The New Criterion

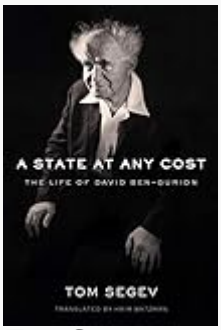
Features November 2019

Ben-Gurion's reality

by David Pryce-Jones

On A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion by Tom Segev, translated by Haim Watzman.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Tom Segev
A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 816 pages, $40.00

It was improbable, to say the least, that the David Gruen born as a Jew in 1886 in the back-of-beyond Polish-Russian township of Plonsk should have become David Ben-Gurion, a world-historical figure. The determination to achieve his purpose still seems extraordinary. For centuries, the majority of European Jews had lived more or less anonymously in a reserve under Russian domination known as the Pale of Settlement. They had no choice but to identify themselves solely as Jews, which set them apart from the neighbors and conditioned prejudice. Ben-Gurion was to have a vital role creating another possible identity. By the end of his career, Jews who hitherto would have been defined exclusively as members of a religious faith could instead be citizens of the state of Israel and also secular if they chose to be.

Ben-Gurion's family could have served as characters in a novel by Sholem Aleichem, the brilliant memorialist of Jewish life in that period. They lived in a two-story wooden house in the appropriately named Goat Alley. Anti-Semitism was seemingly contained, though *A State at Any Cost*, Tom Segev's new biography of Ben-Gurion, contains the off-hand information that a Jew who

saw feathers floating out of the window of a local house could be sure that a pogrom was underway indoors.1 The father provided "paralegal services," which appears to mean befriending and bribing officialdom. He replaced the black kaftan that Jews habitually wore with the kind of everyday clothing everyone else wore, and he had a top hat as well.

Growing up in provincial isolation, Ben-Gurion and companions his age nevertheless picked up the current ideas of thinkers and radicals in the wider world. Socialism, then a new and untried doctrine, was held to be capable of destroying all the European empires, even Russian autocracy. Nationalism, another borrowing from Europe, was a still more powerful threat to empire. In Europe, the Middle East, and beyond, people who inhabited the same territory and spoke the same language were coming to believe that only independence and sovereignty would do justice to their common interests and ambitions. Theodor Herzl's famous manifesto, *The Jewish State*, published in 1896, proposed that Jews should do as others and set up a movement of national liberation, reclaiming the Land of Israel and restoring this backward Palestinian province of the Ottoman Empire to the Jewish homeland it had once been. This was Zionism, and from the moment Ben-Gurion heard about it, he seems to have been an unquestioning Zionist.

Ben-Gurion's family could have served as characters in a novel by Sholem Aleichem, the brilliant memorialist of Jewish life in that period.

Writing without fear or favor, Tom Segev has authority. He lists more than thirty archives in which he has researched, and for a good many years he has been interviewing anyone and everyone with something relevant to say about Ben-Gurion. *A State at Any Cost*, ostensibly a biography, is also an oblique but illuminating history of the making of Israel. An immigrant in 1906, Ben-Gurion then lived through what Segev calls Palestine's "age of eccentricity," so called for the way it was marked by "hesitant beginnings and myriad fantasies." Early Zionists were mostly adventurers and dreamers; they might wear Arab dress and gallop wildly in the countryside on Arab horses. Ben-Gurion's Zionism proved not to be some grand scheme but a slow process of acquiring the soil and working it. Zionists had to do this work by and for themselves, and it has long been held to his credit that he was one of the first to insist that the employment of Arab labor was exploitation. From another perspective, of course, the Arabs were being denied equal opportunity. At Sejara, a successful settlement where Zionist immigrants were trained in agriculture, two local Arabs broke in to steal cattle. By the time this incident was over, one Arab and two Jews had been shot dead. All his life Ben-Gurion told the story of these deaths to anyone who would listen, and Segev comments that here was "the price to be paid for achieving the Zionist dream."

