

# Ben-Gurion: The Man Who Willed A State

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Observation

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July 1 2020

## About the author

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When David Ben-Gurion read Israel's Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948, he did so under a portrait of Theodore Herzl, whom he hailed as "visionary of the Jewish state." The founder of political Zionism—really the founder of modern Jewish diplomacy and politics—Herzl had died 44 years earlier, in 1904. Though Ben-Gurion had always revered Herzl, proponents of the left-wing Zionism in which Ben-Gurion had grown up had had vicious quarrels with Herzl during his lifetime. Should they accept a British territory in East Africa as a national home? Should Zionism prioritize international diplomacy, as Herzl insisted, or focus on building communities and draining swamps, as many East European Zionists argued? The fights over these questions surely contributed to the health difficulties that sent him to an early grave.

By the spring of 1948, however, the memory of Herzl stood above the partisan disputes that would almost bring the new state to the brink of civil war in the coming months. Everyone assembled in the Tel Aviv museum that Friday afternoon recognized that without Herzl none of what was transpiring would have been possible.

Forty-six years after the death of David Ben-Gurion, a similar process of canonization is underway for Israel's first prime minister. In the last election, the political party of the Sephardi Orthodox, Shas, long considered hostile to the Ashkenazi secular elite, released a campaign ad featuring footage of Ben-Gurion declaring the Jewish state. Shas, the ad implied, would be the party best positioned to advance Ben-Gurion's legacy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hails from a very different political family, one which suffered a great deal of uncharitable attacks at the hands of Ben-Gurion and his allies. And yet he too has praised Ben-Gurion as a "great leader of the Jewish people."

Ben-Gurion's influence over Israel is immense, and has always been so. Arriving in Ottoman Palestine without a lira in 1906, Ben-Gurion rose from activist to union boss to leader of the Zionist movement in Palestine and finally leader of Zionism as a whole. He was the country's first prime minister from 1948 until 1963 with only a brief interregnum. In the early years his power verged on the absolute. As defense minister and commander-in-chief he presided over the building of the state's army and its strategy in the 1948 War of Independence, the Suez War of 1956, and other military engagements. He also aspired to be the teacher and chief ideologue of the new state and the new way of life for the Jews it was supposed to guarantee, as evidenced by his promotion of Bible study in the 1950s, as well as by his move to the Negev Desert, with which he aimed to set the example of noble rusticity that he hoped the state would continue to perpetuate.

To study the life of David Ben-Gurion is therefore to study the soul of Israel.

Tom Segev's new biography, *A State at Any Cost*, well translated by Haim Watzman, enables that task. As a work of scholarship, it perhaps does not displace the mammoth four-volume work by the late Shabtai Tevet. Yet it will unquestionably become the standard single volume work. (Also valuable is *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel*, the biography by Anita Shapira published in English in 2014, but it is marred a bit by her having been under the personal and ideological sway of the "Old Man," as Israelis called him, semi-affectionately, when he was not even so old.)

By contrast with Shapira's perhaps overly indulgent-of-his-subjects instincts as a biographer, Segev is a member in good standing of the "new historians," a loosely affiliated group of writers—including the now somewhat renegade Benny Morris—who, beginning in the 1970s, sought to puncture "heroic myths" about the founding of the state. Segev's best known work, *The Seventh Million*, raises some pointed questions about mistreatment of Holocaust survivors in the early days of the state, though without sufficient acknowledgement of the diplomatic and political effort it required to bring Holocaust survivors, in many cases languishing in DP camps, over to the land of Israel in the first place.

In *A State at Any Cost*, Segev does not aim for a consciously "heroic" account of Ben-Gurion. He aims at cool detachment, portraying Ben-Gurion warts and all. And in the work, we read about mental-health crises, mistresses, and every outlandish statement that Ben-Gurion made during his 87 years. We also get a

glimpse of his provocative, laconic, and sometimes myopic opinions about friends, rivals, and enemies. Understandably wanting to offer a complete narrative of his entire life, Segev mentions, but does not analyze, the key moments of decision where one might best get acquainted with the principles and prudence of a political figure. (That task has been ably undertaken in the pages of *Mosaic* by Martin Kramer.)

Yet even without Segev's explicit judgment, the unfolding of Ben-Gurion's life contains lessons of its own. Segev does not much tell us what to think about Ben-Gurion, but in situating his life he puts us before Israel's indispensable man and one of the 20th century's greatest figures.

