MATZPEN
A History of Israeli Dissidence

LUTZ FIEDLER
Translated by JAKE SCHNEIDER
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Lutz Fiedler

Berlin, Summer 2020
Introduction: Cohn-Bendit on the Roof in Gan Shmuel

High hopes accompanied the arrival of the twenty-five-year-old Daniel Cohn-Bendit to Israel in the spring of 1970, but he wasted no time in unceremoniously dashing them. Following the events of May 1968 in Paris, Israeli newspapers had run numerous articles about the leader of the French student protests, mainly highlighting his Jewish ancestry. ‘Danny the Red Calls for Overthrowing De Gaulle’s “Police State”’, ran the headline of a feature report in Maariv in May 1968, which pointed out that of all people, ‘Cohn[-Bendit], a Jew and a German citizen born in France’ was on the warpath against De Gaulle, the same general who had imposed an arms embargo against the Jewish state the previous year.\(^1\) Photographs of the May upheavals in Paris had also sparked memories among members of the leftist Kibbutz HaZorea, where Cohn-Bendit, years before making his name, had spent several weeks back in the summer of 1963 discussing socialism, communism, Zionism and the State of Israel. Now, a year after the Six-Day War, his friends from that visit were convinced that he was ‘by no means anti-Israel’, and that ‘if we could explain our situation to him, he surely would agree with our stance’.\(^2\) Two years later, in May 1970, when Cohn-Bendit finally accepted an invitation from the Hebrew University Student Union to attend their annual Students’ Day, various factions awaited the international celebrity with great anticipation. Maariv printed an article titled ‘“Danny the Red” Arrives in Israel’, the first of many varied reports on his visit. Later, Cohn-Bendit recalled and summarised the subtext of the early vivid press coverage welcoming him back to Israel: ‘He is coming. It is up to us to convince him to stay.’\(^3\)
However, Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s two visits – first as a youth in 1963 and then as the reborn ‘Danny the Red’ of 1970 – were divided by more than the Six-Day War, which had prompted the resurfacing of the long-neglected Palestine question after Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. As those two iconic moments, June 1967 and May 1968, were juxtaposed, the conflict over Israel and Palestine had drawn the attention of the global New Left and become a battleground of the movement’s self-declared internationalism. As one of the leading lights of the New Left in France, Cohn-Bendit had naturally reached out to the New Left’s Israeli contingent ahead of his visit, whose vocal dissent over the Palestine question had placed it in the spotlight of the worldwide political movement. Meeting them, therefore, was Cohn-Bendit’s top priority: ‘From the very first day, I had a discussion with my friends from Matzpen’, he recalled in his memoirs, referring to the Israeli Socialist Organization by its nickname. Together, he and its members had decided that he ‘should represent the traditional internationalist position: “I am against a Jewish state, against an Arab state. I am for a socialist and free Middle East, open to everyone who wants to live in a society governed by workers’ and farmers’ councils.”’

Even though the young celebrity had come to Israel at the invitation of the student union, upon his arrival, he decided to serve as a spokesperson for the New Leftists of Matzpen.

The first affront came as soon as Cohn-Bendit arrived at Lod International Airport (now Ben-Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv). When the face of the Paris Student Rebellion landed on the evening of 24 May 1970, he was greeted at the airport by the press’s camera flashes and the official delegation of the student union. Cohn-Bendit greeted its chair with no more than a ceremonial handshake before turning affectionately to Haim Hanegbi (1935–2018) of Matzpen, who was standing at the margins of the group, and proclaiming that his friends in Matzpen were ‘the sole few revolutionaries this country has’. On Students’ Day, when he delivered his speech at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s expansive Weiss Auditorium, his audience listened intently to his remarks about the events of May 1968 in Paris, the student rebellions and his thoughts about prospects for a social revolution. But the more he voiced the political demands of the Israeli Radical Left – loudly opposing the Israeli occupation and calling, just as stridently, for mutual recognition between Israelis and Palestinians – the more outraged heckles
erupted from the crowd, coalescing finally into a chant of ‘Danny, go home!’ A few days later, members of the right-wing Gurei Ze’ev (Wolf Boys) group tried to disrupt another evening discussion at a student residence hall in Jerusalem. The situation reached a further dramatic climax during a visit to Gan Shmuel, a left-wing kibbutz in the north, where the ideals of collective equality and socialist revolution had been pursued in the name of Zionism and internationalism alike. The images of Paris in May ’68 had made their mark there too. An official event with the leader of the student rebellions was scheduled to be held in the kibbutz’s large cultural hall. However, when Cohn-Bendit arrived at the gates of Gan Shmuel escorted by a delegation of Matzpen members, the mood soured. The kibbutz leadership declined to permit the speeches, which they feared would denounce the Jewish state, to be given at their community centre.

