

Introduction

I SPENT MUCH of the winter of 2010 rummaging through Warsaw's Archive of Modern Records. Among the various documents in the archive's possession are tens of thousands of reports submitted by Polish police officers in the 1920s and 1930s concerning the political activity of interwar Poland's Ukrainian, Jewish, Belarusian, German, Russian, Czech and Lithuanian minority populations, who together made up nearly one-third of the country's inhabitants.¹ Sifting through these reports, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the dynamic and turbulent political life of Polish Jewish youth on the eve of the Holocaust. One afternoon, after hours of fruitless searching, a particular police report caught my eye. It was written by a Polish officer dispatched in October 1933 to a Zionist rally in Kobryń, a market town of some nine thousand residents in eastern Poland. Perhaps to the officer's surprise, the speeches of the Zionist rally's organizers were not solely devoted to building a Jewish state in Mandate Palestine. Instead, the speakers, one after the other, insisted that it was the duty of Zionists to defend the borders of Poland. Among the speakers pledging their loyalty to Poland was a lanky nineteen-year-old with thick, round black eyeglasses and hair slicked to his side. The policeman decided to record his name. Men like Menachem Begin, he noted, left a deep impression on the town's Jews.²

Why was Menachem Begin, who some forty-four years later rose to power as Israel's first right-wing Zionist prime minister, offering to put his life on the line for Poland? When he described his Polish Jewish past to Israelis, Begin remembered the humiliation, harassment, and violence Jews experienced at the hands of the country's Catholic majority.³ "The constant danger of pogroms cast its shadow of fear over us," recalled Begin some twenty-five years after his speech in Kobryń.⁴ The police report told a different story.

Even more questions followed once I discovered that the officer's report was but one among hundreds that had streamed into the offices of Warsaw's Ministry of Internal Affairs in the 1930s concerning the Zionist youth movement Menachem Begin would eventually lead. Claiming over sixty-five thousand members worldwide, nearly forty thousand of whom were in Poland, the Joseph Trumpeldor League (Brit Yosef Trumpeldor), known by its Hebrew acronym, Betar, was one of the most popular Zionist youth movements in interwar Europe.⁵ It was also one of the most controversial Jewish political organizations of its time. The youth movement's militaristic ethos, vehement opposition to socialism, and authoritarian leadership cult for the founder of right-wing Zionism, Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, led many of their opponents—and some of their supporters—to describe its members as “Jewish fascists.”

Even as Betar insisted, perhaps more strenuously than any other Zionist movement, that Jewish life in Poland was doomed to fail, Polish police officers across the country described how the youth movement was placing its pledges of Polish patriotism front and center of their public activity. Some officers recounted how Betar's leaders marked Zionist celebrations by laying wreaths at Polish war memorials, imploring their followers to “act Polish.”⁶ Others described how local Betar units requested permission to march in parades alongside Polish scouts and soldiers during the country's national holidays.⁷ During brawls with Jewish socialists, Betar's members could even be heard singing the Polish national anthem and chanting “Long live the Sanacja!,” the name given to Poland's authoritarian government, which came to power in 1926.⁸

Why would a Zionist movement convinced that Jews were destined for a life of misery and persecution in Europe choose the Polish national anthem as their battle cry? What inspired them to include among their chants a call to support Poland's authoritarian regime? By 1933, officials from the Sanacja (Purification) government had tampered with elections, arrested and jailed many of their opponents, and severely limited the power of Poland's members of parliament.⁹ What was it about the country's policies and practices—many of which were already the features of right-wing regimes across Europe—that could be deemed credible, logical, compelling, and even instructive to Zionists seeking to build a Jewish state in Mandate Palestine?

These questions lie at the heart of this book, which traces the history of the Betar youth movement in Poland between the two world wars. Although Betar clubs operated in more than twenty-six countries by the 1930s, the majority

of the youth movement's members lived in the newly formed Polish state, established in 1918.¹⁰ Like dozens of Zionist youth movements operating in the country at the time, Betar promised to prepare its members for a new life in the Yishuv, the Jewish community of prestate Palestine, by providing vocational training, Hebrew classes, and lessons in Jewish history. What set Betar apart was its commitment to the military training of Jewish youth, as well as its support of several prominent policies of the European Right. If the heroes of Zionism's numerous socialist youth movements were pioneers who established agricultural settlements in Mandate Palestine, Betar's ideal "new Jews" were soldiers, prepared at a moment's notice to follow the orders of their commander and carry out whatever task was required to bring about the Jewish state. They deemed rifles, not ploughs or shovels, to be the most important tools to fulfill Zionism's goals.

Betar's leader, Vladimir Jabotinsky, was described by his supporters and opponents alike as one of the Zionist movement's most spellbinding orators, brilliant writers, magnetic personalities, and provocative activists. His dark olive skin, widely set eyes, and prominent forehead reinforced the impression among Zionist activists that he was somehow more "goyish" than Jewish.¹¹ So too did the elegant style in which he spoke: his Odessan Russian and Germanic Yiddish lent him an almost foreign, aristocratic aura in the eyes of the eastern European Jewish audiences to whom he frequently lectured. His early life looked vastly different from the childhood of other Zionist activists from the Russian Empire, most of whom came from provincial towns and Yiddish-speaking, religiously observant homes. Born in 1880 and raised in the cosmopolitan port city of Odessa, the young Jabotinsky was immersed in Russian language and culture and well read in numerous European languages. Graduating from one of the city's finest gymnasias, he spent several months at a Swiss university, followed by three years as a student in Italy, where he simultaneously worked as a correspondent for a Russian-language newspaper back in Odessa. Although his early work as a poet, playwright, journalist, and political activist had brought him some recognition in the Zionist movement, he gained fame during the First World War for creating the Jewish Legion, which under his leadership participated in the British Army's conquest of Ottoman Palestine. He also achieved popularity among Zionists for his role in organizing the Haganah Jewish defense network during the Jerusalem riots of 1920. Soon after, Jabotinsky broke with the mainstream Zionist movement and called for a more aggressive approach to dealing with Mandate Palestine's British colonial administration and Palestinian Arab population. His Union of

Revisionist Zionists, founded in 1925, would go on to become one of the most popular Zionist organizations in the interwar period.¹²

Betar's namesake was the famed Russian army veteran and Zionist activist Joseph Trumpeldor. The same age as Jabotinsky, Trumpeldor worked closely with him in the early stages of the Jewish Legion's development. He was killed in 1920 during a gun battle defending the Jewish settlement of Tel Hai in the Upper Galilee from Arab militias. Trumpeldor's death embodied to Jabotinsky the principal message he sought to convey to Jewish youth: in a world where the use of violence was the only way to survive, they had no choice but to "learn to shoot,"¹³ and become, in the words of Betar's anthem, "proud, noble and cruel."¹⁴ Only once Jews could prove their indestructible military might, he argued, would Palestinian Arabs be willing to yield to the chief demands of Revisionist Zionists: a Jewish majority living in a Jewish-ruled state or commonwealth that stretched from the Mediterranean sea to the western borders of today's Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Fearing backlash from both Mandate Palestine's British rulers and Arab inhabitants, most mainstream Zionists of the era refused to proclaim their goal to be the creation of a state with a Jewish majority. They mocked the Revisionist movement's geographic aspirations as unrealistic, and condemned its call for the military training of Jewish youth as an unnecessary provocation that would only further aggravate relations between Jews and Palestinian Arabs. When promoting the Zionist cause, they insisted that Zionism would only use peaceful means to achieve its aims, that the demographic changes to the region proposed by the movement were far from drastic, and that Jewish immigration would ultimately benefit the region's Arab population.

