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“Going Down to the Sea”: David Ben-Gurion’s Maritime Turn and Jewish Migrations to Mandatory Palestine, 1933-1948

This article analyzes the original essay “Going Down to the Sea” by David Ben-Gurion, written in 1937. The article studies the historical context of Ben-Gurion’s maritime proclamation and discusses the Zionist Organization’s increasing interest in the sea as a place of power and influence. It demonstrates how a Jewish conquest of the sea influenced the Jewish national movement in general and Labor Zionism in specific. Moreover, it also shows how Zionists propagated a legitimate and national claim to the land and sea of Palestine and counterbalanced Arab and British narratives which questioned free Jewish immigration to the country. Thus, the article examines the Jewish maritime turn which gained influence after the publication of Ben-Gurion’s essay and affected the discourses on Jewish migration to Mandatory Palestine.

Keywords: David Ben-Gurion; immigration; Judaism; Mediterranean; Palestine.

Introduction

When David Ben-Gurion wrote the essay “Going Down to the Sea” in 1937, which would later be published in the Labor Zionist journal *The Jewish Frontier* in 1945, it provided an impressive example of what Eran Kaplan and Derek J. Penslar describe as being “the combination of boundless energy, extreme optimism, and dark trepidation that characterized David Ben-Gurion’s thinking about the Zionist project and the directions it may take in the future” (Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 110). Ben-Gurion’s deliberations about the unique role of the sea in Zionist thinking and the evolution of a Jewish state in the Eastern Mediterranean is therefore an important source from which we may analyze the changing attitude of the Zionist Organization towards Jewish nationalism, the formation of a Jewish state, and maritime mobilities. Moreover, Ben Gurion’s essay is also crucial for the understanding of Jewish migration movements in the 1930s and 1940s and the clash of narratives in Mandatory Palestine.

Consequently, the article closely examines Ben-Gurion's original essay and studies its ideas in order to demonstrate the complexity of the contemporary challenges and problems. It evaluates the Zionist narrative of strengthening Jewish nationalism and building a Jewish state through Jewish migration to Palestine, respectively Eretz Yisrael. It also studies the clash of the Zionist narrative with the Arab and British ones, which aimed at reducing the numbers of Jewish immigrants, and in so doing, presented a different perspective on Jewish migration and the formation of a Jewish nation state. The article therefore aims to look beyond the "paradigmatic lens of violence, migration, and redemption" (Ury, 2017: 128), which is often used to describe Jewish migrations, and re-evaluates Zionism by including a maritime dimension. It reexamines the Zionist turn towards the sea in the early 20th century in the context of nation-building processes, and international power relations as well as internal ideological conflicts of the Zionist movement. Such an approach offers new insights into the history of Jewish nationalism and the evolution of a Jewish nation state. It broadens the understanding of Zionism and illustrates the complexity of the Jewish national movement and its reverberation in different times and places. Unlike most European national movements, Zionism had "gained momentum far away from its designated territory", had to (re)invent its language and – to a certain extent also its culture –, was driven by the "recognition of a collective national identity, the specific Jewish identity of Jews as a people" and had a strong self-emancipatory element (Hermann, 2013: 134-135). All these elements were linked to the evolution of a national narrative and the question of migration. They began to determine Zionism and influence its understanding of a national culture, language and territory. However, David Ben-Gurion's essay "Going Down to the Sea" illustrates that Zionism and its major goal – the formation of a new Jewish nation state – were also influenced by questions of mobility and free migrations as well as maritime spaces in the ideological conception of a Jewish national home in Palestine.

David Ben-Gurion, Zionism and the Idea of a Jewish Nation State

David Ben-Gurion, born on October 16, 1886 in Plonsk, Congress Poland – then part of the Russian Empire – from early on became a supporter of the Zionist movement. Following the dream of a Jewish return to the land of the forefathers, he immigrated to Ottoman Palestine in 1906. During the sea voyage from Odessa (Russian Empire) to Jaffa (Ottoman Palestine) Ben-Gurion experienced the maritime world for the first time and interpreted its "strong waves" and "rainbow colors" as signs of power and mobility, but also as symbols of creativity and diversity, characteristics which he wanted

to infuse into the Zionist movement (Segev, 2018: 59-60). While he was impressed by the maritime world, he was disappointed and shocked upon arriving at Jaffa. The traditional gateway to the country with its non-existing deep-water access to the sea and non-existing piers and modern port facilities led to a first, negative impression (Mirkin and Goren, 2012; Segev, 2018: 64-65). In contrast to the Arab newspaper *Falastin* (9 May 1946), which described Jaffa as the “jewel” of Arab Palestine and the “greatest Arab city” of the country, Ben-Gurion remained skeptical about the importance of the city and its maritime role (LeVine, 2007: 174). However, the fulfillment of the Zionist dream and his immigration to Palestine outweighed his negative arrival experience. He immersed himself into the newly evolving Jewish community in Palestine, the *Yishuv*. He began to implement Zionist ideas to cultivate the country and “regenerate” the Jewish nation. Therefore, he stated in his memoir: “We emigrated not for negative reasons of escape but for the positive purpose of rebuilding a homeland” (Ben-Gurion, 1970: 36).

