

Creating a Historical Narrative for a Spiritual Nation: Simon Dubnow and the Politics of the Jewish Past

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Volume 22, Number 2, 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1008979ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1008979ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gechtman, R. (2011). Creating a Historical Narrative for a Spiritual Nation: Simon Dubnow and the Politics of the Jewish Past. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 22(2), 98–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1008979ar>

Article abstract

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Abstract

Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) was a towering intellectual figure in the history of East European Jewry in the half-century before the Second World War. His influence was manifested mostly in two areas: as the pre-eminent Jewish historian of his generation and as the main theorist of Jewish diaspora nationalism (Folkism) and intellectual leader of the Folkspartey in Russia (1907-1917). This article examines the relation between the two aspects of Dubnow's career and legacy. As a historian, Dubnow developed a method for the study of Jewish history he called 'historism'. Politically, Dubnow was an atypical nationalist, in that he did not demand territorial independence for his people but only the recognition of Jews as a nation with autonomous status within the states where they already lived. I show how Dubnow's Jewish nationalism and his political views derived, to a large extent, from his historical theory and analysis, and in turn, how his historical interpretations were often informed by his ideological preconceptions. By analyzing and juxtaposing his historical and theoretical works, I argue that the writing of history was for Dubnow a means to achieve his more ambitious goal: to change the future of Jewish society and, by extension, the countries where the Jews lived.

* Research for this article was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Standard Research Grant, which I gratefully acknowledge. I would like to thank Adriana Benzaquén and the four anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments that helped me clarify my thoughts and arguments, and Dimitry Shumsky for his useful suggestions. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Résumé

Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) a été une figure intellectuelle marquante de l'histoire de la communauté juive de l'Europe de l'Est dans la première moitié du vingtième siècle. Son influence s'est particulièrement fait sentir dans deux domaines. Il a d'abord été l'historien juif le plus important de sa génération. Il a ensuite été le principal théoricien du nationalisme de la diaspora juive et le leader intellectuel du Folkspartei en Russie (1907-1917). Cet article examine la relation entre ces deux aspects de sa carrière et de son héritage. Comme historien, Dubnow a développé une méthode pour étudier l'histoire juive, qu'il a appelée (en anglais) "historism". Politiquement, il a promu un nationalisme atypique puisqu'il n'a jamais réclamé l'indépendance d'un territoire national pour son peuple, mais seulement la reconnaissance des Juifs comme formant une nation avec un statut autonome à sein des États où ils étaient déjà installés. Cet article explique comment le nationalisme juif de Dubnow et ses vues politiques dérivait en grande partie de sa théorie et de son analyse historiques et, parallèlement, comment ses interprétations historiques ont souvent été influencées par ses préconceptions idéologiques. L'auteur soutient qu'en analysant et en juxtaposant les travaux historiques et théoriques de Dubnow, on peut voir comment l'écriture de l'histoire était pour lui un moyen d'atteindre un objectif plus ambitieux, celui de modifier l'avenir de la société juive et, par extension, celui des pays où ils vivaient.

The spirit of each generation turns around continually in its circuit and the spirit returns again to its circuit, the point of the nation's existence. The soul of each generation (a generation is for a nation what an individual is for society) emanates from the soul of the (collective) 'body' of all the preceding generations, and what endures, namely, the strength of the accumulated past, exceeds the wreckage, the strength of the changing present.

Simon Dubnow, *The Survival of the Jewish People:
The Secret of Survival and the Law of Survival*

The Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) was a towering intellectual figure among East European Jews in the half-century before World War II. His influence was manifested mainly in

two areas: as the pre-eminent Jewish historian of his generation and as the main theorist of Jewish Diaspora nationalism (or Jewish *folkism*). Dubnow's authority and prestige as an historian have endured both within the historical profession and for the Jewish public at large; his contributions to the ideology of folkism, however, are now mostly forgotten, like folkism itself, except by a few specialists. This paper explores the relationship between the two aspects of Dubnow's career, which, I argue, were closely interconnected. By examining the intellectual sources of Dubnow's historiography and ideology, I show how his distinctive Jewish nationalism and his political views derived, to a large extent, from his historical theory and analysis, and, in turn, his historical interpretations were to a large extent informed by his ideological preconceptions. Although the last few years have seen a renewal of scholarly interest in Dubnow's work, particularly within the field of Jewish history, most existing studies focus on Dubnow's central contributions to the development of Jewish historiography and, to a lesser extent, on his role in Jewish politics.¹ A notable exception is the work of Anke Hillbrenner and Jeffrey Veidlinger, who have reframed the scope of Dubnow's historiography and ideology in the context of the intellectual traditions of the liberal intelligentsia in the Russian Empire.² My objective in this paper is to go a step further by situating Dubnow's thought and activism within an even broader historical framework; I do this both by analyzing his (mostly non-Jewish and non-Russian) sources of intellectual inspiration and by conceptualizing his work with the tools offered by recent studies of nations and nationalism.

Politically, Dubnow was an atypical nationalist, in that he did not demand territorial independence for his people or the creation of a nation state with a strong army and other central institutions, as other nationalists do. Still, while for most Jewish nationalists (i.e., Zionists) today Dubnow's folkism would barely qualify as "national enough," Dubnow played a crucial role in the development of the Jewish nationalist historiography, which is at the core of the Zionist popular narrative.³ As transpires from Dubnow's theoretical and historical works, and as Dubnow himself often implied in his autobiography, history writing was for him a means towards a more ambitious goal: to change the future of Jewish society and, by extension, of the

countries where the Jews lived. In this sense, while Dubnow's own national demands were extremely modest (he rejected sovereignty as a national aspiration), others used his historical narrative, during his lifetime and later, to justify territorial demands.⁴ In this way, in Dubnow's case, history writing, however rigorous and "scientific," was a continuation of politics by other means.

