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Max Nordau and the Making of Racial Zionism

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Max Nordau and the Making of Racial Zionism

By

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**History and Jewish Studies Departmental Undergraduate Honors Thesis
University of Colorado at Boulder**

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Abstract

Traditional Zionist historiography dictates two main threads emerging at the outset of the movement: political and cultural. This thesis seeks to define a new category, “racial Zionism.” The naming of this new historiographical group comes primarily from the racial rhetoric and scientific terminology used by Max Nordau, an early proponent of Zionism, in advocating for a muscular regeneration of the Jewish race as a means of achieving a nation. Other manifestations of racial Zionism are also examined, in European gymnastics journals and through the artwork of E.M. Lilien. The result of this examination yielded an overturning of the traditional dichotomy in the understanding of the early years of the World Zionist Organization, where European notions of degeneration and race create an important backdrop to the Zionist movement

Introduction

Muscular Judaism – Racially Based Regeneration

The year 1948 saw the creation of the state of Israel, 51 years after the First Zionist Congress declared the establishment of a “Jewish state” a goal of the movement. Had he been alive at the time, Max Nordau, one of the Congress’s founders, would arguably have seen this moment, and the subsequent military victory, as the pinnacle of an overturning of the weak, Diasporic Jewish body into what Nordau would term “muscular Judaism.” A writer, physician, cultural critic, and early proponent of Zionism in late nineteenth Century Europe, Nordau had come to the conclusion that the Jewish people had adopted an overly quietist mentality that led to their marginalization in nearly every society they inhabited. At the First Zionist Congress he stated in his opening address, “the majority of Jews are a race of accursed beggars.”¹ In order for the Jewish race to reverse its state of being, and for Zionism to succeed, Nordau believed the physicality, muscularity and mentality of the Jewish body needed to be “regenerated.” One year later, at the 1898 Second Zionist Congress, Nordau proclaimed, “*Der uns wieder das verlorene gegangene Muskeljudentum schaffen soll,*” (“We must think once again of creating a Jewry of muscles.”)² He envisioned a Jewish race that was physically strong, able to defend itself against anti-Semitism and be able to make the Zionist goal of a Jewish state become reality.

Five years before this emphatic statement of the need for a transformation to the Jewish body, Nordau, not to mention the world as a whole, had not even heard of Zionism – much less the notion of creating “muscle Jews” (*Muskeljudentum*). Nordau was seemingly breaking new

¹ Max Simon Nordau and Bentzion Netanyahu. “Address at the Second Congress,” *Max Nordau to His People: A Summons and a Challenge*. New York: Published for Nordau Zionist society by Scopus publishing company, inc., 1941. 73.

² Max Simon Nordau. *Zionistische Schriften* “II. Kongressrede” (Cologne and Leipzig; Juedischer Verlag, 1909), 72. Translation mine, with the help of David Shneer. For full German see Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften*, available at http://openlibrary.org/books/OL24440337M/Max_Nordau's_Zionistische_Schriften.

historical ground as his muscle Jews would be the polar opposite from the physically and mentally “sad,” “weak” Jews of Nordau’s Jewish Diaspora, which he described thusly:

In the narrow Jewish street our poor limbs soon forgot their gay movement; in the dimness of sunless houses our eyes began to blink shyly; the fear of constant persecution turned our powerful voices into freighted whispers, which rose in a crescendo only when our martyrs on the stakes cried out their dying prayers.... at last we are allowed space for our bodies to live again. Let us take up our oldest traditions; let us once more become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men.³

Indeed, in thinking about Nordau’s hypothetical response to 1948, what could be more “manly,” “muscular” and diametrically opposite to Nordau’s sad Jewish streets of the Diaspora than a military victory achieved by a Jewish nation? That said, Nordau likely would not have thought of this as a victory of the Jewish nation; rather, he would have described this as nothing less than an overturning of the place in history for the Jewish race.

That Nordau viewed the world through a scientific lens using the category of race is not, in and of itself surprising, given how widespread racial discourse was in *fin de siècle* Europe, even among Jews.⁴ However, what is notable is that the racial rhetoric of Nordau has never been put in dialogue with his agitation for a transformation of the Jewish people into a nation of muscular Jews. More importantly, historians have not considered the arguably novel elements of Nordau’s Zionism. Most scholars simply incorporate Nordau into the (oversimplified) Zionist historiography that posits a debate between, on the one hand, political Zionists, who argued that Jews needed political sovereignty to normalize their status as a nation in their own right. Like Nordau, they tended to be from Central and Western Europe. While on the other end of the spectrum were the so-called cultural Zionists, who saw a Jewish center as a place to renew the Jewish *volk* (people) through Judaism and Jewish culture. They tended to be from Eastern Europe and Russia. In this schema, Nordau-as-Zionist is placed at the side of the founder of

³ Ibid., 379-380.

⁴ For a description of this prevalence by primarily Jewish physicians see, John M. Efron *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-De-Siècle Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

political Zionism, Theodore Herzl. But given his advocacy for an overturning of the Jewish race, Nordau becomes a Janus-faced figure. While his support for a Jewish homeland falls under political Zionism, his advocacy for muscular Judaism is ostensibly placed in the category of cultural Zionism.

This schizophrenic portrayal of Nordau's philosophy does not characterize him properly, nor more broadly Zionism's relationship to the body, as corpus of the Jewish *volk*. It does not explain Nordau's racial rhetoric, use of eugenics, and his (pseudo)scientific approach to the regeneration of the Jewish body. More importantly, arguments such as these ignore Nordau's philosophy and ideologies *prior* to his groundbreaking work related to Zionism. I will argue, and define the historical category of "racial Zionism" as the category in which Nordau fits into. By focusing on Nordau as a central, not marginal, character, I will argue that Zionism's origins demanded a political, cultural, and *racial* overturning of Jewish history in what I am calling racial Zionism. A deeper historical examination of Nordau's intellectual work across his entire lifespan provides for a more historically rooted and developmental approach to his Zionism, rather than insisting, almost hagiographically, on a separation of his life into before and after Zionism. Examining Zionism through the lens of race and putting Nordau at the center, rather than the margins, of the discussion reveals other manifestations of racial Zionism, in such key figures as Ephraim Moshe Lilien and other Zionists. Zionism demanded nothing less than the regeneration of the Jewish body. The Jewish race needed to become stronger, tougher and "more manly" in order to become a nation. This racial transformation, which includes an overturning of the traditional gendered order of "diasporic" Jewish society with its effeminized, weak men, is exactly what Nordau spoke of when he called for the rise of muscle Jews at the Second Zionist Congress.

1

Historiography and Background

Though Nordau was an essential figure in the early workings of Zionism, he has been consigned to a footnote of history. Tomes have been written on Zionism's "founder," Theodore Herzl. Other central figures, such as Chaim Weizman, the first president of Israel, and Martin Buber, the well-known German Jewish philosopher and early advocate of cultural Zionism, all of whom are seen as crucial to Zionism's beginnings. Scholars have generally relegated Nordau to the background in the drama of Zionism's founding. Recently, however, historians have begun to rediscover Nordau. Melanie Murphy's *Max Nordau's Fin-de-Siècle Romance of Race* primarily examines Nordau not as a Zionist, but as a late nineteenth-century racial thinker, through his many works of fiction. She places his work in its contemporary surroundings, and argues "an examination of Nordau's fiction shows how his notions of racial and national identity transmuted."⁵ This "transmutation of race and nation" was an essential piece of Nordau's ideology both before and after his support of Zionism, but has been ignored by historians in their understanding of Nordau. This concept of the blending of nation, race, as well as people, is critical to understanding Nordau and, I will argue, underpins Zionism's origins. Murphy is also the only historian to look at Nordau's intellectual evolution as a seamless and connected process, as she claims "Nordau championed a cause [in Zionism] that joined his social, cultural and political beliefs and that conformed to the Europe-wide fin-de-siècle interest in body culture."⁶ This analysis of Nordau sets Murphy apart as the lone modern historian to have analyzed Nordau and connected some of the gaps between Nordau's ideologies before and after he became a Zionist, and to have conflated his joining of the cause with his prior works.

⁵ Melanie A. Murphy. *Max Nordau's Fin-De-siècle Romance of Race*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

Todd Presner's *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* recently provided the only modern historical account of muscular Judaism. His analysis of this key concept in Nordau's philosophy looks at its intellectual, historical and cultural bases primarily in late nineteenth century Germany; as Presner states, "muscle Jew discourse [was] part of an open field of visions and possibilities that emerged in the richly complex and shifting landscapes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."⁷ Without the rise of body politics, the notions of degeneration, nationalism as well as increased level of anti-Semitism, there would have been no base from which muscular Judaism could have built. Extrapolating from Presner, and pushing his thesis one step further will illustrate not only the effects of *fin de siècle* Europe; but show that these discourses, through Nordau, gave rise to racial Zionism. Presner also argues for the centrality of muscular Judaism as a critical factor of Jewish life before WWI, "between 1898 and the end of World War I, Nordau's reinvented muscle Jew would become arguably the most emblematic figure of Jewish regeneration and Zionism's 'body culture.' Iterations of the muscle Jew would appear in a fascinatingly wide-range of discourses on corporeal regeneration, which simultaneously addressed the reformation of the individual body and the reconstruction of the body politic of the desired nation."⁸ This importance, as well as that of Nordau, has largely been lost to history; however it is critical for a better understanding of the discursive factors of Zionism.

Finally, Michael Stanislawski in his *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle* argues for muscular Judaism and Nordau's Zionism as being largely influenced by the broader European *fin de siècle* discourses. He argues that Nordau, "envisioned a new form of Jewishness, informed at its very

⁷ Todd Samuel Presner. *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*. Routledge Jewish Studies Series. London; New York: Routledge, 2007, 16-17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

root by the truth of science and culture that reached their apogee in nineteenth century Europe.⁹ While Stanislawski's conclusions on situating Nordau as a *fin de siècle* thinker are correct, he dismisses Nordau's specific racial thinking out of hand: "Max Nordau often used the term 'race' in general and 'Jewish race' in particular, [but] he by no means can be categorized as a racist thinker."¹⁰ Instead Stanislawski sees Nordau as a proponent of political Zionism through militant means – he misses, but more importantly *dismisses* Nordau's unique contribution to Zionist ideology.

Though Nordau is key to understanding Zionism, the common historical narrative considers Theodore Herzl as father of modern Zionism, since he was the founder and of head the World Zionist Organization (WZO), and served as the chairman of the First through Seventh Zionist Congresses. Herzl also supposedly "converted" Nordau to Zionism.¹¹ However, the idea of Zionism was not a completely novel idea when Herzl first articulated it in his 1896 pamphlet "The Jewish State" (*Der Judenstaat*), as notions of Jewish collective identity, grounded in political sovereignty, can arguably be traced back to the first exile of the Jewish people by the Babylonians in the Sixth Century BCE. More importantly, many of these collective political Jewish identities have centered on the idea of returning to the Land of Israel.

⁹ Michael Stanislawski. *Zionism and the Fin De Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*. S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹ For a description of Herzl's initial visits to Nordau, see, Anna (Dons) Nordau, Maxa Nordau, and New York Nordau Committee. *Max Nordau: A Biography*. New York: The Nordau Committee, 1943. 121-123. This work claims that after encountering anti-Semitism himself at the Prussian resort of Borkum, witnessing the Dreyfus affair in France and Herzl's convincing, Nordau's response was, "If you are insane, we are insane together. Count on me!" (120).



Figure 1
 Gedenkblatt des Fünften Zionisten-Kongress
 Journal of the Fifth Zionist Congress Cover
 E.M. Lilien, 1901

For centuries in the *Amidah* prayer (a critical prayer recited three times daily by practicing religious Jews), Jews have been stating, “V'techezna eineinu b'shuv'cha l'Tziyon b'rachamim,” (“May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy”¹²). Zionists considered this statement so central, that they used it both on the Fifth Zionist Congress’s journal and postcard, illustrated by E.M. Lilien. This postcard depicted the “down-trodden” Jew of the West being pointed by a muscular angelic figure to the light in the East, implying Israel (see figure 1). Further, calls of “next year in Jerusalem” echo throughout Jews’ prayers and ceremonies, and although rabbinic Jewish culture shifted those calls to one of a messianic return to the land, the original concept had everything to do with land and power, albeit not a modern nationalist agitation.¹³ Zionism, as an ideology and later political movement, would draw on this and others notions of return, but it developed in a decades-long history of something that has been called “proto-Zionism,” recognizing the problematic use of the term.

¹² Translation mine, the Hebrew passage on the bottom of the illustration contains the phrase from the *Amidah*, while the top reads, “The Fifth Congress of the Zionists in Basle 1898.”

¹³ For a more in depth discussion of how the rabbi’s changed the notion of the messiah out of national idea and into more of a religious calling see, Jacob Neusner. *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism*. Studies in Judaism. Lanham: University Press of America, 1988.