Ben-Gurion's ideological conception was strongly influenced by two fundamental principles: first, Zionism was a rebellion against Jewish traditions and second, the Zionist working class had to start the revolution and recreate the Jewish nation (Avineri, 1981: 228). He believed that Zionism and Socialism had to be fused in order to strengthen Jewish nationalism and form a Jewish nation state. Consequently, he joined left-wing Zionist organizations such as *HaShomer* and the newly formed branch of *Poalei Zion* in Jaffa. Despite his early efforts to strengthen the *Yishuv* in Palestine, Ben-Gurion moved to Thessaloniki, and later on to Constantinople where he pursued his legal training at an Ottoman university. During his stay in Thessaloniki in 1911, he experienced a proud and vivid Jewish community which was famous for its influential trading networks and its strong connections to the sea (Chronakis, 2014; Naar, 2016). Since many of Thessaloniki's port workers and sailors were Jews, Ben-Gurion realized that Jews were capable of all types of work and praised the city and its port as a “Hebrew labor town, the only one in the world” (Teveth, 1987: 78). In Thessaloniki he experienced a modern and labor-oriented Jewish community and understood the overall importance of the sea in the construction of a community and nation, ideas which later on reappeared in his essay “Going Down to the Sea”. However, he also agreed that agricultural settlements in Palestine were essential to form out a Jewish state at the shore of the Eastern Mediterranean. The notion to “regenerate” the Jewish nation by working on the Israeli soil became one of his guiding principles, even though it barely took into account the complex situation of Ottoman Palestine, its population and the already existing power structures (Penslar, 1991: 80-127; Brenner, 2002: 59-63). The idea to

work on the land, to become a “cultural mediator between the Orient and the Occident” and to establish a Jewish “civilizing mission” in Palestine, were used by leading Zionists to strengthen the Jewish national movement and gain support of the European powers (Presner, 2007: 155-163). The historian Todd Samuel Presner (2007: 186) concludes:

In seeking legitimacy in the eyes of the European powers, the Zionist colonial imaginary not only bought into the Hegelian account of world history but also established an uncomfortably close alliance between Zionist ideals and those of the great apologists for empire and expansion.

Shortly after World War I (WWI), in which he fought as a member of the British Jewish Legion, Ben-Gurion intensified his efforts to expand the influence of the centrist faction for the Labor Zionist movement. He became the leader of the *Abdut HaAvoda* and assisted in the formation of the *Histadrut* (1920), the General Labor Federation. As a powerful leader of Labor Zionism he frequently traveled to the United States, Poland, Russia and other European countries and became aware of the power of the sea, especially against the background of a growing movement of Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s (Segev, 2018: 129). For example, in a letter to his father in 1921, he wrote that when passing through the up and coming Jewish metropolis of Tel Aviv (founded in 1909) he felt convinced that a new harbor would be built not only to open the gates of Palestine but also to connect the new Jewish city with the world and the Jewish diaspora (*ibidem*: 203). Moreover, as head of the *Histadrut*, he supported not only the influence of the working class in the newly evolving Jewish national movement but also promoted maritime sports associations and accentuated the importance of the sea (Azaryahu, 2008: 257). These early efforts aimed at reemphasizing his ideas that the Zionist project was not primarily a rescue mission for Jews in distress, but rather a movement to transform and “regenerate” the Jewish nation (Alroey, 2014: 1-19; Picard, 2018: 384-385) – processes which were connected to both a geographical and socio-economic transformation (Avineri, 1981: 228).

