

I.B. TAURIS

The Making of the Israeli Far-Right

Abba Ahimeir and
Zionist Ideology

PETER BERGAMIN



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'Don't participate in the census' ('al tepakdu'), Jerusalem, 1931.

Courtesy of the Jabotinsky Institute in Israel.

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For my teachers

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 Academic	9
Vienna	10
Untergang	14
Gaissinovitch and Spengler	19
Academic reception	34
First publications	37
2 Pioneer, Journalist	45
Young worker	45
Journalist	48
The turning point	54
Changes	62
Dictatorship	72
3 Fascist, Revisionist, Revolutionary	85
The Unholy Trinity	85
Notebook of a Fascist	91
Fascist Revisionist, Revisionist Fascist, or neither?	103
The revolutionary	111
4 Betar leader, <i>madrikh l'madrikhim</i> , cultural historian	123
Ideological differences	124
<i>Madrikh l'Madrikhim</i>	130
Ideological overlap between Betar and the BLTS	139
Ahimeir's cultural-historical conception of the Jewish nation	145
Tisha B'Av 1929	156
5 Political activist	161
The turning point II	162
<i>Excursus</i> : Female influences on the Maximalists	167

Brit HaBiryonim	171
Incriminating evidence	173
The Scroll of the Sicarii	180
The Jewish <i>Volks</i> Socialist	184
Trials	191
Conclusion: The bourgeois revolutionary	197
Appendix A	209
Notes	212
Bibliography	247
Index	256

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Introduction

I do not want to know how God created the world. I'm not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts, the rest are details.

–Albert Einstein¹

In the long and varied cast list of characters who compete for privilege of place in the recounting of Zionist history, few cut such a maligned, misunderstood and, indeed, tragic figure as does Abba Ahimeir (1897–1962). A highly educated cultural historian, Ahimeir gained notoriety mainly as a journalist, political activist and – alongside the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981) and writer Yehoshua Yevin (1891–1970) – leader of the ‘Maximalist’ faction of Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s (1880–1940) Revisionist Zionist Party in British Mandate Palestine during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Of the three Maximalist leaders, Ahimeir was arguably the most ideologically influential, viscerally outspoken and politically engaged. While purportedly captivated by Jabotinsky’s persona, Ahimeir nonetheless posed, at times, a very real threat to his mentor’s leadership. This was especially true within the Yishuv (the Jewish settlements in pre-state Israel/Palestine) from 1930 onwards, when Jabotinsky’s return had been barred by the British authorities. While too often marginalised in the past, Ahimeir’s historical importance and ideological influence are gradually being given the recognition that they deserve. Indeed, the distinguished historian of the Israeli Right, Colin Shindler, contends that the title of ‘Father of the Revolt’ should be shared equally between Jabotinsky and Ahimeir.²

* * *

This book traces Ahimeir’s ideological genesis. While his influence upon the Zionist Right is undeniable, the lack of analysis surrounding his ideological contribution has caused the scope and importance of this influence to be undervalued. Thus, this study seeks to comprehensively understand Ahimeir’s

ideological stance and its development, and to position him more accurately within the contexts of the Zionist Right, the historical timeframe in which he was active and the Zionist movement in general. It contends not only that Ahimeir's unique ideological position formed the backbone of Revisionist Maximalism in Mandate Palestine, but that, as a *Madrikh* (leader) for the Revisionist Youth Group Betar and teacher at the Betar Leadership Training School, his ideological influence upon the Revisionist youth movement was far greater than is often recognised.

This study will demonstrate that Ahimeir's initial fascination with – and tentative embrace of – Italian Fascism began three to six years earlier than is generally believed, and that his apparent fundamental ideological shift from Left to Right was not at all the radical move that it is considered to be. Ahimeir's true relationship to both of these political positions will be re-evaluated. A key element in reassessing Ahimeir's ideological development is an understanding of his embrace of Spenglerian theory, which, far from being a mere research interest, exerted a fundamental influence upon him throughout his life. Thus, I contend that Ahimeir's output and actions should be (re-)examined with this consideration in mind.

Furthermore, this study will show that both Ahimeir's loyalty to and gradual disillusionment with various Labour Zionist organisations, including his own party, HaPoel HaTzair (The Young Worker), were based as much on pragmatic necessity as they were on ideology. Indeed, it will conclude that Ahimeir's ideological path was set already in 1924, by the time he emigrated to British Mandate Palestine, and before he joined HaPoel HaTzair. This study contends that the political ideologies of the Revisionist Party and its heirs owe a greater debt to Ahimeir than is generally accepted. Furthermore, Ahimeir's particular case study allows scope for a more general engagement with several intellectual-historical concepts, such as Messianism, Revolution and Fascism. A major underlying thesis of this study concerns the challenges of writing 'difficult history', and the obligation to approach such a challenge in as neutral a manner as possible. For example, the fact that, in 1924, Italian Fascism could represent a viable and attractive political option for both its country's Jewish citizens, and indeed for Ahimeir, as will be demonstrated, should be understood in its historical context, and not be analysed with a disproportionate degree of historical hindsight. Equally, there is no escaping the fact that Ahimeir was a controversial figure who espoused, at times, some highly controversial ideas. Recognition of such facts should not preclude a historically accurate presentation of his life and ideological development.