Dubnow, History and Politics

Simon Dubnow was born into a religiously observant family in Mstislavl, a *shtetl* in the Russian pale of settlement in the Mogilev *gubernia* (now Mogilev *oblast*, in Belarus).⁵ As an adolescent, in the optimistic atmosphere of Alexander II's Great Reforms, Dubnow rebelled against tradition, rejected religion, and taught himself Russian to be able to study in a state high school. In his early twenties, he embraced the progressive principles of the *haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) and, influenced by his reading of Auguste Comte and other secular philosophers and social scientists, he enthusiastically adopted positivism with a quasi-religious fervour.⁶ Like his Talmudist scholar grandfather, young Dubnow had an inexhaustible thirst to learn, but instead of traditional rabbinical literature Dubnow pursued all "the new knowledge of the generation" and was drawn to the most advanced currents in the natural and social sciences.⁷ Materialistic atheism — the rejection of all forms of *a priori* reasoning and notions of a supernatural origin of nature — and utilitarian morality — an ethical system that was not based on divine revelation — merged in Dubnow into a progressive conception of human history and a staunch confidence in the liberating effects of science. This intellectual attitude did not, however, lead Dubnow, as it did other young Russians of his generation, to nihilism and political radicalism. In fact, the young Dubnow never embraced political radicalism or broke with Judaism, and even in the period when, while living in St. Petersburg, he most vehemently rejected the Jewish religion (1880–1884), the main venue for his intellectual output was the liberal Jewish monthly *Voskhod* (The Dawn), where he worked as a journalist, literary critic, and editor, and to which he contributed essays on Jewish history and social reform. During these years he lived

openly with Ida Friedlin, thus expressing his rejection of religious marriage.⁸

By the mid-1880s, the optimism of the Great Reforms era had turned to despair under the reactionary policies of Alexander III, whose reign was marked by anti-Jewish popular violence and renewed restriction of Jews' civil rights on the part of the authorities. The "midnight of the Russian reaction" and the "sunset of the period of reforms" affected Dubnow personally: he was denied admission into a Russian University and later on he was not allowed to reside legally in St. Petersburg, where he was starting to develop a career as a writer.⁹ Back in his hometown with Ida, now his wife (they married anticipating the social pressure in the provincial environment), Dubnow undertook an ambitious, encyclopaedic plan of self-education, or what he called "home university," devoting 13 hours every day to the study of "mathematics, natural science, sociology (including history), philosophy (including psychology and logic), and literature in several languages."¹⁰ This was also a period of psychological and philosophical crisis; Dubnow experienced "doubts about the moral progress of man" and questioned the emotional detachment of positivism: "just as early in my life I had developed doubts in my heart about faith, now I came to doubt the all-powerful force of the mind."¹¹ While he never returned to his former religious faith, Dubnow now embraced Leo Tolstoy's romantic, ethical populism as an alternative to positivist detachment. Dubnow admired Tolstoy for having rejected established religion while dedicating himself to ethical self-perfection.

By his late twenties, after an "internal war between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between the national and the cosmopolitan principles," Dubnow concluded that his "path to the universal lay expressly through the field of the national," in which he was already active as a writer of cultural essays on Jewish topics for the Jewish intellectual press.¹² It was at this time that Dubnow turned himself into a professional historian. He was influenced by the method of the historian and French nationalist Ernest Renan (1823–1892), in particular Renan's struggle to find a balance between reason and faith and his attempts to treat religion as a proper object of historical study.¹³ Dubnow found the solution to his dilemmas in what he called "historism" (not to be confused with "historicism"): the assertion that

the development of the individual's character, tastes, and convictions are strongly shaped by the collective (or national) historical experience. The answer to the injunction *gnothi seauton* (know thyself, the aphorism inscribed in the temple of Apollo at Delphi) was to be found in the study of the collective, historical past. Historical consciousness became for Dubnow the essence of the Jewish national ideal. Dubnow published his "historical credo in miniature," *What is Jewish History*, in 1893.¹⁴ He borrowed from Renan the idea that the nation is an organic entity and from the French historian and literary critic Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) the view that the condition of a nation is reflected in the works of its great writers. From German romantic nationalists, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Dubnow adopted the ethno-spiritual notion that considers the *Volk* not as an entity based merely on biology, but rather as a combination of race, culture, and "spirit," transmitted from generation to generation. For Dubnow, the Jews throughout the world constituted an organic unit, with a common "people's soul" (*Völksele*); this organic unit, which existed since biblical times, had not been affected by millennia of geographical dispersion.¹⁵ Without embracing the Jewish religion, but acknowledging its central role in preserving the Jewish nation, Dubnow posited the existence of a boundless Jewish national spirit that transcends time and space.¹⁶ These romantic and nationalist notions allowed Dubnow to appreciate the beauty and national value of some religious manifestations while dissociating himself from actual religious practice. Historism served two purposes for Dubnow: on the one hand, it enabled him to write social, empirical history with intellectual rigour;¹⁷ on the other, it reinforced his Jewish identity under a secular guise. In a surprising turn away from his earlier *maskilic* (enlightened) and positivist views, Dubnow's first major historical work was his reconstruction of the early stages of Hasidism (first published in the pages of *Voskhod* between 1888 and 1893), in which he emphatically contradicted the negative view of the movement expressed by the foremost Jewish historians of the nineteenth century, such as Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891).¹⁸

The retreat from the principles of the *haskalah* and positivism into Jewish historism and nationalism represented for Dubnow "the

warmth of returning home, where one belonged.” In the following years, he developed the political program of Jewish Diaspora nationalism, which, in the words of one of Dubnow’s intellectual biographers, was “historism projected forward to insure immortality through the collective, and outward to confront the rest of the world with dignity.”¹⁹ Dubnow articulated his now mature views on politics and history in his *Pisma o starom i novom evreistve* (Letters on Old and New Judaism), published and revised in the years 1897–1907 — yet another turbulent period in Russian history, which climaxed in the 1905 Revolution.²⁰ Jewish political life in Russia was also revolutionized and ushered into modernity with the creation of the Jewish Labour Bund, a workers’ revolutionary party, and the Zionist movement, both in 1897, and a myriad of other political parties and movements after 1905 — not least among them, Dubnow’s own *Folkspartey*, founded in St. Petersburg in 1906.²¹

The *Folkspartey* consisted primarily of a small but influential circle of public intellectuals organized in the Russian capital.²² The intellectual stature of Dubnow and other major activists (including Yisroel Efroikin, S. An-ski, and Nokhem Shtif) gave the party a resonance and influence much beyond its actual size and strength as an organization. Under Dubnow’s ideological leadership, folkism combined political liberalism and the autonomist doctrine of Diaspora nationalism, as stated in Dubnow’s *Letters*. Like other Russian liberals, folkists strove to transform Russia into a parliamentary democracy and in parallel to democratize Jewish political life. But as Jewish nationalists who believed in the organic unity of all Jews, the party not only demanded full civil rights for Jews as individuals, but also the recognition of Jews as a nation within a multinational Russia.²³ Folkists’ main proposal (and the main tenet of Dubnow’s Diaspora nationalism) was that the Russian Jews must be granted national-cultural autonomy by replacing the traditional Jewish *kehiles* with local councils under the authority of an elected Jewish national assembly.²⁴ In addition, the *Folkspartey* demanded the recognition of Yiddish as the Jewish national language and the right to use it in public life.²⁵ In the Russian political context, folkists sought alliance with the liberal Kadets (Constitutional Democratic Party).²⁶