Zionism

One of the first proto-Zionists is often presumed to be Moses Hess, who in 1861 wrote *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last National Question*, wherein he argued for the establishment of a Jewish socialist state in the Land of Israel. Twenty years later, in 1882, due to a rise of anti-Semitism and increasing violence in Eastern Europe, Leon Pinsker, wrote “Auto-Emancipation” (*Selbstemanzipation*), a pamphlet, which argued that the only way for Jews to avoid anti-Semitism was to have their own country. More importantly, he stressed that the burden of accomplishing this was on Jewish people themselves. Pinsker concluded by arguing, “The international Jewish question must have a national solution. Of course, our national regeneration can only proceed slowly. *We* must take the first step. Our *descendants* must follow us at a measured and not over-precipitant speed.”¹⁴ Shortly after the publication of “Auto-Emancipation,” the Lovers of Zion (Chovevei Tsion) was established. They actualized Pinsker’s ideals and emigrated to what was then part of the Ottoman Empire. The members of the Chovovei Tsion consisted mainly of Jews from Eastern Europe wishing to escape pogroms and anti-Jewish laws passed in 1883, and other forms of persecution.¹⁵ It is important to note that these earlier groups had no focus (or even care) for creating a nation-state or any organized body that operated under similar paradigms.

The formation of what can be deemed “modern” Zionism appeared in the wake of two major European events. The first was the 1895 election of Karl Lüger as the mayor of Vienna

¹⁴ For a translation of Pinsker’s pamphlet see <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Auto-Emancipation>. The German original can be found at <http://ldn-knigi.lib.ru/JUDAICA/LPinska.htm>.

¹⁵ For a complete history of pre-Herzl Zionist movement, and others who even predated those listed see, Nahum Sokolow. *Hibbath Zion* (The Love of Zion). Hudwig Mayer, Jerusalem, 1934. For another historical account of the proto-Zionists see, Walter Laqueur. *A History of Zionism*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1972, specifically, part one chapter 2 “Forerunners”. Also see, Frankel, Jonathan. *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*. Cambridge Eng.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

under a political party wrought with anti-Semitic policies. As HJ Cohn states in *Theodore Herzl's Conversion to Zionism*, “Political Zionism, a separate, independent Jewish State became the right thing to do.... as Herzl witnessed in Vienna with the election of Lüger.”¹⁶ The second major event was the Dreyfus Affair. In this scandal, a French officer named Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason, the assumption behind the original accusation being that he was a Jew and therefore could not be a trusted officer in the French military. As Robert Hoffman writes, Herzl came out of this affair with the view that “assimilation was a hopeless strategy for Jews, since none had tried harder to assimilate nor experienced a greater disaster in the attempt than did Alfred Dreyfus.”¹⁷ That is to say that after the Dreyfus scandal, Herzl believed that Jewish people could not be fully emancipated and become full-fledged participants in European life – they had to find an alternative. It is with him, and this trial, that Zionism began to carry any real effectiveness and gain ground as a political movement. As Walter Laquer states in his *History of Zionism*:

[O]ld mythical and messianic Zionism was a source of edification but it had proved incapable of inspiring a political mass movement. If its history had ended in 1897 it would now be remembered as one of the less important sectarian-Utopian movement, which sprouted during the second half of the nineteenth century.... Zionism in brief was comatose when in 1896 Theodore Herzl appeared. Within a few years he was to transform it into a mass movement and a political force.¹⁸

From 1896, virtually until his death in 1904, Herzl’s life was dedicated to and consumed by his Zionist advocacy. In 1897, Herzl convened the First Zionist congress, but he did not give the opening address – Nordau did.

¹⁶ Henry J. Cohn, “Theodor Herzl's Conversion to Zionism” *Jewish Social Studies* Vol. 32, No. 2 (Apr., 1970).101-110.

¹⁷ Robert Louis Hoffman *More than a Trial: The Struggle Over Captain Dreyfus*. New York: Free Press, 201.

¹⁸ Laquer, *History* ,83,

The current historiographical understanding of Zionism dictates two main trends growing at the end of the nineteenth century. There are political and cultural¹⁹ approaches to Zionism, whose divergences were further exacerbated at the various Zionist congresses. Political Zionism, as advocated for by Herzl, Nordau and the WZO as a whole, sought to use political and nationalist avenues to pursue the creation of Jewish political sovereignty, ultimately in the form of a nation-state. As Gideon Shimoni writes in *Zionist Ideology*, “[Herzl’s] ideas amounted to a Jewish national conception that came to be labeled ‘political Zionism.’ Its operative implication was the primacy of political-diplomatic endeavors to attain an internationally sanctioned charter leading to a territorial sovereignty for Jews.”²⁰ The Political Zionists, in support of the creation of a Jewish state, lobbied the Ottoman Empire, and, after World War I and the Ottoman Empire’s collapse, Great Britain as well as the League of Nations, as a means of achieving their goal of establishing a territorial Jewish nation. Historian Arthur Hertzberg argues that the “most important aspect of [Herzl’s] work was in diplomacy.”²¹ His mode of thought was so politically and nationally motivated that the location of the state was of little consequence. This is best seen with the Sixth Zionist Congress’s main issue of debate – the Uganda Proposal. Where several Zionist leaders proposed that the British-held African territory be used as a temporary Jewish

¹⁹ It must be noted that many other strands of Zionism have been articulated: socialist, religious, revisionist and more. However, within the WZO and at the early Zionist Congresses the main source of tension would be between the political and social camps. Further, looking at Zionism’s origins the duality of political versus cultural movements can be seen, see Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin De Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*. S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Or, Harold Fisch. *The Zionist Revolution*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. For an in depth history and definition of political Zionism, see, David Engel. *Zionism*. Short Histories of Big Ideas Series. 1st ed. Harlow, England; New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009. For a similar account and definition of cultural Zionism, see, Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz. *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society*. Studies in Jewish History. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

²⁰ Gideon Shimoni. *The Zionist Ideology*. The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series. Vol. 21. Hanover: Published by University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1995. 97.

²¹ Arthur Hertzberg. *The Zionist Idea :A Historical Analysis and Reader*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970; 1959. 203.

homeland; Herzl accepted the plan as an immediate fix for worsening conditions in Europe.

Michael Heyman, in *The Uganda Controversy*, describes Nordau's view of the situation:

Herzl's lieutenant, intellectual man-of-letters Max Nordau, also grudgingly endorsed the proposal, though he privately feared it would lead to "colonial exploitation:" and the dissolution of the movement. He instead envisaged a Jewish settlement in Africa only as a *Nachtsyl*—a temporary "night shelter"—until a permanent foothold could be established in Ottoman Palestine.²²

Nordau begrudgingly went along with the Uganda proposal as the best option at the time in order to get Jews out of heavily anti-Semitic parts of Europe. For his "betrayal" of Zionism, Herzl was called a traitor, and shortly after this there was an attempted assassination of Nordau, though he did not fully support the Uganda plan.²³ This assassination attempted speaks volumes as to how great the tensions were between the cultural and political sides in the early years of the WZO. However these tensions would not deter the congress from convening every other year until 1946²⁴, and continue to be an important conference even after the establishment of the State of Israel through today.²⁵

Cultural Zionism, largely stemming out of the works of Pinsker and Hess, historically predates Herzl's political movement; however, after 1897, this group would come to be associated with the political Zionist movement. The cultural Zionists believed that though the location of the ancient Kingdom of Israel was a desired location for a Jewish nation, the achievement of political sovereignty in that location however was not the primary goal. Cultural

²² Michael Heymann Ed. *The Uganda Controversy*. Vol. II. Jerusalem: Hassifriya Haziyonit. Publishing House, 1977.

²³ For a description of this issue at the Sixth Zionist congress see Halpern and Reinhartz. *Zionism, 141-142*. Also see Laquer, *History*, 126-129.

²⁴ The first five congresses would meet each year from 1897 to 1901. From 1901 to 1946 They would be every other year.

²⁵ For more see Halpern and Reinhartz, *Zionism*, 229-261. For more on the WZO through today see their website at <http://www.wzo.org.il>

Zionism's forerunners, such as Ahad Ha'am²⁶, Chaim Weizman and Martin Buber believed, like many eastern European Romantic nationalists of the era, that in order for any sort of Jewish national movement to succeed, a renewal of Jewish culture was needed. This meant the creation of a distinctly Jewish art and language, as well as a revitalization of collective identity and other such avenues as precursors to agitation for a national homeland. As Shimoni further elucidates the differences between Ahad Ha'am's cultural view and traditional political views:

The revival of Jewish national sentiment and the creation of a committed elite embodying the values and attributes of a modernized Jewish national culture was the precondition for the success of settlement.... Ahad Ha'am set about shaping a cultural elite for the Jewish national movement, a cadre of nationalist intellectuals and educators who would guide the work of national spiritual revival.²⁷

This cultural elite can be seen with Ahad Ha'am's creation of the "*Benei Moshe*" (Children of Moses) organization in 1889, eight years before the First Zionist Congress. Hertzberg describes this organization as being founded to "raise the moral and cultural tone of the Jewish national revival."²⁸ The organization would remain active until 1897, when it was incorporated into the WZO, even though the inaugural First Zionist Congress would be the only congress in which Ahad Ha'am would be in attendance.

Even with Ahad Ha'am's absence, the cultural Zionist side grew as the congresses progressed. At the 1900 Fourth Zionist Congress, in order to avoid conflict between the religious and secularist delegates, Herzl intervened and tabled all questions of culture. Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz describe the evolution of a cultural faction within the WZO:

They felt that Herzl's personal style and his combination of bourgeois and traditionalist Zionists were, in good part, to blame for the alienation of such [cultural] elements from the nationalist movement, and they wished to make good the loss. At the Fifth Zionist Congress, in December

²⁶ This is a pseudonym for Asher Ginzburg, meaning "one of the people/nation," see, Steven J. Zipperstein. *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha'Am and the Origins of Zionism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

²⁷ Shimoni, *Idelology*, 111.

²⁸ Hertzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 251.

1901, the “Democratic Faction” appeared as an organized force expressed opposition on a number of issues, and produced a particularly stormy incident over the cultural question.... The Democratic Faction represented the first attempt at organized opposition to Herzl.²⁹

This democratic faction wanted to place a larger and more focused effort on the cultural aspect of Zionism in order to achieve the creation of a nation. The “stormy incident” to which Halpern and Reinhartz refer was the hotly debated subjects of whether or not the congress should adopt an eight-point plan for cultural plan as well as host an art exhibit at the congress.³⁰ Herzl was obliged and allowed the exhibit to occur. The logic being that the cultural side would only divide and fractionate the congress as a whole – diverting it from its primary goal. Herzl was simply forced to oblige to ensure the WZO’s unity. Art historian Gilya Gerda Schmidt describes the results from the congress, “Herzl’s strong-arm tactics saved the day for the congress, and the monopoly of political Zionism on congress proceedings after 1901 was broken. Buber, Weizmann, Feiwel, Lilien and other members of the so-called Democratic F(r)action were by no means defeated.”³¹ After the Sixth Zionist Congress, Herzl would pass away and the fractionalization of cultural and political Zionism only increased. The overall fractionalization would only continue and hinder the effectiveness of the organization even to this day.

The Backdrop to Nordau: Jewish Body Politics, Zionist Art and National Myths

To better understand the underpinnings of muscular Judaism and racial Zionism, one must see Nordau, and therefore Zionism, on the backdrop of the debates around the Jewish body in *fin de siècle* Europe, and the literature on the Jewish body is quite extensive. Daniel Boyarin’s *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* places

²⁹ Halpern and Reinhartz, *Zionism*, 108.

³⁰ For a full description of this debate and the arguments, conciliations and ultimate fractionalization that occurred see, Gilya Gerda Schmidt. *The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901: Heralds of a New Age. Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003. Specifically the introduction chapter, 1-14.

³¹ Schmidt, *Art*, 13.

Nordau's muscle Jew as the antithesis of the normative discourse of Jewish masculinity, as he views it developing historically. Boyarin argues that Jewish culture posits an ideal masculinity based on study and gentleness, not on physical strength and power. For Boyarin, "the creation of Muscle-Jews [was] the very antithesis of the Jewish ideal,"³² described in his book. Boyarin believes that this "unmanly" nature of Jewish men was in fact a positive phenomenon, and the source of their survival for centuries. To him, Jews were pushed around, but it was their lack of pushing back that allowed them to survive for so long under various power structures. The, "sissy body of the Jewish man,"³³ defines the preeminent and ideal form of Jewish masculinity from Boyarin's perspective. It is into this discursive field and common conception about Jewish masculinity that Nordau's embodied Zionism must be seen.

Another key book on Jewish body politics is Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body*, primarily an analysis of anti-Semitic rhetoric and persecution based around the politics of the Jewish body, as well as the Jewish reactions, or lack thereof. His book provides a basis for understanding where anti-Jewish rhetoric of the nineteenth century came from, as well as an analysis of the responses to the subsequent persecution. Gilman points out that whenever Jews, or any minority for that matter, are persecuted there is a response to the dialogues of persecution:

This response may, however, take a wide range of forms. It may be internalizing and self-destructive (self-hating) or it may be projective and stereotyping; it takes the form of capitulation to the power of the image or the form of resistance to the very stereotype of the Jew. But there is need to respond either directly or subliminally.³⁴

³² See, Daniel Boyarin. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Contraversions. Vol. 8. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 77. Boyarin saw the "sissy body" as what Jewish manhood inspired and was meant to be – quiet study and contemplation, not physically fit or strong.

³³ Ibid., xviii.

³⁴ Sander L. Gilman. *The Jew's Body*. New York: Routledge, 1991, 20.