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The ascent of Ben-Gurion to the leadership of the Jewish settlement in Palestine seems less surprising than other stories of dramatic political ascent simply because there *everyone* was new. Ben-Gurion was born in 1886 as David Gruen in Plonsk, now a part Poland, then part of the Russian empire. His father had been involved in *Hov'vei Zion* ("Lovers of Zion"), the Jewish national movement popular in Eastern Europe that shared a strong kinship with other European nationalisms that developed over the second half of the 19th century. Intellectually interested but an indifferent student, by the time David was eighteen he looked to be a dangerous young man with no prospects. But he picked up work as a teacher and became involved in *Po'alei Zion*, the "Workers of Zion" movement that would form one pillar of the Zionist labor movement that he would ultimately lead. Segev wonderfully captures the stormy atmosphere of this world of "community organizing"—highly fractured as it was between various kinds of Zionism, socialism, and revolutionary anti-Tsarism. An item in a newspaper of the Bund, which opposed Zionism and sought workers' solidarity across ethnic lines, reported that at one debate between Bundists and Zionists Gruen shouted "We have weapons and we will kill you all like dogs." Fake news or not, Gruen flourished in this world of high-stakes, sometimes violent meetings about matters which—rightly as it turned out—were seen to be of life and death.

In 1906, Gruen, along with some friends, immigrated to Palestine. They were both committed to the project of building a Jewish state and despairing of any personal or political prospects abroad. These were the days of the Second Aliyah, the most ideological of the immigration waves that would settle in the then-backwater of the Ottoman empire. Soon after arriving, Gruen dubbed himself Ben-Gurion, after a 1st-century anti-Roman rebel in Jerusalem. There, while he dabbled in farming and continued to find spot work as a teacher, he ultimately found his life's purpose in political organizing.

At the time, *Po'alei Zion* had only about 150 members in Palestine, and Ben-Gurion quickly took on a leading role, helping to found its newspaper, and then becoming a political columnist for it. Though his formal education was weak, he had an outstanding capacity for work and an outstanding memory. As he would all his life, he read extremely widely, if not exactly deeply, in philosophy, science, politics, literature, and world religions. (Much later, in the 1950s, he would summarize his religious views in conversation with the Oxford don Isaiah Berlin: "Socrates, gurus, *rebbe*s—same thing, no difference, deep wisdom.") Through *Po'alei Zion* he introduced the fateful resolution calling for the establishment of a workers' union to promote Hebrew labor

in the land of Israel. But, though he first attained a degree of renown in 1911 by contributing to a volume of Zionist essays called *Yizkor*, it was his genius for union and political organizing rather than his writing that enabled Ben-Gurion's rise.

After a stint in Istanbul where he enrolled for, but did not complete, a law degree, Ben-Gurion spent much of World War I lecturing to the growing number of *Po'alei Zion* chapters in the United States. It was in New York, in 1917, that he met and married Paula Moonweis, a native of Minsk who had come to New York as a teenager. Paula herself was spirited, acerbic, and astute enough to perceive the full range of foibles and virtues found in the political circles in which Ben-Gurion moved. Their marriage contained some happy moments, and it produced three children. But Ben-Gurion, like many of the leadership of the *Yishuv* who had come from Eastern Europe, had typically revolutionary ideas about domestic life. Paula was thus also, in her lonely marriage, "long suffering."

The British conquest of Palestine in 1917, and the issuance of the Balfour Declaration the same year, opened up brighter prospects for Zionism than had existed under the Ottomans. The Balfour Declaration promised British cooperation in the establishment of a national home in Palestine, and, at least for the first several years, the British aided and encouraged the establishment of political and civil institutions, such as a Jewish Assembly of Representatives, that would in short order lead to a kind of home rule for the *Yishuv*.

Ben-Gurion, possessing not only the vision to found institutions but also the ability to sustain them by uniting varied groups into a stable coalition, took advantage. Upon his return to Palestine, he and his bride became close to Berl Katznelson, guru of the Israeli workers movement, and with his support they began to unite the various labor factions into a single party. In 1919, the Zionist Social Union of the Workers of the Land of Israel party (*Ah'dut ha-Avodah*) was formally created, standing for nationalized land, equality, and public capital. By 1930, after another merger, the movement took the name *Mapai*, the forerunner of the Labor party that would rule Israel until 1977.

