

Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems' and Zionism

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Although his 'Jewish Problems' article of 1943 would be his only publication on the subject, Michael Polanyi thought, wrote, and lectured about Zionism throughout the 1930s and 1940s. He framed the issues concerning Jewish settlement in Palestine not within the immediate context of the Second World War but within the wider context of assimilation and Jewish encounters with modernity. Specifically, Polanyi engaged the arguments of Lewis Namier, a Manchester colleague and committed Zionist. Polanyi approached Zionism from the perspective of a 'non-Jewish Jew' who found common ground with some of the views expressed by Anglo-Zionism as well as the 'liberal critics' of Zionism. The fact that he felt compelled to enter this debate speaks to his identity as a Jewish intellectual who regarded 'assimilationists' and their building of in-roads to the modern world as the moral equivalent of the pioneers who settled the Land of Israel and made possible further immigration.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Michael Polanyi thought, corresponded, and lectured about Zionism. Although his 'Jewish Problems' article of 1943 represents his only publication, it was not the only occasion he reflected on the subject.¹ Polanyi articulated his views of Zionism shortly after his emigration from Germany to England in 1933. The themes and ideas he wrote down within a year of his arrival continued to reflect his thinking until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.²

'Jewish Problems' appeared in *The Political Quarterly* but it did not offer a contemporary political analysis. Polanyi did not examine the settlement of Jews in Palestine within the history of the Middle East, nor in the context of British foreign policy during the Second World War. The rise of Arab nationalism following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire came into direct conflict with Jewish national aspirations and created a dilemma over the British Mandate. During the 1930s, Arab nationalists saw Nazi Germany as their ally against the hated British and French colonial regimes. The Arab Higher Committee formed in 1936, and with Axis support, began a propaganda campaign resulting in Arab assaults on Jewish settlements. Violence continued until 1939, when the Labour government issued the infamous White Paper, severely restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine, and in effect, rescinding the government's promise to support the establishment of a Jewish national home. Although large numbers of Palestinian Jews fought alongside British troops during the war, relations deteriorated following the defeat of German forces in Libya in 1942. Tension between Jews and the British government increased in the years leading up to the bombing by the Irgun of the British military command at the King David Hotel in 1946.³

Polanyi saw Zionism in the context of another migration, that of 'Eastern Jews' into Europe, and against the collapse of another empire, Austria-Hungary. He recalled the fin-de-siecle ideals of Theodor Herzl, who envisioned an 'old-new land' as a hedge against anti-Semitism, and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who laboured for a revival of Hebrew language and culture. Zionism did not express a coherent ideology, to accept or reject, but an ideological contest featuring rival and passionate aspirations for Jewish self-identity.⁴ Zionists invoked a religious and historical attachment to the land of Israel alongside modern ideals of secularism, self-determination, and civic society. They substituted a secular self-identity of Jews as a nation for the traditional

and orthodox self-identity in religious terms. Polanyi, who saw himself following the course of assimilated Jews who had turned away from national and religious identity, was moved to write about it.⁵

Polanyi did not support Zionism, and in declaring his non-support during the war, he could be read as expressing a troubling indifference to other Jews hoping to escape from Hitler's Germany. But the Jewish problems Polanyi has in mind when he discounts Zionism have to do with modernity generally and not Nazi terror specifically, and in this way, his thoughts on Zionism say more about his understanding of Jewish identity in world affairs than the extent of his commitment to Jewish refugees. In this essay, I compare his views to that of a strident Zionist, Lewis Namier, and a committed anti-Zionist, Eric Hobsbawm. The first part of this essay deals with Polanyi's correspondence with Namier in 1934 in which Polanyi affirms that he is a non-Zionist. In the second part, I discuss Polanyi's opposition to Herzl's ideas and Jewish messianism. Part three deals with Polanyi's reaction to Anglo-Zionism and his critique of Jewish nationalism. The final part discusses Polanyi's status as a 'liberal critic' of Zionism taking into account his comments about a post-war return to ancient political and religious arrangements.⁶

Manchester Zionists

When Polanyi arrived at the University of Manchester in 1933, he encountered a small but influential Zionist community. Several members of staff and students had founded Zionist organisations in the city and a number of Zionist meetings took place under the auspices of the university. It was in the laboratories of the university's chemistry department that Britain's most well-known Zionist, Chaim Weizmann, had made his important discovery regarding the artificial production of acetone. His contribution to the war effort marked the starting point of the road leading to the Balfour Declaration (1917): 'The British government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.'⁷

No one at Manchester catalyzed Polanyi's thinking with regard to Zionism more than Lewis Namier. Namier's biography, like Polanyi's, overlapped religious and national identities. Namier was born in 1888 to Jewish parents named Bernsztajn, or Bernstein, in Russian Poland. His father, the administrator of a large estate, assimilated to the point of converting to Catholicism and Namier was raised and educated along the Polish Catholic pattern. At ten years of age, Namier learned about the Jewish part of the family story. This, his father had told him, left him without a community that would recognise him as one of their own. Technically speaking, being a Catholic Jew meant that he was 'nothing'. Later on, his mother clarified his situation: the family should be 'recognised as of Jewish descent, with strong Christian sympathies and Polish enthusiasms.'⁸

Namier attended the London School of Economics before achieving in 1911 a degree in modern history from Balliol College, Oxford. During his Balliol years he met Weizmann with whom he would work in Zionist activity until after the Second World War. In 1929, Namier joined the Zionist Organisation as political secretary to its Jewish Agency in London. His zeal exceeded the majority of Britain's Zionists and annoyed more than a few officials in the British government. He made a habit of standing in the hall of the Athenaeum Club, ready to button-hole every Colonial Office official who entered. He was much more effective as a writer. Isaiah Berlin, having read one of Namier's essays on the Jews of modern Europe, remarked that 'It was the best and most arresting piece on that subject that I or, I suspect, anyone had ever read.'⁹