A noted response to this is auto-anti-Semitism, as put forth by the Jewish Viennese writer Otto Weininger. In his book *Sex and Character*, he claimed women and Jews to be lesser beings than Aryan men.³⁵ To Weininger, the Jewish race not only existed, but was inferior, and its failings could not be overcome. To him Zionism was doomed to fail – simply because of its Jewish nature.³⁶ Weininger pushed his thesis to its logical conclusion, and took his own life. In contrast to Weininger’s internalization of racial anti-Semitism is Nordau’s muscle Jew. Like Weininger, Nordau seemingly accepted that Jews were physically inferior, but rather than seeing the immutable biological roots of that inferiority. He saw them as racial, but not immutable traits that could thus be regenerated. Muscular Judaism was his reaction to this acceptance and internalization of anti-Semitic rhetoric. Nordau’s response was clear – Jews must become more muscular than their neighbors.

Nordau was not the only individual in whose ideas a racial form of Zionism can be seen. Both Presner, Schmidt, and Stanislawski, give in-depth accounts and analyses of one key Zionist artist, Ephraim Moshe Lilien, arguably the most widespread and acknowledged Jewish artist of the turn of the century, and one normally placed on the side of cultural Zionism.³⁷ Lilien’s art is a prime of example of decadent art, which Presner defines as “the convergence of certain literary, medical, philosophical, and visual discourses during the last decades of the nineteenth century that reflected upon, embraced and variously represented notions of decline and sickness.”³⁸ Scholarly analyses concur that Lilien’s work is defined by a revolutionary form of art, which sits at the nexus of Jewish identity, masculinity and nationalism. As Presner’s synthesis of Schmidt

³⁵ Chandak Sengoopta. *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna*. The Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 99.

³⁸ Presner, *Muscular Judaism*, 88.

and Stanislawski states, “Lilien’s art ... seems to be searching for a new type of figuration adequate to the Zionism leap into the future.”³⁹ What this art shows is not only the nationalistic aspirations of Jewish identity, but also is also an attempt to visualize a new regenerated Jewish body. Further, by placing Lilien’s artwork in dialogue with Nordau helps to further illustrate the notion of racial Zionism. As his illustration show the envisioned muscular race, as well as the romanticized heroic past.

In addition to this understanding of the Jewish body, are the *fin de siècle* racial discourses that were prevalent during Nordau’s career as a writer, as well as during the rise of Zionism. John Efron’s *The Defenders of the Race* contextualizes and describes the place of Jewish scientists and doctors in *fin de siècle* Europe, a category into which Nordau fits. One of Efron’s most important claims is that “at the end of the nineteenth century, the terms ‘Jewish racial question,’ ‘Jewish question,’ and ‘Jewish Problem’ were used interchangeably by Jews and non-Jews alike.”⁴⁰ This assertion lends further credence to the idea that muscular Judaism was an answer to all three questions – a regeneration of the race, the removal of Jews from a hostile environment as well as the basis for the establishment of a nation. Thus linking the three answer with Zionism gives rise to a racially based regeneration of the nation. It also shows Nordau’s unique and central position within the Zionist movement, as putting forth a (pseudo)scientific means of accomplishing Zionism’s goals. Efron further places physicians, like Nordau, in a position of racially based regeneration: “The work of Zionist physicians demonstrates how they employed the latest tools of medial and social science, such as population statistics, to bolster a political cause that was concerned first and foremost with Jewish spiritual and physical

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁰ Efron, *Defenders*, 3

regeneration.”⁴¹ Arguing for a regeneration of the Jewish body on the backdrop of this emphasis on science and race further places Nordau’s Zionism as unique and central.

The last facet in understanding both Nordau, as well as Zionism’s evolution, is the relationship between history and memory – specifically collective memory. On this subject, Yael Zerubavel’s *Recovered Roots* addresses how Zionism manipulated and created its own version of history in order to help create a stronger nationalistic sentiment. As she writes, “Through the restructuring of the past, the commemorative narrative creates its own version of historical time as it elaborates, condenses, omits or conflates historical events.”⁴² Her book suggests that Zionism created a binary, polarized model of Jewish history. On one side was antiquity, where a Jewish “nation” existed, Hebrew was spoken and the Jews had strong patriotic sentiments; a return to this state was the goal of Zionism. On the other side of this (altered) past was exile, in which Jewish history was one of marginalization, loss of nationhood, language and much like Nordau’s description in his statement of the situation of the Jewish people to the various congresses. Zerubavel follows two events from Jewish antiquity, the fall of Masada, the Bar Kochba revolt and the 1920 Battle of Tel Hai. She examines how each was seen when they occurred, during exile, and how Zionism constructed them in a different light. The most important for Nordau was the Bar Kochba revolt, as he romanticized and reconstructed Bar Kochba, himself a messianic figure, as an example of the Jewish “muscular past.” The construction of the Zionist narrative in her view is a unique dialectic of return to a romanticized past. As Zerubavel concludes:

Zionist collective memory did not invent new mythical structures. Rather it promoted a closer association between existent Jewish myth plot structures and certain periods in Jewish history and

⁴¹ Elfron, *Defenders*, 12.

⁴² Yael Zerubavel. 1995. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 9.

reinterpreted their meaning. It thus linked antiquity and the modern National Revival... and subsumed Exile under the plot structure of persecution leading to victimization and death.⁴³

She argues that the goal of Zionism was a return to this ancient, romanticized national past, the dogmatic “2,000 years of exile” was wholesale deemed as a negative time period – even when Jews were not marginalized or persecuted. Nationhood accompanied by a return to Hebrew, patriotism and to a certain extent military prowess was thus seen as the negation of this miserable 2,000-year exile. This negation of the Diaspora, termed by her as, “*shlilat ha-golah*” (the condemnation of the people who live in exile),⁴⁴ is a critical piece for understanding the rhetoric surrounding Zionism. More often than not, the goal and means by which Zionism was to be actualized condemned and attempted to alter the current status of Jewish people living outside of the land. This concept is key to figuring Nordau’s muscular Judaism inside of Zionism’s negating the Diaspora, and Zerubavel’s argument is useful to further understand the overall schema and systems of Zionism. However, she does not mention how the 2,000 year-exile was to be overcome the Diaspora corporally, rather just through the use of powerful rhetoric.

Nordau in Early Zionist Historiography

Although Zerubavel investigates the founding myths of Zionism created by figures like Nordau, he himself became a mythic figure. In the wake of Herzl’s death, in 1904 Nordau was offered Herzl’s position – an offer he turned down.⁴⁵ Even so, he was considered a critical figure in Zionism up until the founding of the state in 1948. In the introduction to his 1941 *Max Nordau to his People A Summons and a Challenge*, a collection of translated speeches given by Nordau at various Zionist congresses, historian Bentzion Netanyahu, a noted Israeli historian and father

⁴³ Ibid., 217.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ For a description of this see, A. Nordau and M. Nordau, *Max Nordau*, 182. They claim that after Herzl’s death, “People came to [Nordau] and said: ‘You are the leader.’ He answered: I shall remain what I have been. Another must lead out movement I can’t devote myself to it exclusively.”

of current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, writes that Nordau, “became the greatest apostle of Zionism, battling for it in many fields, always the first in the most perilous fronts, always leading the attack on the strongholds of its fiercest opponents.”⁴⁶ Netanyahu saw Nordau as one of the most important actors in the development of Zionism. Netanyahu provides an account of Nordau’s life and accomplishments in which he concludes that Nordau’s, “soul became immortal, his name everlasting. In the history of the most ancient, most tragic and most remarkable people he had a place of honour beside Herzl, his friend, and beside their great ancestors – the ancient prophets of Israel.”⁴⁷ Written during World War Two, *before* the state of Israel became a reality, and also before the horrors of the Holocaust were fully revealed, this account suggests a central place of Nordau in Jewish history. If Israel were to become a reality, Netanyahu suggests, Nordau would be heralded as a major reason.

This prophetic view was further reinforced in Meir Ben-Horin’s 1956 *Max Nordau: Philosopher of Human Solidarity*, in which he writes:

It is not surprising that shortly after the publication of the Balfour Declaration (November 2, 1917) rumors appeared in the press reporting the formation of a Jewish government composed, in part of the following personalities: Nordau – prime minister. Weizmann – foreign secretary, Jabotinsky – defense secretary.⁴⁸

Given Ben Horin’s, as well as Netanyahu’s, statements about Nordau’s position of power as late as 1956, the question remains, why after the founding of the state did he become so marginalized? As soon as 1959, American historian Arthur Hertzberg would write of Nordau as “Herzl’s most important colleague and disciple. Indeed in 1896 when he accepted Herzl’s faith, Nordau was much the more famous of the two.”⁴⁹ However, after this comment about Nordau’s fame in 1896 *before* the First Zionist Congress, Hertzberg does not speak of Nordau importance

⁴⁶ Bentzion Netanyahu. “Introduction” *Max Nordau to*. 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁸ Ben-Horin, Meir. 1952. *Max Nordau: A Study in Human Solidarity*. Thesis – Columbia University, 1952. 4

⁴⁹ Hertzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 233.

to Zionism's successes. Similarly, as Zionism began to be studied as a historical subject, Nordau's role in the founding of Zionism diminished. However, as these accounts show, during his lifetime and until about 1960, Nordau was seen as a central and critical figure to the Zionist cause. Though this historiographical evolution is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is nonetheless pertinent to the study of Nordau and understanding his place in Zionism's history. Given the ubiquity of scholarship on other founders of Zionism like Herzl, Weitzman, and Ahad Ha'am, the relative lack of scholarship on Nordau is noteworthy. From roughly 1960 to 1995, there was no major academic work examining Nordau. Even today there are few books published with him as the main subject or that state his central position to Zionism.

Nordau and muscular Judaism occupy a unique place within the understanding of Zionism today, though this differs from his placement previously. In the past twenty years, scholarship on Nordau has reemerged and examined who he was and what he believed. More importantly, this new scholarship re-engages what Nordau's true intellectual passion were — race and science. As Murphy summarizes at the end of her book:

Nordau believed in rational romances of race, even as he came to an increasing understanding of the fact that ethnic or tribal identities are buttressed by love and hate and every emotion in between. Nordau wished for individuals to consciously recognize the various components that produced their racial or national identities.⁵⁰

The renewed scholarly interest in his science of race, however, has not yet brought Nordau back into the historiography of Zionism's origins. By moving Nordau from the margins to the center of the early story of Zionism, I will show that the "rational romance of race," both Nordau's and others, was in fact a fundamental building block of Zionism. The larger implication of this being that both political and cultural Zionism were promulgated against a backdrop of racial *fin de siècle* notions.

⁵⁰ Murphy, *Romance of Race*, 138.

2

Nordau's Background: Racial Discourse and *Degeneration*

Max Nordau was born on July 29, 1849, as Simon Maximilian Südfeld to a Jewish family in Pest, Hungary, then part of the Hapsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was first educated in a Hebrew religious school, and later in a Catholic grammar school. Nordau's father, Rabbi Gabriel Südfeld, was a translator and writer of religious commentary, and is allegedly the source for Nordau's desire to write. At the age of thirteen, in order to support the family's income, Nordau began writing articles as a journalist.⁵¹ Letters among members of the Südfeld family illustrate that both Max and his sister, Charlotte, born two years after him, were well-educated and capable writers from an early age. Though religion was central to the Südfeld household there was a distinct lack of Jewish community. As Murphy writes:

Nordau wrote once to Charlotte about how lonely their childhood had been.... Religion was at the center of Südfeld family life, but they did not have many or deep community ties, so although Jewish, Max Nordau did not experience or record a particular Jewish sociability. Nordau saw himself as alone, having to make his way, understand the world, and achieve success under his own steam.⁵²

This passage is very telling. First, it suggests that Nordau longed for a sense of belonging and identity. It further notes how driven he was to find success. In 1867, he took the baccalaureate and registered with the faculty of medicine at the University of Budapest.⁵³ His intellectual work, in the form of journal articles and poetry would continue. In *Max Nordau: A Biography*, Anna

⁵¹ Nordau, Anna (Dons), Maxa Nordau, and New York Nordau Committee. *Max Nordau: A Biography*. New York: The Nordau Committee, 1943. 21

⁵² Murphy, *Romance of Race*, 2.

⁵³ "גורדוי מכס", לפרטים כאן לחצו. לעזרתכם זקוק יהודה-בן פרויקט. ראובן, בריינין 19, 2012. <http://www.benyehuda.org/brainin/nordeu.html>

and Maxa Nordau, his wife and daughter respectively⁵⁴, describe this experience, “Thus there began the double and even treble life of ceaseless toil which was to be his last illness. By day he attended lectures and devoted himself to his medical studies; at night he carried on the journalistic work, which provided him and his family with the necessities of life. His hours of sleep were reduced to a minimum.”⁵⁵ The double and treble (triple) lives of Nordau would become his medical profession, literary work and eventual conversion to Zionism, though this would not be a linear progression.