Like the vast majority of Zionist activists between the two world wars, Jabotinsky sought to capture the hearts and minds of Jews living in Poland. Over three million Jews lived in the country in 1931, making up interwar Europe's largest Jewish community. Scattered throughout hundreds of provincial towns and dozens of cities across the central and eastern regions of the country, they accounted for nearly 9 percent of Poland's population.¹⁵ Jews were second only to Ukrainians as the largest minority group in the country. The unprecedented opportunities for political activity provided to Polish Jews in the new state, coupled with the persistent discrimination they faced, inspired them to create numerous political parties to speak on their behalf. Numerous questions pitted these parties against one another. Did the Jewish future lie in Poland or elsewhere? Would Jewish political parties best be served by embracing communism, socialism, democracy, or authoritarianism? Should Jews strive to

live their lives bound by strict religious observance, or should they embrace a Jewish identity defined in secular terms? Which language should Polish Jews identify as their “native tongue”: Yiddish, Polish, or Hebrew? Several of these questions fueled the bitter struggle between Zionists and their chief competitors on the “Jewish street,” the Orthodox political party Agudat Yisrael (Union of Israel) and the socialist General Union of Jewish Workers, known as the Bund. While Agudat Yisrael leaders condemned Zionists as heretics, the Bund’s activists saw them as foolish adventurers who distracted Jews from their real salvation: the triumph of socialism and the establishment of Jewish national cultural autonomy in Poland. Questions about language, religion, and broader European political trends also served as fault lines within the Zionist movement itself, producing dozens of different parties and factions.¹⁶ Although no one Jewish political party consistently dominated in Poland throughout the interwar period, leaders of the country’s numerous Zionist factions played a critical role in the lives of Polish Jews. Some served in parliament, while others held key leadership positions in Jewish communities across the country.¹⁷ Much like their chief political competitors among Polish Jews, Zionists founded an impressive network of organizations, from newspapers, schools, and libraries to youth movements with summer camps, orchestras, and soccer teams.

Well aware of the political power wielded by Polish Jews in the Zionist movement, leaders of various Zionist political parties in Palestine sent emissaries to Poland to mobilize support for their programs.¹⁸ Polish Jews made up the largest number of potential voters to the Zionist Congress, which elected the movement’s executive leadership. They also provided the largest number of immigrants bound for the Yishuv. Approximately 125,000 Polish Jews made up nearly half of all registered Jewish arrivals to Palestine between 1919 and 1937.¹⁹ Poland was especially critical to Vladimir Jabotinsky’s political career. Only on his arrival to the country in 1927 was he able to begin transforming his Union of Revisionist Zionists from a meek organization into a powerful mass movement. Most Revisionists in Poland were Betar members. Palestine’s Betar youth movement, which claimed under two thousand members in the mid-1930s, paled in comparison to its Polish counterpart.²⁰

The newly formed Polish state was more than just a reservoir of supporters for Jabotinsky. It was also an inspiration and an incubator for the development of right-wing Zionist ideology. Drawing on correspondence, autobiographies, party journals, and police reports from archives across Poland, Israel, and the United States, this book uncovers the Polish roots of

right-wing Zionism. I trace how Polish Jewish youth in Betar were instrumental in shaping the attitudes of right-wing Zionists toward the roles that authoritarianism and violence could play in their quest to build a Jewish state. This book also examines how the most important developments in interwar eastern European politics—the collapse of fledgling democratic governments, the rise of authoritarian regimes, and the growth of radical ethno-nationalist movements—influenced the political attitudes and behaviors of right-wing Zionists. In contrast to most historical studies of authoritarian politics in interwar Europe, in which Jews figure solely as the victims of right-wing politics, *Jabotinsky's Children* examines why many Polish Jews found much to emulate in the policies and practices of right-wing movements, even as they condemned the antisemitism advocated by many of these groups. By exploring how Polish Jews within Betar used right-wing politics to navigate the rapidly changing political landscape of Poland and Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, this book illuminates crucial discussions that swept through Polish Jewish society. These included conversations about what it meant to be a “Polish” Jew, the role that youth could play in shaping the political destiny of Jews, the ability of democracy to defend Jewish interests, and the legitimacy of violence as a means to achieve political ends. By capturing the voices of Betar’s leaders, members, sympathizers and opponents as they searched for answers to these questions, this study ultimately sheds light on the reciprocal influence that Jews living in Poland and in Mandate Palestine exerted on one another’s political worldviews and actions.

Jews and the Right

At first glance, the notion that a Jewish political movement in Poland claiming tens of thousands of supporters could embrace—let alone admire—policies associated with interwar Europe’s Right might seem outrageous and, at the very least, impossible. Antisemitism was a critical and often central component of radical right-wing movements throughout interwar Europe.²¹ The rise of the Third Reich inspired right-wing organizations across the continent, from France’s Action française to Romania’s Iron Guard, to intensify their efforts to persecute their Jewish neighbors. During the Second World War, when their countries came under German occupation, many of their members eagerly helped the Nazis in rounding up and killing Jews.²² Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that historians have largely taken for granted that Jews living in interwar Europe viewed right-wing politics only as a threat.

This study restores a historical moment in which Polish Jews had good reason to think otherwise. The history of interwar Europe's Right does not begin with the rise of the Third Reich in 1933. In the mid-1920s, Europeans turned to Fascist Italy, not Germany, as the model for what a country could look like if right-wing politics reigned in full force. In power a full decade before the Nazi takeover of Germany, Italian Fascists for their first sixteen years in power viewed antisemitism as neither an effective mobilizing tool nor a critical component of their worldview. Despite the occasional antisemitism Mussolini exhibited in his prose at the close of the First World War, several Jewish industrialists and landowners were among his inner circle of early Fascist supporters. His Jewish mistress, Margherita Sarfatti, was the author of his first official biography.²³ Mussolini's supporters in Italy believed that his calls for discipline, unity, and sacrifice to pervade every aspect of society would help restore order in their country, reinvigorate its economy, and, above all, prevent the spread of communism. These views extended far beyond Italy: among Mussolini's many admirers were government officials in Britain, France, and the United States.²⁴

Fascist Italy appeared all the more successful to onlookers when they compared the country to the new parliamentary democracies of eastern Europe established in 1918, following the collapse of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German Empires. As the 1920s progressed, many observers of eastern European politics warned that the political mechanisms of the region's fledgling democracies—including universal suffrage, constitutional order, and parliamentary rule with a weak executive—were proving unable to contend with the social and economic turmoil that the First World War had left in its wake. A low vote threshold to enter parliament nourished political factionalism and polarization among a plethora of political parties established along ethnic, religious, and class lines. Rejecting negotiation and compromise, politicians spent most of their time in parliament spurning the type of coalition politics required to pass legislation that could stabilize their country's economy and rebuild its infrastructure.²⁵ Violence was commonplace in the corridors of parliaments across the region. Against this backdrop, many expressed relief when authoritarian governments took the reins of power in eastern Europe.²⁶

