

Intellectuals, Socialists, Capitalists, and Binationalism in Mandate Palestine

Joel Beinin

The likelihood of a “two-state” solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is on an asymptotic trajectory precipitously approaching zero. The present reality is a highly unequal de facto binational state. Between the two world wars, Zionist advocates of binationalism believed that guaranteeing the civic and national equality of Jews and Arabs would make it easier to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. But for those actively engaged in the Zionist settlement project, binationalism was always fraught with contradictions.

Hayim Kalvarisky, an early and persistent advocate of binationalism, also purchased lands in the Galilee for the Jewish Colonization Association and supervised the expulsion of peasant tenant farmers. Kalvarisky regretted the dispossession of Arab peasants but recognized that establishing a Jewish national home required it. Yet, in 1919 Kalvarisky presented a proposal for a Zionist-Arab agreement to the General Syrian Congress, where the forces that had launched the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire were ensconced. The congress accepted Kalvarisky’s text in principle, declaring that “Palestine is the homeland of all its citizens: Muslims, Christians and Jews are all citizens with equal rights.”

Arthur Ruppin, another early proponent of binationalism, established the first Zionist office in Jaffa in 1908. He was also instrumental in securing the loan to establish Tel Aviv and involved in purchasing Arab lands on Mount Carmel, the Jezreel Valley, and Jerusalem. In 1913 he wrote, “Land is the most necessary thing for establishing roots in Palestine. Since there are hardly any more arable unsettled lands . . . we are bound in each case . . . to remove the peasants who cultivate the land.”

Binationalism has most prominently been associated with a group of mainly German-Jewish professors at the Hebrew University who did not live its contradictions—Hugo Bergmann, Martin Buber, Hans Kohn, Judah Magnes, Gershom Scholem, and Ernst Simon. In 1926 they, along with Kalvarisky, Ruppin, and others established Brit Shalom, the first binational

political association. Brit Shalom barely survived the Arab riots of 1929; it ceased activity in 1933. In response to the violence Ruppin abandoned binationalism while Kohn broke with Zionism altogether. Despite the intellectual brilliance of its leaders, Brit Shalom never had more than a few hundred adherents. It had no social or political base.

Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, supported Brit Shalom and its successor, Iḥud. But she did not represent Hadassah’s views on this issue. For many Zionists who believed they were more “pragmatic,” the identification of binationalism with intellectuals was evidence of its infeasibility, whatever its ethical merits.

There was, however, a version of binationalism rooted in the political economy of the *Yishuv*—paradoxically embraced by the most radical currents of the Jewish labor movement as well as representatives of large agricultural and industrial capital. The platform of the 1927 founding congress of the federation of Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir kibbutzim (Ha-Kibbutz Ha-’Arzi Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir) advocated “a bi-nationalist socialist society in Palestine and its environs.” As Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir moved from communitarian anarchism to orthodox Marxism in the 1930s, it became increasingly engaged at the national political level, including more urgent advocacy of binationalism.

The May 1942 Biltmore Conference called for a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine after World War II—the first time a representative body of the World Zionist Organization specified that the goal was a Jewish state. Proponents of binationalism were compelled to respond. Immediately after the Biltmore conference, Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir and its urban ally, the Socialist League, officially joined the League for Arab-Jewish Rapprochement on the basis of a binational program. Po’alei Ṷiyon, a small urban workers’ party, affiliated with the league when it was established in 1939, left the league, the first expression of the changing social character of binationalism.

Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir and the Socialist League won 20% of the vote in the 1942 Histadrut elections. Thus, in the 1940s radical socialist binationalists comprised the largest

minority bloc in the *Yishuv*. To broaden the binationalist coalition, in 1942 the League for Arab-Jewish Rapprochement joined Iḥud, an association established by intellectuals around Judah Magnes. Iḥud there by became a much more substantial organization than Brit Shalom.

In 1946 Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir and the Socialist League fused to form the Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir Workers’ Party. Two-thirds of its ten thousand members were kibbutzniks. The party delegated Mordechai Ben-Tov to draft a book-length memorandum entitled *The Case for a Bi-National Palestine*. It was released in March 1946 when the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which was tasked with formulating recommendations for resolving both the European Jewish refugee crisis and the future of Palestine, was conducting public hearings in Jerusalem. The Jewish Agency obliged all its constituent parties to endorse the Biltmore Conference’s demand for a Jewish state when addressing the AACI. So Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir did not publicly advocate a binational state before the AACI.

Binationalism is primarily a political-constitutional issue. Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir envisioned that the legislature of the proposed binational state would be based on parity between the two peoples regardless of their numbers. This would allow either community to block legislation it regarded as vital to its interests. However, Ben-Tov’s presentation of binationalism depended heavily on economic reasoning to explain why this would not result in legislative gridlock. Ha-Shomer Ha-Ṷa’ir believed that “cooperation between Jewish and Arab labour constitutes the cornerstone of the whole future of both races in Palestine.”

Like all labor Zionists, Ben-Tov argued that Zionist settlement had raised the standard of living of Palestinian Arabs. But he criticized the Histadrut’s policy of excluding Arab workers and Arab products from the Jewish economy—core elements of labor Zionist practice—as unnecessarily exacerbating national tensions. He imagined that the class interests of Jews and Arabs, especially workers, would override their national affinities, and form the basis of a

binational majority for the future government on “every practical . . . piece of legislation on taxes, tariffs, budget, social insurance, labour conditions, protection of industries . . . the bulk of the business of any legislature.”