For a short period of time – from 1928 to 1934 – Ahimeir was a leading figure in the Yishuv, and his influence, and indeed personality and popularity, often outweighed that of Revisionist Party leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky. The fact that figures like Menachem Begin (1913-92) later minimised Ahimeir's influence upon them had more to do with political savvy, self-promotion and certainly self-preservation than with historical accuracy. This study will paint a historically more accurate picture.

* * *

A Zionist from his earliest days, Ahimeir was born Abba Shaul ben Isaac Gaissinovitch, or Haissinovich, on 2 November 1897 in Dolghi, White Russia. Although the family was neither particularly religious nor Zionist, Gaissinovitch was, by the age of six, already studying under the tutelage of the young Yiddish and Hebrew poet David Shimoni (1891–1956). In 1907, two years after the family moved to Bobruisk, the young Gaissinovitch enrolled at the Russian Private Gymnasium, and supplemented his curriculum with Hebrew and Talmud study. It was during this period that he became acquainted with the future Labour Zionist leader Berl Katznelson (1887–1944), who also lived in Bobruisk. Katznelson emigrated to Ottoman-Palestine shortly thereafter, in 1909.

Catalysed by an avid interest in Hebrew literature, Jewish culture and history, and a burgeoning identification with Socialism and Zionism, the fourteen-year-old Abba Gaissinovitch asked his parents for permission to study at the newly opened Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv. The Gymnasium was the first Hebrew High School to open in Tel Aviv, and was an iconic institution. Many of the figures who would go on to play important roles in pre- and early-state Israel were alumni of the Gymnasium, including the future prime minister of Israel, Moshe Sharett (1894–1965) and poet Avraham Shlonsky (1900–73). Rather surprisingly perhaps, Gaissinovitch's request was granted, and in October 1912, the fourteen-year-old made the journey to Ottoman-ruled Palestine. He was chaperoned by his older sister Bluma, who shared her brother's youthful zeal for both Zionism and Socialism. Upon arrival, he quickly renewed his acquaintance with Katznelson, who introduced the pair into Socialist circles. Notably, Gaissinovitch purchased his first 'Zionist shekel' there in 1913, at the ripe old age of fifteen.

The young student returned home to Bobruisk in July 1914 with the intention of spending merely the summer vacation with his family, but the outbreak of the First World War in September forced Gaissinovitch to remain in Russia for its

duration. From 1916 he was active with the Bobruisk Zionist Youth Group, and in May 1917 attended the Russian Zionist Conference in Petrograd. In July and August of that year, Gaissinovitch went to Batumi in the northern Caucasus, in present-day Georgia, to participate in training under the auspices of Joseph Trumpeldor's (1880–1920) HeHalutz (The Pioneer) organisation, an initiative designed to prepare young agricultural 'pioneers' for emigration to Ottoman-Palestine. While there, however, he contracted malaria and was forced to return to Bobruisk.

The October Revolution erupted on 7 November 1917, and further complicated Gaissinovitch's extended sojourn in his native Russia. At the end of 1918, and in a Russia now in the midst of revolutionary turmoil, Gaissinovitch matriculated at the University of Kiev, in the faculties of History and Literature. Tragically, on 19 April 1919, his beloved younger brother Meir – a committed Bolshevik, and officer in the Red Army – was killed in battle with Polish forces. The trauma of his brother's death had a profound, and lasting, impact on Gaissinovitch. Indeed, he found it impossible to remain in Russia, and began studies at the University of Liège in Belgium in 1920, before moving on to the University of Vienna the following year. Chapter 1 will begin at this point in Ahimeir's life.

* * *

Several terms are used regularly throughout this work, and although each one will be given more extensive discussion in the chapters to follow, it is perhaps useful at this stage to provide a basic outline of how each is understood for the purposes of this study.

