

Derek J. Penslar, *Zionism: An Emotional State* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023), pp. 284.

by *Guri Schwarz*

Derek J. Penslar is a renowned and authoritative scholar in the fields of modern Jewish studies, the history of Zionism and the State of Israel. His latest contribution to the field, *Zionism: An Emotional State* is a concise but brilliant scholarly examination of Zionism through the lens of the history of emotions.

The book appeared in the summer of 2023, thus before the global upheaval that followed the horrific events of October 7, and the ensuing Israeli military response against the territory of Gaza. What we have witnessed since these events was the explosion of scorching hot emotional reactions; very diverse, and opposing, views and political positions were expressed, but the force that generated and kept them burning in global media, public opinion and university campuses was passion. Similar in intensity though most often opposing in content, emotions have fueled international debates, grassroots movements, and various forms of communication both in traditional and new media.

This is not new. In fact, through the long history of the State of Israel, previous crisis also led to fiery reactions both locally and abroad. Penslar's book allows us, to some extent, to set this dynamic in a proper historical framework, offering both specialists and non-specialist readers helpful tools to better understand the subject. While there is a wealth of historiography dealing with the origins and history of the Zionist movement and then the history of the State of Israel, and—to a lesser degree—also dealing with anti-Zionism, existing scholarship predominantly offered a political, ideological, sometimes social framework of analysis. Opening to the history of emotions, for and against Zionism, Penslar enriches the current scenario.

Structured in three parts, the book explores Zionism as an ideology and a movement, then analyzes the vicissitudes of the State of Israel, focusing on contemporary cultural and emotional resonances. The first two parts correspond each to a single chapter. The first one, *Staging Zionism*, traces the evolution of Zionism, highlighting its multifaceted nature as both a nationalist movement and an outgrowth of Jewish civilization. Penslar delves into the ideological and

practical components of Zionism while critiquing traditional taxonomies and proposing a more fluid and nuanced categorization. He examines its relationship with Jewish culture and other Jewish nationalist movements. The second part touches on a potentially more controversial, and yet central issue: *Zionism as colonialism*. This section contrasts with equilibrium and acumen internal Jewish discourses on Zionism's benefits with external critiques focused on its impact on Palestinians. It focuses on the theoretical framing of these effects within colonialist discourse, placing them in a precise historical setting. His analysis allows to situate that debate within broader emotional and ideological divides, connecting it to wider patterns in modern nationalism, where religion, ethnicity, and historical narratives intersect with political struggles. The third and final section is subdivided into four chapters. This is the longest and most innovative part of the book, highlighting emotions as the driving force behind both Zionism's endurance and its transformations. Penslar organizes this exploration around emotional clusters rather than isolated feelings. He discusses themes such as love, pride, fear, betrayal, and hatred, mapping their roles in the movement's history and its resonance in contemporary global narratives, both inside and outside the Jewish world. The book concludes with a call to integrate emotional analysis into historical and political studies, demonstrating how emotions underpin both Zionist solidarity and its contentious global reception.

By situating Zionism within the broader histories of nationalism and emotion, Penslar seeks to deepen understanding of its complexities and relevance today. This book is clearly in debt to the new wave of scholarly studies on nationalism that developed since the 1980s, reframing the conventional approaches, projecting attention not only to the reconstruction (and deconstruction) of nationalist narratives, but gradually shifting attention from the realms of the political, of the institutional, of the ideological, to the cultural analysis of the passions that lead men (and in different ways women) to reconfigure their personal identities in relation to the national horizon, squarely placing the option of sacrifice for the motherland at the center of individual and collective identities. Having said this, it must be noted that there is also something more in this contribution, as Zionism is not like any other national movement, it has obvious peculiarities, and it stimulates (and has stimulated) passionate reactions in a global scenario, well beyond the group or groups directly affected by it. Few other national movements

have been able to suscite such intense reactions worldwide for a protracted long period. Among them, and inextricably intertwined with the Zionist issue, is the Palestinian national movement, especially since it arose to global prominence following the Six Days War. The two issues are so thoroughly enmeshed that to fully unravel the tangle of sentiments that conflate contemporary perceptions of Zionism one cannot be considered without the other. The author is obviously aware of this. To fully grasp the issue, two emotional states, one concerning Zionism and the other the Palestinian cause, together with their cultural and political misappropriations worldwide, would need to be analyzed conjointly. There are several studies that deal with the ideological and political history of the Palestinian liberation movement, as well as with the construction of Palestinian identity; further operations aimed at fully bridging the gap between the studies on the emotions provoked by Zionism and those stimulated by Palestinian aspirations would seem to be the obvious next step for scholarship.

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