

THE BALTIC REVIVAL AND ZIONISM

NORMAN BERDICHEVSKY

Norman Berdichevsky, Ph.D; is a translator, researcher, and lecturer in Geography in Zikhron Yaakov, Israel.

The saga of how Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians have managed to maintain their ancient and isolated cultural heritage is remarkable and their rebirth as independent states amidst the incipient disintegration of the Soviet Union immediately calls to mind the protracted struggle to establish a Jewish homeland after centuries of statelessness.

The reemergent three Baltic republics have captured world attention more than any other region amidst the turmoil plaguing the Soviet Union. This is certainly not a factor of their size and population, but rather their previous strategic role as independent states in Europe between the two world wars¹ and the cultural, political and historical interest they exert. This interest evokes the sympathy of those who remember the brief interim between the two World Wars when the Jews enjoyed an unprecedented cultural autonomy in all three independent Baltic states.²

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Baltic region was part of the Czarist Empire, subject to intense Russification and the lingering heritage of an elite minority of "German Balts" who dominated large landed estates, much commerce and the free professions. Many observers gave the Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians even less of a chance of maintaining their individual identity than the submerged regions of Great Britain, France, Spain or the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Provence, Flanders, Catalonia, the Basque provinces, Croatia, etc.)

Indeed, the idea of independent Baltic states or even a cultural and literary revival struck many observers as a fantastic notion. The individuality of the three peoples and especially the revelation that the archaic Latvian and Lithuanian languages, the former Baltic pagan religion, Baltic legends and folk customs were all survivors of the ancient Indo-European or Aryan pre-historic culture only reinforced the analogy of turning the clock back thousands of years, just as Zionism sought to do by reestablishing a Jewish state and reviving the Hebrew language.³

One typical example is the view that "The Balts have historically struggled to escape political domination by the Slavs and Germans, a struggle which has largely failed."⁴ This judgment of failure has been reinforced by disappearance from the map of Europe several times, most recently for the last fifty years. In the great majority of current encyclopedias and world almanacs there are no separate entries for the three lands and peoples. One has to first find the Soviet Union and then meticulously seek out the minor sub-heading of "Baltic Region".

Like the Jews, the Baltic peoples maintained a distinct and isolated cultural heritage stemming from pre-Christian times, suffered the persecution of militant Crusaders (the Teutonic Knights considered it a holy task to Christianize or exterminate the Balts from the 12th to the 15th centuries); were victims of the intolerant designs of the Russian and German empires to assimilate "peculiar" minorities; enjoyed a late flowering national renaissance based first and foremost upon the ancestral languages, sustained a far flung Diaspora (for the Balts in Scandinavia, Canada, Australia and the United States); and strove to bring about reborn national states committed to democratic ideals but surrounded by aggressive and hostile neighbors.

These parallel developments ought to have made the Jews and Baltic peoples firm allies in the face of their common foes during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—the Germans, Russians, and Poles. For a brief period this was indeed the case. In the early 1920s the democratic Baltic states guaranteed full cultural autonomy to their respective Jewish minorities. This policy deserves to be recalled at this critical juncture in time when the prospect of reborn independent Baltic states coexisting with an independent Jewish state appears imminent.

The shared history of "Litvak Jews" (those resident in the areas ruled by Lithuania at its height of power and prestige in the 17th century) and the Baltic peoples was however tragically marked by the Holocaust and the brutal subjugation and annexation of all three Baltic states by the Soviet Union. It is necessary to put these events in historical perspective in order to understand how and why Baltic-Jewish coexistence foundered. The tragic similarities, the shared fate of being cultural isolates and bearers of an ancient pre-Christian heritage which has survived in the modern world and the national rebirth of both peoples deserve recognition.

The Lithuanian language is considered an archaic branch of the Indo-European family, and the one which has changed least in its development over the last three thousand years. It is a telling similarity that the rebirth of the Hebrew and Baltic languages are striking examples of an ancient cultural heritage which was restored and preceded the national sentiment for an independent homeland.