Revisionism, or Revisionist Zionism, was an ideological strain of Zionism that was established in 1925 by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. It existed, at first (until 1935), under the umbrella of the World Zionist Organisation. Jabotinsky's breakaway action was catalysed by his rejection of the 1922 Churchill White Paper, which – through its recognition of the newly created Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan in a portion of the historical biblical Land of Israel – limited the western border of any future Jewish state to the west bank of the river Jordan. Revisionist Zionism advocated not only a return to 'pure' Political Zionism as originally envisaged by Theodor Herzl, which sought the establishment of a Jewish national home through political means (or, more specifically, that international approval gained through diplomatic initiative should precede practical settlement of the land), but also the establishment of a Jewish state on both sides of the river Jordan.³

Maximalism or Maximalist Zionism or, indeed, Maximalist Revisionism was a radical ideological stream within Revisionist Zionism. It was established in the Yishuv, in the wake of the 1929 Arab riots, and its leaders were Abba Ahimeir, Uri Zvi Greenberg and Yehoshua Yevin. The Maximalists, while accepting the territorial demands of the Revisionists, differed ideologically from Jabotinsky and the general Revisionists in several key areas. First, unlike Jabotinsky, who consistently advocated a path of diplomacy with the British, the Maximalists fought, both ideologically and actively, against the British government in Palestine, which they saw as antisemitic, and anti-Zionist.⁴ Second, the Maximalists rejected Jabotinsky's policy of *Havlagah* (defensive restraint) towards both the Arabs and British, and advocated, instead, a much more proactive, militaristic approach. Third, Maximalist rhetoric was imbued with Secular-Messianic overtones. Finally, the Maximalists wanted the Revisionists to adopt a *modus operandi* that was predicated on Italian Fascism, with Jabotinsky as leader.⁵

The concept of 'ideology', so very central to this study, is very much a product of Enlightenment thinking. The word appeared first in French, at the end of the eighteenth century, as a quite literal linguistic amalgamation of 'science' and 'ideas'.⁶ Over time, the word's use and reception developed both a positive and pejorative understanding: thus, 'ideology' could denote either a noble 'philosophy of the mind' or ignoble 'false consciousness and unreality', depending on the situation.⁷ Nonetheless – and putting all etymological interest aside – for the purposes of this study, Shimoni's definition of ideology – 'a coherent, action-oriented set of ideas that provides those who subscribe to it with a comprehensive cognitive map of their position and purposes' – is most accurate, and useful.⁸

Equally a product of the Enlightenment, but somewhat less straightforward in cognizance, is the notion of 'aesthetic'. The word was derived, and Hellenised, by Alexander Baumgarten (1714–62) as a synthesis of 'senses' and 'perception'.⁹ *Merriam-Webster* gives a modern definition of 'aesthetic' as, 'a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste and with the creation and appreciation of beauty', which may also represent a 'particular theory or conception of beauty or art, a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses'.¹⁰

At the risk of oversimplification, it could be said that an ideology is what one believes, while the means which one chooses to express that belief may be seen as an aesthetic expression of that ideology. One might further conclude, then, that an ideology may also possess an aesthetic.¹¹ The recognition of such a cognitive differentiation between the two concepts will be useful throughout this

study. There are occasions when various ideologies might appear to overlap – for example, when discussing the Maximalists and the general Revisionists – yet the aesthetics employed to aid the expression of these ideologies might differ considerably, and vice versa. For example, his concentration on militaristic precision and comportment and the choice of brown for the group's uniform have led some to conclude that Jabotinsky foresaw an embrace of Fascist ideology for the youth of Betar.¹² However, as noted earlier, the fact that he may have borrowed, if only unwittingly, from Fascist aesthetic should in no way lead to the conclusion that Jabotinsky advocated Fascist ideology. For Ahimeir and the Maximalists, the case was altogether different, as will be seen.

* * *

Although not primarily a narrative history, this study does proceed chronologically. Its five chapters cover the years 1921–34: from the year Ahimeir began his doctoral studies in Vienna, until the years of the Arlosoroff murder and the subsequent trials that cost Ahimeir his political reputation. Once again, the focus of this study is on Ahimeir's ideological development. Be that as it may, for the reader who is hitherto unfamiliar with the figure of Abba Ahimeir, I believe that the present narrative also stands on its own as a comprehensive historical account of Ahimeir's life and work over the years covered. In addition, it should be remembered that Ahimeir was a prolific writer. A truly thorough study and analysis of the many and varied articles, letters, unpublished essays and diary entries, all written by Ahimeir between 1921 and 1934, would take years, and would most likely produce a book running to thousands of pages in length. Thus, although comprehensive, this study is not exhaustive. Therefore, as a methodological tool and in the name of variety, I chose, in each chapter, to privilege one particular type of archival source over another – academic, journalistic, testimonial and so on – and which varies from chapter to chapter, as follows:

The first chapter concentrates on Ahimeir's academic magnum opus: his unpublished doctoral dissertation on Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West), which he wrote at the University of Vienna, between 1921 and 1924. It also examines his first publications in the American Hebrew journal *HaToren*, which notably contained his first article on Mussolini and Italian Fascism. As noted earlier, this period in Ahimeir's ideological development is often all but ignored by Zionist historians. Nonetheless, it will be demonstrated that it was precisely during this period that Ahimeir set the ideological course upon which he would continue.