Poland, too, was plagued by political corruption, factionalism, legislative gridlock, and violence. Tensions often ran high between Catholic Poles and the country's minorities. The deep divisions pitting peasants against urban dwellers, socialists against conservatives, and liberals against radical nationalists only multiplied the staggering number of political parties clamoring for power. In the first eight years of Poland's existence, fifteen governments

collapsed, wreaking havoc on the young country's already miserable economy.²⁷ The desire for economic stability was only one reason many Polish Jews criticized the country's parliamentary system. Democratic politics were also seen as a breeding ground for antisemitism. One of the most popular political parties among Catholic Polish voters was the National Democracy movement, also known as the *Endecja*. Founded at the end of the nineteenth century by Roman Dmowski, the party exploited long-standing anti-Jewish attitudes to promote its vision for a *Polska dla Polaków*—a Poland exclusively for Catholic Poles. The *Endecja* accused Jewish merchants and shopkeepers of exploiting the Polish peasantry, depriving Poles of jobs in towns and cities, and accelerating the moral corruption of Polish society. In the interwar period, they added the accusation that all Jews were communists-in-disguise, secretly working to overthrow Poland and place it under Soviet rule. When an opponent of the *Endecja*, Gabriel Narutowicz, was chosen as Poland's first democratically elected president in 1922, they branded him a "Jewish president." As proof, they pointed to the support he received from a loose coalition of Ukrainian, Belarusian, German, and Jewish parties known as the National Minorities' Bloc. Within hours of Narutowicz's victory, bloody antisemitic riots shook Warsaw. He was assassinated less than a week later.²⁸

These were among the reasons that many Polish Jews welcomed authoritarian rule following a coup d'état in May 1926.²⁹ At the helm of Poland's new regime was Józef Piłsudski. A longtime opponent of Roman Dmowski and a former leader of the Polish Socialist Party, Piłsudski was the famed founder of the Polish Legions during the First World War. According to his admirers, Piłsudski's leadership of the legions made him the man most responsible for Poland's independence. His relatively tolerant approach to the country's national minorities, as well as his determination to prevent public outbursts of violence, including antisemitic riots, proved a welcome respite from the previous years of democracy. Piłsudski's call for unity among all of Poland's citizens and his opposition to the *Endecja* resonated with many Polish Jews. So too did his government's hostility toward the Soviet Union as well as local communist and socialist movements, which were viewed with suspicion by many among Poland's largely traditional Jewish population. When the government launched a public campaign for Poland's citizens to conceive of Piłsudski as the liberator of Poland and to envision themselves as citizen-soldiers who would save the state from destruction, it proved popular among many Jews.³⁰ Some Jews turned to his calls for moral revolution, unity, and patriotism as a model for thinking about the Jewish future in Mandate Palestine. Piłsudski's contempt for

what he perceived to be the excesses of parliamentary rule especially resonated with Revisionist Zionists, who frequently accused the elected representative bodies of the Zionist movement of fomenting factionalism and corruption.

Piłsudski's government was far from the only model of right-wing politics from which Betar's leaders drew. They often turned to Fascist Italy for inspiration as well.³¹ Many of Betar's leaders and members embraced a range of convictions and values that they themselves described as fascist. Among them was the desire to create a nationalist state that rose above sectional interests; contempt for established elites; the belief that one had to relinquish individual interests if they obstructed the road to national revival and purification; the call for a total ideology, covering all aspects of human experience, to inspire personal sacrifice and instill discipline, order, and unity; faith in a near-omnipotent leader expressing the will of the masses; the exaltation of violence and war to defend the nation's interests; the privileging of deeds over words and emotion over reason; and finally, the moral necessity of suppressing opponents of the nation.³²

No discussion of Betar's relationship to fascism can dodge the fervent debate among historians of the European Right about what constitutes fascist politics in the first place. Not one of the political beliefs and practices associated with fascism was unique to fascist movements in interwar Europe. Throughout the nineteenth century, left-wing political organizations across the continent organized paramilitary movements. Liberals and conservatives throughout Europe frequently expressed hostility toward socialism. Nearly all European political movements in the interwar period were preoccupied with the sacralization of politics through creating political myths and orchestrating mass spectacles. Despite their preference for preserving the power of traditional elites, authoritarian governments in interwar Poland, Romania, Hungary, and elsewhere in eastern Europe shared many components of Fascist Italy's ideological repertoire.³³

The sheer diversity of movements that described themselves as fascist between the two world wars makes comparative work all the more challenging. Of the variety of Europeans who described themselves as fascist, Italian and German fascists alone managed to seize the levers of power at a national level. Despite their formal alliance in 1938, Mussolini and Hitler differed in numerous respects in how they exercised power, with Fascist Italy tending toward conservative authoritarian rule, and the Third Reich seeking the total dominance of the Nazi Party.³⁴ Although the remaining fascist groups—wielding little to no state power—conceived of themselves as part of a global

network, their attitudes toward modernity, religion, women, and the efficacy of alliances with other groups varied greatly. It is no surprise, then, that historians, political scientists, and sociologists endlessly debate the criteria that a political movement must meet to be considered fascist.³⁵

As historians such as Robert Paxton have argued, scholars searching for ideological coherence among Europe's fascists not only risk flattening the internal ambiguities and contradictions of fascist thought and behavior. They also miss a crucial point. As much as fascists across the continent issued bold, brash, and sweeping political declarations, they saw little need to present an ideologically seamless world to their followers and were constantly redefining their aims and practices.³⁶ The very terms "fascism" and "democracy" were in a constant state of flux in the interwar period. Political leaders on the radical right often insisted that their form of rule was more democratic than parliamentary politics because they represented the will of the masses better than any election ever could.³⁷ Betar's leaders, too, spent much of the interwar period not only debating the value of democracy and fascism, but also questioning the very meanings of these terms and the boundaries separating them. Rather than attempt to create a stable definition of fascism against which I can judge the politics of Betar's members, I instead explore how and why many of them continually struggled to define the term in order to make it their own. This book provides a case study of an interwar youth movement continually reshaping the meaning of fascism, while simultaneously questioning its efficacy as a worldview and behavioral code.

Deciphering Jabotinsky's relationship to the European Right proves no less challenging than mapping the perspectives on fascism expressed by his followers in Poland. Jabotinsky's attitudes toward the roles that liberalism, democracy, and authoritarianism could play in the Zionist movement have been the subject of intense debate among his biographers for decades. Early chroniclers of the Revisionist movement sought to find in his writing a clear, coherent ideological position that somehow definitively answered the question of whether Jabotinsky was an admirer of fascism or a staunch defender of liberalism and democracy.³⁸ More recent historical scholarship, initiated by the pioneering work of Ya'akov Shavit, has done much to complicate these narratives. Instead of seeking a "definitive" political philosophy from Jabotinsky, historians have drawn attention to the ways in which his evolving political positions were shaped largely by his increasingly futile efforts to maintain control over the Revisionist movement's various competing factions. Jabotinsky's sometimes contradictory approaches to democracy and authoritarianism,

they argue, reflected his struggle to balance his commitments as democratic leader of the Revisionist movement and commander of Betar.³⁹ Many of these historians take pains to insist that Jabotinsky was a devout and steadfast proponent of liberalism and democracy until the end of his life. Departures from these values—whether in his political prose or behavior—are explained as the product of pressures from his young followers, who forced Jabotinsky to adopt an “authoritarian guise” and pay lip service to beliefs that were not his own.⁴⁰ In these renditions of the Revisionist movement’s ideological development, Jabotinsky is often portrayed as an unwitting victim of his own political prose, a leader who, despite his best efforts to articulate a clear position, was helpless in preventing his membership from misinterpreting or deliberately distorting his ideological proclamations.⁴¹