Under the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, Jews were invited to settle in the 16th century and enjoyed a tolerance of ecumenical spirit which stood out like an island amidst the vast ocean of religious intolerance provoked by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. This was largely due to the Lithuanian element, which had only shortly before abandoned its long devotion to the old Pagan Baltic religions and accepted Catholicism as an expedient to avoid further bloodshed and rivalry with the rest of Europe and seek Polish support in its conflict with Russia. The Lithuanians as the last people to be Christianized in Europe were singularly free from the accumulated prejudices of the established churches. Jews, Greek Orthodox and Lutheran subjects all enjoyed the new order of tolerance which also laid the foundation for the growth of the largest Jewish community in the world.

Lithuania became a center of Jewish Talmudic scholarship and a bulwark of resistance to the emotional populist appeal of Chassidism. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, and many others who were active in the renaissance of the Hebrew language, were Litvaks. Rationalist currents of thought among Lithuanian Jewry also welcomed the *Hiskalah* (enlightenment) movement which sought secular knowledge and espoused democratic ideals while trying to remain loyal to Jewish traditions and making them more attuned to the modern world.

Under Czarist domination, Lithuanian and Jewish nationalists worked together in a united front in the Duma. Yet this political cooperation never attempted to bridge the enormous economic and social gap between the two peoples. The Yiddish speaking Jewish masses formed a majority in Vilnius, "the Jerusalem of Lithuania," and were concentrated in the *shtetls*—market towns where they acted as middlemen for the produce of Lithuanian and Latvian peasants. German and Polish noblemen dominated large landed estates and the free professions in the cities while a Russian overclass of administrators filled the highest political posts.

Both Jews and Balts, attempting to penetrate the urban middle class, adopted Russian and German to further their careers and assimilate with the ruling classes. Although Zion-ism and Hebrew culture became widely popular, the over-whelming majority of Litvak Jews were unable to sympathize with the growing movement for Lithuanian and Latvian in-dependent and the cultural reawakening of the Baltic peoples. Prosperous urban Jewish merchants and professionals invariably chose a Russian education for their children (German was preferred in East Prussia). As little as three percent of Jewish elementary school students in inter-war Latvia studied in Latvian-language schools as compared to 12 percent in Ger-man schools, over 50 percent in Russian ones, and about 33 percent in the Yiddish or Hebrew schools.⁵

This was naturally resented by the native Baltic peoples who had for so long considered the Germans, Russians and Poles the sources of their oppression. Unfortunately this Jewish wish to be part of "prestigious" cultures was an ironic denial of the basis for Zionism itself which urged Jews to return to their own heritage. Even today many Russian, American, English and French Jews find it anathema to con-template loss of their native tongue which they believe to be a vehicle of a superior national culture and even a cosmopolitan world one. It was only a handful of farsighted Zionists, most notably Zev Jabotinsky, who saw this contradiction and argued against it.

Jabotinsky praised the national rebirth of the Latvian people during a visit to Riga and described Latvia as "an oasis" among the new independent states following World War I.' In the summer of 1932 Jabotinsky spoke in fluent Flemish before an enthralled audience in Antwerp on 'The Flemish Language and Jewish Nationalism.' In so doing, he openly sided with Flemish attempts to achieve equality with the dominant French speaking Walloon society in Belgium. He saw the similarity of the national movements of small nations to Zionism and the danger of Jewish ignorance of them. He specifically singled out the Baltic states in the Hebrew news-paper *Doar HaYom* in 1930:

The world does not love small states. From time to time, when one of the great European newspapers mentions one of the small states, and especially those created after the war,... the writer's face gets all wrinkled and he curses why the world has become "Balkanized". Or else he puts on a serious scientific face and proves that the small states "are not able to exist", because previously when they were districts in one of the large states, they enjoyed a "hinterland" which they now lack.

I guess I have an opposite nature. Indeed, I love the small states. If I had been the creator of the world I would have long ago decreed that all of the great kingdoms be divided up into tiny independent states ... I love that kind of small town that has the audacity to think of itself as the center of the world, as the city of my birth Odessa, for example... My faith in small states has to do with this philosophy: the more capitals, the more culture. Indeed I remember Kovno, Riga and Reval [Tallinn] from before the war. Their inhabitants complained about the boredom, exactly as they do today (to always be in Paris is boring like anything persistent); but a tourist who looks from the side sees the difference.

