

# H-Net Reviews

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**Avinoam J. Patt.** *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009. x + 373 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3426-3.

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## Re-Placing the Displaced

The historical literature on the relationship between Zionism and the survivors of the Holocaust has been a focus of considerable debate and contention. The Zionist enthusiasm that seemed to characterize the mood of so many survivors, as Avinoam Patt explains in the conclusion to his *Finding Home and Homeland*, has been elucidated in large measure according to two competing pictures. The first school of thought, he writes, has cast it as an obvious conclusion to the Holocaust that emerged all but instinctively among the survivors themselves. For the competing paradigm, this apparent Zionist commitment was a foreign import imposed by agents from abroad on the mass of helpless Jewish refugees (p. 259). Patt's book marshals important and largely untapped evidence, which he contextualizes within a rich historical picture, to argue that both of these theses are inadequate, as they reflect a largely monolithic view of Zionism and depict the DPs themselves as an undifferentiated mass (pp. 259-60). In a writing style that succeeds in finding that all-too-rare fusion of dispassionate historical investigation with a genuine sensitivity to the subject matter and a sympathy for its actors, *Finding Home and Homeland* injects this previously dichotomous historiographical picture with a much-needed dose of nuance and color.

Patt's book has two principal and intertwined thrusts. As part of its more direct response to the questions at issue in the historiographical debates, *Finding*

*Home and Homeland* examines the processes by which the DP population was mobilized in the cause of Zionism, and the emergence of a powerful impetus among DPs to immigrate to Palestine as a practical corollary of this apparent ideological commitment. The book's second thrust is aimed at an examination of the daily life, organizational structures, demographic realities, and the complex of social, personal, and psychological needs of the DPs themselves—primarily young Jewish refugees in postwar Europe. Although this latter concern is seemingly less directly implicated in historiographical controversy, the two central themes are inherently interconnected, as Patt makes clear. This is the case, the book argues, because what might be termed the “Zionization” of DP youth cannot be understood without a clearer appreciation of the particular needs that Zionist ideology and forms of organization (the kibbutz plays a particularly prominent role) filled for these young people, often deprived of family or virtually any other social and community moorings, who constituted a disproportionately large share of the DP population. Indeed, the demographic realities of DP life—in particular, the youth of much of the population—emerges as a critical underpinning to the historical developments as Patt understands them, and as an explanatory engine for the large-scale mobilization of DP youth in the Zionist cause.

In his effort to reclaim a missing appreciation of the world of the DPs themselves, Patt points to a critical

flaw—as much ethical as methodological—in a great deal of the previous scholarship. On both sides of the historiographical polemics, he argues, scholars have tended excessively to draw conclusions about DP attitudes and behavior made by outside observers, not from sources produced by the DPs themselvesâ (p. 6). The central pillar of Pattâs methodology is to provide a corrective to this by closely examining the materials produced by the DPs in order to recover their lost voices and to glean insights into their motivations, interests, needs, and desires.

Patt argues convincingly that young DPs, many of whom had a desperate need for community and support, were left with an acute sense of abandonment not only by the international Jewish relief agencies which were slow to arrive on the scene, but also by much of the Zionist establishment and organizational infrastructure. Indeed, in sharp contrast to the thesis of a Zionist machinery quick to dispatch emissaries bent on manipulating the DPs as instruments in the struggle for Palestine, Patt quotes one group of DP youths, for example, asking âWhere are our friends from Eretz [Israel], where is the Zionist Organization? Have we been forgotten as orphans?â (p. 29). In the final analysis, this sense of acute need would coalesce with a particular legacy of political organization among the survivors and with the dynamics of social and political life in the DP camps themselves to catapult the Zionist leadership of the DPs themselves into positions of prominence. This combined process would help to shape âthe options available to the younger segment of the Jewish DP populationâ (p. 36) in meeting their needs for social, communal, and organizational structure, and in giving shape to their ideological and emotional aims and their hopes for the future.

The picture that emerges from Pattâs work may be somewhat closer to the âintuitive Zionismâ school of thought than to the proponents of âcynical manipulationâ by Zionist *shlichim* (emissaries). It does not, however, fall neatly into either of these paradigms. Instead, Patt offers a more complex picture which is enriched by his subtle approach to such critical considerations

as human agency (that of the DPs themselves) and historical contingency—factors which have too often been lost in a historiography caught up at times in a contest between a teleological approach and a conspiratorial model. While based in large measure on a close-up, almost micro-historical, view of the daily life and needs of young Jewish survivors in the DP camps and kibbutzim of war-ravaged Europe, Patt helps us to understand the links between such daily concerns and the larger drama of international politics and diplomacy that helped lead to the creation of the state of Israel. Indeed, the DPâs commitment to Zionism and to Palestine, Patt reminds us, did constitute an important factor in Zionismâs political, diplomatic, and military struggles for Jewish statehood. That Zionist commitment, he concludes however, was neither the product of manipulation by the Jewish Agency, nor an all but automatic and unconscious response to the horrors of the Holocaust and its aftermath. As to the former thesis, Patt writes, âcharges of a cynical manipulation of the Jewish DP population are difficult to reconcile with the evaluations of Zionist enthusiasm among the DP population by contemporary observersâ (p. 264) as well as by the internal evidence of that enthusiasm produced by Patt himself. As to the latter, Patt persuasively argues, DP Zionism cannot be understood without consideration of its success in offering answers to the concrete needs and interests of the DPs themselves: âWithout pragmatic solutions to the most pressing needs of the young survivorsâ, Patt writes, âZionism could not have attracted and maintained the membership that it didâ (p. 268).

*Finding Home and Homeland* succeeds both in staking out a clear-cut and refreshingly new position in a highly contentious historiographical field, while doing so with tremendous restraint and in a dispassionate—and distinctly un-polemical—tone. It is an important, valuable, and highly readable book that will undoubtedly constitute a vital contribution to the historiography of the DPs, postwar Zionism, Holocaust studies, and the course of Jewish history in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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