

Book Review: Peter Bergamin, *The Making of the Israeli Far-Right: Abba Ahimeir and Zionist Ideology*. I.B. Tauris, 2020. ISBN-13: 978-0755645008 (Paperback). 272 Pages. \$39.95.

Reviewed by Shane Burley¹

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One of the reasons that the world of Contemporary Fascist Studies spends such a great deal of time on definitions, and why they so often bleed into hopelessly vague descriptions of political and philosophical phenomena, is that scholars are trying to find some ideological core that will sync up social movements in very different spatial and temporal situations. Is fascism some arcane political phenomenon abandoned to the history of Interwar Europe, or is it broader than that? What does fascism mean in modern countries where politics, social movements and networks, and identities work differently than they did in the 1930s? Maybe just as importantly, what does it look like inside of communities that themselves have been the target of fascist movements?

This is becoming especially true for the growth of increasingly globalized far-right movements that are not relegated solely to Europe and North America and are responding to the conditions of an international political economy. What do these movements look like in the Global South, amongst colonized and subaltern populations? What about Hindutva and other movements that intersect with the term fascism, but are not (solely) the province of white participants? The most pressing example of this is movements that erupt from the community that was the chief target of European fascism and National Socialism: the Jewish and Israeli far right.

Since 1967's "Six Day War" the far-right in Israel has expanded its scope and has begun to have tremendous influence on state politics both through the ruling Likud Party and its coalition partners, and this has successfully shifted much of the identity of incoming generations. The

¹ **Shane Burley**, Independent Scholar, e-mail: blackcatfilmsltd@gmail.com.

change seems most obvious when compared to the social democratic Labour governments that dominated Israel's politics for the first thirty years, and which was increasingly snuffed out after Menachem Begin's victory in 1977, yet that far-right core had been inside Zionism from the beginning. While Labour Zionism and leaders like David Ben-Gurion remain the focus of most Israeli historiographies, the Revisionist Zionist movement, which wanted to "revise" Zionism to focus on military strength as the core of state building, was not only multitudinous, but was also integral to winning the war of 1948 and establishing the kind of Israeli state and economy we have today.

In an effort to understand this development in Israeli politics, particularly the Settlement Movement and ancillary social movements such as neo-Kahanism, groups like Lehava, and the violence of the Hilltop Youth, many scholars are now scrambling to unpack how these Jewish Israeli projects relate to the global far-right. Peter Bergamin's new intellectual biography of Revisionist Zionist leader Abba Ahimeir bills itself as this, but its extremely limited scope leaves us with few answers to the larger questions around the Israeli far-right.

Ahimeir will be unfamiliar to most people, including those well versed in Israeli politics. He was a minor figure in the pre-state Zionist movement in the Yishuv, known mostly for creating the militant activist group Brit HaBirionim and his alleged involvement with, and trials for, the killing of Chaim Arlosoroff, who many Revisionists saw as a traitor to the Jewish people for collaborating with the Nazis to allow for some Jewish emigration from the Reich. Ahimeir, who had come from Germany and had a unique political trajectory from socialist to self-described fascist, pushed what was called the Maximalist faction of the Revisionists: no negotiating with the Arab Palestinians and Israel should instead lead a violent and messianic mission to take all of Eretz Yisrael. This is the ideology that pushed segments of militant terror squads like the Irgun and, especially, Lehi, and led to incredible acts of violence leading up to the creation of the State of Israel and the Nakba, the expulsion of Arab Palestinians.

Amiheir had started as a somewhat moderate socialist, yet had made his way on an intellectual journey that landed him in the fringes of the right. A major turning point for this, recounted in the book, is his response to the English General Strike in May of 1926 organized by the Trades and Union Commission (TUC) whose 800,000 coal miners had been locked out while fighting against pay cuts and extended workdays. Ahimeir criticized the strike for its alleged tactical missteps, for taking Yishuv money donated from Histradut, and for taking Soviet money, all of which helped to

alienate him from HaPoel HaTzair, the socialist Zionist organization he had been a member of. This signaled the beginning of his move rightward and out of the party and into the heart of the Revisionists, which he was pushed even further to the edges of. This may have been sourced in his Spenglerian ideas, which were there right from the beginnings, and his ideas about nationhood and class evolved to more accurately reflect his underlying philosophical positions.

This is an important history because it shows exactly what was at the heart of the Revisionist Movement, of which Menachem Begin was a key part, and which has been carried into the dominant position of Israeli politics through Likud. The Revisionist movement always had a fascist component, and it wasn't even that fringe, so when we ask now why Likud leaders are willing to support Settlement expansion and collaborate with Kahanists and other far-right figures we have a clear answer from the history of the Revisionist/Maximalist relationship.