Ben-Gurion’s political talent was also quickly noted by other leading Zionists in the post-WWI years in the newly established British Mandate of Palestine. He was chosen to be the leader of *Mapai*, a fusion of *Abdut HaAvoda* and *Hapoel Hatzair*, two left-wing Zionist groups and continued to be the head of the *Histadrut* (1920-1935). In 1935 he also became the chairman of the executive committee of the Jewish Agency, the informal Jewish government of the *Yishuv*, and in so doing, emerged as one of the

central figures in the Zionist movement and Mandatory Palestine. When in 1936 the Arab revolt broke out in the country, Ben-Gurion instigated a policy of restraint in order to avoid direct retaliation, concentrating only on Jewish self-defense (Haim, 1978; Cazan, 2009; Kelly, 2015). However, he realized that the closure of the port of Jaffa, which had functioned as the main gateway for Jewish immigrants to Palestine throughout the 1920s and 1930s, severely threatened the Zionist endeavor to build Eretz Yisrael. Even though the Zionist leadership still favored a selective and gradual immigration movement with a strong emphasis on pre-migration training and physical and ideological screenings, growing insecurities led to increasing political pressure (Picard, 2018: 385-386). He openly criticized the Arab politicians, who had called out a national Arab strike and closed the harbor to trade and traffic. Moreover, he also condemned the attitude of the British Mandate authorities, which had closed the borders and characterized Jewish immigration to Palestine as “predominately illegal” and “harmful to the country’s stability”. Several officials of the Mandate administration, including the British High Commissioner Sir Arthur Wauchope, assumed that further Jewish immigration would destabilize the Mandate and jeopardize British achievements in Palestine. Thus, Jewish immigration was temporarily forbidden by the British Mandate authorities. They also questioned the legality and legitimacy of Jewish claims to free immigration.

The British Mandate Authorities and Jewish Immigration

When in 1936 an Arab revolt broke out in Palestine, the British Mandate authorities responded to the disturbances with a suspension of Jewish immigration to the country. In the midst of the fifth *Aliyah* (1929-1939) – the term used by Zionists to refer to modern Jewish immigration movements to Palestine from 1882 onwards – the closure of the port of Jaffa and Haifa, the two main ports of Palestine, caused major conflicts between British but also Arab and Jewish representatives. The suspension of Jewish immigration by the British Mandate authorities directly compromised Zionist efforts to revive the *Yishuv* and rebuild a Jewish nation in Palestine. 174,000 Jewish immigrants to the Mandate, who had arrived between 1933 and 1936 due to the rise to power of the ruthless and anti-Semitic National Socialist regime in Germany and the ongoing oppression and persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, triggered Arab disillusionment, frustration and anger as well as British concerns about the economic capacity and political stability of the British Mandate (Halevy, 1983). Therefore, the British Mandate authorities reconsidered their existing immigration regime and issued new quotas to meet Arab conceptions, to decrease regional ethnic-religious tensions and secure British influence in the region.

Despite the fact that the British government had supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine since the Balfour Declaration of 1917, it had also highly regulated Jewish immigration, and in so doing, followed the demands of Arab representatives throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Fishman, 2017). Even though Ben-Gurion stated in a letter dated 26 October 1933 to Chaim Weizmann, another influential figure of the Zionist Organization, that their era was a “messianic time” with many opportunities for the country and praised the arrival of thousands of immigrants, British Mandate authorities did not agree with the Zionist perspective fearing an unorganized mass immigration to Palestine (Segev, 2018: 252).

When Zionist representatives began to lobby for an independent Jewish port at Tel Aviv in order to counterbalance their dependency on the Arab port of Jaffa, British Mandate authorities withheld their support and questioned the legitimacy of constructing another port. They were concerned that such a new gateway to the sea would undermine their influence on immigration and the Mediterranean. And by taking this stance, they revealed how they perceived the Mediterranean Sea not as an open space in which free movement of people and goods was possible but rather a highly significant socio-political sphere which the British Empire wanted to control. For this reason, the British Mandate authorities heavily promoted the modernization and enlargement of the port of Haifa, a natural deep-water port in the north of Palestine, which was better designed to serve British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean (Lockmann, 1996: 194-197; Cohen-Hattab, 2019: 106-125). They disapproved of Jewish claims for free movement and an open port and sea and declared that a short-term prohibition of Jewish immigration was necessary to pacify the region. In the eyes of the British Mandate authorities, Jewish immigration was only possible in a highly regulated context that followed their understanding of Palestine’s economic and absorptive capacity. Mass or illegal immigration was strongly condemned and forbidden (Reichmann *et al.*, 1997: 343-361). Moreover, when in April of 1936 David Horowitz, Director of the Economic Department of the Jewish Agency, presented a memorandum on the possibility of absorbing half a million Jews within a period of five years, British Mandate authorities strongly disagreed with the Zionists’ ideas (*ibidem*: 347-348). In response, leading Zionists pressured Ben-Gurion to allow for so-called clandestine Jewish immigration to Palestine (*Aliyah-Beth*) and the bringing of Zionist youth groups via the Mediterranean to Palestine. The British Mandate authorities openly condemned efforts of the *Aliyah-Beth*, which started in the mid-1930s and peaked after World War II. In contrast to several Zionist politicians, Ben-Gurion hoped for other political options (Segev, 2018: 283).