The second chapter examines Ahimeir's first years in British Mandate Palestine, and membership in the moderate, Labour-oriented party, HaPoel HaTzair, through a focus on his journalistic output in both the party's eponymous newspaper and the right-oriented newspaper, *HaAretz*. In his articles from the years 1924–8, we can trace Ahimeir's gradual disillusionment with HaPoel HaTzair and the political organisation of the Yishuv, as well as see the first signs of his ability and willingness to court controversy in print.

Chapter 3 details Ahimeir's departure from HaPoel HaTzair for Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionist Party at the beginning of 1928. It then provides a discussion and analysis of the series of articles he wrote under the rubric 'From the Notebook of a Fascist', in his new position at the newspaper *Doar HaYom*. Finally, it uses the more conceptual, phenomenological discussion of the intellectual concepts of Fascism and Revolution, detailed earlier, to better understand and position Ahimeir's embrace of each.

Chapter 4 privileges unpublished contemporary training manuals from the Revisionist Youth Group Betar and the Betar Leadership Training School, alongside unpublished reminiscences by the school's founder Yirmiahu Halpern, in order to paint a comprehensive overview of both groups' ideological positions and practical organisation and Ahimeir's contribution to both, from 1929 to 1930. Furthermore, I undertake a close reading of the first section of his final book, *Yudaikah* – one of only two books that Ahimeir published during his own lifetime – in an attempt to better understand his very particular ideological conception of Jewish history and civilisation. This is one section where I depart from my otherwise almost exclusive use of contemporary documents or personal memoirs of the period. *Yudaikah* is one of the few works where we get a glimpse of Ahimeir the cultural historian, and therefore merits such a methodological departure.

Finally, this study concludes with a focus on Ahimeir as a political activist, beginning with his formation in 1930 of the semi-underground, anti-British, resistance group Brit HaBiryonomim and then proceeding to his arrest in conjunction with Arlosoroff's murder in June 1934, and the subsequent trials that Ahimeir stood. Fittingly, for a discussion of a group that was itself semi-clandestine, my methodological focus in this chapter has been on documents that are themselves 'semi-clandestine' in nature: court transcripts and evidence seized for both the Arlosoroff and Brit HaBiryonomim trials, almost all of which have not been viewed since the time of their production. Such an approach gives the unique impression of observing, first-hand, the conversations, thoughts and, indeed, frustrations of a group that was 'speaking' freely, without fear of being

heard. Ahimeir's reminiscences, written years later, round out the documentary evidence used in this chapter, and paint a more comprehensive picture of the workings of the organisation that was the ideological exemplar for the more extreme paramilitary groups, Irgun and Lehi.

At the end of each chapter, I draw conclusions that are more specifically related to each of the subjects discussed. Nonetheless, standing back somewhat, a broader consideration of this study's more specific findings has allowed me to make some further observations which suggest possible explanations for the gradual radicalisation of Herzlian Political Zionism. Finally, the study very briefly considers Ahimeir's politico-ideological legacy, before making some final overall conclusions regarding both a more accurate dating of his ideological genesis, and some methodological shortcomings that exist in the extant body of scholarship, which have – I contend – until now prevented a truly comprehensive understanding of Ahimeir's ideological development.

Academic

It is perhaps not unfitting to begin this first chapter in the study of Ahimeir's ideological genesis on the ideas that he himself explored and developed in his one academic work: his doctoral thesis *Bermerkungen zu Spenglers Auffassung Russlands* (Remarks on Spengler's Conception of Russia), which he wrote from 1921 to 1924, as a student at the University of Vienna.¹ In order to establish the ideological basis over which would, eventually, unfold an array of concepts that could be as extreme as they could be contradictory, it is methodologically imperative to undertake a close reading of the thesis. Indeed, such action reveals a surprising degree of ideological maturity in this often-overlooked work.

The renowned cultural historian George L. Mosse remarked that Spengler's *The Decline of the West* had more impact through its title than its content, and it has allegedly influenced figures as diverse as the Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, historian Arnold J. Toynbee and literary theorist Northrop Frye.² The work could as easily resonate with German racial theorists and antisemites as it could with future Jewish ultra-nationalist intellectuals. Indeed, it is clear that Gaissinovitch not only became a Spenglerian at this early stage but also remained so, to varying degrees throughout his life. And although his dissertation may deal with material that appears to have no connection at all with the future Ahimeir's ideology, Zionism, or even Judaism, it should be remembered that the primary intention at this early stage is to focus on Gaissinovitch the Spenglerian, and not the 'Zionist Gaissinovitch as Spenglerian,' or even the 'Jewish Gaissinovitch as Spenglerian.' His thesis, while certainly written by a 'Jewish Zionist,' was not at all written from that point of view. Conversely, although he described his time in Vienna as the 'period where my interest in Zionism was at its nadir,' this does not mean that we are not confronted with the 'Zionist' or 'Jewish' Gaissinovitch.³ Indeed, a close examination of his thesis will show that these themes never lurked too far beneath the surface.