Previously there was nothing to examine in those cities or ask about: today each one of them is a laboratory of creative experiments: They are creating one of the greatest of God's miracles—the nations.⁷

Although Jewish life in the *shtetl* had evolved symbiotically with the Baltic peasants and small farmers in the countryside, there was only a very limited contact among intellectuals and politicians among the two peoples who saw an advantage to cooperate against Czarist oppression. Very few Jews had Jabotinsky's insight. The following quote from an anthology in Hebrew of Lithuanian literature⁸ summarizes Jewish cultural achievement, piety and attachment to a common home-land that was however bereft of appreciation and understanding of the rebirth of Baltic culture.

There is a small nation in the North of the world which has distinguished itself by hospitality and an honest human relationship with the remote People of the Diaspora during centuries—the Lithuanian Nation. Its land has served us for generations as a storage place for the Torah, for wisdom and for the spirit of Israel. Here we have lived for hundreds of years, here we have created an original Hebrew culture, here our essence struck deep roots in the soil and here we adopted a second Mother Jerusalem — "Yerushalayim de'Lita" [Vilnius]. Here the study of the Torah flourished, here Yeshivot prospered and bloomed, here lived "The Gaon" and our great rabbis — the words of the Nation; here the cradle of our new literature stood, here lived our writers — the renewers of our tongue and those who breathed new life in us; here sang the Levinsohns, the father and the son, here Mapu dreamed, here Gordon created and Lillienblum fought; here arose the leaders of a renewed nation and here at the same time the living Hebrew language found a home and a network of schools brought forth a healthy living youth whose example one can only find in the Land of Israel.

But behold, in spite of this the literature of this people [Lithuanian] is locked for us with seven seals and entirely unknown to the Hebrew People.

Independence without their historic capital of Vilnius was unthinkable for Lithuanian nationalists. Their claim was on grounds of prescription — an "immemorial possession" in spite of the city's Jewish majority. Polish nationalists, however, viewed the retention of Vilnius and Lvov (in the Western Ukraine) with their large Polish populations and universities as essential to the integrity of their state with links to the past.

Lithuania's stated intentions to protect minority rights and less discriminatory attitude towards its Jewish population were used as arguments to sway public opinion abroad and especially influence the League of Nations. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and end of World War I, all three Baltic states were caught in the middle of a battleground between retreating German troops and a major conflict between Poland and Russia.

Although Vilnius was originally to be included in an independent Lithuanian state, Polish troops, defying the terms that had been reached in negotiations, occupied the city after a coup in order to protect the Poles who, it was claimed, had risen in rebellion against being included in the new Lithuanian state. A "plebiscite" carried out by Polish authorities gave a large majority to annexation by Poland. Both Lithuanians and Jews boycotted the plebiscite.

The need of the Baltic states to mobilize international Jewish support for their independence and territorial claims (especially Lithuania's claim to Vilnius) resulted in liberal constitutions guaranteeing minority rights and cultural autonomy. A Lithuanian delegation to the Paris Versailles Peace Conference pledged that the Jews would enjoy full national-cultural autonomy.⁹ The promise was kept and in 1920 the Jewish community was recognized as a legal institution with the right to legislate binding ordinances. All Jews were subject to the decisions of *Va'ad HaAretz* (Jewish National Council).

The Zionist Minister of Jewish affairs in the government, Soloveichik, often delivered speeches praising Jewish autonomy and declaring that "we are rehearsing here towards a Jewish state." On a visit to Kaunas in honor of the local newspaper *Die Yiddische Shtimme*, Chaim Bialik also added his appreciation of the rights accorded the Jewish minority and stated that "if Vilna is known as the Yerushalayim de'Lita [Jerusalem of Lithuania], then all of Lithuania should be known as the Eretz-Yisrael deGaluta [The Land of Israel of the Exile].

Nationalists in Lithuania and Latvia, where a similar autonomy was established, viewed such minority rights as divisive. Their motives, however, were not based primarily on anti-Semitism but the view that the Baltic peoples should be given preferential treatment in raising their economic and social status, a process that inevitably would have to come about at the cost of the minorities.

Although the Jews were initially viewed in a much more favorable light than the minorities backed by hostile large states (Germans, Russians, and Poles), Jewish economic preeminence, especially in trade, aggravated tensions. (In 1923 there were 14,000 shops in Lithuania owned by Jews, and 2,000 by non-Jews; by 1936 the respective figures were 10,000 and 12,000).¹⁰ With the growth of virulent anti-Semitism in Germany and Poland, similar movements also won adherents in Latvia and Lithuania but they were tempered by fear of Nazi Germany using the economically powerful German minority as a fifth column.