In November 1936 the British government appointed the Palestine Royal Commission (known as “Peel Commission”) in order to investigate the causes of the Arab revolt in the British Mandate of Palestine (Bartal, 2017). Alongside many others, Chaim Weizmann testified in front of the Peel Commission and stated that “the world is divided into places where they [the Jews] cannot live and places where they cannot enter” (Litvinoff, 1983: 102). In his statement he directly criticized not only the increasing anti-Semitism in the world and its social and political consequences, but also the British immigration policies in Mandatory Palestine and its emerging narrative of limited Jewish migration. The Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, also testified in front of the commission and demanded full prohibition of Jewish immigration and Arab independence. In 1937 the Peel Commission issued its report and recommended the partition of the Mandate into an Arab and Jewish state in view of the growing nationalism in both communities. The recommendations were heavily opposed by the Arab population and led to further disturbances (Bartal, 2017). Moreover, it foreshadowed the development which led to the publication of the White Paper in 1939, which restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine even more (Kochavi, 1998).

Ben-Gurion's Vision of a Maritime Economy

Ben-Gurion, who was involved in many Jewish-Arab talks and confrontations, realized that the vision of a Jewish state on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean was at stake (Segev, 2018: 80-82). Even though Ben-Gurion was not one of the most prominent or earliest lobbyists of maritime interests, he embraced the evolving discussions on seafaring and a maritime conquest, understanding it as an important tool to form new alliances. Consequently, he agreed that it was not only the soil of Eretz Yisrael but also the sea that was necessary for the regeneration of the Jewish nation and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The sea as an open and free space emerged as an important sphere which had to be used and – as Ben-Gurion described it – conquered by the Zionist movement. He noted in his essay in 1937: “And yet the realm of the sea is neither an empty one nor an unpopulated desert of water. In its own way, indeed, it is an inhabited area, an immense economic resource, the main artery of communication for humanity” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 111).¹ In a letter to his wife, Paula, dated Paris, 27 July 1937 he even accentuated that the sea, “which lies along our coast and had been ceded to us”, offered numerous opportunities for new shipping industries

¹ The quotes of the essay “Going Down to the Sea” used by the author of this article come from Kaplan and Penslar (2011: 110-115).

and fisheries (Ben-Gurion, 1969: 197; translation by the author). Moreover, he not only saw new prospects at the shore, but stated: “The sea lies open, free, and almost without bourn. Not only the Mediterranean at our door but all ‘the seven seas’ of the world, the gigantic expanse surrounding the six continents” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 114). While he had supported Zionist agricultural settlements in Palestine in the past and had announced that the Jewish nation was not primarily a seafaring nation, he reconsidered his approach towards the sea after the events in 1936-1937.

He embraced the idea of a Jewish port in Tel Aviv, which had been discussed and promoted for over a decade by Meir Dizengoff, the mayor of Tel Aviv, and several other members of the Zionist movement in the Yishuv (Schlör, 2009; Eldar, 2016). Already in the early 1920s and 1930s, several city planners had envisioned a modern and independent Jewish city on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean with an open access to the sea. The discussion, however, on where and how such a maritime access to the sea should be established, kept the Zionist movement occupied until the mid-1940s (Welter, 2009; Rubin, 2013). In 1935 the Zionist Congress at Lucerne opted to establish a maritime department in the Zionist movement which would mirror the changing attitude towards the sea (Cohen-Hattab, 2015: 112-113). From early on, Dizengoff supported the opening of a Jewish harbor in Tel Aviv to expand the economic capacities of the city and fulfill his dream to “open the gate to the sea” – a statement he had already made in 1912 (Azaryahu, 2008: 255, 259). With the 1936 opening of the port of Tel Aviv, Dizengoff stated “We want our waters, the waters of the Land of Israel, the waters of Tel Aviv” (*apud* Lutsky, 1961: 4). The German-Jewish newspaper *Der Israelit* described the opening as an event of “enormous magnitude” (Lewinsky, 1936: 5) and the fulfillment of a dream. When the port of Tel Aviv was opened for general cargo in 1936 Ben-Gurion also began to support the new maritime Zionist endeavor and praised its possible outcome and influence on the future of the *Yishuv*. Thus, he declared that the inauguration of the port of Tel Aviv was “a new turn to our political and resettlement program” and lead up to “the much larger maritime question” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 111). He announced that the Zionist movement had to recognize “its new noble mission to conquer the sea with the same strength displayed in winning the *Emek*” – an agricultural region in the north of Palestine (*ibidem*: 113). With these words Ben-Gurion implied that the so called conquest of the sea had to be made in a similar vein as the development of agricultural settlements, which were organized as independent and predominately left-wing colonies. The foundations of agricultural settlements were backed by the Zionist Organization which had