Throughout this chapter, I will use the term ‘small peoples’. This particular usage refers to a formulation coined – after the Czech writer Milan Kundera – by the Israeli historian Uriel Abulof, and which he defines as ‘a smaller ethnic community that exists in constant confrontation with the arrogant ignorance of the mighty, characterized by uncertainty and individual doubt about the very existence of the collective self’.⁴ The theme of ‘small peoples’ recurs throughout Gaissinovitch’s work and its importance will be discussed later in the chapter. Of course, this is not to say that – were it even possible – Gaissinovitch was conscious of the term, but rather that Abulof’s formulation gives us a useful analytical tool when analysing certain, sometimes unconscious, thematic trends in Gaissinovitch’s thesis.

Vienna

In 1920, Gaissinovitch left the University of Kiev and Communist Russia. Memories of the Great War and a revolution that had claimed the life of his brother Meir had left him embittered and disillusioned. Indeed, the trauma of his brother’s death prompted, that same year, a name change in his memory: from Gaissinovitch to ‘Ahi-Meir’, or ‘Ahimeir’ – literally ‘my brother Meir’ – as he would eventually come to be known.⁵ For the time being, on paper at least, he remained Abba Gaissinovitch. After a short stint at the University of Liège, he transferred, with best friend Josef Katznelson, to the University of Vienna, where he was matriculated in the winter semester of 1921–2 as a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Philosophy, reading Modern and Medieval History, and Art History.⁶

In the autumn of 1921, Austria was entering the third year of the First Republic as a nation beset by economic, political and ideological upheaval. The rate of inflation had been growing dramatically since the previous June, when Chancellor Johann Schober (1874–1932) assumed office to head a coalition between the Christian Socialist and German People’s Party that was representative of the two prevailing politico-ideological trends of the period. By contrast, the city of Vienna had in 1919 elected its first Social Democrat mayor, Jakob Reuman (1823–1925), setting in motion a trend that – with the notable exception 1934–1945 – continues to this day. The notorious ‘Knight from Rosenau’, the politician Georg von Schönerer (1842–1921), had died on 14 August, and although he had not posed a political threat since the demise of his pan-German Party in 1907, his radical German-nationalist, antisemitic,

anti-liberal (and indeed anti-Catholic, -capitalist and -Hapsburg) ideology influenced the increasingly radical *Burschenschaften* (student fraternities), and others who took up the *Kampf für das deutsche Volk*, not least the young Adolf Hitler.⁷

Perhaps one of the best examples of the various irreconcilabilities that competed for – and together, contributed to – Viennese politico-cultural hegemony in Europe can be seen in the figure of the composer Richard Strauss, who was director of the Vienna State Opera during the period of Ahimeir's study. Strauss, as a composer, was the standard bearer of fin-de-siècle decadence. His operas *Salome* and *Elektra* pushed the boundaries of tonality, musicianship and – owing to their difficult subject matter – audience reception. As a conductor, however, Strauss was cool, calculating and completely without sentiment. Himself a foreigner – he was Bavarian – Strauss nonetheless epitomised the Viennese *über-civilised*, bourgeois intellectual. His operatic collaborations with the Viennese dramatist Hugo von Hofmannsthal – who, as the son of an upper-class Catholic mother, and titled Jewish bank-manager father, likewise epitomised Vienna of a certain class and age – are still considered to represent the most valiant attempts at reconciling music and text that exist in the genre. Furthermore, Strauss's son Franz would, in 1923, marry a Jew and go on to father two sons who were 'racially' Jewish – a fact that might best explain Strauss's eventual acceptance of the role of presidency of the German *Reichsmusikkammer*, in 1933. Those in search of ideological consistency would be well-advised to avoid Vienna during the interwar period.

Indeed – all Viennese bourgeois liberal cosmopolitanism aside – in reaction to a staggering increase in both antisemitism and broader nationalistic trends, Vienna's Jewish community slowly also began to organise itself along nationalist lines. The University of Vienna itself was a bastion of Zionist activity throughout this period, mainly in reaction to the increase of pan-German nationalistic fervour from within the student body. The university's Jewish students aligned with the burgeoning Jewish nationalist movement in two ways. Internally, they officially joined the Zionist Organisation and paid its membership fee, the 'Zionist Shekel'. Externally, from 1910 onwards, nationalistic Jewish students – and by 1910, one-third of the university's Jews had so defined themselves – began to list *Jüdisch* (Yiddish) as mother tongue in their student records, when registering for each new academic year.⁸ Eventually, however, since Yiddish was considered a German dialect, it was, over time, supplanted by the linguistically and ideologically more satisfactory 'Hebrew'. Nevertheless, since neither language was officially recognised by the Danube Monarchy, this was a gesture charged as

much with political subversion as it was with nationalist fervour. Gaissinovitch, who as a student at the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv had, already in 1913, purchased his first Zionist Shekel, thus also made his Zionist leanings public in Vienna. His student record for his first year lists his mother tongue as 'Russian', but the following year he changed it to 'Hebrew'.⁹