The notion that Russian Jews should enjoy some form of national autonomy within a reformed Russian multinational state, which became immensely popular among Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, was not exclusive to Dubnow's folkism. In fact, the Marxist and revolutionary oriented Jewish Labour Bund, the first party to adopt a program of Jewish non-territorial autonomy, did so as a way to undermine rather than promote Jewish nationalism.²⁷ After the 1905 Revolution, several other Jewish political parties adopted platforms demanding national autonomy for Jews in the countries where they already lived, including the "territorialists" of the Marxist-oriented *Tsionistish-Sotsialistishe Arbeter Partey* (Zionist Socialist Workers Party, SSRP, or SS, in practice not a Zionist party), the *sejmistn* (the narodnik/populist Jewish Socialist Workers Party, or SERP, "sickle" in its Russian acronym), and the cultural or spiritual Zionism led by Aḥad ha-'Am (pseudonym of Asher Ginzberg, 1856-1927). Most remarkably, in December 1906, the Russian Zionist Federation adopted the Helsingfors Program that stressed the need for *Gegenwartsarbeit* (work-in-the-present), that is, the day-to-day work in the places where Jews already lived (including the demand for individual and collective rights) rather than focusing on some future mass migration to Palestine.²⁸

Despite the immense success of the ideology of autonomism, broadly understood, in Russia during the first decade of the twentieth century, folkism did not thrive as a party at a time when other Jewish political movements succeeded in gaining the active support of tens and in some cases hundreds of thousands of Jews. Most notably, the Bund became, in the years leading to 1905, a complex conspiratorial party, and, after 1905, one of the largest mass organizations in Russia (Jewish or otherwise). Although the original Folkspartey did not last long as an organization, folkism was briefly revived in Russia in 1917 and, somewhat more successfully, in Poland between 1916 and 1926, where the Folkspartey was re-established by writers and teachers active in the Yiddish secular school movement led by Noah Pryłucki (or Noyekh Prilutski, 1882-1941).²⁹ Following Dubnow's ideas, the Polish incarnation of the Folkspartey proposed full civil rights for Jews as individuals and national-cultural autonomy for the Jewish nation within a multinational Poland, with secularized *kehiles*

that would manage local cultural matters subordinated to a Jewish parliament or national council. Polish Folkists demanded that the state not only recognize Yiddish as the Jews' national language, but also establish and fund secular Jewish schools in Yiddish.³⁰ As a staunchly anti-socialist party that tried to appeal to the masses of the Jewish petit-bourgeoisie, the Polish Folkspartei competed with the General Zionists led by Yitshak Grünbaum (1879–1970) and became their chief rival.³¹ As had been the case in its Russian predecessor, the prestige of the Polish Folkspartei's leading intellectuals (such as Samuel Hirschhorn, Hillel Zeitlin and Tsemah Szabad) surpassed the party's popular and electoral support. After a surprising, instant success in the elections to the Warsaw City Council in 1916, support for the Polish Folkspartei soon plummeted, in particular after 1922, and — ironically for a party that claimed to represent the interests of the Jewish nation as one living organism comprising all Jews not only in Poland but throughout the world — it split into several rival factions in 1926.

Historism and Folkism Analyzed

As I noted above, Dubnow's Jewish nationalism and his political views derived, to a large extent, from his historical theory and analysis. At the same time, unlike other politicians or political theorists who paid lip service to history, Dubnow was *the* pre-eminent Jewish historian of his generation, whose major historical works became accepted by scholars and lay people (including his political rivals) as authoritative in his and subsequent generations in most quarters of Western Jewry. Although in his multi-volume *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes* (World History of the Jewish People, a title that itself reflects Dubnow's universal approach to the Jewish nation) Dubnow presented his historical findings as scientific and objective, his interpretations were nonetheless informed by his ideological preconceptions.³²

A central aim of Dubnow's historical narrative was to make Jews conscious of their collective *national* past, of which he believed they had practically no knowledge, and in particular to show how Jews as a collective had taken an active role in shaping history. In his view, a coherent narrative of the Jewish past stressing Jews' political agency

would serve the national cause and shape his nation's future.³³ Like other Jewish nationalist historians after him (namely, the "Jerusalem school" of Zionist historiography),³⁴ Dubnow paid close attention to the Biblical period, portraying it as the early stage in the formation of the Jewish nation. He did not take scripture as an authoritative text that could not be challenged and stressed the need to cross-check this source with other contemporary sources, such as archaeological findings.³⁵ Nevertheless, Dubnow's narrative essentially replicated the Old Testament stories, only removing from them all traces of God's intervention. In contrast to Zionist historians, however, Dubnow did not minimize the post-biblical stage of Jewish life, the two millennia of the Jewish Diaspora before the nation was "reconnected" with its ancestral land. In the popular Zionist imagination, the many centuries of "exile" represented a long litany of oppression, persecution, and violence against Jews that had reached their peak and logical conclusion in the Holocaust.³⁶ On the contrary, Dubnow, who did not believe that the nation state was the desirable goal of Jewish nationalism and did not promote mass migration to Palestine, did not see the conquest of the Kingdom of Judea by the Romans and the Destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE as a politically momentous disaster, but rather as a step in the elevation of the Jewish people to a higher stage, indeed the highest stage any nation could achieve: that of non-territorial or spiritual nation.

According to Dubnow's account of Jewish history, the Jewish nation had developed in three progressive phases: tribal, political territorial, and cultural-historical or spiritual. In an article published in 1912 — and in a section significantly titled "The Law of Survival Considered" — Dubnow summarized Jewish history in these terms:

In the beginning it is a *tribal* creation, one of the tribes of the East A nomadic people develops into a nation settled on its own territory and then into a political nation In its spiritual development, Israel, from the beginning, forges ahead on its beaten path: it creates for itself a God in its own form and image, a national God, a 'ruler of the nation,' amidst a family of rulers of nations of the world After a long internal struggle, there takes shape in Israel a spiritual tendency unique in

kind, the tendency to create a people in the form and image of God, the Exalted Ideal. This is the fruit of the spirit of the Prophets. The God of the Prophets is the universal God and not merely a ruler of the nation. He created and continues to direct the universe and all nations by oral laws based on truth and justice. For several centuries the Prophets of truth and justice are active among the Hebrew people, while the prophets of other peoples extol power and beauty. Slowly the seedlings mature in the soil of the nation and a unique historical creation arises before us: a people that is small and weak in its political structure, but great in its spiritual form In the period of Greek and Roman rule, Judea is surrounded by a wreath of Jewish centers in Egypt, Babylonia, and Syria. Hebrew culture wrestles with Greek culture, the culture representing 'truth and justice' (ethicism) with the culture representing 'power and beauty' (estheticism)