This study proposes a different way to read Jabotinsky. As Michael Stanislawski has shown, the brash, idiosyncratic, and contradictory tendencies of Jabotinsky’s prose as an adolescent in turn-of-the-century Russia were deliberate aesthetic choices deeply rooted in Europe’s fin-de-siècle cosmopolitan culture, which eschewed rigid definitions of identity.⁴² His refusal to be restricted to any particular worldview persisted throughout his career as a Zionist leader. Provocative prose was more than just a literary habit he retained from his adolescence. Rather, it was a political strategy; “an exaggeration,” he explained in one of his most famously controversial articles, “can sometimes be an entirely practical means to beat into our dull, drowsy heads a little bit of truth.”⁴³ It was the incendiary nature of Jabotinsky’s weekly columns in Polish Jewish newspapers that kept the rapt attention of his allies and adversaries alike. “On the day that the newspaper was published,” a Betar member from the northeastern city of Grodno recounted decades later, Jabotinsky’s “supporters and opponents would read his articles, and afterwards, the arguments would begin without end, because they were like little atomic bombs.”⁴⁴

Above all, however, Jabotinsky’s talent as a political writer rested in his ability to situate his bold, provocative claims within an intricate web of contradictions and conditional clauses. Despite the fervent passion with which he employed the terms and phrases that became staples of Betar’s unique political vocabulary, he simultaneously offered multiple, often conflicting interpretations for what these terms actually meant. Reflecting on the constantly shifting meaning of a typical Jabotinsky slogan, a member of Betar’s national leadership in Poland found himself explaining to the youth movement’s membership in 1933 that “its form has yet to be frozen, it finds itself in a dynamic, developing state; changes are still likely to take place.”⁴⁵ The movement’s first official

ideological brochure, entitled *The Betar Idea*, was similarly elusive; “the soul of Betar,” Jabotinsky wrote, “is still a secret, even for its supporters . . . and its leaders, and naturally, for the writer of this brochure.”⁴⁶ Even the very name of the youth movement possessed two interpretive options for its members. Should Betar, the Joseph Trumpeldor League, strive, like its namesake, to represent all Zionist youth who supported the principles of national unity and self-defense? Or should they build an elite group motivated by the ideals of revolt, guerrilla warfare, and zealotry evoked by the legend of the Jewish rebels who died at Betar, the last standing fortress in ancient Palestine during the Jewish revolt against the Romans between 132 and 136 CE?

Like the name of the youth movement, the ambiguities of Jabotinsky’s prose were essential because they allowed Betar activists to interpret their leader’s writings as they saw fit. The intellectual arithmetic performed on his essays by Betar’s leaders in the youth movement’s journals—adding and embellishing several points, subtracting or minimizing others—allowed ample space within the movement for militarist and, in turn, fascist ideas, even if its leader occasionally declared himself to be an opponent—or reluctant supporter—of both. Providing Betar members with a diverse set of images and arguments, Jabotinsky and his colleagues allowed their followers to flirt with fascism’s values while dodging, if they so desired, the term itself. In this study, I highlight the ways in which Jabotinsky deliberately infused his provocative prose with numerous ambiguities and contradictions. I also put Jabotinsky’s writings into conversation with the thousands of articles and pamphlets written by those in Poland who claimed allegiance to him—a source base virtually untapped by historians. In doing so, I demonstrate how Jabotinsky’s followers pruned his writing to match their visions for the development of Zionism. By embracing the contradictions inherent in Jabotinsky’s texts, along with those produced by his followers, I hope to help readers arrive at a better understanding of the discursive system in which the early right-wing Zionists operated, as well as the strategies that Jabotinsky adopted to maintain his hold over his ideologically diverse constituency.

Polish Jews and the Politics of Nationality

Ever ready to denounce Betar, its opponents saw in the youth movement’s flirtations with fascism a full-fledged acceptance of radical right-wing politics. From the moment Betar gained supporters, its members were accused of being Jabotinsky’s “little Jewish fascists,” the brutal “foot soldiers” of “the

Jewish Mussolini” or “the Jewish Hitler.”⁴⁷ Betar’s competitors in Poland drew in equal measure from examples closer to home to discredit the youth movement. Zionist leaders who were critical of the Sanacja regime accused Betar’s members of serving as Piłsudski’s Jewish henchmen.⁴⁸ Other Zionist opponents of Betar accused its members of behaving like antisemitic youth affiliated with the Polish radical Right.⁴⁹

While Betar’s supporters insisted that they had nothing in common with radical antisemitic nationalists, they expressed little discomfort with the claim that they were linked to the Sanacja. No other Zionist youth movement worked as strenuously to create links with the Sanacja regime. In Betar’s journals and newspapers, local youth movement leaders boasted whenever local Polish military officials participated in their events.⁵⁰ During Polish national holidays, Betar was the only Zionist youth movement whose leaders routinely searched for opportunities to march in parades alongside Polish scouts and soldiers, sing Polish patriotic songs, and deliver speeches pledging to defend Poland from attack.⁵¹ The youth movement also created rituals that blurred the boundaries between Zionism and Polish patriotism. Several months after Piłsudski’s death in 1935, thousands of Betar members gathered in a village near Kraków, where a monument commemorating the fallen leader’s role in Poland’s struggle for independence was being constructed. In the ceremony that followed, Betar leaders poured over the memorial the contents of an urn filled with soil from Tel Hai, the Jewish settlement where Joseph Trumpeldor had been killed.⁵²

No less significant was the reaction of Polish government officials to Betar’s pledges of loyalty and their ceremonies blending Zionism and Polish patriotism. In dozens of market towns and cities across central and eastern Poland, they not only encouraged Betar members to participate in Polish patriotic parades, but also gave them access to their paramilitary training programs for Polish youth.⁵³ By the late 1930s, as civil war raged in Mandate Palestine, pitting Palestinian Arabs against the British colonial administration and the Jewish population, the Polish government accepted Jabotinsky’s request for diplomatic and military aid. They lent public support to Revisionist petitions to the League of Nations, helped young Polish Jews immigrate illegally to Palestine, and provided military training and arms to the Revisionist organization’s armed underground in Palestine, the Irgun Tsva’i Le’umi (National Military Organization).⁵⁴

How might historians make sense of Betar’s relationship to Polish nationalism, the Polish state, and its officials? Most scholarly accounts of interactions

between Catholic Poles and Polish Jews in interwar Poland focus on antisemitic ideology, anti-Jewish violence, and the responses of Polish Jews to these phenomena.⁵⁵ This scholarship has shed critical light on the pervasiveness of Polish antisemitism between the two world wars and its profound impact on the lives of Polish Jews. Its focus on moments of crisis, however, risks leaving the impression that Poles and Jews lived in entirely separate spheres and were destined to remain in a perpetual state of conflict. The very term “Polish-Jewish relations,” used by these scholars to describe their work, implies that “Polish” and “Jewish” were fixed and static terms that clearly separated one group’s ethnic, religious, and political sense of self and community from the other.