bought several portions of land and offered them to newly immigrated Jewish groups, e.g. *Chaluzim* (Jewish pioneers). The cultivation of land was perceived by the Zionist Organization as an essential element in the realization of the Zionist dream to regenerate the Jewish nation. Ben-Gurion, who had supported these efforts realized that not only the soil had to be “conquered”, but also the sea. Consequently, he clarified that he did “not propose to substitute seacraft for farming” or “urge self-dedication to the sea at the expense of agriculture”, but rather intended to “include maritime activities in their proper place in our economic program” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 112). Moreover, at the inauguration of the port of Tel Aviv he announced:

The conquest of the soil by city people was the great, first adventure of our movement, of our endeavour in the country. A second adventure, great also, and perhaps harder than the first, still awaits us – the conquest of the sea. [...] Without the sea there is no access, there is no space [...] The Mediterranean is the natural bridge that connects our small country with the wide world. The sea is an organic, economic and political part of our country. And it is still free. The force that pushed us from the city to the village pushes us now from the land to the sea. [...] The road to the sea is a way to expand our country, to augment our economic base, to strengthen our national health, to enforce our political position, to dominate the elements. The sea opens unbounded horizons for us. [...] We should remember: this country of ours combines land and water. (Ben-Gurion *apud* Azaryahu, 2008: 259)

Thus, it becomes clear that Ben-Gurion's turn towards the sea was an important move to develop a narrative, which aimed at defending Zionist claims for free immigration, securing ideas of Labor Zionism and improving the economic and political stability of the *Yishuv*. Even though he realized that the Jews were “complete outsiders” “in one particular economic enterprise – that of the sea”, he was convinced that this “immense economic resource” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 111) had to be utilized by the Jewish nation. In a letter dated London, 5 October 1937, he specified his approach towards the sea and called for the recognition of maritime industries, fisheries and shipping companies as important factors in the processes of rebuilding Eretz Yisrael. He specifically announced that the foundation of a port in Tel Aviv and the establishment of a Jewish mercantile marine were crucial elements in the processes of a national rebirth and celebrated first attempts to build a maritime “bridge between the Jews in the country and the Jewish diaspora” (Ben-Gurion, 1969: 210; translation by the author).

One of the efforts to “conquer the sea” was the foundation of the Palestine Shipping Company (PSC) in 1934-1935. The successful German-Jewish

merchant and shipping magnate Arnold Bernstein had founded the PSC and registered his new shipping company in Palestine. With the maiden voyage of his ship, *Hohenstein/Tel Aviv* in January 1935, Bernstein also promoted the Zionist idea of conquering the sea. The creation of an onboard synagogue and a kosher dining hall, as well as the installation of a one-class system (tourist class) on board, were used by Bernstein to promote the ship as the only truly Jewish vessel en route to Palestine. When the ship set out on its maiden voyage from Hamburg to Haifa, leading members of the German-Jewish community and the Zionist Organization joined Bernstein on board. He reinforced the Zionist image of the *Hohenstein* and – during a stop-over in Genoa – renamed the ship *Tel Aviv* both in honor of the first Jewish city and Theodor Herzl's book *Altneuland* (Ran, 2000: 97; Siegel, 2018: 182). Thus, he joined the Zionist efforts to “conquer the sea” and opened new immigration and tourist routes to Palestine.