Gaissinovitch's sojourn in Vienna witnessed a power struggle between two 'Roberts' – Weltsch (1891–1982) and Stricker (1879–1944) – over control of the primary institutions within the Austrian Zionist movement. The neo-Romantic, intellectual Weltsch had come from Prague in 1918 to work in the Zionist administrative office and was thus well-positioned to further pursue his own political ambitions. By 1925 he had become involved with the newly founded Brit Shalom movement in Palestine, which sought the establishment of a bi-national state characterised by equal rights for both Jews and Arabs. His opponent Stricker was active in Austrian politics and the Viennese Zionist movement, and founded the Jewish daily newspaper *Wiener Morgenzeitung* in 1919. He was a pro-Habsburg liberal democrat who, over time, moved further to the Right. He joined Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Revisionist Party in 1931 and served, eventually, as one of its vice presidents.¹⁰ It is thus no surprise that, on one hand, Weltsch and Stricker did not see eye to eye, and on the other, that the two future Revisionist leading figures, Stricker and Gaissinovitch, became acquainted with each other during this time.¹¹

It was in this colourful, highly charged milieu that Gaissinovitch would spend the next six semesters. In Vienna, he pursued a comprehensive curriculum that included courses as varied as History of Latin, Political Social Movements in Russia, History of the Balkans, History of the Middle Ages, Psychology, German History, German Painting, Shakespeare, The Philosophy of Hegel, Byzantine History and Schopenhauer.¹² Notably, he studied *Staatskirche* (state church) under Hans Uebersberger (1877–1962), Introduction and Study of History, Theoretical Principles of the Science of History and Politics with Wilhelm Bauer (1877–1953) and The Age of the Reformation under Heinrich Srbik (1878–1951).

A cursory look into the backgrounds of these three professors yields some rather interesting information. Uebersberger was a lecturer in Eastern European history and would serve as rector of the university from 1930 to 1931. Bauer, who appears to have been Gaissinovitch's supervisor, lectured in general modern history, and had just published his influential *Einführung in das Studium der Geschichte* (Introduction to the Study of History), in 1921. The two would later examine Gaissinovitch's dissertation and recommend that he be awarded his doctorate. Srbik was a professor of General History who, in 1920, had written a

book on Wallenstein's murder and was working on a two-volume biography of Prince Metternich that would eventually be published in 1925. Notably – and ominously – from 1938 to 1945 he served as president of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Close friends as well as colleagues, Bauer and Srbik were both suspended, along with their colleague Otto Brunner, in 1945 and forced into early retirement.¹³ Their strong pan-German agenda was seen to have influenced and compromised their teaching throughout the years of Austria's annexation, and cast doubt on their future 'ability to unconditionally support the new, independent Austrian Republic': a legalistic euphemism used to describe those who had collaborated with the National Socialists.¹⁴ Indeed, all three academics were members of various pan-German, nationalist *Burschenschaften* in Austria.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Gaissinovitch left no account of the relationship between himself and these three professors, and the only extant comments that exist vice versa are by Bauer and Uebersberger, and pertain only to his dissertation (see the following discussion). Thus, we are left to speculate on the nature of the attitudes between Gaissinovitch – who certainly made no effort to hide his Jewish heritage and Zionist leanings during his time in Vienna – and the pan-German, and most likely antisemitic, academic trio.

Gaissinovitch submitted his doctoral thesis entitled *Bermerkungen zu Spenglers Auffassung Russlands* (Remarks on Spengler's Conception of Russia) to the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Vienna, on 31 March 1924, and on 8 June of that year was awarded his Ph.D. Comprising a mere eighty-seven pages, including a bibliography that lists only eighteen, mainly secondary sources, one is struck at first glance by the difference in methodological approach when compared with a contemporary doctoral thesis. Indeed, within those eighty-seven pages there exists neither a single footnote nor citation.

Although such practice seems strange to a contemporary academic eye, it was nonetheless accepted. The University of Vienna's 1872 Reform Laws, in consideration of doctoral dissertations submitted to the Faculty of Philosophy, were vague, and stated only that candidates exercised free choice over the form of their dissertations so long as they could demonstrate sufficient knowledge of their topics.¹⁶ Thus it was possible to submit a freely formed treatise on a particular subject, and indeed, it appears that this is what Gaissinovitch did. Perhaps less a scholarly study of Spengler's work than a 'philosophical rebuttal', the dissertation reads more like a series of remarks delivered from one cultural historian, if not 'philosopher', to another. An introduction is followed by six chapters: 'Arabian Culture', 'Mujik and Fellah', 'Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky', 'One

Sixth of the Mainland’, ‘The Revolution and Its Consequences’ and ‘To Whom the Last Word in Europe?’.