To be sure, there was much that distinguished Jews from the region’s non-Jewish majority. Religious beliefs and customs marked Poland’s largely traditional Jewish population as a people apart, with different eating habits, dress, educational patterns, and ritual calendars. The country’s Christian population was overwhelmingly made up of countryside peasants. Most Jews lived in towns and cities, eking out a living as peddlers, small shopkeepers, and artisans. Although economic interactions between Jews and non-Jews were usually cordial, their religious and economic differences formed the basis for conflict. Jews had to contend with long-standing Christian beliefs that they bore responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ and that they economically exploited their non-Jewish customers. Traditional hostilities toward Jews were easily integrated into the modern antisemitism peddled by members of the *Endecja*, who insisted that Jews posed an existential threat to the Polish nation. Their claims that Jews unjustly dominated the economic life of the country, polluted its national culture, and were plotting to overthrow the state were not only condoned but promoted by clergy in interwar Poland’s powerful Catholic Church.⁵⁶

Jews had little reason to feel welcome in the new Polish state. Poland’s independence and subsequent battle with Ukrainian and Soviet forces were accompanied by pogroms perpetrated by Polish soldiers and civilians. Polish government officials resented the Minority Rights Treaty imposed on them by the Allied powers in 1919. Its call to guarantee the equality and safety of the country’s minority populations, and its demand that minorities receive a fair share of state funds for religious, educational, and welfare services were all but ignored. So too were the demands of Jewish parliamentary representatives to abolish discriminatory legislation left over from Russian and Habsburg rule.⁵⁷ Although state discrimination against Jews lessened somewhat under Piłsudski’s *Sanacja* regime, following his death in 1935, his successors condoned the economic boycott of Jews, enacted anti-Jewish legislation, and

poured their energies into seeking the mass emigration of Jews from Poland. Contemporary observers spoke of a mass emigration drive among Jews, fueled by their increasing sense that their prospects for a decent future in Poland were dim.⁵⁸ Between 1921 and 1938, nearly four hundred thousand Jews left Poland. In a country whose rulers embraced ethnic nationalism and often deemed Jews to be foreigners, it is perhaps unsurprising that Zionism, itself a form of ethnic nationalism, surged in popularity among interwar Polish Jewry.

The steady rise of ethnic nationalism among Catholic Poles and Jews alike, however, was accompanied by a paradoxical, seemingly contradictory trend. The interwar period saw an unprecedented acceleration of acculturation among Poland's Jews. The acquisition of Polish linguistic, cultural, and social habits had mostly been the preserve of wealthy urban Jewish elites under Habsburg and, to a lesser extent, Russian rule, but by the interwar period, acculturation had extended its reach to Jews from all walks of life. Although nearly 80 percent of Jews in Poland declared Yiddish to be their mother tongue in 1931, Polish increasingly became one of their daily vernaculars and, for some, their preferred language. No group was more affected by this linguistic revolution than Jewish youth.⁵⁹ By the late 1930s, over 80 percent of Jewish school-age children were attending a state public school, an experience unknown to most of their parents. The students spent as many as twelve hours a week learning Polish, reading Polish romantic literature, and listening to their teachers recount the history of Polish kings, noblemen, politicians, and soldiers. Many graduates of these schools not only viewed Polish as a natural language of communication; they also admired Polish culture and expressed an attachment to the Polish state.⁶⁰ As historian Kamil Kijek has observed, the increased popularity of Polish language and culture among Jewish youth meant that "feeling and thinking in more than one cultural universe was natural and unavoidable" for them.⁶¹

Generational differences were not the only fault lines within Poland's Jewish communities to produce diverse attitudes toward Polish language and culture, as well as conflicting attitudes toward the Polish state. Geography played a powerful role as well. "Polish Jewry" in reality comprised three "Polish Jewries," formerly under German, Habsburg, and Russian rule. The differing status and development of Jews in these empires influenced the degree to which their leaders identified with Polish language and culture, as well as the ways in which they interacted with the new Polish state.

Formerly under German rule, the bulk of Jews in the western fringes of the recently established Polish state held deep attachments to German language and culture. Over the course of the nineteenth century, most of the region's

Jewish inhabitants had migrated to German lands, leaving a negligible number of Jews living in Poland's western borderland provinces.⁶² Jews in the southern region of Galicia, formerly under Habsburg rule, had similarly enjoyed full civic equality. The relationship of the region's Zionist activists to Polish language and culture, however, was far more intimate. In the fifty years preceding the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire, it had granted Galicia's Polish population a tremendous scope of autonomy, including control of the province's government institutions and public schools. This autonomy applied not only to the western region of the province, in which Jews were the only significant ethnic minority, but also to its eastern region, where Ukrainians made up the majority of the population. Many early Zionist activists in the province came from urban middle-class homes, attended Polish-language gymnasiums, and chose Polish as their primary spoken language.⁶³ Their participation in parliamentary politics under Habsburg rule had accustomed them to pursuing compromise and moderation with government officials. They brought these political habits to their interactions with the new Polish government and continued to express strong attachments to Polish language and culture.

The country's central region, formerly known as Congress Poland, was home to the largest number of Jews in the new state. Like their contemporaries in the western region of Galicia, they lived among non-Jewish neighbors who were predominantly Catholic Poles. Nonetheless, they came of age in a fundamentally different social and political context than their Galician counterparts. Under Russian rule, Jews, like others, were subjects, not citizens. After years of experience battling the Russian Empire's restrictive policies toward its non-Russian subjects, they were far less reticent than their Galician counterparts to confront the Polish government. Despite the existence of a small modernizing urban elite who spoke Polish, the majority of Zionist activists in the region tended to be raised in religiously observant homes where Yiddish was their primary spoken language. Jews living in the *kresy*, Poland's eastern borderlands formerly under Russian rule, had even less contact with Catholic Poles. Belarusians predominated in the north, and a sizable Ukrainian population lived in the center and south of these borderland regions. Prior to Poland's independence, the modernizing Jewish elite in the *kresy* opted to embrace Russian, while nearly no Jews in the region spoke Polish.⁶⁴

Many Zionist activists viewed these regional differences, coupled with the increasing pace of acculturation among Polish Jewish youth, as major obstacles in their quest to imbue in their supporters an original and authentic Jewish national identity that transcended regional divisions. A critical component of

this new national identity was its call for *shlilat ha-gola*, a rejection of the Diaspora. Many Zionist leaders urged their followers to accept the futility of Jewish life in the Diaspora, envision Europe's Jews as physically and spiritually disfigured, and view with contempt any Jews who sought to deny their distinctiveness and merge with their non-Jewish neighbors.

Paradoxically, however, these very same activists, in their quest to bring about the "normalization" of the Jewish nation, often drew inspiration from the histories, literatures and rituals of other European nationalist movements, and envisioned them as models for Jewish behavior.⁶⁵ Even Yitzhak Grinboym, one of the most outspoken critics of the Polish government during his years as a member of Polish parliament, described in his memoirs how his turn to Zionism as a youth in the Russian Empire was prompted, in part, by his love of Polish literature, which "awakened my love for the Poles, who fought for their rights."⁶⁶ Betar was far from the only Zionist movement in interwar Poland to forge connections between the Polish struggle for an independent Poland and the quest for a Jewish state in Mandate Palestine.⁶⁷ Betar's chief competitor on the "Jewish street," the socialist Zionist youth movement Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir, initially drew inspiration from Polish scouting movements in Habsburg Galicia dreaming of Polish independence.⁶⁸ The curriculum of interwar Poland's Tarbut school network, which sought to immerse its students in Hebrew and nourish their commitment to Zionism, instructed teachers to identify links between the Polish and Zionist national liberation narratives.⁶⁹ Even as these nationalist activists insisted that they sought to forge a distinct national identity, they constantly debated the extent to which they could draw from the beliefs and behaviors of their non-Jewish neighbors.