Other initiatives also supported the Zionist movement and its turn towards the sea. Several other Jewish shipping companies were founded, and groups of Jewish fishermen were established along the coast of Palestine (Cohen-Hattab, 2019: 76-92). In September 1936 the double-masted motor trawler *Bicura* anchored in Jaffa and was perceived as an early attempt to recreate “Hebrew Fishery” (Ben-Yehoyada, 2012: 9-16). Moreover, small Zionist training centers were founded outside of Palestine, e.g. in Hamburg or the Baltic Sea, and some *kibbutzim*, Jewish collective settlements traditionally based on agriculture, were created and promoted a new connection to the sea. The *Ha'kibbutz Ha'meuhad* settlement movement promoted – as Maor Azaryahu points out – “that being a fisherman or a dockworker was as important as being a farmer, and accordingly these occupations were celebrated in terms of pioneering and as a commitment to Zionist ideals” (Azaryahu, 2008: 262). Consequently, the newly emerging maritime endeavors used stereotypical images, e.g. the “primitive Arab fishermen” or the contrasting image of modern and labor-oriented Jewish fishermen in order to strengthen the Zionist claim to the sea (Ben-Yehoyada, 2012: 9-16). Even though these efforts laid the groundwork for the Zionist Organization's decision to (re)transform the Jews into a sea-minded nation, Gilbert Herbert (2008: 190) states that these activities “created a need for skilled manpower at sea in a nation without a true maritime tradition”.

Beyond the Economy

While the discourses on the sea were driven by ideological reasons, Ben-Gurion also understood that the maritime world had to be incorporated into the political vision of the new Jewish state and the Zionist idea of free

immigration to Palestine. Therefore, he stated in his original essay that the “time has come to expand our economic conquest and structure” and that the Jewish nation had to embark on the high seas and “undertake the high duty of establishing a solid maritime economy” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 112-113). His vision of a maritime economy touched on central issues of Labor Zionism which Ben-Gurion had worked for in the last decades. His maritime economic scheme did not only envision the sea as a “highly promising, valuable element[s] of economic growth”, but also as a strongly political space. A “Jewish boat is a place of work”: seamen, dock workers, naval officers, etc. would create “a worker’s boat” full of “economic, cultural, and political value” (*ibidem*: 112) – he wrote. He dreamt of “tens and hundreds of Jewish ships manned by Jewish workmen but under the tutelage of the Jewish labor movement” (*ibidem*) and was convinced that the *Histadrut* as an “instrument with infinite capacity and resources” (*ibidem*: 113) could be the major organization to create such a new maritime movement.

The director of the Public Works Office of the *Histadrut*, David Remez held a conference (10 June 1937) on board of the ship *Har Zion* to unite Zionist activists and support the Zionist maritime turn. Remez, who had studied law at Ottoman universities like Ben-Gurion and immigrated to Palestine in 1913, was an important member of the Labor federation movement in the *Yishuv* and Tel Aviv’s city council. He co-founded later on Ben-Gurion’s party *Mapai* and in 1949 became the State of Israel’s Transport Minister, and later Education Minister from 1950-1951. On the *Har Zion*, a vessel of the Jewish shipping company Palestine Maritime Lloyd Ltd., Remez proclaimed the Palestine Maritime League along with other leading Zionists and called for a maritime turn, ideas which were also supported by Ben-Gurion (Azaryahu, 2008: 261; Cohen-Hattab, 2015: 114).

Ben-Gurion’s approach to conquer the sea and create a Jewish maritime economy was much more than just an economic plan. In his eyes these efforts could establish not only a maritime economy, but emerge into “a Jewish proletarian maritime scheme” (*in* Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 114). Consequently, Ben-Gurion’s turn towards the sea was also linked to his ideas to transform and “regenerate” the Jewish nation as well as his vision to fuse Zionism and Socialism. Moreover, it was also a reaction to ongoing clashes with nationalistic Zionist circles, which had gained influence and power in the 1930s and 1940s. Similar to the *Histadrut*, the nationalistic section of the Zionist movement, the Revisionists had also promoted the conquest of the sea. In 1934 they founded the Betar Naval Academy in Civitavecchia in Italy with the goal to educate the future Jewish maritime

elite (Tolkowsky, 1964: 262-264; Nedava, 1986: 57-66; Laqueur, 1997: 343). They admired the Italian Fascists and Benito Mussolini due to their sense of nationalism and their focus on restoring the glory of the past, including a strong emphasis on the conquest of the sea and the Mediterranean. When the first academy's training ship, *Sarah I*, set out to Palestine in September 1937, the Revisionists praised it as the first Jewish ship in modern times and used its arrival as a successful sign of the reinvention of Jewish seafaring traditions and a symbol for the opening of immigration routes to Palestine (Kaplan, 2005: 149).