Ben-Tov proposed that a special development authority administer Palestine for the next twenty or twenty-five years. Its task would be to promote the settlement of “at least two to three million Jews,” “raise the standard of living and education of the Palestinian Arabs to approximately the Jewish level,” and “actively encourage Jewish-Arab cooperation.” As a Marxist, Ben-Tov supported planned economic development. But, this program was incommensurable with the prescriptions of post-World War II development economics.

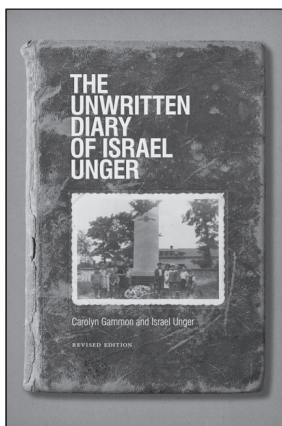
Bourgeois Zionists, who rejected labor Zionism’s “conquest of labor” agenda, formed another group of binationalists. They wanted to hire Arab workers who generally accepted lower wages than Jews; and some were engaged in profitable activities with Arab partners. Eyal Sivan’s film, “Jaffa, The Orange’s Clockwork” (2010), documents Arab-Jewish collaboration in the production and export of citrus fruits through the 1940s.

Moshe Smilansky, the founder of the Farmers’ Association and a prominent citrus grower, was a Brit Shalom member and later a Palmah commander in the Rehovot area, an expression of the contradiction in seeking Arab-Jewish rapprochement while settling on what was once the rural frontier. Other bourgeois supporters of Brit Shalom included Moshe Novomeysky, founder of the Palestine Potash Company, Pinhas Rutenberg, founder of the Palestine Electric Company, and Gad Frumkin, the only Jew to sit on the Palestine Supreme Court.

During the summer of 1936, after the Arab Revolt of 1936–39 erupted, Judah Magnes and these four bourgeois Zionists met secretly with Musa al-Alami and other Palestinian Arabs in a back channel effort to achieve an Arab-Jewish agreement. A major point of contention, according to Aharon Cohen’s account in *Israel and the Arab World*, was the willingness of the Arab parties to accept the immigration of 30,000 Jews annually for the next ten years while the Jewish Agency insisted on 62,000 a year—the difference between achieving a Jewish population of 40% by 1946 and a Jewish majority.

The dispossession of Palestinian peasants, the demand for extensive Jewish immigration, which would turn the Arab majority into a minority, and the postponement of political independence by a lengthy United Nations trusteeship (advocated by Ben-Tov) were substantial obstacles to Arab acceptance of binationalism. Moreover, the contours of global politics have changed dramatically since the late 1940s. Consequently, the history of Mandate-era binationalism does not offer us any unambiguous “lessons” for the present and future. Believing that it can be a facile misuse of history. What we can learn is that the partition solution embodied in UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947 was not inevitable. Alternatives were seriously considered and preferred by thoughtful, conscientious individuals and substantial social groups.

Joel Beinin is professor of Middle East History and Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History at Stanford University. His most recent publication is Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa, 2nd ed. (Stanford University Press, 2013); co-edited with Frédéric Vairel.



The Unwritten Diary of Israel Unger

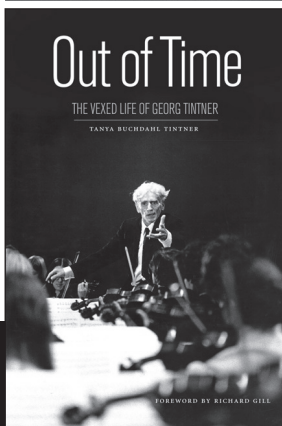
Revised edition

Carolyn Gammon and Israel Unger

\$24.99 Paper • 240 pp., 91 b/w illus. • 978-1-77112-011-1 • Life Writing series

Israel Unger and his family hid for two years during WW II in an attic crawl space in Tarnow, Poland. Against all odds, they emerged alive and eventually emigrated to Canada in 1951. Unger had a stellar academic career, married, and raised a family in Fredericton, New Brunswick. His “unwritten diary” is as much a story of a young immigrant making a life in Canada as it is a Holocaust story.

“A powerful story of courage, survival, humility, and love.... Like so many works motivated by passion and discovery and framed within the borders of historical and family narratives, this book became a journey of self-discovery and narrative renewal.... This book of memory is as finely written an account of a life as I have read.”
— Richard Blaquiere, *Bugle-Observer* (Woodstock, NB)



Out of Time: The Vexed Life of Georg Tintner

Tanya Buchdahl Tintner

\$39.99 Paper • 430 pp., 40 b/w illus. • 978-1-55458-938-8

“An important book ... an invaluable book that can be recommended to music lovers just as highly as the conductor’s Bruckner recordings on Naxos.”
— Rémy Franck, *Pizzicato* (Luxembourg)

“This book ... has been immaculately put together ... with a candour that usually eludes family members who tackle biographies. Tanya Tintner’s long experience as a writer and deep understanding of her fascinating subject is evident on every absorbing page.”
— Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Listener*



WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Visit the Scholar’s Choice booth at the 2013 AJS Conference to see these and other titles.

Available from your favourite bookseller or call 1-800-565-9523 (UTP Distribution).

facebook.com/wlupress | twitter.com/wlupress | toll-free 1-866-836-5551 | www.wlupress.wlu.ca