Namier arrived at the University of Manchester two years or so before Polanyi, although 'arrived' is probably the wrong word. Namier became in 1931 professor of modern history at the university, but the university accommodated a schedule that allowed him to spend most days a week in London working on behalf of the Jewish Agency. Namier shared with Polanyi an interest in assisting Jewish academics stranded in Hitler's Germany. Namier organised in 1933 the Manchester Academic Society to facilitate the resettlement of Jewish refugees in the city and Polanyi and Namier collaborated to some extent in this effort.¹⁰

Polanyi sent Namier a handwritten letter dated 27th May 1934.¹¹ In it, he spelled out the reasons for his non-Zionism with as much commitment as Namier expressed his belief in the Zionist cause. The letter had been occasioned by Namier's introduction to Arthur Ruppin's *The Jews of the Modern World*, published by Macmillan that year.¹² Polanyi said that he 'reread carefully' this introduction, and while 'deeply impressed' by the clarity of argument, he was 'fundamentally opposed' to Namier's view.

Namier described the place of Jews in the world as 'anomalous, difficult, and often ambiguous.'¹³ The Galuth, or exile, had deprived Jews of a space to build national identity. 'A nation cannot, and must not, grow except in soil which it can call its own'. Prior to the present era, this problem had been understood as *luftmensch*, an 'untranslatable term [that] describes men without solid ground under their feet.'¹⁴ Denied access to education and professions, and without training or employment, Jews were forced to create a way of life out of thin air. The solution many Jews had found was individual assimilation. Jews rose to positions of wealth, distinction, and social rank as individuals, and consequently, they, or their descendents, became lost to the Jewish people. The solution of Jewish nationalism, Namier explained, 'expresses the desire of the Jewish people to be like unto all nations...with a Mother Country and Father State of its own'. The chief aim must be 'normality', achieved through national reintegration. 'Whatever will there is in us for Jewish survival must now be focussed on the common national future.'¹⁵

Polanyi acknowledged the dilemma of Jewish identity in the modern world but could not accept Namier's solution. On what basis should Jews aspire to statehood? Was it because they shared a 'common race, faith or language'? Forming a state of Jews could perhaps accommodate the desire for 'normality' of one percent of the world's Jews. What of the other ninety-nine percent? Statehood would not bring about 'what you consider normal in this confoundedly abnormal world', Polanyi told Namier; the logic of statehood only led to the 'absurdity of Zionism.'¹⁶ Polanyi added that while he admired the courage of the *halutsim*, the pioneers who settled *Eretz Israel*, he felt sorry for Jews who 'expect to buy self-respect in sending cheques to that country'. He regretted that those who promoted this 'noble adventure' believed themselves entitled 'to give the law to Jews in general'. Polanyi resolved to oppose 'a revival of the Ghetto spirit' in which some Jews persecuted others for learning 'worldly languages.'

Polanyi then developed what he believed to be his strongest counter-argument to Zionism. National pride had led to many great achievements in world history but Jews were the exception: the greatest Jewish achievements were carried out by those who rejected Judaism. 'Jews who were not satisfied to be Jews' had made tremendous contributions to humanity. This included Christianity, formed by 'those Jews who conceived the idea of World Religion against their tribalist persecutors'. Meanwhile, 'those who were well satisfied to be Jews' had expanded to a 'sombre squalid mass, of which we all, all, including very good Zionists, feel deeply ashamed'. Polanyi acknowledged that 'New Palestine might yet make Jewish history in the future. God help it'. But he defended the place of the 'assimilants' who 'have made Jewish history' as well. These 'pioneers of modern Jewry' who dared to become 'different from Jews and similar to the non-Jews' had not only been

‘treated with contempt by the righteous whom they left behind’ but also agonised over a lifestyle of ‘concealment and untruthfulness.’¹⁷

Namier had in making the case for a Jewish state invoked provocative issues about the place and future of Jews and Polanyi responded. Polanyi was not interested in solving a particular problem, as he did when he wrote about economics, but defended assimilation as a meaningful assertion of Jewish identity. It was an assertion he himself had tried to live.

Non-Jewish Jews

In a lecture to the Jewish Medical Society in Liverpool in January 1936, Polanyi explained that his impression of Herzl’s ideas reflected his outlook as a ‘non-Jewish Jew.’¹⁸ Herzl was not the first to use the word Zionism but came to be regarded as the founder of the movement because he succeeded in translating the idea of a Jewish State into an international programme. He convened in 1897 the First Zionist Congress in Basle and founded the World Zionist Organisation. ‘When I look back to my childhood’, Polanyi recalled that January night, ‘...I am astonished to discover with what supreme overbearance the successfully assimilated milieu in which I was brought up looked upon Herzl’s ideas. Assimilation had become a passion directed toward a luminous ideal, the perfectly non-Jewish Jew. Zionism, with its implications of a return to primeval habits, was simply horrifying.’¹⁹