All the evidence is that Ben-Gurion was lonely and unlikeable, self-obsessed, stubborn, a bully easily moved to sentimentality, displaying throughout his life "extreme swings between happiness

and depression." In one letter that Segev quotes, this victim of mood-swings is openly confessional: "Even in my happiest moments I just cannot shake free that profound melancholy that has penetrated my entire being." Segev doesn't say so, but perhaps deep down Ben-Gurion had a secret suspicion that he and Zionism were likely to come to nothing. There is something unsteady about his cutting of corners, or what in Segev's words was "his tendency to try to get around whatever legal obstacles stood in his way." It fits his personality that he should have traveled out of Europe on a false passport. Coming from the Pale, he was mandated to serve in the Russian army, but he avoided doing so by means of forged documents and bribes. Odder still, his Zionism was bound to be at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, yet he thought of that empire patriotically as "our country" and fantasized that one day he might be a Turkish cabinet minister. Footloose and subsidized by his father, he spent a year in Turkish Salonica and later enrolled in Istanbul University to learn the Turkish language. One of many well-chosen photographs in the book shows him as a young Oriental gentleman with a red fez. Deported from Palestine at the outbreak of war in 1914 by Turkish authorities who suspected every Zionist of subversion, he found himself in Cairo aged twenty-nine, without documents or a profession or means of paying his way. A later photograph shows him as a British soldier in Cairo, in a uniform with forage cap and puttees that have an air of disguise. Enlisted in the Jewish Legion, a shadowy British unit that saw no active service, he had the rank of corporal.

Towards the end of the war, he made a visit to the United States to publicize socialism and Zionism. In contradiction to these ideologies, for a time he intended to become an American citizen, and he settled for three years in New York. He can have been known only in restricted circles, which is to say strictly Zionist ones. In any case, the Zionist future was decided in London. Chaim Weizmann, a strong personality with outstandingly persuasive charm, was a one-man lobbying outfit operating at the upper level of the British establishment and in no need of anything Ben-Gurion could have brought him. Nobody has yet been able to explain convincingly why the British government chose to support Zionism, merely one among other fringe movements at the time. The foreign secretary, A. J. Balfour, gave his name to the historic declaration that Jews had the right to a "national home" in Palestine, evidently a euphemism for a national state. Zionism was spectacularly transformed into a political force that had to be taken seriously. Ben-Gurion immediately switched his previous collaboration with the Turks on to the British. Addressing a huge crowd in New York that had come to celebrate the Balfour Declaration, he was in such turmoil that he paid no attention to what he was saying, writing with characteristic emotion to his father, "I felt only the storm raging in my soul."

Five days after this speech, he married Paula (short for Pauline) Moonweis, a nurse in a clinic. Born in the Pale, she had come to New York as a teenager and expected to stay there for the rest of her life. Their relationship is a puzzle. Some of his letters to her express love in the high romantic style, others are patronizing and dismissive. Engaged on Zionist business in the United States, Canada, and Britain, he abandoned her for periods as long as a year. Already at the outset of the marriage, as Segev puts it, "Her letters conveyed severe, sometimes heart-breaking distress," and he quotes from them: "You are a bad lover, husband and father . . . . Everything is gloomy and dreary in my

life . . . . I read all your letters today and you could imagine how much I cried . . . . I suppose I don't deserve anything better, and I have to suffer." She seems friendless. Those who knew her came to conclude that something was grievously amiss with her—she was too prone to speak her mind, altogether unsuitable, and no credit to him. She suspected him of being unfaithful and caught him out. His few affairs were long-drawn, with more loneliness in them than warmth. Husband and wife stayed together. (I spent 1962 in Israel gathering material for a book and by chance was able to go to a meeting in Tel Aviv of Mapai, the political party of Ben-Gurion, then prime minister. As though we knew one another well, he invited me to sit next to him and proceeded to make a good many disobliging remarks in English about colleagues in the room. Afterwards, he took me to his house for tea with Paula. She greeted me with a question: "Are you circumcised?")

Zionist strategy in British Palestine was to build institutions that gave Jews as much autonomy as possible. One such institution, the Histadrut, founded in 1920, was nominally a trade union for the Jewish workforce but effectively more like a government-in-waiting. Power was Ben-Gurion's objective, and the Histadrut offered the means of obtaining it. Proving to be master of the difficult art of getting committees to do what he wanted, he could be frank: "My plan is the dictatorship of the Hebrew laborer." There was a contemporary model of sorts. In 1923 he visited the Soviet Union. He stood in Moscow's Red Square to pay his respects, but Comrade Lenin was already too ill to turn up. After Lenin's death, Ben-Gurion wrote a eulogy of him that has a sinister passage of praise for "a man of iron will who does not spare human life and the blood of innocent children for the revolution." Not a Communist, he nevertheless preserved for the rest of his life "a special ambiguous attitude" involving some imaginary heroic picture of revolution in spite of the tyranny and corruption that goes with it. Segev approves of a generalization about Ben-Gurion and others like him made by Isser Harel—the one-time Director of Mossad and celebrated organizer of the arrest of Adolf Eichmann—all in his own peculiar grammar: "you are Zionists, but in your outlook, that is, your mentality, you are Bolsheviks."