These debates were inextricably connected to broader discussions among Poland's Zionist activists about the national loyalties of Polish Jews. In a country where Jews were widely perceived by their Christian neighbors to be threatening foreigners, Zionists understood that their calls for Jews to express loyalty to a homeland hundreds of miles away could serve as fodder for antisemites. Well aware that Polish government censors combed Jewish newspapers in search of seditious statements, Zionist journalists writing in the country's Polish-language Jewish daily press spilled much ink to demonstrate that their loyalty to Poland and Zionism could coexist. Their insistence that Polish Jews were patriotic citizens of Poland was often coupled with demands that Jews receive full civil rights, a quest that many Zionist leaders undertook in tandem with their work to build a Jewish state.⁷⁰ Yet their efforts to publicly reconcile the commitments of Jews to Poland and Palestine were not merely

pragmatic performances of loyalty to the Polish state. They also reflected a genuine attempt by some Polish Jews to make sense of their own entangled political and emotional commitments to both Poland and Palestine.⁷¹ This was especially the case for Zionist activists from Galicia who spoke Polish as their mother tongue, as well as Zionist youth who had gained an intimate acquaintance with Polish patriotic culture in the state's public school system. While they certainly did not view their Zionism as a "ticket of admission" into Polish society, some Polish Jewish Zionists believed that Zionism was as much about gaining the respect of their non-Jewish neighbors as it was about creating a Jewish state in Mandate Palestine.⁷² Even as life in Poland appeared increasingly bleak, many Zionists insisted that they had a right to live in Poland as much as they did in Palestine, that they could belong to a nation whose homeland was hundreds of miles away but still view Poland as their "local fatherland," "second fatherland," or "fatherland."⁷³

Given the staggering diversity of Poland's Jewish population, as well as the ambivalent relationship of many Polish Jews to the Polish state, there was unsurprisingly little consensus among them about what it meant to be a "Polish Jew." This was true not only for Polish Jews at large, but for Betar's members and leaders as well, who reflected the geographic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the country's Jewish population. Only against this backdrop can we begin to understand Betar's relationship to Polish nationalism and the *Sanacja*. Historians have depicted the Revisionist movement's relationship with the Polish state and Polish nationalism as a "marriage of convenience" or, in the recent work of Timothy Snyder, a genuine expression of mutual affection and solidarity between Polish government officials and right-wing Zionists.⁷⁴ Both of these interpretations risk ignoring the diverse and frequently contradictory approaches taken by right-wing Zionists and Polish government officials to the politics of national belonging in interwar Poland.

Betar's leaders deftly drew from Polish patriotic culture to attract Jewish youth into its ranks and gain government support. Yet despite agreeing that there was something "Polish" about Revisionist Zionism, Betar's members and leaders frequently debated what it meant for a Zionist to "act Polish" or what functions these performances of "Polishness" could serve. These debates are what I seek to capture in this study. Some Betar members viewed the Polish national struggle as an inspiration but simultaneously insisted that they felt no connection to the Polish state and were foreigners en route to their distant homeland.⁷⁵ Others insisted that every Jew bore the responsibility to make sacrifices for their "two fatherlands," the Land of Israel and Poland.⁷⁶

Still others within the movement vacillated between these two options over the course of their lives—or simply accepted the numerous inconsistencies that characterized their political affiliations. The definitions of “Polishness” presented by the youth movement’s leaders also fluctuated according to their particular aims. Some described “Polishness” as a state of discipline and obedience, while others celebrated Polish acts of revolutionary violence as models to emulate.⁷⁷ Still others depicted Catholic Poles as eternal antisemites who proved the futility of Jewish life in the Diaspora.⁷⁸ Although Betar’s leaders had hoped that the links they drew to the Sanacja would inspire new recruits to Zionism and consolidate their ranks, the conflicting ways in which they imagined Polish identity reveal instead how their nation-building project, much like those of other nationalist activists in central and eastern Europe, was a deeply contested process.

Polish state officials who dealt with Betar were no less conflicted in their efforts to determine the meaning and limits of Polish identity. On the one hand, Piłsudski claimed that the country’s national minorities could be loyal citizens of a multiethnic state, albeit one dominated by Catholic Poles. The Sanacja’s education system encouraged Jews and other minority students to treat Polish patriotic culture as their own.⁷⁹ At the same time, however, the Sanacja’s political elite held a vast range of views concerning the country’s minorities.⁸⁰ Their brutal “pacification campaign” against Ukrainian nationalists in the early 1930s was but one example of how the Polish state’s desire to maintain a monopoly of power frequently overrode any commitments to minority rights. The policies enacted by many Sanacja officials often reflected widespread antisemitic beliefs, including that Jews were naturally predisposed to communism and were overrepresented in key sectors of the Polish economy.⁸¹ Even as they insisted on restraining radical antisemitism, they were deeply sensitive to Polish popular opinion and anxious to avoid being labeled as allies or accomplices of Jews.

Recent scholarship on the Sanacja regime has called into question the extent to which 1926 was a beneficial turning point for the country’s national minorities. Instead of presenting a portrait of a centralized political system that enforced a coherent policy, this scholarship points instead to how a variety of factors—from the competing ambitions and goals of various state institutions to the whims of local political officials—could influence how the Sanacja’s mandates were interpreted and implemented.⁸² Police reports concerning Betar, found in Polish state archives in towns and cities across the country, confirm these findings. Some Sanacja officials depicted Betar’s performances

of Polishness as admirable and saw the youth movement as a potential ally in their war against communism. Others feared that the Endecja would use these performances to paint Polish officials as pawns in the hands of Jews. Still others expressed the very same fears about Jews expressed by the Polish radical Right and sought to prevent their activities altogether.

By exploring the multiple ways in which Betar's leaders, members, and Polish government officials interpreted the youth movement's performances of Polish patriotism, this study aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the fundamental contingency, fluidity, and contested nature of national loyalties in central and eastern Europe.⁸³ Like other instances of nationalism in the region, the case of Betar illuminates how nationalist activists continually changed the contours of national identity to correspond with their evolving social, economic, and political goals. It also highlights how the imagined constituents of nationalist activists and, at times, the nationalist leaders themselves, defied the constraints of ethnic nationalism they claimed to endorse. Instead of revealing a fixed pattern of "Polish-Jewish relations," Betar's performances of a Zionist "Polishness," as well as the government reactions to them, demonstrate how Polish Jews and Catholic Poles were constantly negotiating the social and political boundaries that defined how they imagined each other and, in turn, themselves.