Polanyi was born in 1891 in Budapest, the second capital of Austria-Hungary under the Habsburgs. His family resided in a grand house on *Andrássy út*, the address for the city’s wealthiest Jewish families. The family’s original name, since Emperor Josef’s edict of 1782 requiring Jews to take surnames, was Pollacsek. Adolf Pollacsek, Polanyi’s grandfather, operated a flour mill, and Polanyi’s father, Mihály, a civil engineer, multiplied the family fortune building railways. Polanyi’s mother, neé Cecile Wohl, was the daughter of a scholar at the rabbinical college in Vilna. She organised a salon, attended by the brightest lights in the Budapest intellectual scene.²⁰ Neither encouraged the practise of Judaism. They did not observe Jewish holidays or keep kosher. Polanyi did not attend a Jewish school, recite prayers in synagogue, or study Hebrew to become bar mitzvah, the traditional entrance into Jewish community life. The family spoke German, and he learned, from tutors in his home, English and French. He attended Trefort Street Gymnasium, the best in Budapest; it was also known as ‘the Minta’, a reference to its status as a model gymnasium. In 1919, Polanyi received baptism in the Catholic Church, before travelling to Germany to pursue a career in research chemistry. He married Magda Kémeny two years later, a Catholic, in a civil ceremony in Berlin.²¹

In what sense then could Polanyi have thought of himself as Jewish? The historian Eric Hobsbawm grew up in 1920s Vienna and his sense of Jewish identity offers some insight into Polanyi’s. Hobsbawm’s family took no notice of Shabbat, Jewish holidays, or dietary laws. He received minimal instruction in Judaism, something less than an hour a week at the gymnasium. He suffered nothing personally in the way of anti-Semitism and lived a life completely remote from the beliefs and practises of Judaism. Yet, as Hobsbawm writes in his autobiography, ‘though entirely unobservant, we nevertheless knew that we were, and could not get away from being, Jews.’²² On one occasion at about ten years of age, after he had made a remark about a relative’s behaviour being ‘typically Jewish’, his mother told him firmly: ‘You must never do anything, or seem to do anything that might suggest you are ashamed of being a Jew’. He aimed to live by this ever since despite his indifference to religion and virtually lifelong commitment to communism.²³

Vienna's non-Jewish Jews advanced the progressive Viennese imagination. The progressives were militantly secular, politically radical, and great believers in social reform, popular education, and technological progress. They renounced ethnic identity as prerequisite for assimilation. Jews comprised the majority of progressives in Vienna, although they would have denied that they constituted a nationality.²⁴ For Jews to be German or Hungarian in the context of Austria-Hungary did not express a political or national project, but a cultural project. 'It meant', as Hobsbawm puts it, 'leaving behind the backwardness and isolation of the *shtetls* and *shuls* to join the modern world'. The leaders of the town of Brody, in Galicia, a population in which eight of ten was Jewish, had petitioned the emperor years earlier to make the language of school education German, not because they aspired to become Teutonic but because they wanted to distance themselves from the Yiddish-speaking Talmudists and Hasidim. Middle and upper class Jews, whose parents had migrated from Polish, Czech, and Hungarian provinces demarcated themselves from the 'Eastern Jews' for this same reason.²⁵

This, I think, explains something very important about Polanyi's outlook and particularly his views of Zionism. As might be expected from an advocate of assimilation, Polanyi did not write his social philosophy in a self-consciously Jewish way. There are no Hebrew words or quotations from rabbis. He makes a point, in fact, of including references to Christian themes, and thereby affirming his non-Jewish status.²⁶ Yet in his reaction to the views of Zionists, he reveals how he thought of himself in relation to other Jews; a community he claims to have distanced himself from still retains a hold on him. As he explained in his letter to Namier, he feels 'ashamed' of the Eastern Jews. He defends assimilation as the best and most appropriate way of life for Jews, but admits to feeling guilty about living a life of 'concealment and untruthfulness'. He concludes with a personal confession: 'Every assimilated Jew has one time or another gone through the shameful experience of being glad not to be taken for a Jew. And many have sinned beyond that.'²⁷

Polanyi credited Herzl as having been 'the first to recognise that assimilation had proved a failure'. Polanyi accepted that if Jews succeeded in building a community of their own in Palestine, it would represent a 'great moral asset'. But he doubted that returning to the land would offer Jews any more of a 'chance to acquire dignity' than those who remained in the Diaspora. Some of them had simply been attracted, he suggested, by the possibility of escaping from the 'standard of conduct' imposed on them by their non-Jewish surroundings.²⁸

The most 'horrifying' part of Herzl's ideas was its allusion to Jewish messianism. For Polanyi, it invoked the history of the medieval period when Talmud scholars scoured biblical texts for clues about the year of Messiah's appearance. The tradition of messianic calculation continued into the early modern period. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several messianic treatises appeared, along with several individuals claiming Messiah status and offering to lead a return to the land. In the middle of the seventeenth century, the Cossack rebellion that devastated Polish Jews heightened the yearning for national salvation, and in 1665 the arrival of Shabbetai Tzevi electrified the Jewish world. Claiming to be the Messiah, he attracted a large number of followers before converting to Islam and evoking widespread despair and disillusionment.²⁹ As Polanyi saw it, the Jewish people had produced nothing of human value during five hundred years of their history; rabbinic scholarship had wasted itself 'elaborating fruitless Talmudist speculations' and 'crude, fanatical visions of a national Messiah.'³⁰

Messianism confirmed what Polanyi believed was the backwardness of a Jewish population closer to home: 'a mass of orthodox Jewry, speaking Yiddish, their men with forelocks, their married women with wigs over their shaven skulls'. The non-assimilated recalled 'the original mass of medieval degradation and mental narrowness.'³¹ During the eighteenth century, messianic expectation continued to resonate with the *Hasidim*,

a movement that spread out from the Ukraine. The Hasidic version of rabbis, or *rebes*, rejected the impersonal intellectual approach of the Talmudists. They taught their followers through proverbs, myths, songs, and allegorical tales. Aside from their long beards and floor-length coats, they are often remembered for their ‘wonder tales’; accounts of angels descending from heaven to assist a poor Jewish water-carrier and glimpses of the prophet Elijah walking among the shtetls. A popular Yiddish song describes how when the rebe dances, all the Hasidim follow his lead and dance; when the rebe sings, all the Hasidim sing as well; when he sleeps, they sleep, when he sneezes, they all sneeze together.³² Some rebes were rumoured to have performed miracles and pilgrims travelled great distance to seek advice or a blessing.