In the end, the event did take place, drawing even more attention as an impromptu private gathering on the flat roof of a building in the kibbutz. ‘The audience was nearly in danger of collapsing the roof’, Haim Hanegbi later recalled of the crowded event, which was held under the proviso that Cohn-Bendit’s Matzpen escorts were banned from speaking. In addition, to keep Cohn-Bendit in his place, Benyamin ‘Benio’ Gruenbaum (1907–72), the kibbutz’s unchallenged authority, joined him as his discussion partner on the rooftop stage. More than anyone else, as an admired teacher of the kibbutz’s children, Gruenbaum had imparted left-wing Zionist values to multiple generations of Gan Shmuel. Now he wanted to defend his kibbutz to Cohn-Bendit as a fulfilment of the socialist utopia and the Zionist dream. But the recalcitrant leader of the student movement was only mildly impressed. In a provocative mood, he asked Gruenbaum point-blank whether the country’s Arabs were also included in this paradise of freedom and equality. ‘Can socialism be for Jews only? If it is socialism, then it should be for everyone. [. . .] The road of Zionism has already been a road of conquest’, he is reported to have said, summarising his core stance on the fundamentals of the Palestine question: ‘My basic view rests on the idea that all people are equal, with equal rights, and that every nation has the right to self-determination.’ Soon some of the audience members were so incensed that they repeatedly cut the power supply, leaving all the participants in the dark.
The scene on the roof in Gan Shmuel was more than just a political confrontation – that is, a clash of opposing views on the Israel–Palestine conflict. In fact, the figures of Gruenbaum and Cohn-Bendit represented two different sets of experiences in Jewish history that were now colliding by way of the Palestine question. To a degree, they embodied the dramas of Jewish and Israeli existence in the twentieth century. Benyamin Gruenbaum may have been the educator who shaped the kibbutz, and whose political notion of the unity of socialism and Zionism drew on the experiences of turn-of-the-century Polish Jewry. But as the firstborn son of the Polish politician Yitzhak Gruenbaum, he also bore the scars of the catastrophic collapse of Polish Jewry. His father’s advocacy for minority rights at the Polish Sejm had won him the nickname ‘King of the Jews’; after immigrating to Palestine in 1933, the elder Gruenbaum became head of the Jewish Agency’s Rescue Committee (the Vaad Hatzalah), tasked with rescuing European Jews. Benyamin Gruenbaum’s younger brother Eliezer had opted to remain loyal to communism over the family’s decision to move to Palestine. In Europe, he fought the communist fight for universal liberty, first in Spain and then as part of the French Resistance, before he was eventually captured by the Nazis. In the final years of the war, Eliezer was forced to serve at Auschwitz as a Kapo. After liberation, he died in uncertain circumstances during Israel’s War of Independence. In the end, Kibbutz Gan Shmuel itself was testimony both to Zionists’ ultimate hopes and to the failure of the alternatives in Europe. After 1945, the kibbutz became home to a growing number of Holocaust survivors. The day after his night-time discussion on the roof, the young Cohn-Bendit was also scheduled to meet with those survivors, who would leave a lasting impression on him.

Thinking back to his visit to Israel, he reflected: ‘I, for example, have never been personally or directly oppressed; I repressed the fact that my parents were forced to leave Germany.’ Born in 1945 to exiled parents in France, Cohn-Bendit was shaped tangibly by D-Day: ‘When the Allies landed, they said, “now we can make a child of freedom.”’ Cohn-Bendit recalled his parents’ stories from their youth and his own path from ‘a child of freedom’ to the figurehead of the New Left in France. The statelessness of the young French-born German Jew played another part in his decision to identify with internationalist principles and socialist utopias. ‘My ideology is a strange
blend, because I am not deeply rooted anywhere and am therefore especially receptive to all experiences’, he wrote, before concluding: ‘One must overcome one’s own emotional ties to the national past.’ This self-proclaimed internationalism had found vivid expression in Cohn-Bendit’s political biography. Far beyond France and Germany, he had become a symbolic figure of the New Left, whose agenda for social change ranged from a universalistic anticolonialism to protests against the Vietnam War and support for dissident movements in the Eastern Bloc.

Cohn-Bendit was less occupied with his own Jewishness or the State of Israel. When asked at Gan Shmuel how he saw himself, his reply was ironic: ‘The first time I felt like a Jew was when a hundred thousand students were demonstrating in Paris, chanting “We are all German Jews!”’ Even Algerian Arabs had joined in the calls against his deportation from France, a memorable gesture of transnational solidarity. Since 1967, when the Six-Day War
placed the Israel–Palestine conflict at the centre of debate for the European Left, it was, in fact, the tragic fate of the Palestinians that began to spark Cohn-Bendit’s internationalism. But it was not until the spring of 1970, when he revisited Israel and became acquainted with the local left-wing activists of Matzpen, that he joined the Israeli dissidents’ position on this issue. This became apparent on the rooftop in Gan Shmuel, where he proclaimed to his audience: ‘The solution [to the conflict] is a socialist Israel in which Israeli Jews and Arabs – Christians and Moslems – can live together.’ Eventually, only fifteen miles from the left-wing kibbutz, near the Arab town of Umm al-Fahm, Cohn-Bendit came another step closer to this internationalist vision. Together with his Matzpen escorts, he met with members of the Arab group Abnaa el-Balad (Sons of the Village), who had already been envisioning a common future together with members of the Israeli New Left.

By then, Israel’s excitement in the run-up to Cohn-Bendit’s visit had flipped against him. The terror attack on an Israeli school bus on 22 May, directly ahead of Cohn-Bendit’s visit, shook the country and significantly influenced his concluding press conference. By neutrally condemning the deaths of any children, Jewish and Arab alike, he significantly distanced himself from the immediacy of the terror. ‘Don’t you ever show your face here again!’ a reporter shouted at him, demanding a clear statement of solidarity. The Jerusalem Post dubbed Cohn-Bendit’s visit ‘Danny’s “Eight-Day-War”’. Even Israel’s prime minister, Golda Meir, entered the fray. ‘Cohn-Bendit had nothing interesting to report to us’, she later said. ‘To her mind, he had simply been given ‘an opportunity [ . . .] to rebuke Israel and the Jewish people’. And the left-wing Zionist newspaper Al HaMishmar concluded that even if Cohn-Bendit had failed ‘to suppress his feelings of enmity against Israel and its justified struggle’, the source of those feelings lay in Israel itself. The journalists were convinced that Cohn-Bendit had been exposed to almost a week of ‘brainwashing’ and to the ‘demagogical anti-Israel spirit’ of the notorious Matzpen group. ‘They were not entirely mistaken: in the end, what Cohn-Bendit remembered most vividly about his visit to Israel was his formative encounter with his political allies in the Israeli New Left. ‘Matzpen redeems the “honour” of the Jews’, he remarked later in his memoir. And he came to the conclusion that ‘[t]hirty or forty years from now, when people examine the question
of Israel, it will be highly important for young people who are becoming political to be able to identify with Matzpen’.  