Somewhere along the line, he became disenchanted with Judaism. While still working on his medical degree, Nordau took a series of jobs and assignments that took him around Europe for the next six years. When he arrived in Berlin in 1873, he had changed his name from Südfeld (southern field) to Nordau (northern meadow). In the process, he formally broke with his father, and his visible connection to his Jewish identity. Though it is unclear when he began to reject his birth religion, by the time he changed his name, he was no longer a practicing Jew.⁵⁶ After his travels, he settled down to practice medicine in Budapest. The following year, 1879, he moved to Paris, and his writing career blossomed.⁵⁷ That same year, he published his first major work, *Soap Bubbles (Seifenblasen)*, a collection of 10 short stories. *Soap Bubbles*, is described by Murphy as “utterly, essentially Nordau, going to the core of his concerns, examining issues of difference, exile, blood, ties, conflict and coexistence between groups and nations.”⁵⁸ Alongside his short stories and cultural critiques, he published novels and plays, which commented upon

⁵⁴ To date this is the most thorough account and biography of Nordau, published in 1943, it sits between a firsthand account of Nordau’s life and a biased biography. It is nonetheless useful in further understanding how Nordau would seem to those close to him and how they wish for him to be remembered.

⁵⁵ A. Nordau and M. Nordau, *Max Nordau*, 33.

⁵⁶ Murphy, *Romance of Race*, ix.

⁵⁷ Anna and Maxa claim that Nordau had been offered the position as a doctor on two ships, one bound for America, the other Indonesia, he turned both down in order to stay with his mother. The move to Paris was to allow him for a greater reading audience and medical practice, as he had “outgrown” Pest. He would further be able to bring his mother along. See A. Nordau and M. Nordau, *Max Nordau*, 70-71.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Romance of Race*, 28.

the same topics. In fact, until his death, Nordau's fictional works, as well as his Zionist writings, continued addressing the same issues as those articulated in *Soap Bubbles*. In 1883, Nordau published his first book critical of *fin de siècle* Europe, *The Conventional Lies of our Civilization* (*Die konventionelle Lügen der Kulturmenschheit*). The following year, his book *Paradoxes* (*Paradoxe*) derided, critiqued, and tore apart numerous literary, artistic, intellectual and cultural movements of the day.

Nordau's breakthrough work, that would garner him European-wide fame, *Degeneration* (*Entartung*) appeared in 1893. In a similar vein to *Paradoxes* and *Conventional Lies*, *Degeneration* was a heavy-handed critique of European culture. With Nordau's application of science and medicine to analyzing culture, as well as a new emphasis on evolutionary principles set this book apart from Nordau's earlier works, as this book took on a new sense of teleology and scientific thought. In the book's opening Nordau states that all societies have criminals and degenerates, a not unusual statement in the early 1890s when criminal anthropologists' theories like those of Caesar Lombroso were ascendant.⁵⁹ Nordau however believed that in *fin de siècle* Europe the genuine degenerates and criminals were not those incarcerated for crimes, but instead occupied important cultural positions, such as the musicians and writers who perpetuated an unhealthy culture. He starts *Degeneration* by diagnosing the maladies of society. Primarily using scientific and psychological notions Nordau emphasizes that European society was becoming increasingly complicated and fast paced due to new inventions like the telegraph, train, as well as increases in newspaper production and the spread of new ideologies like socialism and Communism. Nordau claims that these changes wrought by modern society "involve an effort of

⁵⁹ Lombroso started the field of "criminal anthropology," which believed that criminals inherited their desire to commit crimes through birth defects and genetics. Drawing off early forms of psychology, eugenics and Darwinism he would prove this pseudoscience. For more see, Mary Gibson. *Born to Crime: Cesare Lombroso and the Origins of Biological Criminology*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002.

the nervous system and wear of tissue.... Every civilized man furnishes, at the present time, from five to twenty-five times as much work as was the demand of him half a century ago.”⁶⁰ The wearing down of the nervous system coupled with an over consumption by the masses of alcohol led to this degenerative state, and allowed for cultural degenerates to take the main stage of society.

In 1898 Nordau would marry a Danish Protestant named Anna Kaufmann,⁶¹ the two would have a daughter the following year, named Maxa. He would continue his medical practice through his career as a Zionist. In becoming a Zionist, Nordau took the ideas he saw as important and crucial to the regeneration of society, and grew his version of Zionism. The seeds that would flower into his Zionism can be found in Nordau’s earlier works, specifically in *Degeneration* and *Paradoxes*. Though he would spend the rest of his life in the service of the Zionist cause, Nordau would never set foot on the land in which he sought to create a renewed Jewish nation, as he passed away in 1923. He was reinterred in Tel-Aviv three years later, his coffin wrapped in what would become the flag of the state of Israel.

Nordau’s Weltanschauung: The Transmutation of Race and Nation

What is most important about *Paradoxes* is how it sets up Nordau’s view of nationalism as well the upcoming twentieth century. In *Paradoxes* he predicted that nationalism would crush smaller nations and people out of existence:

The small nationalities who share the same country with others, and have no powerful relatives upon whom they can rely, are destined to destruction. They are not able to hold their own in the struggle for existence waged with their stronger fellow-countrymen. As nationalities, they must perish. The great nations alone will continue to exist, and among the smaller, only those who are

⁶⁰ Max Nordau. *Degeneration*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1968. For full German see, Max Simon Nordau. *Entartung*. Berlin: C. Duncker, 1893. 40.

⁶¹ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 66. In defense of her jack of Jewish birth, Anna claims that, “If I am mistaken Moses married a Midianite,” *Max Nordau*, 138. Referring to the biblical character who married outside of his race, yet still was able to able to guide the nation.

so circumstanced as to be able to found an independent, national political organization, expelling or reducing to a subordinate position, if necessary, all the elements of alien nationalities which may have settled among them.⁶²

Looking at how this view could evolve to encompass the Jewish nation or race within Europe, the Jews would have to find a means of overcoming their subordinate position and move towards one of power. If the struggle were to occur physically, then the change would not simply be a political or cultural one. A muscular race capable of waging war would be able to survive this “grand historical drama.” This passage goes further to almost prophesize both World Wars, as Nordau’s transmutation of race and nation is further evident:

It is not probable that the Twentieth Century will pass away without having witnessed the conclusion of this grand historical drama. Until then a large part of Europe will see much distress and blood-shed, many crimes and deeds of violence; peoples will rage against each other, and whole races will be pitilessly crushed out of existence.⁶³

Throughout this passage Nordau uses the words people, nation and race interchangeably. More importantly, the smaller nations or races that he speaks of would, if they wanted to survive, find a means to circumvent this position. He concluded that if the smaller nations or races wanted to survive the wars of this “historical drama” there was something that would have to undo their marginalization in the countries they inhabited, change their status of marginalization and create a nation.

Degeneration serves as the best case study of Nordauian ideology. Ideas about the importance of science, race, nationhood and the teleological path of history are found in numerous places throughout this book. The title *Degeneration* speaks volumes as to how Nordau thought. He was a thinker motivated by the science of the day, evolution and late nineteenth century notions of rationality. More importantly, he saw the world working in a teleological manner. If there was an atmosphere of degeneration then a reverse of this process or regeneration

⁶² Max Simon Nordau. *Paradoxes*. From the German of Max Nordau. Chicago: L. Schick. 1886. 364

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 365

would be needed. All of his critiques contained in *Degeneration* are directed at individuals, movements and schools that did not follow his perceived best teleological path, and because of this failure, were called “degenerate.”

The three books of *Degeneration* each critique a degenerate group of social and cultural leaders. First, he critiques mysticism, which included the pre-Raphaelite movement, Richard Wagner, and Leo Tolstoy. His second target, what he calls Ego-Mania, included artists’ movements like the Parnassians and Decadents in addition to writers and philosophers like Henrik Ibsen and Frederic Nietzsche. Finally, Nordau goes after the Realist movement, in particular criticizing Emile Zola, who five years later would be a hero to many European Jews for his *J’accuse* essay defending Dreyfus during the affair that bears his name. Though Nordau saw these individuals and groups as undermining society, he ultimately believed that society would “evolve” away from them: “degenerates must succumb, therefore. They can neither adapt themselves to the conditions of Nature and civilization, nor maintain themselves in the struggle for existence against the healthy.”⁶⁴ This evolutionary and teleological form of thought was central to Nordau as a *fin de siècle* intellectual.

Early on in the book Nordau’s near fetishization of science is clear. When addressing the preeminent degenerate group, the Symbolists⁶⁵, who had rejected science as a method of thought, Nordau describes the importance of science:

Science is said not to have kept what she promised. When has she ever promised anything else than honest and attentive observation of phenomena and, if possible, establishment of the conditions under which they occur... If anyone has expected of her that she would explain from

⁶⁴ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 541.

⁶⁵ Nordau wrote that the common trope of the symbolists was, “things are not as they seem,” (Ibid., 46) meaning that what was being seen, or read, by the viewer had a deeper, mysterious meaning. The symbolist movement attempted to illustrate truth about life and society, which they believed could only be understood through abstraction. Their art was rooted in allegory, metaphor and symbolic meaning. For more see, Robert L. Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*. New York: Skira., 1978.

one day to another the whole mechanism of the universe, he has indeed no idea of the true mission of science. She denies herself all leaps and flights. She advances step by step. She build slowly and patiently a firm bridge into the unknown, and can throw no new arch over the abyss before she has sunk deep the foundations of a new pier in the depth, and raised it to a new height.⁶⁶

This section is Nordauian thought in its purest form; science was the be all and end all of the epistemologic world to him. It created a perfect, linear and rational means by which the world could be understood. More importantly, it was not a fast or quickly moving process, but a slow march forward. Finally, extrapolating from this near deification of science, looking at nations and peoples in a scientific manner was no doubt a means of thought that Nordau would utilize when analyzing what makes a nation – a scientifically determined race.

The means of thinking about the world by racially determined means permeates *Degeneration*. While illustrating the evolution of the pre-Raphaelite⁶⁷ movement in England, Nordau introduces the racial underpinnings of his social analysis: “the Anglo-Saxon race is by nature healthy and strong-minded. It has therefore a high degree, that strong desire for knowledge, which is peculiar to normally constituted persons.”⁶⁸ These racial assumption were said off-hand by Nordau, illustrating how central racial discourse was to his day.

Degeneration also describes a natural order. This is described both in terms of a natural progression, in the case of science, but also that the world had a set nature. Trying to live against that natural order was another manifestation of degeneration. For example, Nordau describes the degenerate Charles Baudelaire as one who “abhors nature, movement and life; he dreams of an ideal immobility, of eternal silence, of symmetry and artificiality... he addresses his prayer to

⁶⁶ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 50.

⁶⁷ The pre-Raphaelite movement critiqued art which they believed had become too mechanical and devoid of genuine expression. They cited art created before Raphael and Michelangelo as the standards to which they aspired to. They have been often been deem as the first avant-garde artists movement. For more see, Heather Birchall and Norbert Wolf. *Pre-Raphaelites*. Köln: Taschen. 2010.

⁶⁸ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 76.

Satan, and aspires to hell.”⁶⁹ A natural progress of both nature and of history was a means by which Nordau analyzed the degenerate. The world was set in its specific ways according to Nordau, and a person or group that did fit the natural order was not destined to last – as was the case of the degenerates of his day. However, by overcoming some natural set backs, the natural order and teleological path could be altered. A degenerate could reverse the process and regenerate. A smaller nation, person or group could reverse whatever degenerate nature they possessed, while remaining inside of the same operating principles of the larger scheme, and improve their status all the while remaining true to these natural laws.

Nordau concludes *Degeneration* on a relatively high note. Taking a cue from Charles Darwin, whose *On the Origin of Species* had taken Europe by storm, he argues that the degenerate schools he has identified will die off, like poorly adapted versions of an organism. Evolution will “catch up” with the fast paced life that humans are beginning to lead:

The end of the twentieth century will probably see a generation to whom it will not be injurious to read a dozen square yards of newspaper daily, to be constantly called to the telephone, to be thinking simultaneously of the five continents of the world, to live half their time in a railway or in a flying machine, and to satisfy the demands of a circle of ten thousand acquaintances, associates, and friends. It will know how to find its ease in the midst of a city inhabited by millions, and will be able, with nerves of gigantic vigour, to respond without haste or agitation to the almost innumerable claims of existence.⁷⁰

He did not think the hysteria of the day will endure and humanity will evolve to a better place. All the maladies of the age will be lost, and humanity will arrive at a better place. His conclusion is wrought with evolutionary language, since “degenerates, hysterics and neurasthenics are not capable of adaptation. There they are fated to disappear.”⁷¹

The last key element to *Degeneration* is the way in which Nordau saw anti-Semitism, and the general European attitude towards the Jewish people. Though at the time of *Degeneration*'s

⁶⁹ Ibid, 294.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 539

⁷¹ Ibid, 540.

publication, Nordau was far from a practicing Jew, he nonetheless despised anti-Semitism, and linked it directly with degeneration.

The first major anti-Semite Nordau attacks is Richard Wagner. He writes that Wagner typifies the German modern mystic movement. Wagner displayed megalomania, hysteria and a “craving for revolt and contradiction; in his writing all the signs of graphomania, namely incoherence, fugitive ideation, and a tendency to idiotic punning, and the character of his being, the characteristic of emotionalism.”⁷² Wagner, despite all of his acclaim at the time, was in Nordau’s mind a completely lost, emotional mystic. His logic did not follow a clear and rational path, and goals of his book were pointless. Again with Wagner, we see Nordau’s idea of the necessity of clear straightforward logic. He cites a biographer of Wagner, Ferdinand Praeger claiming that:

For Wagner’s persecution mania, we have the testimony of his most recent biographer and friend, Ferdinand Praeger, who relates that for years Wagner was convinced that the Jews had conspired to prevent the representation of his operas – a delirium inspired by his furious anti-Semitism.⁷³

Wagner’s anti-Semitism was a manifestation of his “persecution mania.” Meaning that Wagner’s perception of the Jewish conspiracy against him fueled a fierce anti-Jewish attitude – both were a direct result of his degeneracy. Pushing this logic one step further, it appears as though Nordau saw anti-Semitism as a symptom or manifestation of degeneration. It is thus no stretch to assume that as degeneration grew, so too did anti-Semitism, and as he personally would experience this prejudice he would need to find a way to combat it.