How, Polanyi wondered, could Zionists ‘justify a return to Messianic traditions, from which the best of our forefathers 100 and 150 years ago turned away with such force and contempt?’³³ How could a ‘faith which seemed outworn and even degrading to men who were brought up in it’ possibly justify the actions of their descendents having been educated in western civilisation? He decided that Zionist leaders were simply insincere. Despite the ‘high emphasis on the Jewish religion and Messianic traditions’, most had little commitment to Judaism or to *Eretz Yisrael*. The appeals to an eternal faith in the Jews’ return to the land expressed no real conviction, Polanyi said. Most Zionists had no intention of emulating the pioneers and settling in the Land of Israel themselves; they only preached to others about its spiritual merits. ‘A faith is not real unless we are bound to live by its precepts. And we must live it by ourselves; not make others live by it on our behalf.’³⁴

Anglo-Zionism

Polanyi’s ‘Jewish Problems’ article originated as a lecture. In November 1942, he addressed the Manchester Branch of the Trades Advisory Council of the Boards of Deputies of British Jews. Zionism was, at the time, the foremost issue for British Jews concerned about Jews in Germany.

Beginning in March 1933, British Jews began reading about the Nazi terror directed at German Jews.³⁵ During the next few months, they organised committees to boycott German imports and made plans to lobby the Foreign Office in an effort to pressure the German government. By 1939, it had become increasingly clear that economic and diplomatic strategies were not working and the desire to aid Jews terrorised by Hitlerism centred on establishing Jewish national sovereignty.³⁶ As Polanyi told his Manchester audience, the idea that had attracted so little interest a few years earlier had acquired new and urgent importance. ‘When Hitler condemned all Jews in Germany—the orthodox, the reformed, the baptised and even those with only a fraction of Jewish blood alike—to the same common destruction, Zionism suddenly appeared in a new prophetic light.’³⁷

Prior to the war, the Board of Deputies of British Jews regarded Zionism not merely as irrelevant, but harmful. The leadership believed that Zionists endangered rights won by Jews over many decades and interfered with their loyalties as British subjects. Anti-Semitism had not been the problem in Britain it was on the Continent and British Jews affirmed their Anglo-Jewish heritage.³⁸ The Board of Deputies of British Jews sought to counter-act anti-Semitism by calling on British Jews to keep a low profile. In October 1933, the president of the board, Neville Laski, blamed Jews who ‘by their own conduct fostered anti-Semitism.’³⁹ Only after 1938, the year of Kristallnacht, did the Board consider Zionism. In December 1939, Selig Brodetsky became the new president. Brodetsky, who represented a group of Zionists connected to Anglo-Jewry’s elite, shared the organisation’s overall desire to maintain Anglo-Jewry as a tolerated minority in Britain. He expressed a form of Anglo-Zionism which sought to accommodate the call for a Jewish State within the

framework of British interests.⁴⁰ Zionists did not succeed in capturing a majority of the Board of Deputies until 1943.⁴¹

Much of what Polanyi said in opposition to Zionism would have resonated with his hosts. Polanyi distanced himself from Jewish nationalism and clarified his views of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in Palestine: whatever Jewish settlers accomplished there should occur within the larger political framework of the British Empire. Clearly, Polanyi had come to think of the British Empire with some affection. After his initial reluctance to accept a post at a provincial university, he came to appreciate Great Britain. It had extended hospitality to him as a refugee from Hitler's Germany. It represented, to Polanyi along with many other central and eastern European Jews, the most civilised and humane society in the world. 'Jews are still backward in many ways, and have yet more to learn from the great nations who built up our modern civilisation', Polanyi said.⁴²

German totalitarianism and British democracy were at war and he was eager to defend the place of Jews in this effort. There was an outbreak of public anti-Semitism in Britain after the start of the war; specifically, insinuations that Jews were prominent in the black market and were not doing their full share in the military services.⁴³ When in Germany, Polanyi had resigned his position at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical and Electrical Chemistry in April 1933 as a protest against National Socialist policy against Jews. He numbered among a few Jewish scientists who would have been, technically speaking, exempt from the law seeking to remove Jews from government service, but resigned because he believed himself obligated to defend the dignity of Jews.⁴⁴ In Britain, following the outbreak of war in 1939, Polanyi offered his scientific talents to allied military needs, but was prohibited from contributing. He volunteered as a fire-watcher during bombing raids.⁴⁵

Polanyi conceded some benefit to establishing a Jewish community in Palestine but distanced himself from what he regarded as militant Jewish patriotism. He recognised the matchless spiritual significance of the Holy Land. It was bound to inspire, particularly when enjoined to a renaissance of Hebrew language and culture. He admired the *halutsim*. The pioneers who had settled the land after the First World War had given themselves to agricultural labour, draining swamps and establishing settlements. 'So far I will go, with willing admiration for settlers and organisers alike. I can see good reason for supporting their scheme so long as it does not conflict with more important interests.'⁴⁶ But he scolded 'some minor Jewish publicists' for 'disgracing their fellows' with insincere rhetoric about Jewish aspirations. In particular, he pointed to 'a Zionist leader'—he had Namier in his sites but did not mention him by name—who had encouraged Jews to think about themselves as Jews first and only second as human beings.⁴⁷ 'Such defiance only frightens our friends, while causing delight to our enemies.'⁴⁸ The Zionists appeal to nationalism represented a misguided attempt to instil a national identity; it had in the past spelled disaster for Jews. 'National life is a deep source of strength... But national life is not all; there is plenty outside it.'⁴⁹