Matzpen, the Hebrew word for compass, was the name of the magazine of the Israeli Socialist Organization, whose story this book will recount. Matzpen also became the nickname of that organisation as it developed a disproportional reputation as the country’s greatest domestic threat and became a codeword for radical dissent in Israel in the years following the Six-Day War, ‘a name the majority of Israelis loved to hate’. The roots of the Israeli Socialist Organization and the beginnings of its political deviation trace back to the autumn of 1962, when a small group of communist dissidents gathered around Akiva Orr (1931–2013), Moshé Machover (b. 1936), Oded Pilavsky (1932–2011) and Yirmiyahu Kaplan just after breaking off from the Communist Party, known by its Hebrew abbreviation Maki (Miflaga Kommunistit Isra’elit). The birth of Matzpen was a manifestation of the New Left’s secession from the ideological hegemony of a party-communism loyal to Moscow. Its ‘second birth’, which finally made Matzpen a household name in Israel, revolved around the war of June 1967 and Israel’s conflict-laden existence in the Middle East. Society accorded this small group of just a few dozen members a prominence utterly out of proportion with its actual size or its true political influence. On the eve of the war, when Arab threats of annihilation united domestic Israeli society across party lines, Matzpen broke with this consensus. Even during the war, the London Times released a ‘Joint Israeli–Arab Statement on the Middle East Crisis’, co-authored by the Israeli leftists and a Palestinian group on 3 June, which opposed the escalation and called for a socialist solution to the Israeli–Arab conflict. Just when the national euphoria over the military victory was being further fuelled by Israelis’ newfound access to Jewish holy places, renewing Israel’s confidence, Matzpen was demanding an immediate withdrawal to the borders of 4 June 1967. Shouting the rallying cry Hal’a HaKibush! – Down with the Occupation! – the small group of young leftists paraded down the streets of the Jewish state and through the university campuses of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. At a time when Israel’s prime minister, Golda Meir, was openly questioning the very existence of a Palestinian people, Matzpen was proclaiming the rights of this same people: both to exercise self-determination and to resist the Israeli
occupation. Given the guerrilla activities and recurrent violence by Palestinians, Matzpen was accused of making common cause with Israel’s enemies, betraying the national interest and harbouring disloyalty towards Israeli Jewry. Members of the group were physically beaten on several occasions on university campuses and during their many demonstrations. Newspaper articles accused Matzpen of ‘psychopathy’, ‘treason’ and a ‘collective lack of integrity’, resurrecting the old trope of the ‘self-hating Jew’.

The resentment, rejection and even hatred that Matzpen inspired after the Six-Day War were not short-term responses to their provocative protests against the Israeli occupation or to their solidarity with the Palestinians. Indeed, the group had inflamed deep-seated sensitivities – in fact, it had asked questions that touched upon the very existence of the Jewish state. Just as the Six-Day War had unearthed Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians but was by no means the conflict’s original cause or trigger, Matzpen’s public protests did not solely centre on the events of 1967. ‘Identifying with Israel’s enemies has been Matzpen’s party [sic] line since its very establishment’, wrote the journalist Avraham Wolfensohn in the pages of *Davar*, a Hebrew-language daily newspaper, in May 1970. His contemptuous judgement, though, also expressed a truth. Long before the war, Matzpen had stressed that the national dispute between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs was almost deadlocked because it was not a conventional territorial conflict, but a collision between pioneering settler-immigrants and a resident population. As a conflict over the foundation and preservation of a Jewish nation-state in a majority-Arab environment, these New Leftists saw this quarrel as irreconcilable: the establishment of the Jewish state and the Palestinian national catastrophe were irrevocably linked, tainting the legitimacy of the state itself. In the era after Auschwitz, when the Jewish world stood in almost unanimous solidarity with Israel on the territory of historical Palestine, such a radical perspective towards the Israel–Palestine conflict must have violated the collective notion that a Jewish state was the essential prerequisite for Jews’ safety and survival after the Holocaust.

Yet these radical leftists were neither the first nor the only group in Israel to address the state’s founding conflict. Concurrent with Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s visit to Israel, issue 54 of *Matzpen* reprinted excerpts from the short story ‘Khirbet Khizeh’ by the Israeli writer S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky), a canonical masterpiece from ‘the most important author of the Palmah generation’. Narrated
from the perspective of a participating soldier, the story openly describes the forced displacement of the Arab populace and the destruction of Arab villages during the Israeli War of Independence. And yet the moral shock that the author was expressing at the time had different motives from those of Matzpen’s reprinting. As an intelligence officer in the Giv’ati Brigade, Smilansky had participated in the war himself, and as a Ben-Gurion loyalist and Member of Knesset for his Mapai party (Mifl eget Poalei Eretz Yisrael; the Workers’ Party of the Land of Israel), he had remained silent in public about the military government and the measures against the Arab minority in the Jewish state. Matzpen’s intentions were different. By printing Smilanky’s story under the headline ‘History of Zionism’, they set out to transform his literary work into a critical, political manifesto that confronted Israeli society with its historical responsibility and compelled it to action. In relation to Israel’s ongoing conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab world, their future-oriented internationalism based on socialism and revolution laid the groundwork for untangling the basic questions surrounding Israel’s founding conflict and for negotiating its long-term transformation. The political agenda of Matzpen was determined by the idea of a ‘de-Zionisation of Israel and its integration in a socialist Middle Eastern union’, which would facilitate a new existence for Israeli Jews within their Arab region.