In the last section of Book III, Nordau reaches the heights of degeneration when he addresses Friedrich Nietzsche, who he deems *the* philosopher of ego-mania. To Nordau, Nietzsche’s writing was utter garbage: “The first to last page of Nietzsche’s writings the careful

⁷² Ibid, 171.

⁷³ Ibid, 172.

reader seems to hear a madman, with flashing eyes, wild gestures, and foaming mouth spouting forth deafening bombast.”⁷⁴ After quoting a passage from Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality (Zur Genealogie der Moral)*, Nordau snidely remarks, “I have no explanation or interpretation of this profundity to offer.”⁷⁵ Nordau’s further problem with Nietzsche is that his philosophy suspends the categories of good and evil, “Nietzsche would seem to deny the legitimacy of a classification of actions from moral standpoints. ‘Nothing is true, all is permissible.’ There is no good and no evil. It is a superstition and hereditary prejudice to cling to these artificial notions.”⁷⁶ To Nordau, Nietzsche’s moral relativism was evidence of his degeneracy.

Nordau’s more telling argument, and longest mention of Jews, occurs in the section on Nietzsche. While discussing *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nordau takes issue with Nietzsche’s idea of the “slave-revolt in morality.” According to Nietzsche, the Jews were a subjugated race, who always had an opposing morality to the more dominant races. However, in an extraordinary event that in some ways defined modernity, the two switched in a “transvaluation of values.” This had occurred, according to Nietzsche, centuries earlier, beginning with the nailing of Christ to the cross. This revolt was:

...an act of vengeance on the master-race which had long oppressed the Jews, and the instrument of this vast vengeance was the Saviour. ‘Has not Israel by the very subterfuge of this “Redeemer,” this seeming adversary and destroyer of Israel attained the final goal of its sublime rage for vengeance? It is at least certain that *sub hoc signo* Israel, with its vengeance and transvaluation of all values has hitherto triumphed again and again over ideals, over all nobler ideals.’⁷⁷

This view of the world to Nordau was completely untrue, as he picks apart the argument as lacking logic: “Who was this Israel which conceived and executed the plan? Was it a parliament,

⁷⁴ Ibid, 416.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 419.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 426.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 423.

ministry, a ruler, a popular assembly? Was the plan before ‘Israel’ set about realizing it, submitted for general deliberation and resolution?”⁷⁸ Nordau’s answer to his rhetorical question was, of course, no one – it was simply not possible for this to have occurred. The issue remained however that Nietzsche’s slave revolt in morality had simply lent a philosophical patina to this age-old source of Christian Judeophobia – that the Jews killed Jesus. If Jews were a slave-race, as Nietzsche argued they were, then they must prove to the world that they were the opposite.

Nordau’s “Conversion”

Exactly when Nordau became a Zionist is not fully understood. It is most likely though that there was not one singular event that triggered it. His wife and daughter suggest that three different events combined to effect this transformation. The first took place in the summer of 1893, when Nordau went to stay at the German resort of Borkum, on the North Sea coast. Allegedly, when Nordau received his first dinner he was given a note stating, “We do not wish to see Jews here.”⁷⁹ The following day Nordau received another similar letter. The letters kept coming until the tenth day, when Nordau finally had enough and left. This seems to be the first major and overt incident of anti-Semitism that Nordau encountered. Anna and Maxa claim that after the incident, “He felt a profound distaste for the entire settling of life. He went straight to Antwerp and walked through the great galleries alone.... He tried to forget the stupid vulgarity of the Borkum incident but he found the impression indelible.”⁸⁰ This incident only confirmed Nordau’s supposition of a societal decline. This was in all likelihood the beginning of Nordau’s intellectual shift. Though he had previously written of anti-Semitism as a symptom and manifestation of society’s degeneracy, the personal experience of dealing with it may have

⁷⁸ Ibid, 423

⁷⁹ A. Nordau and M. Nordau, *Max Nordau*, 117.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 118.

placed in his mind the idea of how anti-Semitism, degeneration and the “Jewish question” could be resolved – through a muscular regeneration.

The second incident of anti-Semitism that encouraged him to see it as another disease of *fin de siècle* society was, like many Jews of the day, the Dreyfus affair in 1895. On his reaction to the affair, Anna and Maxa write, “For Max Nordau it meant the end of a process. Indignantly he now rejected the crippled solution of assimilation, and set out to seek another solution of the Jewish question, the urgency of which no man of good faith could any longer deny.”⁸¹ Though it might seem that Nordau’s encounter with anti-Semitism echoes Herzl’s encounter with the Dreyfus Affair and French anti-Semitism, the two are actually quite different. Even after his personal anti-Semitic encounters and the Dreyfus affair, Nordau did not immediately see Jewish sovereignty as the solution to the anti-Semitism that plagued *fin de siècle* society. It was at this precise moment, in 1896, when Nordau moved from diagnosing social problems to looking for solutions, that he received a visit from Herzl:

Herzl came to see Nordau, and read his book to him. His first words were: ‘Schiff says that I’m insane.’ For three consecutive days he came back reading, explaining, arguing. Max Nordau listened, answered, discussed. The idea pierced him like a sword of light. The air vibrated about those two.... He curbed himself, but he was overcome and impressed. At last he rose and opened his arms to his trembling friend: “If you are insane, we are insane together. Count on me!” Thus the Jewish State was born. The great message concerning the resurrection of the people was ready to go forth to all Israel.⁸²

Whether this hagiographic representation of that night was the birthplace of the Jewish State is a subject of historical debate. The fact remains that by the end of this visit from Herzl, Nordau became convinced that Jewish sovereignty might solve at least the social ill of anti-Semitism. He saw it as a solution to the perennial “Jewish question” that had been plaguing European society ever since the whole idea of emancipation first appeared at the end of the eighteenth century. He

⁸¹ Ibid, 118.

⁸² Ibid, 120.

also saw a resolution to Jewish degeneration. It is also important to note the cold, hard rationality of Nordau even in the face of an earth-shattering idea. It took three consecutive days of convincing and debating in order for Herzl to persuade Nordau into adopting his “insanity.” Nordau would be the first supporter and promoter of Herzl’s Zionistic idea.

This succession of events no doubt changed what Nordau believed in, where he saw the future of the world, and the future of Jewish people. Though many individuals quickly became Zionists (like Herzl) after the Dreyfus affair, Nordau would not seemingly change his priorities and mode of thought. His rationality simply would not allow for this change. It took multiple anti-Semitic experiences, as well as a shift in intellectual constructs all on top of a three-day long visit from Herzl for Nordau to agree to this “insanity.

3 **Max Nordau: The Racial Zionist**

Shortly after Herzl “converted “ Nordau to the Zionist cause, he quickly made his mark on the organization, giving the opening address at the First Zionist Congress. The address was a basic summary of the overall condition of the Jewish people across Europe at the time, which gave a very Herzlian sense⁸³ of what Zionism was bringing to the table. Overall, Nordau’s opening speech was grounded in political means of accomplishing the Zionist goal, as well as addressing the general issue of Jewish marginalization across Europe. As Nordau opened his speech, “The Western Jews meant emancipation to be real liberation, and hastened to draw the final conclusion therefrom. But the nations made him fear that he erred in being so heedlessly

⁸³ By this term I mean the implication of Zionism as a reaction to the rampant anti-Semitism of the day, the necessity to remove from persecution as soon as possible, and one that was also founded upon political values.

logical.”⁸⁴ Nordau believed that the Jewish people had jumped to the conclusion that Emancipation would improve their situation. Much like Herzl, and many of the initial Zionists, Nordau suggested that political Zionism was a means by which the failures of emancipation could be overcome. Zionism was not yet a goal to be actualized through a regeneration of the Jewish race. However, Nordau’s mode of thought and the transmutation of race and nation was evident. As Nordau describes the evolution of emancipation:

The emancipation of the Jews was not a consequence of the conviction that grave injury had been done to a race, that it had been treated most terribly, and that it was time to atone for the injustice of a thousand years; it was solely the result of the geometrical mode of thought of French rationalism of the 18th century.⁸⁵

Nordau saw that the emancipated status was not a genuine gesture; yes in France, and later across Europe, the Jews had been “freed.” However this occurred not because of a benevolent and kind society, but purely by extending the conclusions of the Enlightenment. Everyone was, on paper, to be treated equally. The Jews became emancipated on paper, an act that did not protect them, nor guarantee their safety. After centuries of being subject to wearing a yellow badge and live in ghettos, Nordau reminded the audience that emancipation by law could not change everything:

The majority of Jews are a race of accursed beggars. More industrious and more able than the average European, not to speak at all of the inert Asiatic and African, the Jew is condemned to the most extreme pauperism, because he is not allowed to use his powers freely. This poverty grinds down his character and destroys his body.⁸⁶

Jews were a “race of accursed beggars” because of their constant state of pauperism and by being targets of anti-Semitism. Even though he believes the Jews to be more “industrious and more able” their marginalization position did not allow for these natural abilities to be fully utilized. It

⁸⁴ Nordau, “Address at the First Congress” *To His People*, 64. For complete German see, Nordau, “I Kongressrede,” *Zionistische Schriften*, 39-57.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

is also is also important to note how Nordau believes that the Jewish body's degradation and feebleness was also a further manifestation of their marginalized status. He explicitly blames the impoverished conditions across Europe as a key means to the destruction and degraded state of the Jewish body.

Nordau's concluding remarks in 1897 began to set his Zionism apart. Predating the notion of muscular Judaism as a means by which Zionism was to be accomplished, Nordau directly links the failures of civilization and the Jewish question, he also sets the stage for his paradigm-shifting speech at the next congress:

To Jewish distress no-one can remain indifferent, neither Christian nor Jew. It is a great sin to let a race to whom even their worst enemies do not deny ability, degenerate in intellectual and physical distress. It is a sin against them and the work of civilization, in the interest of which they have not been useless co-workers. That Jewish distress cries for help. To find that help will be the great work of this congress.⁸⁷

Linking the Jewish condition to degeneracy, Nordau concisely summarizes the congress's goal as the improvement of the Jew's marginalization, but the implication for achieving such a goal has far ranging consequences. He places the accomplishment as one that rested on all people, not just on the shoulders of them Jews, though he still does explicitly place them at fault. The sin committed against the Jewish race was a burden which civilization in its entirety bore. What is most critical about this statement is that he equates the worsening situation for Jews with a furthering of degeneration. He believes that if the "distress" of the Jewish race were to continue then the Jewish race would further degenerate. This degeneration would also be one not only of the mind, like the "criminals" he described in *Degeneration*, but also of body. He did not yet have a theory by which this process could be avoided or reversed.

During this year between the first and second congresses, Nordau's close friend,

⁸⁷ Ibid., 74.

Madam Olga von Novikoff,⁸⁸ wrote a personal letter challenging him on two issues: the first, his marriage to a non-Jew, the second, his support of the Zionism. To both Nordau responded :

I must guard myself, lest she convert me to Judaism after she's embraced it. In any event, she would be the only believing Jew in the household. But enough of such jokes. The base souls who attack me so viciously do not understand that I am not a Jew by religion but by race, by historical sentiment, a Jew in response to the calumnies that afflict us, a Jew because of the tortures inflicted on those of my race. If the Jews were happy, I'd have little to do with them."⁸⁹

Nordau saw Judaism as a racially based inheritance, but he believed his protestant wife could be more *religiously* Jewish than he. Though he does not provide a full resolution as to how he could marry a non-Jew, Nordau clearly thought that while he may have been fighting for the Jewish race, that did not mean he had to marry a Jew. This personal letter echoes many of the sentiments that Nordau put forth to the various congresses he addressed. His equivalence of being Jewish with the belonging to a persecuted race, rather than a religious group chosen by God to maintain a covenant (or something suggesting a covenanted people), fits his world view outlined in *Degeneration* and *Paradoxes* while also pointing the way towards Zionism.

By stating, "I am not a Jew by religion but by race" Nordau implies two categories of Jews, religious and racial. The latter did not require a belief in the religion in order to tie one to the nation as it was inborn. The former could be chosen by, or rejected by anyone, as Nordau's protestant wife could be more Jewish than him. Most importantly, this letter shows that Nordau's views at the congresses were not just rhetoric for public display, but also informed his most private correspondence. He had fully adopted and become a Zionist, as it was burden on the race, which he could not ignore. Finally, by speak of the "souls who attack me so viciously," Nordau

⁸⁸ This close friend, Madam Olga von Novikoff, was an anti-Semitic Russian aristocrat with whom Nordau maintained a personal correspondence from 1886 to 1902. Stanislawski proposes that the two may have had an intimate relationship. See Stanislawski, *Zionism in the fin de siècle*, chapter 3 for the only academic work to have examined the letters. It should also be noted that their last time of face-to-face interaction came a few months before Nordau married his wife, Anna Kaufmann.