Polanyi reiterated in his Manchester lecture themes he had developed in his Liverpool lecture. He described how a Jewish tendency in the nineteenth century to become 'violent nationalists' had contributed to the calamities of the twentieth. Nationalism of the National Socialist kind originated in the cafés of Munich, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and Budapest after 1918, where nihilist intellectuals, many of them Jewish, spent so much time in speculation and gossip.⁵⁰ Polanyi reviewed the student radicalism in Vienna and nationalist tensions within Austria-Hungary. In 1880, Victor Adler, Heinrich Friedjung, and George von Schönerer met at Linz to formulate the *deutschnational* movement. The charter, which became known as the Linz Programme, centred on demands for radical social and political reform as well as for the satisfaction of extreme German

nationalist ambitions. The Linz programme, Polanyi said, ‘engendered the spirit of Hitler, who, a direct descendent of Friedjung’s mind’ determined to conquer the world for anti-Semitism. ‘The sad collapse of this perverse effort came with almost comic swiftness;’ two years after the Linz meeting, the programme was adopted by the pan-German party ‘with one addition only, “that no Jew could be a member of the party”’.⁵¹

At some point in the future, Polanyi speculated, the part of Jews in socialist revolution might bring them honour. But ‘at the moment, I can see only the miseries of the case’. The rise of anti-Semitism had driven Jews such as Adler and Friedjung from the movement. Adler, who founded the Austrian Socialist Party, turned to the ideas of two other Jews, Ferdinand Lassalle and Karl Marx. Polanyi saw the attraction of Jews to socialism as a feature of ‘militant internationalism’, resulting from ‘Jewish craving for full participation in civic life’. Adler pursued socialism out of ‘Jewish resentment and Jewish homesickness’. He felt sure that many Jews he had met would not have become communists or socialists if they had never been made aware of the fact that they were Jews. The ‘revolutionary solution’ advocated by the left was no less misguided than the attempt at a nationalist solution. Overthrowing civilisation in an attempt to resolve the Jewish situation spoke to a ‘miserable egocentrism’ on the part of Jewish intellectuals.⁵²

Polanyi chided the Zionists for professing to concern themselves with preserving the continuity of Jewish life generally rather than assisting individual refugees and their families, or presumably, civilian activities taken in military defence of Britain generally. He argued that the Zionist claim to be interested in securing the future for the ‘nation’ of Jews should not be taken literally. Jewish organisations had ceased to complain about the oppression of the largest population of Jews, those living in the Soviet Union. He made several trips to the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1935 and was familiar with the Soviet attitude toward Jews. If the Zionists believed the Soviets had abolished anti-Semitism, the Zionists were wrong. The Soviets prohibited Zionism, forbade use of Hebrew, and suppressed the practise of Judaism.

Liberal Critic?

Polanyi’s ‘Jewish Problems’ article became his only publication on Zionism. In publishing his Manchester lecture, he established himself as a liberal critic of Zionism.

As Walter Laqueur explains, the most plausible case against Zionism, and the most often heard until the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, concerned the ‘utopian’ character of the Zionist vision.⁵³ Critics insisted that Jews had been scattered throughout the world over a period of centuries and that nothing could be done to reverse this historic and sociological process. Western civilisation was leading toward a cosmopolitan culture; social and economic developments were breaking down national distinctions. Further, it was simply a case of too many Jews. Zionists speculated that several hundred thousand, and perhaps as many as a million, Jews might settle in Palestine, but the ‘Jewish problem’ in Eastern Europe had to do with millions, not hundreds of thousands. ‘The Jewish question in the West would ultimately be solved by assimilation; as for the situation in East Europe, no one had an answer.’⁵⁴

Except that in Polanyi’s case ‘liberal critic’ is too simple. Eric Hobsbawm did not support Zionism either—‘Communist Jews, were of course, anti-Zionist on principle.’⁵⁵ For Hobsbawm, the principle was internationalism, the idea that communism was a movement for all people and not any particular section of it. He recalled how many young Jews who had started out as Zionists became communists because they recognised however visible the victimisation of Jews, it was only part of universal oppression. Or as one former Zionist

turned communist put it: 'the smaller aim has to give way to the bigger.'⁵⁶ Polanyi seems to be making this argument, or a version of it, as well. The Jews who emigrated to Palestine would 'make no mark in Jewish history', he predicted, because by isolating themselves within an inward-looking Judaism, they would recreate the tribalist outlook that contributed to their isolation. 'The Jews' in Polanyi's understanding 'are descendants of a religious tribe which having given the Bible to the world, ran into heavy conflict with the later developments of its own ideas, and was ever since left more or less outside the main flow of humanity.'⁵⁷ Yet Polanyi has something more in mind than a political programme; his idea of a bigger purpose has to do his own vision of the place and future of Jews in the world.

After ridiculing Jewish belief in a messianic age, Polanyi offers his own vision of a cosmopolitan commonwealth in which national identity would wither away. The Zionists had, in attempting to make national identity the basis for Jewish identity, wagered their future on a political order headed for obsolescence. Nationalism would give way to cosmopolitanism in the decades after the war. Jews should be imagining the basis for cultural life in a world without nation-states which, he surmised, would not survive in the aftermath of Hitlerism. 'Whatever will be left of Europe after Hitler has finished with it will be under international organisation', he said.⁵⁸ Jews had a special place in this reconstruction *as Jews*. The time might come when Christianity, confronted by the 'religions of brutality', might hang in the balance. 'Jews might remember then that this religion was founded by their ancestors, and that in upholding Christianity they might fulfil their international mission.'⁵⁹