Untergang

The first volume of Oswald Spengler’s magnum opus *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*) appeared in 1918, and bore the title *Form and Actuality* (*Gestalt und Wirklichkeit*). A second volume, *Perspectives of World History* (*Welthistorische Perspektiven*), followed in 1922, one year after Gaissinovitch had begun his doctoral research. Spengler believed that the real utility in his approach was in its attempt at

predetermining history, of following the still untravelled stages in the destiny of a Culture, and specifically of the only Culture of our time and on our planet which is actually in the phase of fulfilment – the West-European-American.¹⁷

Such a revolutionary, meta-historical methodology required a new cognitive and analytical strategy. Spengler eschewed the traditional grouping of one ‘long’ world history into temporal periods – ancient, medieval and modern – in favour of a less Eurocentric approach that grouped world history by epochal ‘Cultures’, which could then be studied comparatively.¹⁸ Furthermore, a Spenglerian ‘Culture’ is like all other ‘biological’ phenomena: a living organism that possesses a life cycle of its own, and which, in this case, lasts approximately 1,500 years. It comprises four predetermined, temporally fixed stages that correspond to the life-cycle of human beings – childhood, youth, maturity and old age – or the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter.

The pre-cultural, ‘childhood’ phase of a Spenglerian Culture lasts approximately 500 years and is characterised by much change, albeit unconscious, as the ‘germinating’ Culture leads an almost directionless, somnambulistic existence. Eventually, however, like a butterfly from a cocoon, a new Culture emerges out of what Spengler calls a ‘proto-spirituality of ever-childish humanity’, into its two major periods of development: youth, which lasts approximately 500 years, and maturity, which lasts approximately 300 years.¹⁹ The period of ‘youth’ is marked by religious zeal, and its ruthless defence: Spengler characterises actions in this phase as ‘warm-blooded’ and impulsive, and settlement is in the countryside, as feudal organisation begins to predominate. The ‘mature’ phase represents the pinnacle of creativity, expression and fulfilment of each Culture, as country

marketplaces grow into towns that – in turn – enable scientific, artistic, political and philosophical evolution.

The final stage – ‘old age’ – sees ‘culture’ transformed into ‘civilisation’. This period is ruled by cool intellect and calculated reason that act completely independently of passion and instinct. Towns become cities, and finally ‘megalopolitan’ centres, where rationalisation prevails and cultural decay is widespread. Religion becomes dogma, science and philosophy become rational analysis, prophetic vision becomes journalistic superficiality, art becomes technique and history is no longer ‘made’, but is ‘studied’. Worst of all, money – the prime indicator of a ‘rootless’ Culture – assumes a central, irresistible role. All traces of rural life are abandoned in favour of the stone ‘cosmopolis’, at which point the Culture’s blood ‘congeals’, a sure sign of its demise. Indeed, ‘warm’ blood, and money – ‘congealed-blood’ – were, for Spengler, polar opposites. Blood as a life-force plays a central role in Spenglerian ideology, hence his glorification of the ‘warm-blooded primitive’ versus his debasement of ‘cold-blooded civilisation’ and his overall mistrust of reason.

The ‘civilised’ population, ‘culturally-rootless’ once again, begins anew to wander aimlessly, similar to its predecessors in the ‘childhood’ stage, but now evolved into ‘intellectual drifters’ that Spengler calls *fellaheen*. And although indicative of a Culture that was now firmly in decline, this final phase does not manifest itself without various forms of resistance. Spengler believed that the increase in supernatural belief and flirtation with ‘pseudo-religion’ that were indicative of this phase marked the advent of a Culture’s second, albeit corrupted, ‘childhood’. At the same time, those few who had remained in the countryside – the ‘simple’ folk – now come to the fore, in what Spengler calls a ‘Second Religiosity’. In spite of its promise, however, this Second Religiosity lacks vitality; it brings forth no new religion and is therefore quickly converted into the already extant religion of the *fellaheen*. All distinctions between the religions of city and province become blurred in a religion that no longer experiences any form of historical progression. Eventually, a ‘new’ Culture – one nonetheless predicated on the former, ‘ossified’, Culture – would emerge, led by a new elite of warm-blooded barbarians, and begin the process anew. Indeed, Spengler specifically appropriates the Arabic term for peasant farmers, since he believed that the ‘real’ *fellaheen* that existed at the time of writing were both remnants of a now-dead Arabian Culture, and the prototypes of what would eventually become the new barbarian elite – the ‘proto-spirituality of ever-childish humanity’ – of a reborn Arabian Culture.