⁸⁹ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 67. This is a translation done by Stanislawski of the letters exchanged between Nordau and Novikova.

shows that at the time of his adoption of Zionism, it was not just Madam Novikoff who disapproved of his newfound cause.

Later that year, at the Second Zionist Congress, Nordau again summarized the marginalized and persecuted state of the Jewish race his opening address, a situation that had changed little since the last congress. He went country by country in Europe, as well as in the United States, and nowhere did he list the condition of the Jewish people as even acceptable. In this progression across Europe, Nordau reassessed the Jewish position in France, with the Dreyfus case in mind. Nordau points out that during the trials:

[The] French Jew-haters have invented an idiotic story of a so-called Jewish syndicate, employing unlimited sums of money, to arrange a diabolical conspiracy against the French State.... Jewry saw that not Dreyfus alone, but the whole Jewish race was indicted, and did not open its mouth to claim, at least the right of defence.⁹⁰

While further enforcing the traditional Zionist historiography as growing primarily out of this affair, Nordau draws a further conclusion about the Jewish people. He suggests that during this crisis their quietest timidity, and desire to avoid conflict (like Boyarin's model "sissy Jew") led not only to an indictment against Dreyfus, but against the entire race. No Jewish press or individual challenged the idea of a secret Jewish syndicate or advocated for Dreyfus's innocence. Nordau accused the rest of European Jewry of attempting to avoid further conflict, by accepting these claims and hanging Dreyfus out to dry. This was a mentality that Nordau believed had to change. He sums up the lack of Jewish solidarity:

There you have that famous Jewish solidarity! The race that first among mankind raised the cry, "Justice!" whose eternal glory in history it will remain that it was the first to understand and glorify God as a God of Justice, as a just judge, this race has kept aloof from a struggle for right, only because the victim of a violation of the law was a Jew.⁹¹

Condemning first the failure of Jewish solidarity in the Dreyfus case. Nordau again romanticizes

⁹⁰ Nordau, "Address at the Second Congress" *To His People*, 80-81. For complete German see, Nordau, "II Kongressrede," *Zionistische Schriften*, 58-76.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

the ancient past of the people as one where they had strong solidarity. He saw the Jewish race as one that used to have strong principles of solidarity, but more importantly of justice. In the current marginalized state the traits that had separated this race from others had been lost. Therefore the Jews were led to perpetuate their condition, as Nordau concludes his analysis with what he calls the, “ineradicable Jewish optimism, to call out even in looking at the Dreyfus case! *Gam Zo le-Tova*: ‘Even this is for good.’”⁹² “*Gam zo le-tova*” suggested that no matter how the situation was, the ultimate result would eventually be for the good. This would be manifested through not respond or acting to change the persecuted and marginalized state of the Jewish people. It further marked an attitude of acceptance and refusal to react even in the face of injustice (Boyarin’s “sissy boy” at its most advanced). This had been the rallying cry of Jews across centuries as they endured persecutions and social marginalization, an attitude Nordau rejected as he witnessed in the Dreyfus affair.

After this assessment, of the common trope of Jewish acceptance of inferiority and unwillingness to fight back, Nordau offered how he saw the actualization of Zionism reversing this general trend:

Zionism has awakened Jewry to new life, morally through the national ideal, materially through physical rearing.... We must think once again of creating a Jewry of muscles.... For the first time since Bar-Kochba does there exist among the Jews an inclination to show themselves, and to show the world, how much vitality they still possess.⁹³

Zionism was the awakening of not only an oppressed minority, but of a vital race. The method by which the Zionist goal would then be actualized was through the creation of a “Jewry of muscles,” a Jewry emboldened by both a transformed identity and physical body that would not allow for Dreyfus Affair or similar scandals to occur at their expense, all the while saying, “*gam zo letova*.” Nordau references the Bar Kochba revolt against Roman rule, led by Shimon Bar

⁹² Ibid., 84.

⁹³ Ibid., 88.

Kochba, which took place between 132 and 136 CE. The revolt, the last major Jewish military uprising against imperial rule, was successful for a time, but ultimately failed and Bar Kochba and his followers were publicly and brutally executed. Traditional rabbinic Judaism remembers the Bar Kochba revolt as a disaster and a warning against military uprising, not as a moment of Jewish heroism.⁹⁴ That was until the era of Zionism.

Nordau was not the first to resurrect Bar Kochba's image to construct a mythic Jewish past of military heroism. 1893 saw the creation of the Bar Kochba Student Association in Prague, and in 1898 the Bar Kochba gymnastics Association in Berlin opened.⁹⁵ Both these groups, and then Nordau, looked to the figure of Bar Kochba through a nationalistic lens as a means of negating the stereotype of the weak ghetto Jew. As Nordau regaled the Second Zionist Congress, he hoped that the recovered story of Bar Kochba would inspire the Jewish race of the present by reminding it of its muscular past. By creating and rebuilding a heroic epoch, Nordau was illustrating what the Jewish race *could* be; the recreation of this past would be manifested through Racial Zionism.

The final aspect of Nordau's vision was how he saw the future of Zionism and Judaism as irrevocably intertwined. Nordau believed not only that Zionism would save the Jewish people of Europe, but also would be the future of the Jewish race, "It may be that the Zionists are yet a minority of the Jews. But because of them it will be rejuvenated, through them it will obtain new life, and be rescued at a future time."⁹⁶ Thus, the Jewish race would be regenerated through Zionism, which in his mind was not just about Jewish political sovereignty, but was also about a

⁹⁴ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 53-55.

⁹⁵ For a further description of the various Bar Kochba associations see Presner, *Muscular Judasim*, 113 n245. For more on the associations as well as general Jewish gymnastics associations across Europe see, Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni. 2006. *Emancipation through Muscles*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

⁹⁶ Nordau, "Address at the Second Congress," *To His People*. 90.

transformation of the race itself. As he concluded his speech:

Judaism is Zionism and Zionism is Judaism. Any party which is content with slavery, or looks forwards to an early natural death of Judaism stands coldly aside. Adapting the well-known words of the Austrian poet, Grillparzer, we Zionists may exclaim: 'In our camp is Israel, in the other dead limbs.'⁹⁷

Not only were the people and body of the Jewish race to be regenerated, but those who stood aside awaited a sure death, of both Jews and Judaism. Again, Nordau uses of bodily terminology to describe how the Zionists were to succeed. In the failed camp of Judaism were dead limbs, on the Zionist side, a Jewry of muscles.

Nordau would look beyond the Jewish past in order to construct his paradigm of muscular Judaism. In an 1899 speech to a group of Viennese Jewish Students (whose Zionism reportedly prompted him to call them, "heroic children, these youngsters,"⁹⁸) he compared Zionists to ancient Spartans. Nordau gave a description of the subjugation of the Helots by the Spartans in ancient Greece, and spoke of how he had grown up detesting the Helots for their nominalized and "unmanly" position under Spartan rule. He further likened the Jewish majority of Europe to the Helots – Zionists he saw in a different light

Zionist Jews are not Helots. They are Spartans. 'Return under the shield or on it – such today is the motto of the Jewish Zionist, as it was of Sparta. The Zionists live in the proud conscience of the great honor to be a Jew.... For to be a Zionist is to be doubly and trebly a fighter!'⁹⁹

This was indeed a rousing and insinuating description of what racial Zionism was meant to be – comparing Zionists to the ancient Spartans. It was not just a minor alteration of the Jewish people. Nordau saw the Zionist Jews as a warrior race that most of all was ready to fight, proud of their Jewish heritage to a state of warmongering. With this rhetoric Nordau implied that not only were Jews ready to fight – they were to be prepared to die in the name of Zionism. The

⁹⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁹⁸ A. Nordau and M. Nordau, *Max Nordau*, 151.

⁹⁹ Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften*, 376-377. Translation mine based off translations from Presner, *Muscular Judaism*, 76, as well as from A. Nordau and M. Nordau, *Max Nordau*, 155.

statement of “on or under shield” meant either fighting and living or being carried back, dead, on it.¹⁰⁰ Returning without the shield meant it had been cast off to make running away from battle easier. A Spartan or Zionist warrior was to return victorious (with) or heroically dead (on) from battle. The romanticizing of war, but moreover dying for one’s country was the core idea that Nordau was suggesting.¹⁰¹ A revolutionary idea given that dying in the name of a Jewish nation had not yet even been imaginable four years prior. This was an utter upheaval of the weak, ghetto Jew that had been dying for centuries due to anti-Semitism and other oppressive forces. This view speaks even more to Nordau’s prior assertions in *Paradoxes* of the inevitable clash of nations which would outlast the twentieth century. The weak nations and races would perish – a Zionist nation like Sparta would not.

These three speeches, given in 1897, 1898 and 1899, respectively, illustrate the evolution of Nordau’s muscle Jew as he integrated his earlier philosophy into a ideology of Jewish regeneration. What is more, all of this occurred within Zionism’s first five years. At a time when the “celebrities” of Zionism were Herzl and Nordau, Nordau’s fame outside European Jewry was arguably even greater than Herzl at this point because of his earlier widely read cultural critiques. It was from this position that Nordau argued for and promulgated the concept of muscular Judaism.

¹⁰⁰ This statement originally comes from Plutarch who writes about a Spartan women who, “handed her son his shield, and exhorted him: 'Son, either with this or on this.’” See, Plutarch. “Sayings of Spartan Women (241.16)” *Moralia*. Lipsiae: B.G. Teubneri. 1959. For a further discussion of Spartan mothers, see, Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, Oxford University Press, 2002. Especially 57-64.

¹⁰¹ The idea of dying for one’s country, and in this case the Jewish nation, developed its own mythology beginning with Joseph Trumpeldor, when he supposedly said after the 1902 Battle of Tel Hai, “Tov lamut be’ad artsinu.” Translated as “it is good to die for our land,” the Hebrew phrase became a central part of Zionist nation-building, thematized in schools and made an irony in the wildly popular film *Late Summer Blues*. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 89-90, see also 57-62.

The Vehicles of Racial Zionism

By examining Nordau's speeches, which opened each early congress, questions about race emerge as central to Zionism's emergence. Although Nordau may have been the first to publically speak of a Jewry of muscles, the spread of gymnastics associations, and the improvement of the body by both Jewish and non-Jews was extensive across *fin de siècle* Europe.¹⁰² Quite often this was undertaken not for personal gain or pleasure, but for nationalistic purpose. Presner places *fin de siècle* Jewish interest in the body in a broader, specifically German context, into which Nordau's doctrine fits. He connects Nordau's ideologies to the ideas put forth by Johann Fichte shortly after the fall of Prussia to France in 1806, which directly related the nation to the body. As Presner summarizes Fichte, "the German people were actually a 'single body' and a 'single nation.' German unity already existed, he maintained, because they shared a common cultural tradition, a common language, a common history and a common place."¹⁰³ Drawing upon this assumption, if the Germans were a single grouping, the Jews were also a singular nation through traditions, history, and most importantly – body. If that nation was going to grow and become a reality, the body would need to be developed. Fichte's physical notions were realized later in the century through Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, "the father of German *Turnen* (gymnastics)."¹⁰⁴ Presner further explains the concept of *Turnen* versus the common translation of gymnastics,¹⁰⁵ "while the two have some overlap in terms of practice, they are not equivalent

¹⁰² For a discussion of the general German *Turnen* movement see, Fred Eugene Leonard, "Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and the Development of Popular Gymnastics (*Vereinsturnen*) in Germany," *American Physical Education Review*, x.1 (March 1905), for a modern-day academic overview see, Svenja Goltermann. "Exercise and Perfection: Embodying the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *European Review of History*. 11.3 (2004)

¹⁰³ Presner, *Muscular Judaism*, 113.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰⁵ Here gymnastics does not refer to the Olympic sport, but implies more of bodybuilding, weight-training and creating an aesthetically pleasing, strong figure.

since *Turnen* had a specifically German bent.”¹⁰⁶ *Turnen* was the advancement and building of the body in the service of the German nation. Thus, with a single word the advancement of the nation was tied to the advancement of the body. This connectedness was what Nordau evoked when he called for the rise of muscular Judaism in Zionism

The Bar Kochba Gymnastics association established *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (The Jewish Gymnastic Journal), a monthly publication that was a central organ for German Zionism and Jewish physical regeneration between 1899 and the end of WWI.¹⁰⁷ More importantly, this journal would come to expand the definition of *Turnen* beyond German advancement to include any nationalistic cause. The journal would also be a vehicle by which Nordau’s values could be disseminated to the journal’s readers. An article entitled “Muskeljüden,” (Muscle Jews) a term he had introduced two years earlier at the Second Zionist Congress, was featured in 1900 in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*. The article suggested that in some ways Zionist Jews of the present were better off than their Hellenistic predecessors of Bar Kochba’s time:

Our new muscle Jews have not yet regained the heroism of their forefather... to take part in battles and compete with the Hellenic athletes and strong northern barbarian. But morally speaking, we are better off today than yesterday, for the old Jewish circus performers of yore were ashamed of their Judaism and sought, by way of a surgical pinch, to hide the sign of their religious affiliation... while today members of Bar Kochba proudly and freely proclaim their Jewishness. May the Jewish Gymnastics Society flourish and thrive and become ardent, models for Jewish life everywhere.¹⁰⁸

The “surgical pinch” Nordau spoke of was the process of *epispasmós* (stretching), whereby circumcised Jewish Olympic athletes would surgically uncircumcise themselves in order to compete in the games.¹⁰⁹ Nordau compared the Jews of the Bar Kochba Gymnastics Association to Greco-Jewish athletes, but stressed that modern-day athletes would never perform such an

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 245 n19.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 3

¹⁰⁸ Max Nordau, “Muskel Judentum” *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, (June 1900 no.2) 10-11. Translation by Todd Presner in, *Muscle Jews*, 3. For full German see Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften*, 379-381.