He concluded his Manchester speech with reference to this same vision of an emerging international federation. 'The world is now heading towards a western commonwealth, comprising Europe and North America, in which men of a cosmopolitan kind will be needed'. Jews, given their experience in promoting 'universal thought', first Christianity and second socialism, would be valuable to this 'Western Commonwealth of the future' which would likely be threatened by particularist dissensions.⁶⁰ Polanyi surmised that it would 'resemble the Roman Empire about the time of Constantine'. This political order would be based on the rule of law, equal citizenship, and 'a religion rather similar to early Christianity with its admixture of Greek philosophy.'⁶¹ The image Polanyi invents here is striking. The second millennium ends where the first began: an empire in which people had no consciousness of national identity and in which Christianity was understood as a sect of Judaism.⁶²

In its religious aspect, this conception resembles Namier's vision of a future reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity. Namier articulated this idea in his essay 'The Jews' originally published in November 1941. How long Namier had thought about the issue is not clear. He had an interest in Christianity, and the formative centuries of Christianity in particular, since his student years at Balliol.⁶³ He had come to think of Judaism and Christianity as something along the lines of two branches of a common faith: 'Nineteen centuries ago our people divided: one branch, the Hebrew Nazarenes, carried into the world our national faith coupled with their new tidings, the other, as a closed community, preserved the old tradition. Yet both were part of one nation, and both are part of our national history. Only by seeing them as one whole shall we recover the full sense and greatness of our history.'⁶⁴ The 'branch' that went the way of the Gentiles transformed these other nations and left them an enduring and binding creed. The other branch became the 'remant', awaiting return from exile to the land.⁶⁵

In 1947, Namier married a Christian and received baptism into the Anglican church, resulting in the loss of Weizmann's friendship. At a London party hosted to 'find common ground between enthusiastic

Christians and persecuted Jews’,⁶⁶ Namier met Julia de Beauobre, a Russian émigré who had arrived in England during the 1930s after many years in Stalin’s labour camps. She was a devoted Christian and insisted on his baptism as prerequisite to their wedding. Namier’s new status as a ‘baptised Jew’ made him ‘more Zionist than ever’, Blanche Dugdale (Lord Balfour’s niece) told Weizmann; Namier was convinced about the need to pursue a fusion of Christianity and Judaism and that this could only happen in *Eretz Israel*.⁶⁷ Weizmann could not see anything positive in Namier’s apostasy. In changing his affiliation from the Jewish religion to Christianity, Namier had decided to sever connections with his people. Abandoning the weak for the strong simply and unavoidably meant betrayal. ‘What he tells you about the integration of Christianity and Judaism are meaningless phrases which do not make this act any better or beautiful. It is a bad thing at all times...’⁶⁸

Polanyi knew of Namier’s effort to find common ground between Judaism and Christianity. His Manchester lecture of 1942 responded to Namier’s collection of essays *Conflicts*, which appeared earlier that year. Namier’s ‘The Jews’ appeared in this book and Polanyi refers to the book at several points in his essay. What Polanyi’s thought about this aspect of Namier’s writing is difficult to say. Polanyi does not comment on Namier’s idea concerning the joining-up of Judaism and Christianity, nor is there in the archived correspondence between Polanyi and Namier anything to suggest that Polanyi appreciated this aspect of Namier’s outlook.⁷⁰ It also is important to recognise that Polanyi did not seek to integrate his comments about a future western commonwealth within his wider social philosophy (as it appears in his *The Study of Man*, for instance). This reference expressed the expectation, shared by many in Britain during the later years of the war, that dramatic social reconstruction and political realignment would follow the Allies’ success over Nazism.

Conclusion

It is difficult to read some of the statements Polanyi makes in opposition to Zionism. He published them at a time when Hitler had intensified the war against the Jews in Europe and the British took active steps to prevent their emigration to the Yishuv. Polanyi chose not to think of Zionism in its immediate context but within a more personal context. Zionism, and particularly the ideas of Lewis Namier, provoked a committed and passionate response. Namier dealt with issues at the centre of Jewish identity in the modern world and in this way recalled an issue Polanyi had settled, or perhaps had wanted to settle, earlier in his life. To understand his response, it is necessary to frame his comments not around events during the time in which he wrote them, but around events that had occurred before the Second World War, before Hitler, before the demise of Austria-Hungary. To write his critique of Zionism, Polanyi turned the clock back fifty years.

Essentially, Polanyi disagreed with Namier’s solution but acknowledged that he had specified an important problem. Polanyi believed that the threat to Jews as individuals was bigger than the collective solution of nationhood. Modernity represented a deeper and tougher dilemma that could only be negotiated on individual terms. In making the case for a Jewish state as the solution to anti-Semitism, Zionists had thrown up an array of mistaken identities, defining Jewishness in political, religious, and cultural terms. Polanyi rejected this as inward-looking, even reactionary; he pursued an outward-looking understanding based on the relationship of Jews to non-Jews. Polanyi saw assimilated Jews not as running away or denying Jewish identity, but instead, as pursuing a truer and more significant expression of Jewishness. Polanyi regarded the assimilationists and their building of in-roads to the modern world as the moral equivalent of the pioneers who settled the land of Israel and made it possible for further immigration.

Polanyi's lack of support for Zionism reflected his outlook as a non-Jewish Jew. Polanyi grew up in a milieu not unlike many other middle-class and upper-class Jews in Austria-Hungary: non-observant, Hungarian or German acculturated. From this perspective, Herzl seemed to be advocating a return to the *wunderrabbis* and *yeshivabokhers*. It was as if the Zionists had wanted to reverse Jewish history, to return to a pre-enlightenment Jewish world organised under 'the Ghetto spirit'. Polanyi did not accept the theory that the only difference between Jews and non-Jews was religion and that in converting one could make a discrete and uncomplicated exit from the Jewish world. Converted Jews, even those who had never experienced Jewish life via the practise of Judaism, maintained bonds of kinship requiring mutual aid. Polanyi knew because he experienced some anxiety in distancing himself from poorer Jews; he had felt the sting of rejection from Jewish traditionalists who questioned his Jewishness.