Thus, Ben-Gurion ultimately became the de-facto leader of the *Yishuv* in the pre-war years by merging under his control both union business (through the *Histadrut*) and Zionist politics. Seeing labor and politics together was essential for his leadership, and, as we'll see, it reveals an orientation to centralized authority that typified his ideological views.

Segev is at his best describing those views, as well as the political character of *Ah'dut ha-Avodah* and the Israeli Labor movement as a whole. *Ah'dut ha-Avodah* willingly established itself as a "branch of the world socialist labor movement." Yet the party, like the Israeli Labor movement as a whole (excepting a quite far-left rump), quickly tampered down the class warfare that typified other socialist movements at the time.

Ben-Gurion was very much of a piece with this tendency. He was indeed a lifelong "socialist" since he saw its centralizing powers as the best way to unify a fractured and disputatious people and deploying their energies, while ensuring that he and his friends would remain on top. Yet he was never doctrinaire, and whenever in his whole career there was some clash between "socialism" and Zionism, the latter would always win out. There were pictures of Stalin in the dining halls of kibbutzim well into the 1950s, and the tradition of centralized economic planning, boasting some great successes as well as catastrophic failures,

would continue well into the history of the state. But as the late Ze'ev Sternhell has shown, one should not over-interpret the ideology that informed Ben-Gurion's leadership. The Labor Zionism that he championed was ultimately a project of national revival rather than a project for the liberation of the working class. His hatred of the urban bourgeois and commerce notwithstanding, Ben-Gurion never seriously contemplated measures that would stamp out their slow but steady growth in the state of Israel.

Another strong point of Segev's work is the depiction and analysis of the sometimes vicious quarrels between Ben-Gurion's Labor (soon called "mainstream") Zionist movement and the Revisionist movement led by Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky. In Segev's account, the quarrel between these groups before the founding of the state was in many ways more a matter of style and a contest for power than truly substantive. In the wake of the first wave of Arab violence in the early 1920s, Jabotinsky had authored a famous article called "The Iron Wall" which argued that the Arabs of Palestine, as people with a firm sense of pride, would not accept the *Yishuv*, and that the *Yishuv* had to be prepared to defend itself. If there were Labor Zionists who thought greater economic development would mean less conflict with the local Arabs, Ben-Gurion was not one of them. In 1930, six years after Jabotinsky had introduced the term "iron wall," Ben-Gurion himself adopted it; in general, he often acted in line with the substance of Jabotinsky's argument.

Segev likewise shows that even the difference between Revisionists and Labor on the question of the borders of the state has often been overstated. Yes, Jabotinsky and his followers insisted on a state on both sides of the Jordan River. Ben-Gurion made a diplomatic calculation in accepting the British government's Peel Commission partition plan of 1937, which called for the creation of both Jewish and Arab states to the west side of the Jordan River. Yet the Peel Commission fell apart, and Ben-Gurion saw clearly, over the course of the whole next decade up to and including the period of the War of Independence, that the question of the borders of the state was far more likely to be settled by force of arms than by any international agreement.

Important as his pre-state activities were, Ben-Gurion's statesmanship comes to light through decisions made at the founding of the state and in his tenure as prime minister. But when describing these years, Segev rides his "new historian" hobby horse at the expense of what might have been valuable analysis. He spends less time leading the reader through Ben-Gurion's most consequential decisions and instead marshals some evidence that in 1948 the *Yishuv* and the new state, under Ben-Gurion's leadership, conducted a more-or-less deliberate campaign of expulsion and population transfer of Arabs during the war. In a perceptive review of Segev's work in the *Wall Street Journal* and in his own writing, the historian Efraim Karsh has disputed this characterization with a good degree of evidence of his own.

My own view lies somewhere in between. It is indisputable that in some instances, in the midst of a genocidal battle being waged against the *Yishuv*, Haganah soldiers evicted Arab villagers from their homes. In many other instances, Arab villagers, encouraged by Arab notables and propaganda, left their homes even when encouraged to stay by Jewish military or political figures.