Then comes the destruction of the Second Temple. The political center in Judea is destroyed and replaced by a regime which has no parallel in world history: a regime of 'nomocracy', the rule of laws, 'hedges' and 'fences'. Israel lays aside the weapons of the zealots, the defenders of political freedom, and takes up other weapons which in fact it wielded in a limited way even before the fall, and which it uses now almost exclusively 'to fence itself in' The nation acquires more powerful weapons: the Talmud is the arsenal for the camp of Israel

The national thread continues to be woven. National hegemony passes from center to center [in various Diaspora locations]: from Spain to France and Germany, from there to Poland and Russia. In and around each center the Jewish nationality fights for its individual character. In the same way that the synagogue had become a 'miniature Temple' the autonomous community becomes part of a living, self-supporting body — a token (surrogate) for the state, a miniature state. Each community is a division of the great army that is united in our dispersion.³⁷

This passage deserves to be quoted at length because it represents, in a nutshell, Dubnow's understanding not only of the phases of Jewish history, but also of the uses of such history as justification for the demand of non-territorial autonomy. He expressed similar ideas in many other theoretical and programmatic texts, and, as I will show below, they permeated his historical analysis. In this historical scheme, the nation of Israel achieved its natural maturity at some point in late antiquity and thanks to a series of "rigid tests" to the spiritual energies of the nation: the loss of political independence to alien rule, the loss of the homeland and the scattering of the people in alien lands, and the loss of a unifying language. "If, despite the fact that the external national bonds have been destroyed," Dubnow asserted, "such a nation still maintains itself for many years, creates an independent existence, reveals a stubborn determination to carry on its autonomous development — such people has reached the highest stage of cultural-historical individuality and may be said to be indestructible, if only it cling forcefully to its national will ... This unique people is the people of Israel."³⁸

According to Dubnow, some "external manifestations of national survival" — such as the written law of the Bible, the 'oral' ordinances of the Talmud and the rabbis, the isolation of the ghetto, the internal autonomy of the community, and enduring faith in the ultimate coming of the Messiah — helped Jews to survive and strive as a nation in the Diaspora. The organizational manifestation of this national existence was the Jewish autonomous community (the *kahal* or *kehile*).³⁹ However, the true source of the Jews' vitality consisted in the fact that, after developing "through the states of tribal nationalism, ancient culture and political territory," the Jewish nation "was able to establish itself and fortify itself in the highest state, the spiritual and historical-cultural, and succeeded in crystallizing itself in a spiritual people that draws the sap of its existence from natural or intellectual 'will to live'."⁴⁰ Dubnow did not see this pattern of development (tribal, political-territorial, cultural-spiritual) as particular to Jews; it was historically inevitable that all nations would eventually reach the highest stage, that of a purely cultural or spiritual entity that does not depend on a state or territory. As it happens, Dubnow claimed that Jews were the *only* nation that had already achieved that

stage, and thus, even though he did not claim a special status for Jews as God's chosen people, the sense of Jewish superiority here is unmistakable.

It is possible to find instances of Dubnow's nationalist stand on virtually every page of his works. Like other modern nationalists, he not only traced the existence of his nation (and nationalism itself) to ancient times, but also judged the historical actors positively or negatively according to the criterion of whether their actions matched what he perceived as the true (and eternal) spirit of the Jewish nation. Those who followed this spirit were for him veritable (and commendable) nationalists. When he discussed the revolt of the "religious-nationalist party of Pharisees" against the Hasmonean king Alexander Yannai (or Jannaeus) early in the first century BCE, Dubnow accused him and his allies, the Sadducees, of carrying out an aggressive and militaristic policy of war and conquest. Justifying the Pharisee rebellion (that led to a six-year civil war with 50,000 casualties, c. 94–88 BCE), Dubnow asked:

Was it for this that the kingdom of Judea had fought against the Syrian yoke and sacrificed her best sons for a quarter of a century? Was it in order to become a military state, merely on a par with the neighboring pagan countries? The Pharisees maintained that the Jewish people had been created for something better; that in the person of its sovereign it had to achieve the ideal of internal spiritual-social progress, not the ideal of brute force.⁴¹

Fortunately, according to Dubnow, Jews (as opposed to most other nations) were by his generation already beyond the phase of "brute force" and did not, or should not, become a nation state that would ever need to resort to military might.⁴²

In contrast to the positive contribution of the Pharisees (and jumping almost two thousand years in time), Dubnow saw the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) movement in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Germany as fatally harmful to the Jewish nation. Whereas a major political cataclysm, such as the destruction of the Second Temple, could be interpreted as a positive step that

pushed the Jews forward in their development as a nation, Dubnow depicted the *Haskalah* as a time of almost complete disintegration of German Jewry, despite the fact that in this period the Jews of Western Europe enjoyed unprecedented freedom, equality, and social mobility. For Dubnow, the source of all evils was “that generation’s dominant idea that Israel has no nationality,” which led them to conclude that Jews must integrate as individuals into the German and other nations while maintaining their religion as a private matter.⁴³ Religious reform, even though a necessary development, was a surrender to alien ideas, a severe wound to the national body, because it was motivated not by a religious need but by the desire to appease the authorities in the struggle for equal civil rights (by showing that, having made changes in their religion, Jews were ready to enter mainstream society). Because German Jews at the time considered themselves to be “Germans of the Mosaic Faith” (i.e., Jews in religion and German in nationality), the traditional autonomy of the *kehile* was no longer relevant for them. Dubnow condemned their position, stating that “those people did not understand the secret of historical development and did not feel that destroying the national element of the culture of Israel is like burning its soul, leaving behind only the embalmed body of religious principles and practices.” The new formulation of Jewish identity by German Jews was, in Dubnow’s analysis, negative and harmful: “there is no way to break the barrel and save the wine.”⁴⁴ The sole element of the German *Haskalah* that Dubnow rescued was the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* — that is, “the science of Judaism,” the intellectual movement whose aim was to investigate Jewish literature and culture, including rabbinic literature, using rigorous scientific methods — in particular the pioneering historical writings of Leopold Zunz (1794–1886). To Dubnow’s mind, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* had given birth to Jewish studies through scientific research, and he saw himself as an intellectual heir to the movement.