Polanyi was not so much anti-Zionist as non-Zionist. He had no contempt for Zionists nor did he insist that they abandon their project. He admired the courage and tenacity of actual Zionists, the pioneers who emigrated to the Land of Israel, in making their vision a reality. Polanyi conceded the benefit to Jews of establishing a Jewish community in Palestine but believed that this community should be built within the overall framework of the British Mandate. In this he shared the view of Anglo-Jewry's elite who resisted Zionism because it interfered with Jewish loyalty as British subjects. To Polanyi's ears, Jewish patriotism had the sound of the reckless nationalism advocated by Central Europe's café intellectuals before the First World War. This misguided yearning for national identity on the part of Jewish intellectuals had in the nineteenth century contributed to currents of radicalism that fuelled the war against the Jews in the twentieth. He drew on his own experience as a Jew to understand how Zionists, socialists, and others came to their way of looking at the world.

In a sense, Polanyi can be read as a liberal critic of Zionism, a critic who discounted the idea of a Jewish state because of its utopian aspects. However, Polanyi offered an alternative to Zionism as 'utopian' as the Zionists' vision of a planting a European nation-state in the Middle East. Polanyi imagined a western commonwealth that would transcend national boundaries. In this federation, free of religious superstition and ethnic prejudice, no one would question Jewish origins or challenge Jews' claims to possessing no ethnic identity at all. The political configuration would resemble an empire in the ancient world, and its prevailing religious outlook something akin to Second Temple Judaism, when the line between Jews and Christians was less clearly drawn. And, Polanyi went so far as to suggest that Jews had a major historical role in making this happen.

Endnotes

¹ This essay has also been reprinted in R.T. Allen (ed) *Society, Economics and Philosophy: Selected Papers* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1997). I am working from a manuscript version entitled: 'Jewish Problems: A Tradition Rejected', in the archive collection. Michael Polanyi Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library, Box 31, Folder 1.

² Polanyi's 'Jewish Problems: A Tradition Rejected' manuscript includes a handwritten note on the cover page indicating that it has been 'Typed out from "The Political Quarterly"' on 8 September 1947. The fact of this typescript containing Polanyi's handwritten editorial changes indicates that Polanyi had not changed his views at this date.

³ Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People*. (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp.225-233; Norman Rose, 'The Arab Rulers and Palestine, 1936: The British Reaction', *Journal of Modern History* 44 (1972), pp. 213-231.

⁴ Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 13.

⁵ The collapse of Austria-Hungary, the rise of Hitlerism, and the outbreak of war forced Jewish intellectuals out of Central Europe. Many of these émigrés did not, as Malachi Hacoen has observed, engage in open discussion of their problems. Instead, they developed a ‘coded discourse’ to express their anxieties as intellectuals of Jewish origin. While the extent to which Polanyi engaged in such coded discourse has yet to be explored, he was, I think, somewhat of an exception to this in the sense that he lectured and published on Jewish issues per se. Malachi Hacoen, ‘Dilemmas of Cosmopolitanism: Karl Popper, Jewish Identity, and Central European Culture’, *Journal of Modern History* 71 (1999), pp. 132, 134.

⁶ In a separate essay, I explore the influence of Polanyi’s Jewish identity on his philosophy of science; particularly, his reference to the ‘baptised Jew’ as a model for the scientist-as-discoverer. Paul Knepper, ‘Michael Polanyi and Jewish Identity’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 35 (2005), 263-293.

⁷ Israel M. Sieff, ‘The Manchester Period’, in Meyer Weisgal and Joel Carmichael (eds) *Chaim Weizmann: A Biography by Several Hands*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962).

⁸ Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 37-38.

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 63.

¹⁰ There is a letter dated 7th July 1934 in the Polanyi archives in which Namier tells Polanyi there may be a place for ‘Miss Werner’ in a ‘big chemical firm’. Namier explains that the position is currently held by ‘another German-Jewish refugee’ who is likely to leave it on account of marrying a British subject. Michael Polanyi, Letter to Namier 7 July 1934. Michael Polanyi Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library, Box 2, Folder 17.

¹¹ Michael Polanyi, Letter to Namier 27 May 1934. Michael Polanyi Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library, Box 2, Folder 16.

¹² Arthur Ruppin, *The Jews of the Modern World* (London: Macmillan, 1942).

¹³ Namier, ‘Introduction’ in *Jews of the Modern*, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Namier, ‘Introduction’, p. xxv.

¹⁵ Namier, ‘Introduction’, p. xxix.

¹⁶ Letter to Namier 27 May 1934.

¹⁷ Letter to Namier 27 May 1934.

¹⁸ The phrase is associated with Isaac Deutscher. A decade before he died, Deutscher gave a lecture with this title in which he discussed six Jewish heretics who were revolutionaries of modern thought, including Spinoza, Marx, and Trotsky. David Horowitz, ed., *Isaac Deutscher: The Man and His Work*. (London: Macdonald, 1971).

¹⁹ Michael Polanyi, ‘On the Position of Jews’. Address to the Jewish Medical Society, Liverpool, 21 January 1936. Michael Polanyi Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library, Box 25, Folder 8, p. 12.