But you will learn none of this from Bergamin's book because his focus is less on history, nor practical politics, and instead on the often obscure writings of this one, outsider figure. The study begins with an almost agonizingly long chapter outlining Ahimeir's doctoral dissertation, where he builds on far-right theorist Oswald Spengler's ideas about historical and civilizational cycles and types. Bergamin shows, definitively, that Spengler's ideas motivated Ahimeir throughout his life, up to and including his work with the Revisionist Party and the Beitar youth movement. Bergamin hopes to reframe how Ahimeir's work was understood, including how he understood himself as a self-proclaimed fascist. Instead of ideological clarity, Ahimeir called for fascism as a kind of ecstatic, violent force in the service of Zionist state building: it was this energy that was necessary to overcome the unlikelihood of Zionist success. His ideas were less than coherent despite his identification with Benito Mussolini (he liked to call Revisionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky "Duce"), yet his valorization of violence and calls for an uncompromising vision has had an effect on the unique synthesis between Orthodox messianism and radical right-wing Zionism we see emerging from the Settlements today. Ahimeir viewed fascism "as a *modus operandi* for effecting his nationalist vision, the creation of a Jewish nation state in Palestine," writes Bergiman (205). The point here is that fascism was perhaps necessary as a methodology beyond ideology, a revolutionary fervor that could carry the colonists to victory. This calls into question not only the founding myths of Zionism, but of states in general, and gets at the heart of the conflicted stories we tell about nationalism and nationhood. But these are, alas, more missed opportunities in this book.

The question about Bergamin's book is less about his scholarship, which is iron clad and proves every single thing he outlined in his introduction. Instead, it is hard to ignore that a book called *The Making of the Israeli Far-Right* does not actually explain anything about the foundations of the Israeli far-right. There is no discussion at all of the consequences of Ahimeir's influence or of the Maximalist position, which is more than a missed opportunity because it is what connects this scholarship to its relevance. Ahimeir's relationship with the later Herut party after the forming of Israel is almost completely ignored, yet that is crucial for understanding the continuation of the Revisionist movement after Labour took the state. This would help us to understand how Revisionism maintained its coherency into the creation of Likud, which puts Ahimeir at the potential center of Israel's rightward shift. The final chapter talks about Ahimeir's trials and involvement with more serious radical far-right politics, but that is perhaps the least researched of all the chapters and prefers to focus on court transcripts rather than recount the events that had happened.

Some pieces of Ahimeir's writing get so much time that the reader will wonder what exactly it was about the primary sources that so seduced Bergamin. An example of this is the chapter on the Beitar educational program through the Beit Sefer L'Madrikhei Betar school, which spends well over a dozen pages discussing the curriculum. Now, the reason for this is to show exactly how Ahimeir's ideological trajectory was both predetermined in his Spenglerian roots and had an influence on the self-conception of Beitar membership, a defensible and useful point. But why let it dominate the book? Why not show its real-world consequences rather than force us to analyze the fragmented educational planning documents in excruciating detail?

Bergamin's book is something you commonly find in academic publishing. Because scholars often hyperfocus on particular topics, especially ones where they can find intellectually enticing primary sources, they often produce awkwardly specific studies. But that would not sell, so instead the book is sold on the notion that this obscure study actually has some relevance for contemporary issues. An example of this is a recent good book by Susie Linfield called *The Lion's Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky* which is ostensibly about how the political left relates to Zionism, a complex topic to be sure. Except that is not what the book is about. It is about how eight authors, most of which are so obscure that non-academics will hardly have heard of them, wrote about Zionism. This, while fascinating at times, feels like

a bait and switch and, subsequently, begs the question of what its real function is.

I will acknowledge that this discussion is largely unfair to Bergamin who set out a particular task and completed it admirably, and there is no doubt that *The Making of the Israeli Far-Right* will serve as a particularly useful book for those that intersect with its subject. But the numbers of those who will find it useful has to be painfully small, which is a shame given Bergamin's sizable scholarly chops. This book could be reframed and built on, with much detail of the intellectual history cut or merely summarized, and then placed into a more literary biography that ends with at least a full chapter explaining the ongoing relevance. That would take Bergamin's research to new heights, and yet we are living in a fantasy since that is not the book we have here. The fact that Ahimeir is not tied more fully to the legacy of people like Menachem Begin, Meir Kahane, Abraham Isaac Kook and his son Zvi Yehuda Kook, as well as movements like Gush Emunim really is so disappointing that it calls the entire book's function into question.

There is little that most people, even most scholars, will find here that they won't find in earlier books such as Eran Kaplan's *The Jewish Radical Right* or work that covers more contemporary Israeli movements, like that of Ami Pedahzur or even the late Ehud Sprinzak. The bottom line is that books do, in fact, have to justify their existence by giving the reader something to hold onto, effective expertship is not enough. The lack of literary flourishing or editorializing from Bergamin, and perhaps a lack of attention to the craft of writing, holds this book back from some of the heights it could have been capable of.

I appreciate Bergamin's work. He is a good scholar, a dependable intellectual historian, and as someone who studies the far-right, I think his commentary on Spengler and his use of George Mosse was particularly impressive. I intend not only to cite this book, but will also read whatever he does next. But I would be hard pressed to recommend *The Making of the Israeli Far-Right* to anyone but the most die-hard, and even then I would offer the title with a layer of caveats. Bergamin's book outlines one of the key tensions in academic publishing: is this a book, to be read cover to cover, or is it a catalog of available citations? You can do both the research and provide a bit of storytelling, and that tension is being resolved as academic publishing heads more broadly into the mainstream. It was a tension I hope Bergamin resolves in his next project.