Youth and the Limits of Modern Jewish Politics

Just as Betar's leaders and members continually adjusted their definitions of Polish identity, so too did they craft definitions of "youth" that were flexible enough to serve their ever-changing goals. Interwar Poland was by no means the first time or place where political activists in Europe turned their attention to mobilizing youth. Throughout the nineteenth century, imperial armies, religious authorities, school reformers, and leaders of nascent nationalist movements were preoccupied with transforming young people into emissaries and embodiments of their cause. Recreational activity was increasingly viewed as a conduit to shape the political beliefs and behaviors of young people. In manifestos, pamphlets, and newspapers, political activists across the continent frequently invoked long-standing ideas about the nature of youth—from their virility, enthusiasm, and idealism to their recklessness and impulsiveness—as a way to promote their views.⁸⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, youth movements were emerging in western Europe as one of the most popular organizational models to mobilize young people. On the eve of the First World

War, Germany's Wandervogel movement, with its calls for youth to return to nature and shed the excesses of modern life, boasted 25,000 members. In France, youth movements run by Catholic organizations had more than 75,000 members. The British Empire's Boy Scout movement, with its emphasis on instilling patriotism through camping in the wilderness, counted more than 128,000 participants. Polish, Czech, and Slovak nationalist activists in the Austro-Hungarian Empire established scouting and gymnastics organizations of their own.⁸⁵

Despite these precedents, the First World War radically transformed how political activists imagined the roles young people could play in the activists' quest to gain political power. The military mobilization of millions of young men across Europe proved to them just how pivotal young people could be in shaping the political destinies of the continent.⁸⁶ Drawing on ideas about the masses cultivated at the turn of the century, politicians increasingly came to believe that the only way to gain power was to appeal to the political instincts of ordinary citizens. In their view, political power would be found not in the journals, newspapers, and cafes of the educated elite but on the street, where they would stage mass public events.⁸⁷ More than ever, young people came to be seen as pivotal players in the performance and acquisition of power. Many were inspired by the spectacle of uniformed, disciplined youth in the Soviet Union's Komsomol and Fascist Italy's Balilla movement. Political leaders hoped that the elaborate public rituals of their youth movements, from parading in the streets to singing in public squares, would put on display the strength and potency of their programs and, in doing so, appeal to the emotions of potential supporters in the crowds. The very activities promoted by Europe's youth movements, from marching in unison to singing around a bonfire, aimed to be emotionally immersive experiences that would set the political allegiances of young people for the rest of their lives. As political leaders across the continent made harnessing the perceived power of youth a top priority, youth movement members were told that they had the power to shape the political destinies of their adult patron organizations. Paradoxically, political leaders hoped that their promises of youth empowerment would provide them with unprecedented opportunities to shape and control the attitudes and behaviors of young people.

The theatrics of youth movement politics were especially enticing to Polish Jewish political activists. Despite their promises to remake Jewish life, they were largely powerless to effect any significant change. As members of a beleaguered minority with little government power to speak of, Polish Jews were

often at the mercy of forces far beyond their control. As the 1930s progressed, they were increasingly limited by the dire political and economic conditions in Poland. Against this backdrop, Jewish youth movements provided one of the rare avenues for political activists to exert power. Their youth movement clubs, drama societies, soccer teams, occupational training centers, and summer camps were conceived of as “republics of youth,” where their visions for the Jewish political future could be realized and put on public display. With political redemption delayed, they could, at the very least, prepare young Polish Jews for the future they hoped lay ahead.

Every major Jewish political party boasted a youth movement. The Bund founded a youth movement, *Tsukunft* (the Future), in 1915. Socialist Zionists of a variety of ideological hues established the pioneering movements *He-Halutz* (est. 1917), *Frayhayt* (1920), and *Gordonia* (1925). The popular socialist scouting organization *Ha-shomer Ha-tsa'ir* (1916) claimed more than thirty thousand members by the mid-1930s. Even the Orthodox *Agudat Yisrael* Party, whose mandate was to defend traditional Jewish interests, formed its own youth movements, incorporating elements of secular youth movement culture into its program, including the establishment of choirs and drama clubs.⁸⁸ Jewish youth movement branches proliferated throughout Poland; even in small market towns with several thousand inhabitants, it would not be uncommon to find a variety of Jewish youth movements vying for the support of locals as young as ten and as old as twenty-two. Organizing dramatic productions, musical performances, and public lectures throughout the year, they played a pivotal role in the cultural life of these towns.

Despite the centrality of youth movements in interwar Polish Jewish life, we know relatively little about their emergence, cultural universe, and impact.⁸⁹ Until recently, studies of Polish Jewish politics tended to focus on the ideological proclamations of political leaders, with less attention to how politics operated on the street. This book joins a small but growing body of scholarship exploring the social history of Polish Jewish politics between the two world wars.⁹⁰ I take readers to Betar’s summer camps, parades, and concerts in towns and cities throughout Poland. I also reconstruct the internal life of local Betar clubs, from their intricate rituals of dressing, reading, and speaking to the portraits, posters, and slogans that decorated their walls. Through close readings of sources designed for the members of youth movements—from pamphlets intended to make ideology comprehensible to children to curricula for Betar leaders for how to make singing, playing, dancing, and marching explicitly political acts—I reconstruct the popular political culture through which many

if not most Polish Jewish youth encountered and experienced politics. To do so, I examine not only the youth movement's periodical literature, but also handwritten communal journals produced by local Betar clubs across central and eastern Poland, where most Polish Jews resided.

To reconstruct Poland's Jewish youth movement culture, I also take advantage of a treasure trove of autobiographies written by Polish Jews coming of age in interwar Poland. These autobiographies were written in 1932, 1934, and 1939 as part of a contest spearheaded by the famous Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich at the Jewish Institute for Scientific Research (Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut, YIVO), headquartered in the northeastern city known in Yiddish as Vilne, in Polish as Wilno, and in Lithuanian as Vilnius.⁹¹ Of the 627 autobiographies collected by YIVO, just over half were lost or destroyed during the Second World War. Among the 302 autobiographies that survived, now housed at YIVO's headquarters in New York, I was able to analyze some 25 that were written by young Jews who, at one point or another, joined Betar. While sensitive to the complications that autobiographies present as historical sources, I use them to help situate the political activity of Betar's members within the broader context of their lives, including their economic struggles, religious worldviews, experiences at school, family life, and friendship networks. These documents also recover the voices of ordinary Polish Jews as they grappled with the ideologies of their day.

Paying attention to these voices has profound implications for the study of Polish Jewish history. To capture the dynamic world of Jewish politics in interwar Poland, historians frequently set their focus on urban Jewish life in cities such as Warsaw, Kraków, Wilno, and Lwów. While these studies amply document the cauldron of ideologies promoted by urban Jewish political leaders, they often pay little attention to how Jewish politics was experienced and practiced in hundreds of provincial market towns across Poland, where nearly 40 percent of interwar Poland's Jewish population resided.⁹² The YIVO autobiographers, most of whom hailed from these provincial towns, provide us with unprecedented access to the politics of small-town life in interwar Poland. This book helps to bring their experiences into the study of Polish Jewish politics and examines the various political fault lines that divided Jewish small-town and urban life. The autobiographies also provide a window into the political experiences of young Jewish women, whose voices were often absent from the pages of youth movement periodicals in the country's urban centers.⁹³ Above all, the autobiographies provide vivid accounts of how young Jews explained their participation in Betar and, in some cases, their decision to

leave the movement. These accounts alert readers to the dangers of presuming that Betar's detailed curriculum guidelines, which choreographed nearly every aspect of life, accurately represent what actually took place within the youth movement's clubs. The vast disjuncture between the party guidelines and the autobiographies reveals instead how the ideological prescriptions of interwar Poland's Jewish political leaders often did not correspond to how their followers interpreted them.⁹⁴

Betar's leaders in the movement's Warsaw headquarters were well aware of the vast gap between the scripts for national behavior they had devised for Jewish youth and the conditions on the ground in hundreds of their youth movement's branches across the country. Ezra Mendelsohn's observation that Polish Jewish politics oscillated between euphoria and despair certainly holds true when reading Betar's triumphant ideological texts in tandem with letters, from the very same authors, lamenting the indifference of Betar's members to the youth movement's program.⁹⁵ In this respect, Betar's activists were far from alone; across the continent, political activists struggled to convince young people to carry out their ideological guidelines, let alone understand them.⁹⁶