²⁰ Ersébet Vezér, ‘The Polanyi Family’, in Kari Polanyi-Levitt (ed), *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi*. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990). In his description of Karl Polanyi’s family background, J.R. Stanfield says that Mihály Pollacsek ‘converted his wife and children to Protestantism’. See his *The Economic Thought of Karl Polanyi* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 1-2. He offers no specific attribution for this, but thanks Kari Polanyi-Levitt for ‘helping me to avoid the more egregious errors in the biographical synopsis of Polanyi’. No similar statement appears in Vezér’s biography, also edited by Polanyi-Levitt.

²¹ William Scott, ‘At the Wheel of the World: The Life and Times of Michael Polanyi’, *Tradition and Discovery* 25 (1998-1999), pp. 10-24.

²² Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*. (London: Abacus, 2002), p. 21.

²³ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 24.

²⁴ Malachi Hacoen, 'Karl Popper in Exile: The Viennese Progressive Imagination and the Making of the Open Society', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 26 (1996), p. 469.

²⁵ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 22.

²⁶ This point has been made by Martin Moleski, Polanyi's biographer, who kindly replied to an email enquiry from me concerning the issue of Jewish identity.

²⁷ Letter to Namier 27 May 1934. There is a letter in the *Manchester Guardian* collection at the University of Manchester from Magda Polanyi to the editor, A.P. Wadsworth, in which she defends the dignity of Jewish people. She suggests that Michael would have agreed with her in her desire to publish a response. Specifically, she writes to say that she became 'very worked up' by a review of Arthur Koestler's *The Invisible Writing* the paper had published that morning. While she distances herself from Koestler's views, she believes that the reviewer, Maurice Cranston, had been unfair in his critique and out-of-line in his commenting that Koestler's publisher was Jewish. 'What has this got to do with it—unless the reviewer thinks that it has'. Magda Polanyi to A.P. Wadsworth 28 June 1954. Manchester Guardian Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, B/P 194/2.

²⁸ Polanyi, 'On the Position', p. 12.

²⁹ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Jewish Messiah* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1997), pp. 101-149.

³⁰ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 4.

³¹ Polanyi, 'Jewish problems', p. 9.

³² Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), p. 51.

³³ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 12.

³⁴ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', pp. 14-15.

³⁵ In the pre-war period, when there was free communication between Britain and Germany, information about Nazi atrocities was available. The *Manchester Guardian*, in fact, gave extensive coverage to Nazi crimes.

³⁶ Sharon Gewirtz, 'Anglo-Jewish Responses to Nazi Germany 1933-39: The Anti-nazi Boycott and the Board of Deputies of British Jews', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26 (1991): 255-276.

³⁷ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 12.

³⁸ Walter Laqueur, 'Zionism and its Liberal Critics, 1896-1948', *Journal of Contemporary History* 6 (1971): 161-182.

³⁹ Geoffrey Alderman, *The Jewish Community in British Politics*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 121.

⁴⁰ Gewirtz, 'Anglo-Jewish Responses', pp. 270-271.

⁴¹ Bernard Wasserstein, 'Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Great Britain During the Nazi Era', in Randolph Braham (ed), *Jewish Leadership During the Nazi Era*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 42.

⁴² Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 16.

⁴³ Wasserstein, 'Jewish leadership', p. 41.

⁴⁴ Stefania Jha, *Reconsidering Michael Polanyi's Philosophy*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), p. 16. Like his colleague and friend, Fritz Haber, Polanyi could have remained in his position given an exemption in the Nazi civil service law of 7 April 1933 (intended to eliminate Jews and socialists from government posts) for veterans of the First World War (which would likely have recognised his service as a medical officer). See my article 'Michael Polanyi and Jewish Identity' for further discussion of this point.

⁴⁵ Scott, 'At the Wheel', p. 21.

⁴⁶ Polanyi, 'On the Position', p. 13.

⁴⁷ Namier offers this anecdote in *Conflicts* (London: Macmillan, 1942), p. 163. It had first appeared

in 'Zionist Review' during 1941.

⁴⁸ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', pp. 15, 17.

⁴⁹ Polanyi, 'On the Position', p. 15.

⁵⁰ Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), p. 129.

⁵¹ Polanyi, 'On the Position', p. 7.

⁵² Polanyi, 'On the Position', pp. 8, 9, 10.

⁵³ Laqueur, 'Zionism', pp.161-182.

⁵⁴ Laqueur, 'Zionism', p. 162.

⁵⁵ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, pp. 172-173.

⁵⁶ Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 16.

⁵⁸ Polanyi, 'On the Position', p. 16.

⁵⁹ Polanyi, 'On the Position', p. 16.

⁶⁰ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 19.

⁶¹ Polanyi, 'Jewish Problems', p. 19.

⁶² There is also Polanyi's conclusion to 'The Perils of Inconsistency' . In the last paragraph, Polanyi describes the influence of Christian Messianism. His reference here to modern thought as an unstable compound of 'Christian beliefs and Greek doubts' invokes a concept not unlike Namier's theory of transference theory. The combination of faith and scepticism, brought about by the fusion of Christian beliefs and Greek doubt, animated western civilisation. It produced 'moral inversion', by directing the heritage of moral passion for materialistic and totalitarian purposes, the chisel of scepticism driven by the hammer of social passion. The formula was unavailable in the ancient world, 'before Christianity had set alight new vast moral hopes in the heart of mankind' .Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, p. 135.

⁶³ Namier, *Lewis Namier*, p. 261.

⁶⁴ Lewis Namier, *Conflicts* (London: Macmillan, 1942), p. 134.

⁶⁵ Namier, *Conflicts*, pp. 134-135.

⁶⁶ Namier, *Lewis Namier*, p. 248.

⁶⁷ Norman Rose, *Lewis Namier and Zionism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 149.

⁶⁸ Rose, *Lewis Namier*, p. 146.

⁶⁹ The handlist of the Namier papers held at the University of Manchester contains no reference to Michael Polanyi.