The theoretical presuppositions of Dubnow’s historical method bear a strong resemblance to Hegel’s dialectics. Dubnow’s discussion in the *Fourth Letter* of the historical phenomenon of the autonomy of the traditional Jewish community as a justification for his autonomist political program, is organized as a dialectical triad consisting of thesis,

antithesis, and synthesis. According to Dubnow's analysis, the isolation of the traditional community, embodying the "old fossilized order of Jewish life" (the thesis), was challenged during the Age of Revolutions of the early nineteenth century by the idea that dominated West European Jewish communities at the time: that Jews would achieve full civil rights and equality through assimilation (the antithesis). Dubnow claimed that historical experience "has demonstrated that both the thesis and the antithesis [were] one-sided."⁴⁵ It was therefore a historical necessity that the synthesis (autonomism) be a suppression and elevation (*Aufhebung*, Hegel's term, not Dubnow's) of thesis and antithesis. In other words, Dubnow's imagined future (the folkist program of national-cultural autonomy, or the synthesis) would not seek to reverse the civil rights Jews had achieved, or were striving to achieve, in the countries where they lived. Nor would it mean a regression to the isolation of the medieval Jewish community. Rather, Jewish culture would be invigorated by new meanings and modern secular contents that would emerge in the renewed, secular autonomous communities. "In his memoirs, Dubnow profusely applied the dialectical method to describe the stages of his own intellectual development as well. The thesis here was his boyhood period of pure faith and traditional studies, the antithesis his rebellion, adoption of a positivist and universalist stand, and rejection of religion, and the synthesis his formulation of the ideologies of historicism and Diaspora nationalism, which he viewed as recognizing a unique national identity for Jews while contributing to human science and culture in general."⁴⁶

Dubnow warned his readers that his use of dialectics differed from the pure idealism of Hegel, since his historical approach was based on sociological facts rather than ideas. Yet even Dubnow's attempt to deny or downplay his Hegelianism has a Hegelian ring to it — "The three stages [thesis, antithesis and synthesis] constitute the complete cycle of development and each of them has a corresponding basic idea which is a balancing force in every period" — or appears to be hair-splitting — "The synthesis is not 'the negation of the negation' (as in Hegel's dialectic), but a balancing theory."⁴⁷ Unlike Hegel's, however, Dubnow's history, though teleological, was free of theodicy, that is, the belief that, despite the concrete historical accidents and

evils that individuals may suffer, history is guided by providence to an ultimate higher end. Dubnow's own national teleology did not rely on divine intervention; in this sense, his views differed from those of most other Jewish nationalists (and orthodox Jews) for whom, in one way or another, God's promises to ancient Israel acted as a justification of their nationalism.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the technical use of dialectics is not the only aspect of Dubnow's method that echoed Hegel's. Dubnow's phases of development of the nation (discussed above), from tribal to political to spiritual, were also imbued by Hegelian logic. For Hegel, reason governs the world, human history is a manifestation of spirit, and world history "represents the development of the spirit's consciousness of its own freedom and of the consequent realization of that freedom."⁴⁹ The state was central to Hegel's philosophy of history as the manifestation of spirit in human society and the embodiment of rational freedom. Its most advanced form was to be found in the modern German states, where all citizens enjoyed freedom and were conscious of being free. In Dubnow's historical system, the Jews had gone one step further than the Germans by having abolished and elevated (*aufheben*) the state, thus becoming a pure, *spiritual* and stateless nation.⁵⁰

Dubnow's concept of national unfolding was also influenced by Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism. As Robert Seltzer suggests, Dubnow often represented the nation as a living organism that wages "a perpetual struggle to survive in the face of other national organisms that seek to dispossess or destroy it."⁵¹ In this process, as the nation is gradually shaped by the social environment, it acquires some definite characteristics that become part (following the evolutionary metaphor) of its biological constitution. The Jewish nation was therefore a living organism whose existence spanned the entire world and all of history. According to Dubnow, each "generation in Israel carries within itself the remnants of worlds created and destroyed during the course of the previous history of the Jewish people." Every generation "builds and destroys worlds in its form and image, but in the long run continues to weave the thread that binds all the links of the nation into the chain of generations."⁵² In consequence, there were some constant "laws of heredity" that dictated national character:

Over a period of many generations, unique characteristics, emotions, and historical tendencies, the effects of the suffering and pains of the past, were brought out by the law of heredity The weapons used by the nation in its struggle for survival were adapted to more difficult conditions A nation is not merely an aggregate of individuals, but also of successive generations, a community of the living and the dead. Therefore, the law of heredity, the common denominator of various historical transformations operating below the threshold of consciousness, directs the course of development of national life and copes with the influences of the external environment.⁵³

What set Dubnow apart from other social Darwinists and prevented his ideology from developing into a destructive and aggressive form of nationalism was his conviction that what made the Jewish nation superior was precisely its spiritual and non-territorial character.⁵⁴

As an intellectual formed in the period before the Great War, Dubnow was a firm believer in human progress. His study of history strengthened his faith that, despite the many human setbacks and calamities of the past, justice and freedom would ultimately prevail in the future. Already in 1901, he reckoned that despite “the present reaction, the course of history [was] directed, not toward the subjection of national groups, but toward their liberation.” Just as the hegemony of one ruling church over the state had been eliminated after bitter struggles, “so too the principle of a ruling nationality is bound to be discarded.⁵⁵ If the nineteenth century was able to secure the legal recognition by the community of the principle of freedom of the individual, the twentieth century is faced with the task of establishing the freedom or the autonomy of the national individual.”⁵⁶ Dubnow’s views on national-cultural autonomy in the context of a multinational state were thus elements within this secular or humanist teleology:

In the same way that enlightened countries came to recognize that only a free citizen can be a loyal and useful member of the community, so the realization will slowly come that, in a state composed of different nationalities, a nationality enjoying internal

autonomy is a stronger support for the commonwealth than a suppressed nationality made restless by constant oppression. The function of a 'ruling nationality' in the state will be relegated to the same position occupied today by a 'ruling Church' in a free state. This is not just a myth, but a historical necessity.⁵⁷

Dubnow retained his optimism and his faith in the eventual triumph of emancipation until the very end of his life. What worried Dubnow in 1935, what he considered "the worst plague of our times," was that "the world is returning once again to political unitarism"; nevertheless, he believed that Nazi and Fascist insanity, which would "be remembered as one of the greatest catastrophes in world history," would not prevail in the long run. Despite these "volcanic eruptions," he insisted, human history develops according to laws founded in human culture, "There are times when large masses of humanity are beset by the evil principle, by the beast in man. In such times all the others must organize themselves in order to strengthen the good principle, the human conscience, the categorical imperative."⁵⁸ Survivors from the Riga ghetto testified that even when marching towards his death (he was murdered there by the Nazis in 1941), Dubnow did not give up his conviction that the liberal and humanistic values he had espoused all of his life would ultimately triumph. He urged his fellow Jews to record Nazi atrocities and expose them after the Third Reich's inevitable defeat. His last words, according to witnesses, were *Shraybt yidn, un farshaybt!* ("Write, Jews, write it down!").⁵⁹

