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## **Dueling Visions of Rebirth: Interwar Palestine Versus Soviet Russia**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Dueling Visions of Rebirth: Interwar Palestine Versus Soviet Russia**

*Jonathan Dekel-Chen (bio)*

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Almost every nation-state wrestles in its formative stages to galvanize a coherent, convincing national narrative.<sup>1</sup> For reasons arising from cultural diversity, shared history, imagination, communication skills, and perhaps a bit of luck, some emergent nations are more successful than others in this task. Modern Israel is in this sense part of a larger context of newly independent states born in the wave of decolonization in Africa, the Near East, and Southeast Asia after World War II. Ideological leaders of the Zionist movement from the late nineteenth century and the first generation of independent Israel's intellectual elites after 1948 labored to construct the new nation's national narratives. Again, like most newly formed nations, Israel's foundational narratives intended to present the country's historical *raison d'être*; for Israel this meant presenting it to a multiethnic citizenry, Jewish diaspora communities spread over four continents, and the rest of the world. In the case of Israel, however, the narrative of a new state situated amid hostile neighbors in the Near East had to also merge somehow with the story of the horrors inflicted upon the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. No less important, this same narrative had to take into account, and perhaps mobilize, the profound collective trauma, loss, and guilt that the Holocaust had wrought upon European Jews who had survived the war and those elsewhere in the global diaspora who had been distant witnesses to its destructive power.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of these realities the pace quickened in the formation of this narrative after 1945, as it became increasingly obvious to Jews and others that a Jewish state would be created. Pioneering agricultural settlement emerged as a core component in the national narrative generated by the Zionist movement from as early as the turn of the twentieth century. According to this part of the national epic, ideologically motivated young European Jews—particularly from regions in which Jews suffered persecution at the hands of Judeophobic regimes—resettled in the Land of Israel. These young Jews shared a profile that featured an unbending will to reclaim neglected fields and build vibrant infrastructures, thereby forging with their own hands a territorial and economic backbone around which a new Jewish nation could grow. These

young pioneers would undergo a simultaneous individual and collective “rebirth.” **[End Page 139]** In line with this vision, rural life in the Land of Israel would spawn a new generation of hardened farmers who would spearhead a generational rebirth of earnest, hardworking, “biblical,” agriculturalist Jews. Such “new” Jews would reap plenty from the earth, while strengthening their souls and bodies in preparation for the future defense of the national homeland. And this “reborn” biblical Jewish farmer would render obsolete older images of European Jews held in the popular imagination.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Jewish nationalists and antisemites from the end of the nineteenth century shared that same negative imagery of the “old” Jew, characterized by ignoble professions, physical weaknesses, and sinister intentions.<sup>4</sup>

The Zionist narrative also lauded urban and industrial growth in the Yishuv but applied disproportionate attention to agricultural settlement; it elevated the image of pioneering settlers who were to “capture” (*kebush ha-avodah*) the land without reliance on the physical labor of the indigenous Arab population. A strong subtext of this narrative was a belief that a Jewish “return to the land” became possible only by virtue of resettlement in Palestine, which provided an ideological and moral legitimacy for Jews to undertake a two-fold emigration: from Europe to the Near East and from the familiar surroundings of towns to the demanding life of farming. Even today, popular memory in Israel still overwhelmingly associates the founding generations of Zionist settlement with heroic agricultural resettlement. Although it might surprise some, the reality did not always match the imagery. Since the arrival of the first Bilus (*Beit ya’akov lekhu vene klha*, “House of Jacob, come ye and let us go forth” [Isa., 2:5]) in Ottoman-controlled Palestine in the 1880s, probably no more than 8 percent of the total Jewish population between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River ever farmed...

## DUELING VISIONS OF REBIRTH: INTERWAR PALESTINE VERSUS SOVIET RUSSIA

Jonathan Dekel-Chen, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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