These transformative ambitions, indeed, the reinvention of Israeli society itself – in order to resolve the Israel–Palestine conflict and seek a common future for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs – are the subject of this book. Facing ominous scenarios for the outcome of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Matzpen sought to be no less than a compass and to orient Israeli Jews towards establishing a lasting, secure existence in the Middle East. In the timeline of history, this compass pointed straight at the future and drew on utopian ideas. Matzpen’s hopes for change were radically informed by the universalistic expectations that the New Left had resurrected upon its secession from the old party-communism: the renewal of past utopian visions of progress, and of a united humanity. In view of the historic ‘Palestine question’, and given the irreconcilability of the conflict over a Jewish state within its Arab surroundings, the compass needle of the New Left turned away from the Zionist notion that the Jews had an historical right to Palestine. Rather, they were convinced that a new direction towards de-Zionisation and socialism would give Israeli Jewry fresh legitimacy. The members of Matzpen hoped that by
decoupling themselves from the Zionist project—a nationalist movement that had entered the scene as outsiders in an Arab region—they could forge a new beginning for an Israeli collectivity that had since been born in that region. In developing this notion, they looked beyond the realm of politics and entered the sphere of culture. After the varied groups of diasporic Jews began to undergo a collective transformation during their national territorialisiation, Matzpen belonged to a milieu that sought to radicalise this process by emphasising the existence of an all-new emergent Hebrew nation. Hence, their advocacy of a political breakaway from the project of establishing and asserting a Jewish nation-state also embodied a complete secularisation of the Israeli present and a retreat from the religiously grounded bond between a unified Jewish people and Eretz Israel.43

Ultimately, the visionary redefinition of Israeli existence by the Israeli Left also pointed outward: to the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab world at large. The invention of another Israel—apart from its Zionist history—simultaneously heralded the transformation of the Arab societies through comprehensive modernisation and secularisation, a development linked to the hope that the Arab world would be willing to recognise a non-Arab nation in their midst and accept its belonging in the region. And yet, as sweeping as these ideas for reinventing Israel may have been, they also revealed a giant blind spot: their creators disregarded the Jewish experience of the Holocaust and the genocide’s ramifications for the Jewish collectivity. The directional needle of their compass wavered when the Israeli leftists were not just confronted with the Zionist claim to a Jewish state in Palestine, but challenged by Jews’ existential retreat into their own collectivity and their own state—based on nothing but the experience of annihilation. This made the Jewish past, the Israeli–Hebrew present and the socialist future mutually irreconcilable.

The radical vision of reinventing Israel was not merely grounded in hopeful expectations or in a conviction that the region could be transformed. What makes these ideas particularly interesting is their links to various historical experiences beyond Zionism that had been largely buried by the founding of the state. Within Matzpen’s political programme of reinventing Israeli existence, Haim Hanegbi played an emblematic role in rediscovering and revering archives of those historical experiences from pre-state eras. In 1970, Hanegbi
had eagerly met Daniel Cohn-Bendit at Lod Airport and shown him around the country. After two of Matzpen’s founders, Akiva Orr and Moshe Machover, moved to London before the Six-Day War, the charismatic bohemian Hanegbi rose to become a spokesperson for the Israeli Radical Left.

In April 1968, when a group of religious Jews, who were intending to settle in Hebron to enforce the Jewish presence there, celebrated Passover with the governing Labour Party’s approval, Hanegbi’s denunciation was guided by political convictions and personal memories alike. He placed the full weight of his family’s history into his public protest. ‘Anyone pretending to speak on behalf of the entire Hebronite community is misleading the public’, he wrote in an indignant letter that was printed in the Haaretz daily newspaper on 20 May 1968. Negating the settlers’ claims to be resuming the tradition of Hebron’s Jewish community, which had existed until the riots of 1929, Hanegbi signed the letter as Haim Bajaio-Hanegbi, referring to his ‘family which has inhabited Hebron continuously for the last four centuries’ and identifying himself as the ‘sole heir of the famous Rabbi of Hebron, Haim Bajaio’. In that capacity, he demanded that the state recognise the ‘sanctity of [his] private property’ in Hebron and decried the Jewish settlers’ request for legal establishment. ‘I shall demand the realisation of my ownership rights when the ownership rights of the Palestinian Arabs over their property in Israel are realised’, the letter concluded. ‘Until such a day arrives, I herewith permit those who inhabited my land before the Israeli occupation on 5th June, 1967, to go on doing so.’

Immediate political relevance was only one aspect of this public protest. Hanegbi’s reference to his grandfather also pointed to the history of Jewish–Arabic coexistence in Hebron under the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate. His grandfather, Haim Bajaio, had lived in Hebron as an Arab Jew. Apart from Hebrew and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), he spoke fluent Arabic, and was held in equal esteem by both Jews and Arabs. Even after the riots of summer 1929, Haim Bajaio returned to Hebron and resettled there, before eventually moving to Jerusalem in the mid-1930s. His grandson, Haim Hanegbi, had likewise grown up in a Jerusalem shared by Jews and Arabs, before the war of 1947–9 divided the country along ethnic lines. Hanegbi brought this set of experiences to Matzpen. ‘So, in the 1960s, when we talked about the principle of equality in Matzpen, I wasn’t just thinking in terms of socialism or a universal
concept’, Hanegbi recalled many years later. ‘With me it was baladi, my country, the scents and memories of my childhood.’ The period of pre-state coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Palestine took on an almost mythical status. He remembered obsessively ‘collecting [...] Mandate period maps to locate the villages that had been erased, the life that ceased to be. And the feeling that without them this is a barren country, a disabled country, a country that caused an entire nation to disappear’.