Conclusion

Simon Dubnow's historical writings, which, I have argued, were heavily influenced by his political ideology of Jewish Diaspora nationalism, played a central role in the creation of the Jewish nationalist myth. His *Weltgeschichte*, which was translated into Hebrew soon after its publication in German and became very popular among Zionists in Palestine and later in Israel (at least until Zionist historiography produced its own authoritative synthesis of Jewish history in the 1960s)⁶⁰, helped shape the mainstream Jewish nationalist understanding of the early stages of Judaism. As I attempted to show in this

paper, however, Dubnow's Diaspora nationalism, even though it represents a genuine and influential form of Jewish nationalism,⁶¹ deviated in significant ways from Zionism, particularly as it developed since the 1930s, with increased militarization and *mamlakhtiut* (statehood) as the overriding objective.⁶² Indeed, Dubnow's ideology differs from most other forms of nationalism precisely because it does not demand national or territorial sovereignty. Whereas, according to Ernest Gellner, nationalism is "primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent,"⁶³ the folkist program rested on the idea that state and nation need not be congruent, in other words, that Jews (and eventually all nations, when they reached the higher stage of "spiritual nations") would realize their national aspirations not through a nation state, but within what, to most other nationalists, would seem a worthless compromise: a limited autonomy within a multinational state. Dubnow — ever the humanist — parted company with other nationalist movements, including Zionism, in his vehement rejection of the use of "brute force" and military might to achieve national goals. His historical works emphasized the ancestral connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel nonetheless, and once that connection was made, Zionists were able to use it to fuel their own, more extensive and aggressive (territorial) claims.⁶⁴

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Endnotes:

- 1 For recent studies of Dubnow's contributions to Jewish historiography, see Michael Brenner, *Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 93–106; and Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 235–51. On the relation of Dubnow's historiography to Jewish politics, see Simon Rabinovitch, "Alternative to Zion: The Jewish Autonomist Movement in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2007); and *ibid.*, "The Dawn of a New Diaspora: Simon Dubnow's Autonomism, from St. Petersburg to Berlin," in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 2005*, 267–88. See also the edited volume published on the 150th anniversary of Dubnow's birth. Abraham Greenbaum, Israel Bartal, and Dan Haruv, eds., *Safra ve-sayafa: Shim on Dubnov, historyon ve-ish tsibur* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar le-ṭoldot Yisra'el and Ha-merķaz le-ḥeķer ṭoldot Yehude Polin ve-ṭarḃutam, 2010).
- 2 Anke Hillbrenner, *Diaspora-Nationalismus: Zur Geschichtskonstruktion Simon Dubnows* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); and *ibid.*, "Simon Dubnow's Master Narrative and the Construction of Jewish Collective Memory in the Russian Empire," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2003): 143–64; Jeffrey Veidlinger, "Simon Dubnow Recontextualized: The Sociological Conception of Jewish History and the Russian Intellectual Legacy," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts/Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 3 (2004): 411–27.
- 3 On Dubnow's role in the creation of the popular Zionist narrative and the "invention of the Jewish nation," see Shlomo Sand, *Matai Veeyh Humtsa 'Ha 'am Hayehudi?* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), 93–109.
- 4 For other examples of nationalist historical narratives used to bolster nationalist claims, see Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12–13.
- 5 On Dubnow's life, see his autobiography, Simon Dubnow, *Sefer ha-ḥayim*, trans. M. Ben Eli'ezer (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1936), originally published in Russian (Dubnow's autobiography has not been translated into English). See also Sophie Dubnow-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler, trans. Judith

- Vowles (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1950, 1991). For a more concise version, see Sophie Dubnow-Erlich, "La vie de Simon Dubnow," *Simon Dubnow: L'homme et son oeuvre* (Paris: Section Française du Congrès Juif Mondial, 1963), 1–25. On Dubnow's intellectual development, see Hillbrenner, *Diaspora-Nationalismus*, 36–92; on his intellectual method, see Jonathan Frankel, "S.M. Dubnow: Historian and Ideologist," in Dubnow-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S.M. Dubnow*, 1–33.
- 6 In his autobiography, Dubnow later wrote, with reference to the practicing Jews who ostracized him for not practicing the religious precepts, that as long as they were obliged to preserve their precepts, he himself had to "keep my own religion, positivism, for as long as I recognize its truth; otherwise, the earth would be filled with falsehood: the beliefs and opinions of hypocrites, and life would lose its highest purpose," the search for truth; Dubnow, 175.
 - 7 Ibid., 175–6.
 - 8 Ibid., 166–75.
 - 9 Ibid., 182.
 - 10 Ibid., 173–4, 177–80. This gruelling daily routine caused Dubnow serious vision problems.
 - 11 Ibid., 190, 189. See also Robert M. Seltzer, "Coming Home: The Personal Basis of Simon Dubnow's Ideology," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 1 (1976): 284–92, 297; and Brenner, 94–5.
 - 12 Dubnow, 193. The tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism was experienced by many educated Jews in modern Eastern Europe. On this topic, see the special issue of *European Review of History*, "Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and the Jews of East Central Europe," 17, 3 (June 2010), in particular the introduction by Michael L. Miller and Scott Ury, "Cosmopolitanism: The End of Jewishness?" 337–59; and *ibid.*, Israel Bartal, "Israeli Historians and Universalism," 541–9.
 - 13 Dubnow, 194.
 - 14 Seltzer, 295. Dubnow's essay was first published (in Russian) as a series of articles in the journal *Voskhod* between October and December of 1893; English translation: *What is Jewish History: An Essay in the Philosophy of History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1903).
 - 15 Brenner, 101.
 - 16 See Sand, 94.
 - 17 Dubnow believed that historicism gave him the tools to produce a more rigorous, objective, and scientific narrative of the Jewish past. See Brenner, 104.
 - 18 The influence of Renan's *History of Christianity* on Dubnow's *History of Hasidism* is evident in both the work's structure and content. See Robert