The Lithuanian Ministry of Jewish Affairs was abolished in 1924. The ostensible reason given for this decision was internal bickering between Yiddishists and Hebraists for control of the Jewish educational sector, but many observers held that this was the beginning of Lithuanian ultra-nationalist sentiments coming to the fore. Although Lithuania eventually fell under an authoritarian regime (as did Latvia and Estonia), there was no mob violence against Jews or their property. Lithuania's toughening attitude towards aggressive pro-Nazi elements among the Germans in Klaipėda resulted in the trial and conviction of Nazi activists for treason, a step which infuriated German public opinion and instinctively evoked Jewish support around the world.

The Holocaust and Soviet annexation of the Baltic States left behind a deep residue of pain which obscures the previous centuries-long coexistence and suffering of both peoples. A small but vocal and dedicated minority of Jewish communists had from the outset of the Russian Revolution cast their hopes upon the Soviet regime. For them, the old attraction to Russian culture and disdain for the Baltic languages and customs was increased by the added magnetic pull of the center of World Socialism. Jewish autonomy and a thriving Yiddish and Hebrew press were compared unfavorably with the new Soviet Jewish autonomous region of Birobidjan. The crowning achievements of the Jewish educational systems (the Hebrew secular *Tarbut*, the Yiddish Sodalist *Kultur-Liga*, and religious *Yavneh* schools) were also denigrated by idealistic comparisons with the new Yiddish proletarian culture being created in the Soviet Union. Lithuanian communists even adopted the reformed spelling of Yiddish current in the USSR (*Emmes* spelled with the Hebrew letters ayin- mem -ayin- samech instead of *Emet* with aleph-mem-tav).

These Jewish communists welcomed the arrival of the Red Army and the annexation of the Baltic States to the USSR in 1940. Until the German invasion of 1941 the new Soviet regime decimated the ranks of the Baltic intelligentsia, thoroughly eliminated private enterprise, destroyed all independent institutions, exiled tens of thousands of civilians suspected of any nationalist or democratic sympathies (including Zionist activists, stamp collectors and Esperantists), and thoroughly wiped out every vestige of Jewish culture as well (including the Yiddish as well as the Hebrew schools).

Nazi propaganda lost no time in singling out the Jews for revenge when they overran the three Baltic States. Extremists in the three countries rent their vengeance on the Jews (most of whom, of course, were not communists and had taken no part in the Soviet regime). This work by collaborators and the occupying German forces has been condemned by the present leaders of the Baltic republics. This misdirected revenge nevertheless remains a bitter legacy of events in which the Baltic peoples and the Jews were both the victims of totalitarian states.

It should be remembered, however, that as long as independent Baltic states existed, the governments suppressed violent outbreaks against Jewish citizens and in the case of Lithuania provided sanctuary to Jewish refugees from Klaipėda after its cession to Germany, and again to those fleeing Poland and reaching Vilnius after its transfer to Lithuania.

The leaders of the Baltic states have all issued appeals calling upon renewed contacts and friendly cooperation with the Jewish people. There is little doubt that the Baltic republics will seek full diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. The Baltic nationalists of today resemble those of the early 1920s who won the sympathy and admiration of Jabotinsky.

1 *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence, 1917-1940*. Georg von Rauch, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1974.

2 "Jewish National Autonomy in Lithuania (1918-1925)" by Samuel Gringauz, *Jewish Social Studies*, July 1952.

3 For a survey of the ancient Baltic traditions and languages see *Balts and Aryans in Their Indo-European Background* by Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1968.

4 *The European Culture Area* by Terry Jordan, Harper & Row, 1973, p. 125.

5 Lucy Dawidowicz, "The War Against the Jews" — Hebrew edition, p. 422.

6 "The Hasmonean from Riga" *Razsvet*, Feb. 28, 1926.

7 Doar *Ha-Hom*. 11 October 1930.

8 "Antologia shel HaSifrut HaLitait", Kaunas, 1932, edited by Yitzhak Kissin.

9 Gringauz, *July 1952*.

10 "HaMedinot HaBaltiot" by Binyamin Eliav in *HaTfuza: Mizrach Europa* edited by Yaakov Tzur, Keter Publishers, Jerusalem, 1967, p. 106.