The Revisionists' narrative of breaking the moratorium on immigration established by the British Mandate authorities agitated the Labor Zionist elite, including Ben-Gurion. They feared the Revisionists' efforts would undermine and decrease of their power in the Zionist movement and the *Yishuv*. Consequently, Ben-Gurion accentuated in his essay the ideological component of "his maritime vision", which was supposed to run "counter to traditional Diaspora psychology – so we must now orientate the Zionist movement toward a new goal and begin to muster will power and where-withal for the great nautical project required of us" (in Kaplan and Penslar, 2011: 114). He wanted to create "new economic possibilities", open "opportunities for immigration" and enlarge the "absorptive power" (*ibidem*: 113) of Palestine and in so doing, weaken the British narrative of closing the border and prohibiting Jewish immigration to the Mandate. Even though he realized that "Jews have no ships of their own" (*ibidem*: 111) or did not have a sufficient mercantile marine, he stressed his ambition to "batter down the walls between Palestine and the Diaspora" (*ibidem*: 114). Against the background of rising numbers of German and Central European Jewish immigrants to Palestine, Ben-Gurion raised the following question: we "who have undertaken the great and arduous task of gathering a dispersed people and of bringing it back to the land by sea – can we submit to having the sea locked in our very face?" (*ibidem*: 112). In another letter dated London, 5 October 1937, he even advanced that the sea would be the bridge between the Jews in Palestine and the Jewish diaspora in the world. And he added, that the Jews had to create the preconditions to bring them [the Jews in the Diaspora] on "our ships" and by "our seamen" to Eretz Yisrael in time of need (Ben-Gurion, 1969: 210; translation by the author). He realized – as Herbert (2008: 192) notes, that the "Jewish people began to understand the sea as an instrument for the ingathering of the exiles, as a channel for the sustenance and strengthening of the Jewish National Home, the State in the making". The "conquest of the sea" was not only an economic endeavor but also a political and ideological issue in the Zionist discourse on the

regeneration of the Jewish nation. Moreover, the integration of the sea into the Zionist narrative opened the way for further discussions on the legality and practicality of Jewish immigration to Palestine as well as the legitimacy of the Zionist claims to the land and sea of Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, leading Zionists linked the contemporary efforts to establish a Jewish mercantile marine and to found new maritime gateways to Mandatory Palestine, e.g. the port of Tel Aviv (1936) to ancient Jewish seafaring traditions, and in so doing, tried to enhance their right to the land and the sea. Raphael Patai, who in a short article in 1941 studied the Jewish maritime traditions, reflected on these issues: "if one were justified in trying to trace back this striking aptitude to some ancient tradition that has been lingering subconsciously among them through hundreds of years, and now, in the new favorable circumstances [the foundation of the port of Tel Aviv in 1936], regained a new activity" (Patai, 1941: 1-2). Similar to Patai, who saw in the efforts during the 1930s and 1940s a sign of a Jewish maritime revival, leading Zionists, including Ben-Gurion, used the reinvention of seafaring traditions to justify their claim to maritime power, to overcome the prohibition on Jewish migration to the Mandate, and to counterbalance the British narrative which linked internal problems to Jewish immigration.

In May 1942 major Zionist groups gathered in New York and adopted the Biltmore Program, which demanded the opening of Palestine to Jewish immigrants, claimed recognition of the Jewish Agency as major Jewish representation, and promoted the foundation of a Jewish Commonwealth (Ben-Gurion, 1973: 86). Against this background, Ben-Gurion's turn to the sea became even more important. His call for maritime efforts during and after World War II led to an intensification of *Alyiah Beth* activities which sought to bring persecuted Jews and later on Holocaust survivors to Mandatory Palestine. At the 22nd Zionist Congress in Basel in December 1946, Ben-Gurion reemphasized the Zionist ambition to protect the *Yishuv* against Arab aggressions and found a Jewish state in Palestine (*ibidem*: 89-92). In May 1948 Ben-Gurion proclaimed the independence of Israel in Tel Aviv and focused his efforts on the protection of the newly founded state. While ships continued to bring new immigrants to the country, Ben-Gurion's focus had to shift to the establishment and protection of the Israeli borders and the formation of a unified Jewish society (Teveth, 1987: 873). Even though maritime efforts decreased after the proclamation of independence, Ben-Gurion, who became the first Prime Minister of Israel and remained in power until 1963, understood his maritime turn as an important tool and instrumental approach to fulfill his dream of a modern Jewish state. Thus, the historian Shabtai Teveth (1987: 874) concludes: "Ben-Gurion,

in a sense, turned the life's breath of the lost six million into a wind that bore aloft the survivors and powered the sails of the Zionist ship, as he steered it across the waves with a sure hand to its destiny, the state".