The debate about population expulsion in the 1948 war has usually been strangely parochial. Population transfer, within established countries, rightfully horrifies humane sensibilities, and the term transfer has deservedly ugly connotations. Yet Segev quotes (never-implemented) statements about transfer by Israeli

figures without explaining that population transfers were a major feature of world politics in the 20th century, corresponding with the rise of new nation-states. Nearly three and half million Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia after the end of World War II; by some estimates, the violent partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 saw at least seventeen million people take to the roads; and, of course, after the establishment of Israel, there would be a mass “transfer” of the Jews of the Middle East, expelled from their Arab lands, with pogroms often included free of charge. Any fair assessment of population movement during Israel’s War of Independence needs to be considered in light of that context.

When it comes to the substance of Ben-Gurion’s political and military leadership in the 1948 war, one cannot help but marvel at his ingenuity, bloody-mindedness, and good judgment. When in May 1948 some colleagues, like defense minister Moshe Shertok, contemplated declaring a provisional independence— independence under the rubric and indeed management of the United Nations—Ben-Gurion insisted that the Jews had to take the future into their own hands and declare a fully sovereign state. At just the right juncture in the war, he transformed the military strategy toward a successful offensive-minded approach rather than the merely “hold what you have” approach that had defined the Yishuv’s strategy since settlements had first been created. Against the views of some commanders, he insisted on diverting forces to reinforce Jerusalem, and that control of its Jewish neighborhoods to be held at all costs. One could imagine the war having gone a very different way had someone else been in charge. One might say the very same for subsequent events in the early years of the state.

Rather than discussing the rest of Ben-Gurion’s tenure as prime minister, typified at turns by instances of brilliant leadership and shocking myopia, we should conclude by looking at the side of Ben-Gurion that Segev emphasizes least of all. This is Ben-Gurion as a man of ideas and as an aspiring teacher of the nation. It is true that Ben-Gurion, above all, was concerned with gaining, wielding, and keeping power. No doubt he thought this would be good for the Jewish people on the whole. Even the political doctrine he invented—*mamlakhtiyut*—means only that the “state” should have primacy and that, by extension, he as leader of the state should be able to do what he likes without much oversight.

Yet he also aspired to leave the state with new ideas and practices that it would serve it in the years ahead. As a participant in the Second Aliyah, he believed that the Jewish state should be the ground for the creation of the new Jew. He would often, wisely and of necessity, compromise with the traditional religious and economic practices that the old Jews brought with them to the new state. Yet he hoped to maintain and perpetuate a culture where martial virtues and the spirit of the Bible would prevail. In the 1950s, noticing a certain lack of “general culture” among the young men and women of the kibbutzim and *moshavot*, and growing materialism in the cities, he tried actively to promote Bible studies and the cultivation of the desert as an antidote to both. As a reader of world classics (he called himself a disciple of Spinoza), he understood that a nation required philosophic and moral reinforcement if it were to flourish in the long term.

And yet Ben-Gurion mostly failed in this respect. The Bible contest was established, but it’s hard to say that a biblical spirit overtook the country. Materialism and declining cultural knowledge continued apace. Beautiful as it is, the Negev Desert, even the beloved Kibbutz Sdeh Boker he joined there, remain criminally underused to this day. While promoting Bible study for the general public, Ben-Gurion himself as he aged was engaged in a kind of postmodern tour through various intellectual fads, exploring mysticisms, Eastern

religions, the counsel of a psychic, and so on. Where in their later years of retirement from public life, American founders such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson devoted themselves to reading, writing, and reflecting on what they had done for the benefit of future generations, Ben-Gurion spent a good deal of time following the soulful exercise regime of a man called Moshe Feldenkrais, who taught the old man how to stand on his head. The spiritual renewal of the Jewish people would have to be borne on other shoulders.

Perhaps this would be too much to ask of any mere political leader of his time and place. Tom Segev draws out for us a Ben-Gurion in full: a man who could be petty, harsh, and stubborn, and who in the course of his career came to found or decisively shape almost every central institution that would form the state of Israel. For it was David Ben-Gurion who founded the political party that would dominate Israel for many years; it was he who founded the army that kept it safe through existential battles and directed it mostly with wisdom and judgment; it was he who organized the unions that employed, mildly oppressed, and also unified a people hailing from many lands. At the founding of the state, he held together a people that had had little experience of politics for tens of centuries and who were highly given to faction. From a position of weakness, he helped give this reborn nation a state, having seen more than most that, for the stateless Jews, sovereignty was a necessary condition for survival in the modern era.

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