Some of that bygone commonality was revived and revised in Matzpen when the group became a gathering place for both Jews and Arabs. In that light, the story of Matzpen is also the story of a Jewish–Arab relationship that, under the banner of socialist internationalism, claimed to be paving the way towards a common future for the whole region. This relationship grew out of the involvement of members such as Ahmad Masrawa, who was born in 1939 and raised in the Arab village of Ar’ara in the north. He joined shortly after his role in the 1966 documentary *My Name is Ahmad* lent him prominence in the public debate on the situation of Israeli Arabs. The film depicted more than Masrawa’s personal story. Rather, using him as a case study, it illustrated the history of an Arab in the Jewish state who had experienced harsh social exclusion while seeking work and housing in Tel Aviv. By joining Matzpen, Masrawa received recognition as an equal within a state that was inconsistent about the equality of its Arab citizens. ‘In Matzpen, we Palestinian members were not there as token Palestinians to be pampered and indulged’, recounted Khalil Toama, who had joined in 1963, a year after the group was established. ‘We were valued equally and had equal rights.’

Toama was born in 1944 in Rama, in the north of the British Mandate’s territory on the land of the future Jewish state; his Christian Arab family had returned home after the displacements of 1948. The Israel–Palestine conflict and the harried circumstances of Arabs inside the Jewish state became his lifelong cause. Indeed, it contributed to his decision to study law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1963. He soon rose to become secretary of the Arab Student Council, but he did not find an outlet for his hopes of Jewish–Arab coexistence until he joined Matzpen.

Toama’s political activism quickly placed him in the crosshairs of the Israeli security apparatus, and he was repeatedly summoned to court appearances. In early 1968, Toama finally came into open conflict with the state
institutions when he allowed Ahmed Khalifa, a member of the Palestinian political group Kaumiun Al Arab, to stay in his home. Under charges of collaborating with the enemy, he was taken into administrative detention on 8 January and prosecuted in short order. The case outraged Toama’s political allies: there was no clear evidence of a crime, and his trial was held in a military rather than civil court.54 Besides releasing their own statement, the members of Matzpen organised a broad-based international campaign for his release, which prompted shows of solidarity in many countries and drew renewed attention to the general situation of Arabs in Israel. The initiative was backed by such intellectuals and literati as Erich Fried, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre.55 At home in Israel, Matzpen attracted major media attention with its protests.56 In July 1968, Haim Hanegbi and his fellow activists stood outside the Military Court of Appeal wearing T-shirts reading ‘We are all Khalil Toama’ and ‘We are all Palestinian Arabs’, an echo of the slogan ‘We are all German Jews’ that Parisians were chanting that year in solidarity with Daniel Cohn-Bendit.57 But it was all in vain. Although Toama’s eighteen-month prison sentence was suspended and he was released early on parole, the conditions of that parole confined him to his native village and thus prevented him from continuing his studies. Disheartened, he accepted an invitation from the Socialist German Student Union (SDS) to take up residence in Frankfurt am Main. The news of this internationalist connection trickled home: ‘He now lives in Frankfurt, where he shares a flat with Danny Cohn-Bendit.’58

The campaign for Khalil Toama’s release was only one of Matzpen’s public initiatives. Soon afterward, when Ilan Shalif (b. 1937) signed a statement against Israel’s occupation policy, the community of his left-wing kibbutz, Negba, first demanded a retraction and then decided to expel him – to the vocal objections of Matzpen.59 The demonstrators outside the kibbutz gates carried placards decrying ‘McCarthyism in Negba’. And yet, the campaign to free Khalil Toama was mostly an unprecedented success outside Israel and beyond the Jewish community. ‘Matzpen’s drive to mobilise world opinion against the Jewish state was an ordeal Israelis had never experienced’, the Israeli political scientist Ehud Sprinzak later wrote, looking back. ‘[N]one of the anti-Zionist movements active in Israel had ever dared to oppose the Jewish state among the Gentiles’.60 On that basis, contemporary commentators
such as the foreign correspondent of the *Maariv* daily newspaper stressed that of all Matzpen’s tactics, nothing alienated Israeli society more than the group’s willingness ‘to wage its battle among *goyim* [Gentiles] in a forum where Israelis confront their enemies’. Indeed, Matzpen had rapidly made a name for itself abroad. In particular, the New Left in Europe and the United States provided a forum for the group and raised its international profile. In Paris, London, Washington and Frankfurt, the representatives of the Israeli Left were treated as experts on the Palestine question; this gave the Matzpen story a transnational dimension. The Matzpen members also attracted attention when they directly confronted Israeli politicians. This took place in June 1969, when Eli Lobel (1926–79) of Matzpen was invited by the SDS chapter in Frankfurt to deliver a rebuttal to a talk by Asher Ben-Nathan, the Israeli Ambassador to Germany, and again during a joint Israeli–Palestinian protest coinciding with Golda Meir’s visit to London that same year. After the Six-Day War, when Palestinian organisations began recruiting international support in the face of the Israeli occupation and could count on a solidarity speech from the dissidents at their rallies, the public outrage against Matzpen in Israel became almost limitless.

Even so, shortly after Daniel Cohn-Bendit arrived in Israel, the government-friendly newspaper *Davar* wrote: ‘Despite the anguish and the harm that Matzpen’s international activities cause for Israeli PR, […] the damage that Matzpen inflicts domestically is much more grievous.’ Cohn-Bendit’s visit occurred during a time when latent tensions within Israel were coming to a head; tensions that had been submerged by the wave of national euphoria after the Six-Day War. In autumn 1968, the Israeli journalist Amos Elon had investigated the student protests in Europe and concluded that Israeli society demonstrated all signs of stability, at least on the surface, and that the country had long since outgrown its own youthful rebellion: the Zionist revolution. Scarcely two years later, this conclusion would prove deceptive. An ongoing process of segregation and individuation was beginning to crack open the social homogeneity of the immediate post-war period. Certainly, these early shifts could not be attributed solely to Matzpen’s own activities. Especially in the cultural realm, various scandals were gesturing towards a transformation in the social consciousness. For example, in April and May 1970, the play *Queen of the Bathtub*, by prominent playwright and director
Hanoch Levin, caused a scandal that spread far beyond the lobby of Tel Aviv’s Cameri Theatre. Its open criticism of Israel’s militarised society, its charge of societal hubris after the war and its laments of the Arab population’s treatment under Israeli occupation unleashed a tempest of indignation, violent attacks and a bomb threat before the play’s run was finally cut short under pressure from the Tel Aviv authorities.