Conclusion

When in 1937 David Ben-Gurion wrote his essay "Going Down to the Sea" he showed his strong commitment to the Zionist movement and its vision for a modern Jewish state in Palestine. Following the disturbances in 1936 he thought that not only the land but also the sea had to be incorporated into his Zionist vision of a modern and vital Jewish state. Consequently, the Zionist turn towards the sea was an essential tool to support Jewish nationalism and Jewish immigration. It was the closure of the port at Jaffa during the Arab revolt and the newly implemented British immigration scheme as well as the prohibition of Jewish migration, which made Ben-Gurion and the Zionist elite realize that not only Jewish immigration but also the conquest of the sea and the question of maritime power had become contested issues. The efforts to enlarge maritime influence of the Zionist movement were therefore not only used to expand Jewish immigration but also directed against the British Mandate authorities' policy, which limited Jewish immigration to Palestine based on the idea of the land's weak economic and absorptive capacity. By expanding maritime labor and industries, Ben-Gurion and other leading Zionists questioned the propagated British narrative.

Zionists intensified their maritime efforts and lobbied for the establishment of a Jewish port at Tel Aviv, which mirrored the contemporary belief in the sea and its influence on nation-building processes. The foundation of Jewish maritime industries, such as the PSC by Arnold Bernstein or the establishment of fishery *kibbutzim*, illustrated the increasing importance of the sea in Zionist discourses. Moreover, Ben-Gurion's turn to the sea also aimed at strengthening Labor Zionism and expanding its influence. His "proletarian maritime economy" echoed his life-long commitment to Socialist ideas, which sometimes collided with other Zionist concepts. He knew that the Revisionists and their maritime strategy, which was designed to educate the future maritime elite of the Jewish state, gained influence in the *Yishuv* and threatened the influence of Labor Zionism as well as its vision of a modern and Socialist Jewish state. By reinventing maritime traditions and linking them to modern Socialist ideas, Ben-Gurion hoped to counterbalance the nationalistic narrative of the Revisionists and their claim to land and water.

Thus, the sea became a bridge for the newly evolving Jewish nation-state in Palestine, but it also emerged in a highly disputed space in the context of migration and nation-building. It was a space in which not only people and

nations came into conflict and fought for legitimacy and legality but also narratives, aspects which also serve to determine migration movements even today.

Edited by Scott M. Culp

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Received on 14.01.2021

Accepted for publication on 16.07.2021

<https://doi.org/10.4000/rccs.12215>



“Going Down to the Sea”: a viragem marítima de David Ben-Gurion e as migrações judaicas para a Palestina sob mandato britânico, 1933-1948

Neste artigo, analisa-se o ensaio original “Going Down to the Sea”, de David Ben-Gurion, escrito em 1937. No artigo, estuda-se o contexto histórico da proclamação marítima de Ben-Gurion e discute-se o interesse crescente da Organização Sionista em relação ao mar como lugar de poder e influência. Demonstra-se como uma conquista judaica do mar influenciou o movimento nacional judaico em geral e o sionismo trabalhista em particular. Além disso, mostra-se também como os sionistas propagaram uma reivindicação legítima e nacional sobre a terra e o mar da Palestina e contrabalançaram as narrativas árabe e britânica que questionavam a livre imigração judaica para o país. Assim, examina-se a viragem marítima judaica que ganhou influência após a publicação do ensaio de Ben-Gurion e afetou os discursos sobre a imigração judaica para a Palestina sob mandato britânico.

Palavras-chave: David Ben-Gurion; imigração; judaísmo; Mediterrâneo; Palestina.

“Going Down to the Sea”: le virage maritime de David Ben Gourion et la migration juive vers la Palestine sous mandat britannique, 1933-1948

Dans cet article, on analyse l’essai original « Going Down to the Sea » de David Ben Gourion, écrit en 1937. On étudie le contexte historique de la proclamation maritime de Ben Gourion et on discute l’intérêt croissant de l’Organisation sioniste pour la mer en tant que lieu de pouvoir et d’influence. On montre comment une conquête juive de la mer a influencé le mouvement national juif en général et le sionisme travailliste en particulier. De plus, on montre également comment les sionistes ont propagé une revendication légitime et nationale sur la terre et la mer de la Palestine et ont contrebalancé les narratives arabe et britannique qui mettaient en cause la libre immigration juive vers le pays. Ainsi, on examine le virage maritime juif qui a gagné de l’influence après la publication de l’essai de Ben Gourion et affecté les discours sur la migration juive vers la Palestine sous mandat britannique.

Mots-clés: David Ben Gourion; immigration; judaïsme; Méditerranée; Palestine.