National liberation movements are disputes about boundaries and rights, issues likely to end in bloodshed. "States are not served to peoples on golden platters" is a home truth Ben-Gurion took from the Talmud. His own beliefs and hopes, he persuaded himself, were morally pure, but, ever since the murder of the two farmers at Sejara, he had no illusions that the Arabs might accept the Jewish nation-state peacefully. In a revival of traditional terror, Haj Amin al-Husseini, a member of a leading Palestinian family and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, mobilized his followers to attack Zionists and all their works. The ensuing trial of strength had a moment of uncertainty in 1927

After Lenin's death, Ben-Gurion wrote a eulogy of him that has a sinister passage of praise for "a man of iron will who does not spare human life and the blood of innocent children for the revolution."

when the Jews who left the country outnumbered those who immigrated to it. The failure of democracy in Europe was definitive. The arrival of refugees from Hitler's expanding Reich in ever-increasing numbers prompted the Arabs to revolt and forced the British into the impossible position of choosing whom to appease and whom to repress.

In the war years, the Jews of Palestine could do nothing about Auschwitz. Each one murdered meant one less potential immigrant. Having fled to Berlin, Haj Amin got Hitler to promise that as soon as he could he would wipe out these Zionist Jews along with all the others. For a time, it looked as if Field Marshal Rommel, on the loose in North Africa, might invade Palestine. Should Jews form an underground militia for self-defense, or should there be a Jewish unit in the British army? Did Churchill or Roosevelt have the Jewish future in their hands? In helpless conditions, Ben-Gurion campaigned against Weizmann for the position of leader of the Zionist movement. The victory of the former and the humiliation of the latter is a sad story of antipathy, manners, ego, and status, and Segev tells it in his best careful style with a bright image of two gladiators fighting: "With the exception of physical blows, they used all weapons at their disposal."

The British withdrawal from Palestine in 1948 left the country at the mercy of various Arab and Muslim claims of ownership and the differing interests of the great powers and the United Nations. Converting from Zionist leader to prime minister, Ben-Gurion met the dangerous confusion head-on. One of his repeated formulations was, "If I had to choose between a small Israel with peace and a large Israel without peace, I would prefer a small Israel." As soon as Jewish institutions had sole power to give orders and be obeyed, he declared that the state of Israel had come into existence. People danced in the street and the world had to take note. A lesser man might have hesitated for fear that the Israelis could not defend themselves, or possibly have sought some form of international trusteeship as protection—in which case, there would be no state of Israel. As it was, he was ready to send people to their death on behalf of Israel, and Israelis were ready to die for it. In this Israeli identity, Jews at last were a free people. They had taken their future into their own hands.

At a moment when the state was still not properly established, Ben-Gurion's political opponents, known as Revisionists, defied him.

Some final chapters deal in detail with the thirteen years of Ben-Gurion's premiership. At a moment when the state was still not properly established, Ben-Gurion's political opponents, known as Revisionists, defied him. The *Altalena*, a ship of theirs, was bringing in armaments that would enable them to treat Arabs and Jews alike with whatever brutality they judged fit and give the means to stage a coup. Ben-Gurion insisted that in a democracy the use of force has to be solely the government's prerogative. He gave the critical but unnatural order to some Jews to fire on other Jews and capture their arms. Strength of will and personal standing saved the state from a confrontation with the potential of civil war. Arab

violence remained at a fairly constant level, and Ben-Gurion had no genuine qualms about reprisal. The aggression in him seems to imply that he never believed in peace, or, to put it another way, that peace would look after itself. Moshe Sharett, a close colleague and rival for office, thought that Ben-Gurion was "impervious to reality," a critique tempered with a proper element of compliment.

In old age he retired to Sde Boker, an out-of-the-way kibbutz in the Negev. There is a sense that, like the great Emperor Charles V, he had withdrawn to reflect on the ways of the world. He read and commented on the Jewish sages and Plato and the classics, he gave interviews, and he wrote. A State at Any Cost has a hidden bequest. The Palestinians have had numerous offers of a state, but every one of their leaders, from Haj Amin to Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas, has rejected every offer of one. For reasons that go deep into their past and their culture, they prefer a large Palestine with no peace to a small Palestine and peace. Theirs is therefore a national movement with no liberation about it.

---

1 *A State at Any Cost: The Life of David Ben-Gurion*, by Tom Segev, translated by Haim Watzman; Farrar Straus and Giroux, 814 pages, $40.

David Pryce-Jones is the author, most recently, of *Openings & Outings: An Anthology* (Criterion Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 38 Number 3 , on page 25

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/11/ben-gurions-reality