- M. Seltzer, "The Secular Appropriation of Hasidism by an East European Jewish Intellectual: Dubnow, Renan, and Besht," *Polin* 1 (1986): 154–5. On Dubnow's changing attitude to Graetz's work, on national grounds, see Brenner, 99–100.
- 19 Seltzer, "Coming Home," 300. Seltzer adds that the program of autonomism "enabled [Dubnow] to remain in the violence-prone mass society of the twentieth century, faithful to the gradualist, rational, humanitarian liberalism of the nineteenth"; *ibid.* See also Jacob Lestschinsky, "Dubnow's Autonomism and his 'Letters on Old and New Judaism,'" in Dubnow-Erlich, *Simon Dubnov: L'homme et son oeuvre*, 77.
- 20 An English translation of the *Letters* is in Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, ed. Koppel S. Pinson (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958), 73–249. However, this version is abridged and therefore the numbering of the letters is different from that in other editions. For the full text of the *Letters* in Yiddish, see *Briv vegn altn un nayem yidntum* (México: D.F. Shloyme Mendelson Fond bay der Gezelshaft far Kultur un Hilf, 1959); and in French, *Lettres sur le judaïsme ancien et nouveau* (Paris: Cerf, 1989). Unless noted, all references to Dubnow's *Letters* are to the English edition and by letter number (e.g., Twelfth Letter). For a discussion of the different editions of the *Letters*, see Dimitry Shumsky, "Tsiout be-merkha'ot ha-kfulot 'o: be-'eizo mida haya Dubnov lo tsiot?," forthcoming in *Zion* 77, 2 (2012). I would like to thank Dr. Shumsky for kindly sharing his unpublished work with me.
- 21 According to Lestschinsky, the decade during which Dubnow worked on his *Letters* was "the happiest and most productive of his life." See Lestschinsky, 77.
- 22 For a brief history of the Folkspartey, see M. Belberyszki, "Volkism and the Volks Partei," in *The Struggle for Tomorrow: Modern Political Ideologies of the Jewish People*, eds. Basil J. Vlavianos and Feliks Gross (New York: Arts, 1954), 236–43. On the Folkspartey in interwar Poland, see Mark W. Kiel, "The Ideology of the Folks-Partey," *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 2 (1975): 75–89.
- 23 It was because of their stress on national unity that Dubnow and the folkists strove to form alliances with other nationalist Jewish organizations, in Russia and elsewhere. Dubnow envisioned a broad coalition of all Jewish national groups that would include Zionist and non-Zionist but not assimilationist Jews. These views were expressed in one of the *Letters* left out of the English edition. See *Briv vegn altn un nayem yidntum*, 252–60, or *Lettres sur le judaïsme ancien et nouveau*, 326–34.
- 24 Even though these proposals make folkism radically different from Zionism, whose core belief is the creation of a sovereign Jewish state in the

- Land of Israel, in an illuminating article, Israel Bartal shows how Dubnovian ideas made their way into mainstream Zionism, influencing even major figures, such as David Ben Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. Before World War I, Ben Gurion and Ben-Zvi (then young labour Zionist leaders in Palestine) demanded a personal or territorial autonomy for the Jews in Palestine in the context of a multinational Ottoman Empire (which already conferred various degrees of autonomy to the many cultural groups that constituted it). See Bartal, “Me-‘erez kodesh’ le’erez historit — ‘otonomizm’ zioni be-r’eshit ha-me’a va- ‘esrim,” in *Kozak u-Vedui: ‘Am” ve- ‘arets ba-le ‘umiyut ha-Yehudit* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 2007), 152–69.
- 25 While Yiddish was important for folkists as the spoken language of the East European Jews, as a scholar Dubnow frequently noted the multi-lingual character of Jewish culture in different places and times. See Veidlinger, 129.
- 26 Dubnow, Twelfth Letter, 229–30. On how Dubnow’s historical narrative, like those produced by other non-Russian minorities in the Tsarist Empire, was rooted in his sense of his nation’s marginality and his opposition to the political conditions in Russia. See Hillbrenner, “Simon Dubnov’s Master Narrative,” 145.
- 27 See Roni Gechtman, “Conceptualizing National-Cultural Autonomy: From the Austro-Marxists to the Jewish Labor Bund,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts/Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 4 (2005): 17–49; and *ibid.*, “A ‘Museum of Bad Taste’?: The Jewish Labour Bund and the Bolshevik Position Regarding the National Question, 1903–1914,” *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire* 43, 1 (Spring 2008): 31–67. For a discussion of the differences between Dubnow’s and the Bund’s autonomist programs, see *ibid.*, “Non-Statist Jewish National Programs: Simon Dubnow and the Jewish Labour Bund,” paper presented at the International Symposium “Rethinking the History of Jewish Nationalism,” University of California Los Angeles, 30–31 January 2011. On Chaim Zhitlovsky’s attempt to find a synthesis between socialism (in its *narodnik*, i.e., Russian populist) version and Jewish nationalism through autonomism, see Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 258–87; on Zhitlovsky’s relation to Dubnow, see Rabinovitch, 36–44.
- 28 See Oscar Isaiah Janowsky, *The Jews and Minority Rights (1898–1919)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 106–12; and Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 555–6; Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York:

- Oxford University Press, 1993), 18–20. On Dubnow's influence on the intellectuals and young Russian Zionists who promoted the Helsingfors Program, see Matityahu Mintz " 'Avodat 'eretz-yisrael ve-'avodat ha-hove: konseptsyia shel 'ahdut u-mamashut shel stira," *Ha-Zionut* 9 (1984): 154.
- 29 On the Polish Folkspartey, see Mark W. Kiel, "The Ideology of the Folkspartey," *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 2 (1975): 75–89; and Kalman Weiser, "The Yiddishist Ideology of Noah Prylucki," *Polin* 21 (2009): 367–71, 373–9, 389–90.
- 30 Noah Prylucki, the party leader, was a committed activist for Yiddish rights, both as a politician and as a scholar. See Kalman Weiser, "Mother-tongue, Mame-loshn, and Kulturshprakh: The Tension between Populism and Elitism in the Language Ideology of Noah Prylucki," in *Czernowitz at 100: The First Yiddish Language Conference in Historical Perspective*, eds. Kalman Weiser and Joshua Fogel (Boulder, CO: Lexington Books, 2010), 60–2. Weiser's monograph on Prylucki is forthcoming as *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
- 31 Weiser, "Yiddishist Ideology," 369–71.
- 32 Dubnow's *Weltgeschichte* was published in English as *History of the Jews*, 5 vols. (South Brunswick, NJ: T. Yoseloff, 1967). Each English volume comprises two volumes of the original German and Russian editions. The title of the Hebrew edition (also in ten volumes), produced under Dubnow's direct supervision, is especially meaningful. Dubnow, *Divrei yemei 'am 'olam* (History of the Universal [or Eternal] People) (1929, 2nd ed.; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958). Numerous abridged editions of Dubnow's *Weltgeschichte* have been published in several Western languages.
- 33 See Hilbrenner, "Simon Dubnow's Master Narrative," 146–9, 151–2.
- 34 See David N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 35 See the Methodological Appendix to the first volume of the *Weltgeschichte*. "One cannot derive the whole truth about the past from an analysis of the evidence from one series of sources alone ... what is indispensable is to set their dispositions against those of some other contemporary source." Such sources, Dubnow continued, were already available to his generation in a vast array of archaeological findings. Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, 415.
- 36 This is the case mostly in the popular version of the Zionist narrative. Historians of the "Jerusalem School," such as Gershom Scholem, indeed studied Jewish life in the Diaspora, but their findings were communicated mainly to an academic audience. In contrast, archaeology of the biblical period became, in the first decades after the founding of Israel, a national