‘McCarthy is alive and hiding in Israel!’ ran a feature in Haaretz in May 1970, criticising the culture of public debate, which was stirred up by the ongoing Goldmann Affair. The previous month, the Israeli government had put an end to the efforts by Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress, to broker a direct meeting with the Egyptian president and pave the way to peace talks. Yet the ‘Give Goldmann a Chance’ demonstrations, which were organised by various groups on the left fringe of Israeli society, were only one side of the Israeli domestic response. The other response was to denounce Goldmann publicly. ‘Dr. Goldmann no longer believes in the Zionist solution’, said Aryeh Dolchin, a minister from the right-wing Gahal party, turning against him, ‘He is becoming a standard-bearer for Matzpen and Rakach [the Communist Party].’ At a gathering of students in Tel Aviv where Goldmann was scheduled to speak, he was greeted with fierce opposition, with shouts of ‘Goldmann is a traitor! A destroyer of Israel! A foreign agent! Matzpen! Go to Moscow!’ Before long, the Goldmann Affair provoked the next social upheaval. A group of graduating high school students wrote an open letter to Golda Meir expressing their doubts about reporting for their military service in view of the ban on Goldmann’s initiative. The ‘Michtav HaShministim’ (Letter by Sixth-Formers) first raised concerns when it became evident that the signatories were students attending elite Jerusalem high schools and the main author, Shmuel Shem-Tov, was the son of a leading cabinet member. In the wake of the letter, a legitimate concern began to spread that Matzpen’s influence on Israeli youth was clearly on the rise, a concern some of the letter’s co-authors did not contest. This was half a year after the school newspaper Gashush had sparked an initial debate over the influence of the Israeli New Left on the country’s schools. Haaretz then ran an article titled ‘Matzpen and the Educational Gap’, alleging and bemoaning the Israeli youth’s waning connection to Jewish history and the alarming rise of Matzpen’s influence at Israeli schools. Yet, not until the
summer of 1972 would Israel witness its first real post-1967 conscientious objector, Giora Neumann, whose affiliation with Matzpen provided ample fodder for the daily newspapers. By spring 1970, Matzpen already seemed to have become the scapegoat; all purportedly critical or dissent views were ascribed to the group’s ultimate influence, regardless of its members’ true involvement. Unsurprisingly, that spring witnessed the first public proposals to take the Israeli leftists to court. But the suggestion of revoking the Israeli passports of Matzpen members living abroad did not lead anywhere, and nor did Member of Knesset Mathilda Guez’s call for banning the organisation outright. The first cracks within Israeli society [. . .] were already revealing themselves, wrote Cohn-Bendit retrospectively about the situation in Israel at the time, adding that the attacks on Matzpen were ‘attempts [. . .] to stave off this development’. After all, Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s visit single-handedly attested to Matzpen’s significance and its lasting impact on Israeli society. With its utopia of a reinvented Israel, Matzpen took on the role of Israel’s internal ‘other’ and kept confronting Israeli society with itself.

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Amidst the turbulent spring of 1970, during which Daniel Cohn-Bendit arrived in Israel, the first accounts of Matzpen’s history began to appear. There had already been reports on the group’s activities in Israel and abroad since the end of the war of June 1967, and a few even earlier – reports on which this book draws as sources. Yet those months were the first time the Israeli press produced detailed explanations of this social phenomenon – Matzpen – that kept the whole country in suspense. In May 1970, Haviv Canaan (in Haaretz) and Avraham Wolfenson (in Davar) each published a four-part series of articles; meanwhile, Yediot Aharonot published a multi-page feature article by Aaron Bachar profiling the group. Whereas Canaan’s report made a point of objectivity, Wolfensohn accused Matzpen of lacking any scruples in their struggle against Zionism and for the Palestinians’ cause. Bachar’s reaction was polemical: ‘No one could have anticipated [. . .] that in the course of time this small circle would grow into the most repulsive ulcer that has ever existed in the Israeli political landscape.’ The tone of coverage changed by 1992, the thirtieth anniversary of Matzpen’s founding, when
several in-depth articles in the Hebrew press reviewed the group's history. The pluralisation of Israeli society and the historical distance from the phenomenon took some of the venom out of the language.\textsuperscript{84}