At the same time, as they worried about their ability to mobilize support, some of Betar's leaders grew increasingly anxious about those who claimed to be the youth movement's most fierce supporters. Particularly worrisome for many Jewish political leaders was the tendency of their youth movements to push for more radical measures. Concerns about the zealotry and radical tendencies of youth were far from the preserve of Poland's Jews. Political leaders across Europe who poured their efforts into mobilizing youth increasingly feared that their young recruits would wrest control from them. In Italy, Mussolini spent much of the 1920s trying to reign in the violent exploits of his *squadristi*. In the first few years following the Russian Civil War, tensions ran high between Soviet officials and Komsomol youth, who accused the government of halting the revolution by allowing small private enterprises to function under the New Economic Policy. In Poland, veteran leaders of the *Endecja* felt increasingly threatened by their young guard.⁹⁷ Many observers of European politics agreed that a "conflict of generations" was sweeping the continent.⁹⁸

Fears about the rise of political radicalism within Polish Jewish communities fueled constant conversations about a "conflict of generations" among Jews. "The air is full with conflict between parents and their children," wrote Max Weinreich in *The Road to Our Youth (Der veg tsu unzer yugnt)*, his study of the autobiographies YIVO had assembled in 1932 and 1934.⁹⁹ Weinreich,

among other contemporary observers, spoke of a “youth with no tomorrow,” pushed to radical politics as a result of deepening economic crisis and persistent discrimination.¹⁰⁰ This trend toward radicalization played out in various ways throughout the 1930s. The radical ideals of the Polish Communist Party became increasingly attractive to some Polish Jewish youth.¹⁰¹ Members of the youth movements affiliated with Mizrahi, a religious Zionist party, defied their older leaders by calling for an alliance with the working class.¹⁰² Many of Betar’s leaders increasingly called on Jabotinsky to abandon his diplomatic ventures and embrace revolutionary violence as the only tool that could build the future Jewish state.

Throughout this book, I trace how Betar’s leaders, much like their contemporaries throughout Europe, wrestled with the prospects and pitfalls of empowering youth as political actors. The book situates Jabotinsky’s hesitations about youth movement politics against the backdrop of debates sweeping throughout the continent about the benefits and dangers of mass politics. I also highlight how Revisionist activists constantly drew on ideas about the nature of youth to convince the Polish Jewish public to support their movement’s increasing turn to authoritarian politics and revolutionary violence. Finally, I capture the struggle of the youth movement’s leaders to determine when to encourage, tolerate, or reject the young radicals within their ranks. In doing so, I hope to shed light on broader dynamics that propelled Europe’s vibrant youth movement culture between the two world wars.

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 tells the story of Jabotinsky’s first encounter with Polish Jewish youth, during a last-ditch effort in 1927 to gain supporters for his fledgling, feeble, and ideologically inchoate political organization, the Union of Revisionist Zionists. He initially viewed the Polish Jews flocking to greet him at train stations with a mix of pity, disdain, and suspicion. Little did he know that they would transform his very understanding of Revisionism’s mission and the tools required to bring him to power. The chapter describes how members of several Jewish youth movements in Poland, some established years beforehand, helped to convince the Revisionist leader to turn the celebration of militarism and the rejection of socialism into core components of his organization’s program. The chapter also traces the ways in which the movement’s members drew inspiration from Polish nationalism and Poland’s new authoritarian government. Culminating with

the founding of Poland's Betar youth movement at the end of 1927, it reveals how Polish Jewish youth were not merely the passive recipients of ideology imposed "from above" but played an active role in shaping the political beliefs and behaviors they adopted.

The second chapter focuses on 1928–1931, the years Betar began its transformation into a mass movement in Poland. Across Europe, admirers of Fascist Italy were sifting through Mussolini's political program in search of an antidote to their own political challenges. This chapter takes the reader to the workshops of Betar's cultural architects, as they designed an array of myths and rituals linking the group to Judaism and ancient Jewish history, and explores how these projects provided fertile ground for Betar's leaders to determine the extent to which they would embrace the beliefs and behaviors they associated with fascism.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Jabotinsky deftly used his distinctive brand of "youth politics" to withstand challenges to his leadership from the Revisionist movement's moderates and radicals alike. Jabotinsky believed that he could invoke ideas sweeping across Europe about the nature of youth, their role in politics, and the challenges of "generational conflict" to convince his followers that his increasingly authoritarian behavior was the only mode of leadership available to Zionist leaders in the 1930s. The chapter demonstrates how his deliberately ambiguous and provocative writing about generational conflict, as well as the innovative ways in which he delimited "youth" from "adult" in his movement's regulations, allowed him to further embrace authoritarian measures within the movement without publicly abandoning his claim to be a firm proponent of democracy.

The fourth chapter takes up Betar's complex relationship to Polish nationalism from the diverse and often conflicting vantage points of Betar's members, leaders, and Polish government officials. It explores the dynamics and paradoxes of acculturation for young Jews coming of age in interwar Poland, as well as the complex factors at play when government officials attempted to determine the extent to which young Jews and other minorities could be integrated into the new Polish state.

As the first four chapters illuminate the elaborate ideology designed by Betar's leaders, the final chapters highlight the challenges they faced in their efforts to transform Jewish youth into a disciplined unit, ready at a moment's notice to obey Jabotinsky's commands. The fifth chapter follows the efforts of Betar's leaders in Warsaw to capture the hearts and minds of Jewish youth in provincial towns across central and eastern Poland. Armed with long-standing

stereotypes about *shtetl* life, Betar leaders were certain that bringing “modernity” and “progress” to these towns would mobilize provincial youth for the Zionist cause. This chapter examines the YIVO autobiography collection, as well as correspondence between Betar’s headquarters in Warsaw and its small-town outposts, to reveal the tensions that arose between these urban activists and the young Jews they sought to transform. Providing a vivid account of Jewish life in small towns across interwar Poland, the chapter exposes the vast gap between the ideological vision of Betar’s leaders and the political beliefs and experiences of its members.

The final chapter turns to Betar’s activities in the twilight years of the Second Polish Republic. With Hitler’s rise to power, a surge in anti-Jewish riots across Poland, and the escalating conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews in Mandate Palestine, numerous Betar leaders were calling for Zionist youth, no matter their location, to turn to acts of revolutionary violence to defend Jews from attack. Some of them wondered aloud whether their potential targets could include their Jewish rivals. The chapter follows Betar’s overlapping conversations about their use of violence in Poland and in Palestine. Ultimately, it reveals how right-wing Zionist debates about violence in Poland and elsewhere in Europe helped lay the groundwork for justifying acts of terrorism during the Arab Revolt in Mandate Palestine (1936–1939).

The chapter brings into focus an argument that can be traced throughout the book—that Poland’s Zionist politics had a decisive impact on developments in Mandate Palestine. This argument runs up against the work of Zionism historians who have focused almost exclusively on Mandate Palestine’s Jewish population and its leadership to explain the rise of Israeli militarism.¹⁰³ I challenge their suggestion that Israeli militarism was principally the creation of “native-born” Jews in 1930s Palestine. Instead, I draw attention to the Polish roots of Zionist attitudes toward the use of force. Although Zionist efforts in Palestine, and the reactions they provoked among the country’s Palestinian Arab majority, were crucial to the development of Zionist ideology, the influence of Poland was often no less decisive.

It is thus toward Warsaw, not Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, that we now turn to begin exploring the rise of right-wing Zionism.