then actually did not exist. All this literature, which focuses on the events of the period that the authors themselves experienced, naturally lacks a historical view of the period, and is devoid of any attempt to comprehend it in an historical perspective. Nowhere is this more striking than with regard to its principal subject: the Jewish society and its leadership in the Nazi period.


Critical scientific research into the history of the Jews under the Nazi regime, which combines the use of contemporary archival sources with a historical perspective, was slow in developing. Scholarly Israeli historiography begins in the 1960s, first at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and subsequently in the other universities that were being established in Israel.

Passing over the details of these beginnings, I move to the mid–1970s, when a distinctive method of researching and teaching the subject at the university level emerged in Jerusalem. It may be very accurately characterized as the “historicization” of the life and death of the Jews under the Nazi regime. I refer of course to the approach that was presented later, in the mid–1980s, in the well-known article by Martin Broszat, “Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus.”

Even though the Jerusalem research method contains emphases and meanings that differ from Broszat’s, both approaches demand the incorporation of the historical dimension beyond the period of National-Socialist rule itself, and the introduction of comparative and diversified aspects of the research.

From another point of view, this methodological framework can perhaps be designated the “Jerusalem school of research of Jewish history under Nazi rule” or the “Jerusalem school of Holocaust research.” This of course should not be wholly identified with the renowned “Jerusalem school,” grounded in an explicit Zionist ideology, represented by Gershom Scholem, Ben Zion Dinur, Yitzhak Baer, Shmuel Ettinger, and Jacob Talmon. Nevertheless, the adoption of two of the conceptual and methodological principles embraced by the “Jerusalem school”—the perceptions of the unity and the continuity of Jewish history—enabled us to develop its research approach with regard

---


Tendencies in Zionist Historiography

to the period which then was still considered ostensibly outside the historical continuum.

This development took place in a series of joint seminars for M.A. and Ph.D. students, given by three teachers at the Hebrew University for three consecutive years. Their central subject was comparative research and an examination of historical perspectives. The teachers were Yisrael Gutman, Richard Cohen, and myself, and the comparative research dealt with Germany, Poland, and France. Unlike the then prevailing historiography, especially in Germany, the method does not limit itself to one-dimensional research into National-Socialist ideology and the persecution and annihilation of the Jews. Apart from this central aspect, its emphasis is on the study of the Jewish society and its leadership, encompassing all its spheres of life and activity, and on the attitude of the non-Jewish population toward the Jews and toward the Nazis’ anti-Jewish policy. The principal sources that are employed to study the attitude of the population in Germany—the secret reports of the Nazi security services—include, among other things, a wealth of material on Jewish society and its organizations (naturally, depicted from the point of view of the government’s surveillance and supervisory bureaucracies); these, too, have been integrated into a study of the first aspect (i.e., the Jewish society and its leadership).

Yisrael Gutman’s basic research and scientific editions of sources on the Warsaw Ghetto and on relations between Jews and Poles during the Nazi period; Richard Cohen’s works on the Jews of

---


13 For the most recent study of this aspect, based on this source material, see: Otto Dov Kulka, “Jewish Society in Germany as Reflected in Secret Nazi Reports on ‘Public Opinion’ 1933-1945,” in Moshe Zimmermann (ed.), On Germans and Jews under the Nazi Regime: Essays by Three Generations of Historians, Jerusalem 2006, pp. 261-279.

France,\textsuperscript{15} and my studies on the Jews of Germany;\textsuperscript{16} together with the proceedings of the seminar I mentioned, produced a large number of doctoral theses, books, and articles on important subjects, which previously had not been studied at all, or had been touched upon only marginally. Of this large body of research work I shall mention only a few doctoral theses, most of which have also been published: that of Esriel Hildesheimer, on the Central Organization of the Jews in Nazi Germany;\textsuperscript{17} of David Bankier on German public opinion and the Jews;\textsuperscript{18} of Sarah Bender, on the history of the Bialystok Ghetto;\textsuperscript{19} and the excellent later work by Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), on the Jewish perspective of the Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.\textsuperscript{20}

All these works anchor the study of the Nazi period in the Jewish history of the past generations or the recent generations, and all of them examine spheres related to everyday life, including the Jewish


\textsuperscript{20} Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), “Poland and Poles in the Eyes of Polish Jews during the Second World War (1939-1944),” Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2005 (Hebrew with English summary); published as, \textit{“We Polish Jews”? The Relations between Jews and Poles during the Holocaust, the Jewish Perspective}, Jerusalem 2009 (Hebrew).
leadership and the population’s attitude toward the Jews—all, of course, within the fateful context of the “Final Solution” and of what preceded it in the policy of the Nazi Regime. The research based on this conceptual and methodological approach is not confined to the Hebrew University. It is found in all Israeli universities, though today’s senior teachers are mostly graduates from Jerusalem. Suffice it to mention some basic works published by Israeli historians in the last two decades:

1. The fourth volume of the collective work on the history of German Jewry in the modern era (German–Jewish History in Modern Times), edited by the Leo Baeck Institute and Michael Meyer covering the period 1918–1945, and by Avraham Barkai and Paul Mendes-Flohr for the later period.21

2. Two parallel works by an individual historian, Moshe Zimmermann, on German Jewry from 1914 to 1945: Deutsche Juden 1914–1945 and Deutsche gegen Deutsche: Das Schicksal der Juden 1938–1945.23

3. A large collective work on the Holocaust of German Jewry published by Yad Vashem, edited by the late Avraham Margaliot and by Yehoyachim Kochavi (History of the Holocaust: Germany).24

4. The monumental work of a historian who at least from the point of view of his conceptual approach and his methodological intentions belongs to the “Jerusalem School” of Jewish history under Nazi rule: Saul Friedländer’s two volumes on Nazi Germany and the Jews.25

5. My own work on German Jewry under Nazi rule, Deutsches Judentum unter dem Nationalsozialismus, volume I, (1933–1939), which is basically a scientific edition of sources on the history of the Central Jewish Organization and its leadership;26 as well as the

22 Munich 1997.
24 Two volumes, Jerusalem 1998 (Hebrew).
26 Tübingen 1997.
It is perhaps no coincidence, and a sign that this “Jerusalem School” is making its presence felt internationally, that most of these works were first published in German or English, outside Israel; only later were some of them translated into Hebrew.

The final point that remains to be made within the framework of a symposium on ideology and historiography brings us back to the opening discussion on the articles of Dinur and Buber: Is the new Jerusalem School, whose adherents are Israeli researchers who reside permanently or partly in Zion, borne on the wings of Zionist ideology? It seems to me that anyone who peruses the variety of books I have described will find that, despite their conceptual closeness, common subject, and the interpretative theses they adduce for the history of this period, they are quite varied and in some cases even mutually conflicting. It would be difficult to categorize any of them simply as Zionist ideological writing. The fact that most of the authors espouse Zionism and its basic demand for a “return to Zion” finds expression only in the researchers’ early biographies. Thus, in the seminar I mentioned, the teachers came to Israel in their early years from different countries: one from Poland, another from Canada, and the third from the former Czechoslovakia. The only author I cited who is Israeli-born, Moshe Zimmermann, is perhaps the most unconventional “Zionist” of all in the content of his research, as well as being a sharp critic of several aspects of Zionism in his polemical writing. All of them, however, I think, owe a great debt, directly or dialectically, to the founders of Zionist ideological historiography, above all to Gershom Scholem, but also to Dinur and Buber.

I have one final comment to make, on the slightly odd, though not surprising, emergence of a “post-Zionist” historiographic approach, fundamentally anti-Zionist, in Holocaust research. The representatives of this approach, have effectively focused on one specific point of the

27 Die Juden in den geheimen NS-Stimmungsberichten 1933-1945, see note 12.
28 See note 1.
Tendencies in Zionist Historiography

history of the Jews under the Nazi regime. They are scathingly critical of the Zionist leadership of the Yishuv during the period of the “Final Solution” for their alleged passivity and disinterest in fate of the Jews in the Diaspora,29 and they charge its post-WWII policy with manipulative exploitation of the Jewish catastrophe.30 It is difficult to detect any ideology that underlies this historical writing, apart from the saliently revisionist outlook of the younger generation, which intends to rebel in its writings against the fundamental ideas or political traditions of the founding fathers, in the quest for its own identity and for an independent understanding of the central historical events that have remained embedded in the collective historical consciousness of the Jewish people. In a way the character of this “accusatory polemic” returns the historiography to its initial postwar stage, which I described above.31

Concluding, I wish to mention a marginal, though radical, type of basically anti-Zionist Jewish historiography and dispute: ultra-Orthodox historiography. This approach definitely has a coherent ideology but its attitude toward Zionism and the Holocaust consists primarily of a severe castigation of Zionism for being ostensibly responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews in “collaboration with the Nazis”—with the supposed aim of allowing the masses of Orthodox Jews to die in Europe in order to create a secular state in Israel.32

Another aspect of ultra-Orthodox historiography relates to the Zionists in the “assimilationist” streams, such as the Reform movement in Germany, which are said to have caused the secularization of Judaism

31 The most outspoken kind of this criticism, though from an independent position, is Tom Segev’s The Seventh Million. The Israelis and the Holocaust, New York 1991.
and, ultimately the abandonment or distortion of the basic elements of its tradition. This approach is marked by theological arguments according to which the horrific devastation that was visited on European Jewry was a divine punishment and warning against imitating the deeds of the heretics, the Reformists, the assimilationists, and the Zionists. Within the ultra-Orthodox camp, there is an extensive catalogue of claims and accusations against Zionism, and there are also some interesting historiographic works that study the phenomenon.33

33 See Dina Porat, “Amalek’s Accomplices.”