Perhaps owing to the ongoing, pressing questions of the conflict and the embattled political and cultural self-definition of Israeli Jews, academic research about Matzpen still has not lost its political edge, decades after the fact. Beginning with the very first attempts to describe the group within its historical context, there is a palpable tension between the requisite academic distance and the authors' own political leanings. This holds true, for example, of Nira Yuval-Davis's master's thesis, "The Left in Israel: Matzpen, the Israeli Socialist Organisation", which was submitted to the sociology department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1970 and published there seven years later.\textsuperscript{85} Not only was Yuval-Davis's thesis the very first academic volume about Matzpen to give a sociological overview of the group's history and activities, but it also signals its author's political evolution; before long, she found herself moving among the same circles as Matzpen. Another example of intermingling political perspectives and academic research was the master's thesis of Ehud Sprinzak, completed in 1973 at Hebrew University's Levi Eshkol Institute for Economic, Social and Political Research. Until 1970, as the chair of the Union of Israeli Students in North America, he had tried to contain Matzpen's influence at American universities. Three years later, these experiences animated his academic thesis, "The Emergence of the Politics of Delegitimization in Israel, 1967–72", which devoted two chapters to the Israeli Left, one of them specifically on the impact of Matzpen.\textsuperscript{86} More than two decades later, as a distinguished professor, Sprinzak based his findings on the broader history of extremism inside Israel on his earlier research and political judgements.\textsuperscript{87} And even in the recent past, following the failure of peacemaking efforts in Israel in the 1990s, research into Matzpen has continued to pursue a political cause. The prime example is the groundbreaking 2003 documentary \textit{Matzpen: Anti-Zionist Israelis} by Israeli filmmaker Eran Torbiner.\textsuperscript{88} In many respects, this film paved the way for future involvement with Matzpen, its genesis, protagonists and vision. The work of Tikva Honig-Parnass and Ran Greenstein, who were both Matzpen members or allies in the 1970s, served a similar function. While Honig-Parnass's descriptions are embedded in a critique of the
Zionist Left in Israel, in which she all but recapitulates Matzpen’s role in her own disconnection from socialist Zionism, Greenstein endeavours to catalogue the various critical voices on the issue of Palestine, including the Israeli leftists of Matzpen. A collection of his enlightening essays appeared in late 2014 under the title *Zionism and its Discontents*. Its claim to be a guide for people seeking societal alternatives in the Israel–Palestine conflict testifies to the book’s political nature. In parallel, a body of historical research into the history of the Israeli Left went beyond immediate political aims. Its origins stretch back to Charlie Glass’s essay, ‘Jews Against Zion’ from 1975, which explored Matzpen’s political identity as part of a broader discussion on Jewish dissidence in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. His study established a research tradition that was carried on by the books of David N. Schnall (*Radical Dissent in Contemporary Israeli Politics: Cracks in the Wall*) and Laurence J. Silberstein (*The Postzionism Debates: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*). Their comprehensive research situates the history of Matzpen in the framework of dissident currents in the Jewish state and within the depiction of an Israeli community beyond Zionist principles. August Grabski’s article ‘Matzpen and the State of Israel (1962–1973)’ from 2006 instead compares and contrasts Matzpen’s political outlook with that of the United States Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In 2010, the Israeli historian Nitza Erel published the first thorough monograph on the history of Matzpen. Erel’s study provides a comprehensive portrait incorporating an extensive corpus of published sources.

This book’s approach departs from Erel’s portrayal of the group, which restricts itself mainly to the organisation’s history. Placing a stronger focus on the history of concepts and memory, I will situate Matzpen in the broader context of the divergent notions of Israeli community and identity. Building on past research, this book probes the development and ideas of Matzpen, treating the group as a fisheye lens that focuses basic questions of Israeli Jewish existence within a single story. The invention of another Israel, as Matzpen intended, is thus also fertile ground for another history of Israel, a history from the margins. For that very reason, this book avoids taking a purely organisational history approach or centring its discussion on the group’s immediate political allure, although I will devote ample space to these topics, citing both the group’s Hebrew publications and
existing translations into German and English. Rather, I will tell the story of Matzpen as the narrative of its protagonists, reconstructing their lives in each chapter alongside key events of Israeli history. This approach may defuse political perspectives, but, more importantly, it will decode them as expressions of experience and memory that take effect in various distinct historical constellations. Partly for this reason, the book draws extensively on biographical writings and autobiographical memories that were in some cases written down and in others recounted orally in interviews. Although this book is intended to provide a new perspective on the history of Israeli dissent in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, it is certainly not all-embracing. For example, it does not delve into the relationship between Matzpen and the Israeli Black Panthers movement, which stirred up Israeli society from 1972 onwards. Sami Shalom Chetrit, Nitza Erel, Tali Lev and Yehuda Shenhav have examined this collaboration from different perspectives and with profound understanding.

The first chapter, ‘Communist Dissidents’, sets out the origin story of the Israeli Socialist Organization as the outcome of a split from the Communist Party. Building on the work of Sondra Rubenstein and Joel Beinin, I show that this split resulted from more than mere ideological frictions in the communist movement. The chapter delves beneath the superficial ideological fault lines to expose opposing perspectives towards the Jewish state’s interior structures and exterior relationships. I examine two early political positions held by future representatives of Matzpen – their radical critique of Israel’s Histadrut trade-union movement and their divergent interpretation of the war of 1948 – and consider the extent to which these stances influenced the later emergence of a New Left in Israel.

The second chapter, ‘The Israel–Palestine Question’, discusses Matzpen’s independent engagement with, and analysis of, the Palestine problem. It elaborates on how they came to interpret it as a colonial-type conflict between nationalities: a clash between a European population aiming to establish a state and a native population, residing there since before the foundation of Israel. This is analysed, first, in view of the Trotskyist traditions of dissidence that already existed in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel. Second, it is situated in the context of Algerian decolonisation, as the dramatic fate of the
French Algerians gave the Israeli Left a new conception of their own circumstances in the Israel–Palestine conflict. Applying Albert Memmi’s writings on the coloniser and the colonised and comparing them to Albert Camus’s stance on the Algerian question, I will lay out Matzpen’s programme to cut ties with the legacy of Zionism, and thus recognise Israeli Jews’ transformation into a new Hebrew nation: ‘foreign natives’ (Dan Diner) who belong to the region.101

The third chapter, ‘The Invention of a Hebrew Nation’, examines the enormous cultural foundation underpinning Matzpen’s political vision of a post-colonial existence for Israeli Jews. Matzpen built on a process of transformation that had worked to turn Diaspora Jews into new Hebrews, or Israelis. Drawing on the research of Yaacov Shavit and James Diamond into the movement of the Young Hebrews, or ‘Canaanites’, the chapter outlines an emerging Hebrew-language culture that blossomed in the young Israeli state of the 1950s and ‘60s and defied the discourse of a unified Jewish people.102 This exposes a cultural context that had its roots in the Zionist Right, but grew far beyond its political origins. Culturally, it centred on the magazine Haolam Hazeh, which was published by Uri Avnery (1923–2018), and extended as far as Matzpen on its far-left fringe. Finally, I will also highlight the internal political differences within this milieu, gaps that the Six-Day War ultimately rendered unbridgeable.103