¹⁰⁹ For a more in depth look at the process and logic behind the “*epispasmós*” see chapter 9 of, Allen Edwardes, *Erotica Judaica: A Sexual History of the Jews* New York: Julian Press, 1967

operation. They were proud of their Jewish heritage, as the magazine circulated both notions of physical progress, as well as Jewish national pride in the form of Zionism. Finally, Nordau emphatically endorsed what *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* stood for and saw its publication as a beacon of hope for the regeneration of the race.

Nordau's second featured article in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, "Was Bedeutet das Turnen für uns Juden?" (What Does Gymnastics Mean for us Jews?), appeared in 1902.¹¹⁰ Four years after he postulated muscular Judaism, Nordau again called for a regeneration of the Jewish race. Moreover, this article offered encouraging words to Jews:

No one need be satisfied with the muscle they are given. Everyone can have the muscles that he wishes for. Methodical, persistent exercise is all that is necessary. Every Jew who is or believes himself weak can attain the musculature of an athlete.¹¹¹

Significantly less strongly worded than his earlier calls for muscle Jews, Nordau implores Jews to work and improve upon their bodies. Here can again be witnessed his general worldview of slow, steady and methodical progress of the race – this time through corporeally improvement.

The publication of Nordau in such a magazine illustrates two larger points. First, Nordau occupied a central position within the Zionist organization, since the Bar Kochba Gymnastics Association was founded in 1898, the same year he first articulated muscular Judaism. There were Jewish gymnastics associations across Europe before Nordau spoke of muscular Jews. Such clubs existed in Britain and the US earlier in the century, and the first Jewish gymnastics club in Europe was founded in Istanbul in 1895.¹¹² But it was not until similar clubs connected physical regeneration to Zionism that their gymnastics publications

¹¹⁰ Max Nordau, "Was Bedeutet das Turnen für uns Juden?" *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, June 1902 no.7 112. Translation by Todd Presner in, *Muscular Judaism*, 59. For full German see Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften*, 382-388

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² American and Britain had such clubs dating back much earlier in the century, see Presner, *Muscle Jews*, 120. For more on these clubs see George Eisen "Jewish History and the Ideology of Modern Sport: Interpretations and Approaches," *Journal of Sports History* 25.3 (fall 1998) 482-531.

became more widespread. Explicitly Zionist gymnastics associations only occurred *after* Nordau's speech at the Second Zionist Congress. Secondly, the publication of such a journal is an indication of the rising body politics and simultaneous enthusiasm for Zionism amongst central European Jews of the time. Nordau's call had inspired an entire sub-culture to adopt and actualize the notions of muscular Judaism.

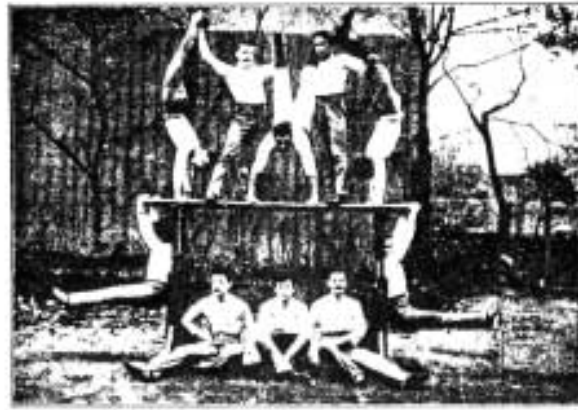
It is important to note that while Nordau may not have explicitly spoke of a regeneration of women, though he did not use gendered terms, *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* did have articles for women as well as exercises specifically designed for them. Though the heroic male tradition was no doubt the primary emphasis of *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, the journal was not exclusive to men. As a 1900 article reveals:

Daughters of Israel, whose beauty has radiated across all time since Sara and is still today uncontested, recognized and sung; there is a Miriam, a Deborah, a Judith, a Ruth, and an Esther for you to emulate...take part in everything that endows your body with power, agility, and grace. Become a strong and healthy sex and you too will play an important part in helping to solve the Jewish question.¹¹³

The *fin de siècle* Jewish body culture applied to both men and women, and romanticized past biblical and other ancient Jewish heroines, just as Bar Kochba had been resurrected to inspire Jewish men. Ultimately, the point however of this regeneration was for the benefit of the nation. By having both sexes physically strong (and women beautiful), the overall body of the nation would be more readily regenerated and built up into a mighty nation.

¹¹³ *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (1900, no. 7:75) Translation by Presner, *Muscular Judasim*, 129.

Aus der jüdischen Turnerwelt.



Herren-Pyramide.

Figure 2
“From the World of Jewish Gymnastics,”
Die Jüdische Turnzeitung, 1902, no. 1:12.

By its tenth anniversary in 1909, the Bar Kochba Gymnastics Association had 57 clubs across Europe – primarily in Germany and Austria-Hungary – and similar associations throughout other parts of Europe and America. In fact the rise of such clubs gave birth to the “Jewish Gymnastics Federation” whose charter stated, “The purpose of the Jewish Gymnastics association is to cultivate gymnastics as the means of corporeal improvement of the Jewish people in the sense of the national-Jewish idea”¹¹⁴ By this time Nordau’s strong rhetoric at the opening congresses about a Jewry of muscles had become a Europe-wide phenomenon. Rhetoric similar to Nordau’s ideals of regeneration in the face of degeneration were used throughout *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, as writer after writer emphasized the ultimate effect of a weak Jewish body. Richard Blum’s 1900 article illustrated this well: “Only the beneficial education of the entire human being, through gymnastics, protects against any sort of corporeal and mental

¹¹⁴ *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (1905, no. 12:224) Translation by Presner, *Muscular Judasim*, 121.

crippling and deformation.”¹¹⁵ Pushing this logic further, if the race was going to be improved, and a nation realized, physical rejuvenation was the first step. More than just this connection to degeneracy in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* is the transmutation of nation and race. In another 1900 article “The Tasks of the Jewish Gymnast,” Emanuel Edelstein writes that preparation being done in clubs across Europe anticipated “a battle for nationality and a race war.”¹¹⁶ Linking back to the ideas of Fichte, the improvement of the Jewish body was in preparation for defending the nation/race, through a realization of Nordau’s muscular Judasim.

Manifested through the dissemination of *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* were three critical factors defining racial Zionism. First, the Jews who were members of the clubs and read the journal were participating in the reinvention of the race across Europe. Second, this reinvention of the race was inextricably tied to the growth and furthering of the Jewish nation overall. Finally, the direct tie to Nordau’s ideologies, both pre and post Zionism, can be found in the publication of the journal with the physical regeneration of the race leading to a reversal of the overall degeneration of the day as well as preparation for the impending wars of race/nation.

Nordau’s racial Zionism also demanded data to identify the degeneration that he thought Zionism would overcome. To that end, one of the key contributions to Zionism that Nordau promoted was the social scientific study of the Jewish body throughout Europe. He articulated this in his speech at the Fifth Zionist Congress, where he posed a long series of questions in his address:

We must have comprehensive answers to the question: How is the Jewish people physically constituted? What is its average number? What are its anatomical peculiarities? What are the figures of the sick and of mortality? How many days of illness has the Jew on an average every year? What is his longevity? What diseases does he die of? What is the number of marriages and of births? How many criminals, lunatics, deaf mutes, cripples, blind and epileptics does the Jewish people number? Has it crimes peculiar to it, and if so, what is their nature? How many

¹¹⁵ Presner, *Muscular Judaism*, 129.

¹¹⁶ *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (1900, no. 6:61) Translation, *Ibid.*, 128.

Jews live in towns and how many in rural districts? What are the occupations of the Jews? How do the Jews work, what do they earn, how much do they possess? What do they eat and drink; how do they live; how do they dress? How much do they devote from their earnings for maintenance, clothing, rent, and for spiritual needs? All these things must be known if one wishes to be thoroughly acquainted with a people.¹¹⁷

Nordau's obsessive, ranting list of questions echoes his early writing style of near graphomania; however, this obsessive list of questions was critical. Nordau was not simply involved in strong rhetoric regarding the muscular regeneration of Jewry – he wanted this process to be grounded in the science of the day. He moreover wanted this study to be undertaken in great details and depth. The year after Nordau's speech, Alfred Nossig created the Association for Jewish Statistics, again suggesting Nordau's vast influence.¹¹⁸ Following Nordau's call for statistical research, in 1903, the Association published *Jüdische Statistik*, where a reader would find the results to many of Nordau's questions. The goal in both Nordau and Nossig's mind was to use this data to implement muscular Judaism and carry out the physical rejuvenation of the Jewish race. As Presner points out, "The predominately Zionist emphasis on statistical analysis of the Jewish population played an important role in the development of Jewish race science and hygiene discourses in the first decades of the twentieth century."¹¹⁹ This was not just a racial study meant for the advancement of science. The entire point of the scientific compilation was to posit the flaws of the Jewish body so that they could be improved upon.

Two years later, in 1905, the *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden* (Journal for the Demographics and Statistics of Jews) appeared. This publication, started under the editorship of Arthur Ruppin, published a yearly study of the Jewish people until 1931. Its function was to compile statistics about Jews' racial features, muscularity, mentality as well as

¹¹⁷ Nordau, "Address at the Fifth Congress," *To His People*, 122-123. For full German see, Nordau, "V Kongressreder," *Zionistische Schriften*, 112-139.

¹¹⁸ Presner, *Muscular Judasim*, 109.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109

marriage, death, birth, insanity, and criminality across Europe.¹²⁰ Working from a perspective of building the nation through the definition and codification of the race, the WZO and Zionism more generally aimed to manipulate these statistics in the service of a nation. As historian Mitchell Hart further illustrates in his *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity*, Zionists used these methods “as one expression of the impulse to assume the role of a ‘government of the Jews,’ undertaking those tasks – census taking, the shaping of economic and social policy, concern over public health and hygiene – usually associated with political and official administrative bodies.¹²¹ According to Hart, these statistics, though compiled to answer questions about the race, could be turned around and used as a vehicle by the Ppolitical Zionists as a legitimizing the idea of a Jewish nation. At the same time, although Hart reads Zionists’ interest in social sciences through the lens of political Zionism, underpinning the whole enterprise of Jewish statistics was Nordau’s interest in race and the Jewish body.

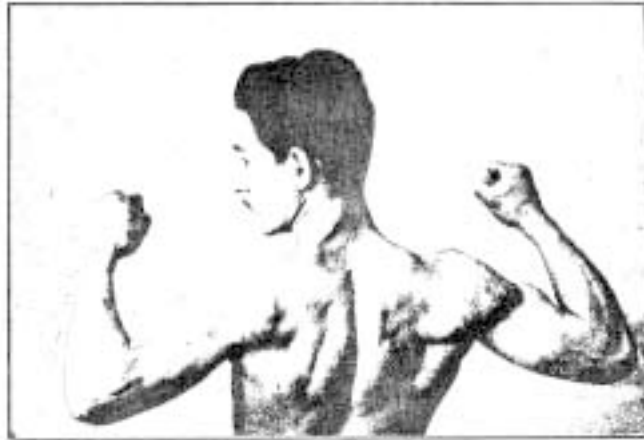
In 1898 Nordau’s “Jewry of muscle” concept was an idea at best, and Zionism had barely taken root; a reinvention of the Jewish people was a mere abstraction. However this changed rapidly as Nordau brought Zionism and Jewish body culture together. Jews across Europe began to use exercise as a means by which their personal identities as Zionists could be developed and romanticized the ancient Jewish past, as they discovered heroic Jewish fighters themselves seemingly inspired by mythic Spartans. Nordau’s ideas were actualized as the muscle Jew, who flaunted his, and sometimes her, muscles on the pages of the new Jewish magazines.

¹²⁰ Efon, *Defenders*, 166-174.

¹²¹ Hart, Mitchell *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 38.

E.M. Lillen and the Illustration of a Regenerated Race

The pages of *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* were lavishly illustrated with drawings of the imagined Jewish race and photographs of the new Jewish man and woman realized. While important for the spread of racial, corporeal and national regeneration, these depictions were practical and simple. They showed men in various poses and positions that emphasized physicality, depictions of a new physicality of the race. There were also images of strong new women. The majority of images in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* were in fact photographs, since the magazine was interested in showing real “muscle Jews” in action. The images were grainy, but since they were photographs, they documented some kind of external reality in the form of a buff Jewish body (see figures 2 and 3). The depictions were not gargantuan larger than life figures. Instead, the illustrations were meant to inspire readers about the possibilities of their own bodily regeneration. As such the images were often accompanied by workout guides for achieving the results shown in the various images. As figure 3 shows the subject’s back and arm muscles, they are not disproportionately large; instead they are built, well defined, yet reasonably achieved. The contrast between figure 1 and figures 2 and 3 should be noted that the subjects in the latter are shown upright, usually standing, with straight backs, while the former is shown hunched-over and sitting. This contrast of upright, standing and strong with bent-over, sitting and weak is a common trope that defines the difference between the muscle Jew and the Diasporic weak Jew.