- obsession, and it was promoted by political leaders, such as David Ben Gurion and Moshe Dayan, as a source of empirical evidence supporting Zionists' claims to Palestine. See Sand, 109–115.
- 37 Dubnow, “The Survival of the Jewish People: The Secret of Survival and the Law of Survival,” in *Nationalism and History*, 328–30. This article was originally published in *Heatid* 4 (1912). This annual journal (the title means “the future”), edited by Shai (Sha’ul Yisra’el) Ish Hurwitz, served as a discussion forum for Jewish nationalists of different stripes on various historical and social issues. It promoted debates and invited different opinions on the future of the Jewish nation (hence its name).
- 38 Dubnow, First Letter, 80.
- 39 Bartal contends that Dubnow anachronistically projected a form of modern national identity back onto medieval corporate societies. See “‘Tahlif le-memshala, li-mdina u-le-ezrahut — Shim ‘on Dubnov ve-ha-shilton ha-‘azmi ha-yehudi,” in *Kozak u-Vedui*, 200.
- 40 Ibid., 84–5.
- 41 Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, vol. I, *From the Beginning to Early Christianity*, 569–72 (quotation from page 569); cf. Koppel S. Pinson, “The National Theories of Simon Dubnow,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10, 4 (October 1948): 343.
- 42 Dubnow’s pride in Jewish military weakness and his belief that Jews should continue to refrain from participating in war certainly set him apart from most other nationalists, Jewish, and non-Jewish, in his and later eras.
- 43 Dubnow, *Divrei yemei ‘am ‘olam*, 41.
- 44 Ibid., 50, 51.
- 45 Dubnow, Fourth Letter, 134–5. See also Hillbrenner, *Diaspora-Nationalismus*, 107–15.
- 46 Dubnow, *Sefer ha-hayim*, 153–5, 174–5, 193–4.
- 47 Ibid., Fourth Letter, 131–2. Historian Raphael Mahler agreed with Dubnow’s assessment of his method as non-Hegelian, and characterized it instead as national, secular, “sociological-realistic and scientific-evolutionary.” Still, Mahler criticized Dubnow’s historiography for paying little attention to economic factors. See Raphael Mahler, “Shitat Dubnow umif’alo bahistoriografia hayehudit,” in Dubnov-Erlich, *Simon Dubnov: L’homme et son oeuvre*, 61–63, 66–7 (quotation from page 62).
- 48 See for instance the debate on “the essence [*mahut*] of Judaism” that followed the publication of Hurwitz’s “Lish’elat kiyum hayahadut (hegiyonot vehirhurim)” in *Ha-shiloah* 12 (April 1904): 287–303, which provoked responses from some of the most renowned Zionist thinkers of the time (M.L. Lilienblum, A.M. Brukhov, Yosef Klausner, etc.). In this debate, justification was sought by recourse to traditional (religious) sources of

- authority, concepts such as ‘essence’ or ‘organic nation,’ and metaphysical or supernatural laws, all of which are virtually absent from Dubnow’s works.
- 49 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1837), trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 43.
- 50 The theme of the Jews being a spiritual nation pervades Dubnow’s writings and is a constant thread throughout his life, from his earlier works of the early 1890s. See Oscar Isaiah Janowsky, *The Jews and Minority Rights (1898–1919)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933). Pinson, “The National Theories of Simon Dubnow,” 342–3.
- 51 Seltzer, “Coming home,” 298–9 fn43. See also Veidlinger, 417–8. In his autobiography, Dubnow refers to his thorough study of Spencer’s evolutionary theories during the “home university” period during which he developed his own historical and philosophical synthesis. See Dubnow, *Sefer ha-hayim*, 177, 179–180.
- 52 Dubnow, “The Survival of the Jewish People,” 326.
- 53 Ibid., First Letter, 85.
- 54 In Dubnow’s words, “the Jewish national idea ... can never become aggressive and warlike,” Third Letter, 130.
- 55 The Austro Marxist theorist Karl Renner made a similar argument in *State and Nation*, published two years earlier. Karl Renner, *State and Nation* (1899), in *National Cultural Autonomy and Its Contemporary Critics*, ed., Ephraim Nimni (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 20, 29–30. See also Gechtman, “Conceptualizing National-Cultural Autonomy,” 26–27; and Rabinovitch, “Alternative to Zion,” 48–9. I have not found any evidence of Dubnow’s having read Renner or other Marxist theorists on the “national question.”
- 56 Dubnow, Fourth Letter, 141.
- 57 Ibid., Seventh Letter, 174–5.
- 58 From an article published in the Yiddish monthly *Zukunft* in 1935, quoted in Pinson, “The National Theories of Simon Dubnow,” 341, 357–8. The “categorical imperative” refers, of course, to the central concept in Kantian ethics. Not all of Dubnow’s disciples continued to share his optimism by the late 1930s, though. Some of them, such as Elias Tscherikover, Yisroel Efroykin, and Zelig Kalmanovitsh, the founders of the Yiddish journal *Afn Sheydvveg* in 1939, succumbed to deep resignation and despair in the face of the increasing power of fascism and Nazism and declared the whole emancipation project a failure. See Joshua Karlip, “In the Days of Haman: Simon Dubnow and his Disciples at the Eve of the WWII,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Institut Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook IV* (2005): 531–64.

- 59 Ibid, 541, 547; Brenner, 106.
- 60 Abraham Malamat, Shmuel Ettinger, and Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, *Toldot 'am Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969), popularly known as the “Red Book,” not only for the colour of its covers but also for its status among Israelis.
- 61 In a forthcoming article, Shumsky suggests, despite Dubnow’s own protestations, that Dubnow was indeed a Zionist. See Shumsky, “T’sionut be-merkh’ot ha-kfulot.” In fact, even though in the 1920s, after the Folkspartey’s demise in Eastern Europe, Dubnow became more receptive to the idea that Palestine might become the Jews’ spiritual and cultural centre, and even considered the possibility of migration to Palestine (where some of his close friends, such as Aḥad ha-’Am, had settled), he soon rejected this solution and continued to advocate the ideology of autonomism. See Rabinovitch, “The Dawn of a New Diaspora,” 283; and Brenner, 97.
- 62 Uri Ben Eli’ezer, *Derekh ha-kavenet: hivazruto shel ha-militarizm ha-yisraeli 1936–1956* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1995).
- 63 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1.
- 64 The impact of Dubnow’s historical narrative (as well as those of later Zionist historians) on the construction of the modern Jewish nation confirms Hobsbawm’s dictum, “Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round.” Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10.