Although the parallels with the Nietzschean *Übermensch* are rather obvious, the Hegelian overtones should also not go unnoticed. Spengler's theory of Cultural evolution is not completely dissimilar to Hegel's concept of dialectical 'becoming': a Spenglerian Culture comprises not only Hegelian thesis (culture) and antithesis (civilisation) but also – in the idea of cultural rebirth led by the 'New Barbarian' – a synthesis of the two, which then serves as the point of reference for a new dialectical process. The real point of departure from Hegel is that, for Spengler, Cultures are independent 'biological' organisms, and thus lack any sort of universal truth, although they may, in fact, share similar spiritual ideals. As such, he rejects Hegel's idea of one overriding history of humankind that develops teleologically for the notion of several smaller self-sufficient, biologically predetermined historical Cultures that all develop in a similar manner. As he noted:

Here I would protest against two assumptions that have so far vitiated all historical thought: the assertion of an ultimate aim of mankind as a whole and the denial of there being ultimate aims at all. The life *has* an aim. It is the fulfilment of that which was ordained at its conception. ... 'Historical' man ... is the man of a Culture that is in full march towards self-fulfilment. Before this, after this, outside this, man is *historyless*.²⁰

He also rejected Darwin, in favour of Goethe, who he believed, in his essay *Geistesepochen* (Spiritual Epochs), had 'characterized the four parts of a Culture – its preliminary, early, late, and civilized stages – with such a depth of insight that even today there is nothing to add'.²¹ Spengler thus uses Goethe's theory as the template for his own theory of Cultural biological predetermination. He believed that the idea of Darwinian evolution was refuted in nature, especially in palaeontology, but also – remarkably – in the study of human evolution:

As for mankind, discoveries of the Diluvial age indicate more and more pointedly that the man-forms existing then correspond to those living now; there is not the slightest trace of evolution towards a race of greater utilitarian 'fitness'. And the continued failure to find man in the Tertiary discoveries indicates more and more clearly that the human life-form, like every other, originates in a sudden mutation (*Wandlung*) of which the 'whence', 'how', and 'why' remain an impenetrable secret.²²

Indeed, because Cultures appeared – like any other life form – as a 'sudden mutation', and consequently had similar life-cycles with parallel stages of development, Spengler believed that corresponding periods of different Cultures could be studied comparatively. He terms this 'Morphology'.²³ Accordingly, parallel events

that occurred during corresponding spiritual epochs in any particular Culture are considered, in Spenglerian methodology, 'morphologically contemporaneous'. Thus, in Spenglerian analysis, Plato and Goethe were – morphologically speaking – 'contemporaries', in spite of the fact that they lived 1,500 years apart, since each assumed a similar role at a corresponding period in the development of his particular – Classical and Western, respectively – Culture.²⁴ Moreover, Spengler borrowed the mineralogical term 'pseudomorphosis' to describe a situation where an older Culture cuts short a younger Culture's evolutionary self-expression, and thus prevents it from 'becoming': from evolving into its own Spenglerian-predetermined mature Culture. Cultures may superficially borrow from each other, but can never substantially assume each other's characteristics.

Spengler identified six Cultures which he believed had completed their respective life-cycles: Egyptian, Babylonian, Classical, Chinese, Indian and Arabian. He identified a further two, incomplete, Cultures: Mayan, which had begun its cycle but met with a sudden end, and Western, which was still extant, but in the process of decline, having already entered its phase of 'old age' or 'winter'. He further distinguished between 'Apollonian' (ancient Roman and Greek), 'Magian' (Jewish from 500 BCE, Persian, Arabian, early Christian) and 'Faustian' (Western) Cultures.

Gaissinovitch's homeland, Russia, was – for Spengler – in a state of pseudomorphosis, a process that had begun in 1703 when Peter the Great founded St Petersburg. Until this period, Russia had been 'morphologically contemporaneous' with Europe during its 'pre-cultural' and 'spring' epochs. From 1703, 'Old Russian' Culture was abandoned in favour of an emulation of Western Culture. Spengler pits Tolstoy against Dostoyevsky: the 'Western', 'revolutionary' father of Bolshevism *cum* social reformer, versus the 'Asiatic', saintly figure who represented primeval Russia, and – consequently – the Russia to come. Thus for Spengler, the 1917 revolution was less the revolt of a disenfranchised, urbanised proletariat, as it was the innate yearning of a town-less, primitive *mujik* (Russian peasant) for his own life-form, religion and history.²⁵ A Spenglerian reading sees the Bolsheviks as the epitome of a megalopolitan 'civilised' – in other words, at the end of its life cycle – Western European society. Nonetheless, because of Russia's unique pseudo-morphological state with the Spenglerian 'Western' Culture, the Bolsheviks could only ever attempt to emulate Western European society. Consequently, for Spengler, Marxist rhetoric, a product of 'civilised' Western Europe, was nothing more than pure, rationalist fetishism. The reason that the revolution had been successful in Russia and not, for example, in Germany or Austria was due to ideology, but rather to the strong *mujik* element