Although the Six-Day War of 1967 sounded the death knell for this secular Hebrew–Israeli identity, the interplay of June ’67 and May ’68 brought about a turning point for Matzpen with the incursion of currents and trends from the European New Left. Expanding upon the research of Ran Greenstein and Nitza Erel, the fourth chapter, ‘Hal’a HaKibush’, reconstructs Matzpen’s split as a history of clashing perspectives on the solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict.104 In view of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation’s (PLO) turn towards diplomacy after the Yom Kippur or October 1973 War, I will read the internal quarrels among Israeli leftists as a confrontation between distinct temporal imaginaries: on the one hand, a stubborn devotion to the utopic timeline of revolution, and on the other, a shift towards realpolitik, territorial compromise and the prospect of a transitional two-state solution.

Considering the example of Khamsin magazine, the fifth chapter analyses how the language of progress, socialism and revolution remained the basis for cooperation between Jewish, Israeli and Arab intellectuals throughout the Middle East in the 1970s. To that end, the chapter begins by unearthing the story of
the magazine’s driving force, Eli Lobel and his internationalist efforts, as kind of a ‘foreign minister without a state’, to further the interests of post-colonial communities. Building on the research of Fouad Ajami into the history of the Arab Left, I portray a group of Arab dissidents that formed around Sadik Al-Azm (1934–2016) and Lafi Lakhdar (1934–2013), a circle whose efforts for mutual recognition in the Israel–Palestine conflict were linked to their advocacy for the modernisation and secularisation of the Arab world. Hence, *Khamsin* was the ‘Journal of Revolutionary Socialists of the Middle East’ whose shared vision transcended the political and national fault lines of the era.

The final chapter, ‘Beyond the Holocaust: Jewish Past, Hebrew Present, Socialist Future’, can be read as laterally linked to this chronology. This section analyses the story of Matzpen using concepts proposed by Hannah Arendt and advanced by Dan Diner, which frame 1940s Palestine as a spatial realm that enabled the preservation and continuity of self-conceptions and political visions from the pre-Holocaust era. It explores the degree to which Israeli leftists’ social and national utopias of socialist revolution and Hebrew nationhood, mutually reinforcing each other, contributed to their avoidance of the significance of the Holocaust and its impacts on Jewish consciousness. Drawing on the work of Anita Shapira, among others, I will show that, from the outset, the notion of a new Hebrew nation was insulated from the Jewish historical experiences in Europe. As the group clung to its faith in progress, rooted in the socialist teleology of history and referring to the political struggles of previous generations, Matzpen’s alienation from the consequences of mass extermination only increased. Its members remained unaware of the new Jewish collective self-image that had originated in Auschwitz, as a result of which the majority of Jews had transferred their shared identity to the Jewish state. Thus, this book concludes with an historical aporia: the conflict between the perpetual effects of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and the unresolved Israel–Palestine conflict, on the other. The quest for a road out of that aporia – for a way to cut that Gordian knot – is also part and parcel of Matzpen’s history and legacy.

**Notes**

1. Uri Dan, ‘Danny the Red Calls for Overthrowing De Gaulle’s “Police State”’, *Ma‘ariv* (17 May 1968), p. 2 [Hebrew]. All Hebrew- and German-language sources below will be cited using original English translations of their titles without the inclusion of transliterations.
4. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
17. Vidal, ‘If I Forget Thee, O Zion’.
29. ‘The Week of “Danny the Red”’, Al Hamishmar (7 June 1970) [Hebrew].
30. Cohn-Bendit, Der grosse Basar, p. 17.
33. “There were no such things as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria before the First World War, and then it was a Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.’ Golda Meir, The Sunday Times (15 June 1969).
36. Ibid.
43. It is unsurprising that Shlomo Sand, a former Matzpen member, has carried forward this cultural–political project to this day. See Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London: Verso, 2009); Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Land of Israel* (London: Verso, 2012); Shlomo Sand, *How I Stopped Being a Jew* (London: Verso, 2014).


47. Ibid.


50. Ibid.


54. Arab Student Detained for Sheltering a Leader of the Terror Groups in the West Bank’, *Israel Imperial News* 1: 9 (1968), pp. 9–10 and 14.

55. Bajaja (Hanegbi), ‘The Khalil Toama Affair’.


60. Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother*, p. 122 (emphasis in original).

70. Meir Chazan, ‘Goldmann’s Initiative to Meet With Nasser’, in Mark A. Raider (ed.), *Nahum Goldmann: Statesman Without a State*, SUNY Series in Israeli Studies (Albany [Tel Aviv]: SUNY Press; Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, the Chaim Weizmann Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel, Tel Aviv University, 2009), pp. 297–324.
72. The letter is reprinted in: Uzi Benziman, ‘Security is the Quest of Peace (Interview with the Sixth-Formers)’, *Haaretz* (1 May 1970), p. 10 [Hebrew].
74. Benziman, ‘Security is the Quest of Peace (Interview with the Sixth-Formers)’.
80. Moshe Meisels, ‘No Room in Maki for Critical Voices’, *Ma'ariv* (9 October 1962), p. 3 [Hebrew].
82. Aaron Bacher, ‘All the Secrets About Matzpen’, *Yedioth Aharonot* (22 May 1970), pp. 5–7 [Hebrew].
83. Ibid., p. 5.
87. Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother*.
91. Ibid., p. vi.


97. Alongside autobiographical texts by individual Matzpen members and sympathisers, the cultural supplements of Hebrew-language newspapers proved to be a treasure trove of biographical writings and interviews. Also, interviews lasting multiple hours were conducted with many of the group’s leading figures.