Gut durchgebildete Rücken- und Armmuskulatur.
(Max Cohn, „Bar Kochba“-Berlin).

Figure 3
“Well-trained Back and Arm Muscles”
Die Jüdische Turnzeitung, 1904, no. 5:106.

In contrast to this plain visualization stands the work of Zionist visual artists. These artists sought to illustrate both the weak, Diaspora Jew as well as the strong imagined muscular Jew. A built, defined (nearly always male) body was idealized, both in the depictions of a romanticized past, as well as of what the Jewish body was meant to look like in the future. Of this group of artists, Ephraim Moshe Lilien stands out.

The creative works of these artists responded to, and potentially internalized, the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the day. In addition to being perceived as physically inferior, Jews were thought of as unable to create works of art. This is best articulated by Richard Wagner in his “Judaism in Music,” first published in 1850, “The Jew’s sensory perceptual talent has never been sufficient to give rise to plastic artists: From time immemorial, their eyes have been busy with far more practical things than beauty and the spiritual content of the formal world of appearances. We know nothing of a Jewish architect or sculptor in our times.”¹²² Borrowing Sander Gilman’s logic, if muscular Judaism was the internalization and rejection of this rhetoric

¹²² Presner provides his own translation of Wagner, see, *Muscular Judaism*, 76.

around the body, then Zionist art was the internalization of the rhetoric regarding Jews' lack of artistic capabilities. This epitomized a cultural attitude with which Lilien and other Jewish artists had to contend with in the late nineteenth century. Just as Nordau had been impacted by the anti-Semitic attitudes regarding the Jewish body, and found its resolution through muscular Judaism; so too did Lilien and other artists internalize these ideas and respond by producing Zionist art. Their goal was to prove such notions wrong through the realization of art that was wholly Jewish – Lilien even more so as he embodied both the renewal of culture and of the strong race.

Lilien became influential in the early years of the WZO, since he and Martin Buber did much of the organizing of the “stormy incident” – art exhibition of the Fifth Zionist Congress. Gilya Schmidt claims that what is even more important to the growth of Zionist Art is that its creation was a fusing of racial/physical regeneration and cultural rejuvenation, “Jewish physical regeneration could not proceed without a spiritual renaissance – these works of art were tangible evidence of the Jewish spirit, and of a renewal of that spirit.”¹²³ By bridging both cultural and racial Zionism, Lilien's art was crucial to the early development of Zionism. Mark Gelber points out the larger connection of race and art:

While it is true that the German words for race and blood, “Rasse” and “Blut,” are polysemic signifiers that, given contextualization, may be free of racist or genetic connotations, these terms are employed by Buber and an entire segment of German Cultural Zionist writers precisely in their racialist sense.¹²⁴

Extrapolating further from Gelber's centralization of race and blood, as literally defining the Jewish people has large-scale implications for Zionism as a whole. Racial regeneration for Nordau occurred through a physical regeneration of the body; however, Gelber suggests that similar racial tones penetrated the entire Zionist movement.

¹²³ Schmidt, *Art and Artists*, 3.

¹²⁴ Gelber, Mark H. 2000. *Melancholy pride: Nation, Race, and Gender in the German Literature of Cultural Zionism*. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer. 134.

Examining Zionism with Gelber's notion in mind the traditional dichotomy of Zionism is transformed. Political Zionism's aim was a Jewish nation. Nordau and other Zionists saw the creation of such a nation as directly linked to notions of race. Cultural Zionists wanted a renewal of the Jewish spirit and people. Many of these cultural Zionists would think of this renewal through a regeneration of the Jewish race. The link between political and cultural was the body. Racial Zionism was the creation of a strong, muscled Jewish nation. The process by which this nation was created would cause a renewal of Jews in all aspects: spiritually, physically, culturally and racially. In Lilien's art these ideas all converged.

E.M. Lilien's Judenstil

Lilien, like Nordau, was born in Eastern Europe, in Drohobycz, Galicia in 1874. In 1894, after winning a prize in a competition to design a diploma, he used the prize money to move to Vienna and enroll in the Academy of Arts. He stayed briefly at the academy and soon after moved to Munich, where the *Jugendstil* movement was growing.¹²⁵ His early works of art, depicted the proletariat and themes of class strife. Like Nordau, it is not entirely clear exactly when Lilien became a Zionist, but his first Jewish themed artwork appeared in 1900 in *Juda*, a compilation of Jewish and Zionist poetry. Soon after publication of *Juda*, Lilien began having Zionist meetings in his studio. He would join the WZO, and be instrumental in starting the Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem. Lilien remained an advocate for Zionism until his death in 1925.¹²⁶

Lilien is often referred to as the most well known Zionist artist.¹²⁷ His avant-garde, art nouveau style¹²⁸ is often categorized as part of the *Jugendstil*, a popular movement of the time

¹²⁵ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 101-105.

¹²⁶ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 112-15.

¹²⁷ This designation has been given by Presner (21), Stanislawski (99) and Schmidt (153). For more on Lilien and his placement as the "Zionist Artist" see, Orna and Micha Bar-Am. *Painting with Light: The photographic*

that utilized flowing curves, natural features and an overall harmonization of the image wishing to be portrayed.¹²⁹ Michael Stanislawski takes the *Jugendstil* description one step further as he coins the term “Judenstil” to describe Lilien’s art:

Lilien’s extraordinary mélange of decadence and Jewishness – the admixture of *Jugendstil* *Judentum*... a nationalistic Jewish art that would at once decry the sterility and unnaturalness of bourgeois Jewish society, celebrate sexuality and physicality as well as the life of the workingman, and promote the rejuvenation and potential freedom of the Jewish people.¹³⁰

Lilien’s artwork can thus be seen as a means by which the “unnatural” or degenerate body of European Jewry could be represented and reconstructed in a strong, muscular form. Presner agrees with Stanislawski’s coinage of “*Judenstil*,” but places Lilien against the general backdrop of the *fin de siècle* Decadent movement, which Nordau saw as symptomatically degenerate.¹³¹ According to Presner, “Lilien’s art requires a reevaluation of conventional understandings of decadence as simply tantamount to decline, sickness, and senescence precisely because he placed his iconography of decadence in the service of the Zionist concept of progress and Jewish rejuvenation.”¹³² Traditionally, decadence evoked the idea of renouncing any ties to progress or improvement. Lilien’s art would forgo this standard and use the same techniques and concepts to

Aspect in the Work of E.M. Lilien. Tel Aviv, Israel: Tel Aviv Museum of Art. 1991 also, Rûti Ôfeq and Ephraim Lilien. *E.M. Lilien, the First Zionist Artist: Letters, Etchings, Drawings, Pphotographs*. [The Open Museum ... 8th February 1997]. Tefen: Open Musuem. 1997.

¹²⁸ Trying to localize Lilien’s art into one category is impossible if not foolish. Presner, writes Lilien’s development of *Judenstil* into the larger European decadent movement, see *Muscular Judaism*, 88-92. The other of placement of Lilien focused purely on *Jugendstil* without the connection to decadence, Gilya Schmidt, *Art and Artists*, 51-89 and Michael Stanislawski, 98-115. See also Heyd, Milly “*Lilien and Beardsley: ‘To Pure all Things are Pure,’*” *Journal of Jewish Art*, 7 (1980), 58-69.

¹²⁹ For more on the *Jugendstil* movement see, Siegfried Wichmann. *Jugendstil art Nouveau: Floral and Functional Forms*. Boston: Little, Brown.1984. For the Jewish aspect to the movement see, Mark Gelber. “The Jungjüdische Bewegung: An Unexplored Chapter in German-Jewish Literary and Cultural History,” *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute*, 36(1986), 105-109.

¹³⁰ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 100.

¹³¹ Nordau exclaims that their practices were completely against the way human beings were meant to function, “to allow one’s self to be carried away by instincts is, in other words, to make unconscious life the master of consciousness, to subordinate the highest nervous centers to the inferior,” *Degeneration*, 321. Meaning decadents were using their brains in the wrong way, which led to their degenerate state.

¹³² Presner, *Muscular Judasim*, 91.

depict the progression from the weak, *galut* (exile) Jew to the strong masculine hero. The linkage of decadence with a nationalistic movement was also a unique step taken by Lilien. Though Nordau may have deemed his school and style as degenerate, the true service of Lilien's art was to create a visual idealization of Nordau's muscle Jew. In effect Lilien's artwork overcame degeneracy by placing it, as well as decadence, in the service of the nation.

One of the most often referenced of Lilien's works is the postcard he designed from the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901 (see Fig.1). This work is a typification of the weak, ghetto Jew. The grey, haired man is depicted sitting with his head down. Lilien emphasizes his weakness with a cane on which he rests his weary head. A key trope in Lilien's work were the thorned vines which envelop the old Jew's body, a symbol of the forces, both internal and external, that kept Jews in their weakened physical state. He is pointing to the right of the page, east, towards the rising sun, where Israel would be geographically, and more important metaphorically, located from Europe. In the direction where the angel is pointing is a man standing plowing the land. Lilien implies that the new Jewish man must move to the land of Israel to work the land and become strong (and upright) in order to reverse his current sad state. The change from sitting in exile to standing in the land further illustrates the concept of a complete regeneration of the race.

Shortly after the Fifth Zionist Congress, Lilien illustrated *Lieder des Ghetto* (Poems of the Ghetto), a 1903 translation by Berthold Feiwel's German translation of Morris Rosenfeld's Yiddish poetry.¹³³ The poems were mainly written as a protest against exploitation of the working class, but were also focused on a critique of assimilation. Lilien's illustrations depict the

¹³³ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 110.

regenerated Jewish body, which contrasts starkly with the visualizations of the *galut* Jew. This is evident in the “Creation of Man” (figure 4).¹³⁴



Figure 4
Die Erschaffung des Menschen (The Creation of Man)
 E.M. Lilien From Bertholf Feiwel, *Lieder des Ghetto* (1903)

The angel on the far left bears an uncanny resemblance to Herzl.¹³⁵ His muscles are well defined and prominent. With this illustration comes Lilien’s first visualization of muscular Judaism through the body of Herzl, a stock image in Lilien’s art. As Stanislawski elucidates:

Herzl would appear countless times in Lilien’s work, either as an angel usually bearing a clearly phallic sword, or as a heroic figure from the Bible. Most obviously, Lilien used Herzl to portray Moses, the liberator of the Jews from Exile.... Lilien idiosyncratically combined Nordau’s fascination with the New ‘Jews of muscle’ with a related though distinct phenomenon, the widespread admiration of Theodore Herzl’s allegedly Assyrian, ancient Semitic look.¹³⁶

Lilien is also famous for his 1897 photograph taken of Herzl, which quickly became an icon of Zionism.

¹³⁴ The only in-depth analysis of this work can be found in Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 111-114, despite extensive searching no further explanation of the image have been published.

¹³⁵ After extensive searching I have still not found a full interpretation of this piece, most comments simply center around the use of Herzl’s facial features. The only I explanation found was that the muscled Herzl-figure was meant to dominate the page and the child, representing artists, namely Lilien, who drew this to, “reference himself as an artist dominated by the larger-than-figure of Herzl,” see, Haim Finkelstein. *Lilien and Zionism*. Ben Gurion University of the Negev, full text can be found at: <http://arts.tau.ac.il/departments/images/stories/journals/arhistory/Assaph3/11finkelstein.pdf>

¹³⁶ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 111-112.



Figure 5
Herzl over-looking the Rhine
E.M. Lilien, 1897



Figure 6
Mose Zebrecht die Tafeln (Moses Breaks the Tablets)
E.M. Lilien, 1914

Lilien's portrayal of Herzl illustrates a culmination of many of the themes of racial Zionism.

First, Lilien emphasized Herzl's Assyrian, Semitic looks, something even Nordau pointed out in a positive manner.¹³⁷ Second, the linkage of Herzl and Moses is critical, Though not seen in the creation of man, numerous paintings by Lilien depict biblical heroes. Aaron, Jacob and most often Moses (figure 5) were given facial features with striking resemblance to Herzl. This is evident in "Moses Breaks the Tablets" as Moses is given Herzl's facial features, especially the beard, which also resemble the angel from "The Creation of Man." Moses's pronounced arm muscles, which again sharply contrasts with Lilien's depictions of the Diaspora Jew.

In his time Herzl was already seen as a prophet, who, with his charisma and strong appearance, could lead the people back to land, as Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in

¹³⁷ At the Seven Zionist Congress, Nordau gave a eulogy for the recently deceased Herzl, wherein Nordau said, "we miss the tall central figure with the blackbearded Assyrian head that drew all eyes." see Nordau, "Tribue to the Late Dr. Herzl: Adress at the Seventh Congress," *To His People*, 149. For full German see, Nordau, "Trauerrede auf Herzl," *Zionistische Schriften*, 155-165.

the Exodus story. If Moses was muscled, strong and able to lead the people out of slavery and to Israel, then Herzl would embody and typify the same characteristics in order to lead the people out of exile and back to the same land. This heavily romanticized notion of both Moses and Herzl would then be actualized through Zionist gymnastics, exercises and means of corporeal regeneration.

In what may be the best visualization of racial Zionism, Lilien illustrated Herzl's 1904 book, *Altneuland* (*Old New Land*), his major book outlining the goals and directives of Zionism.

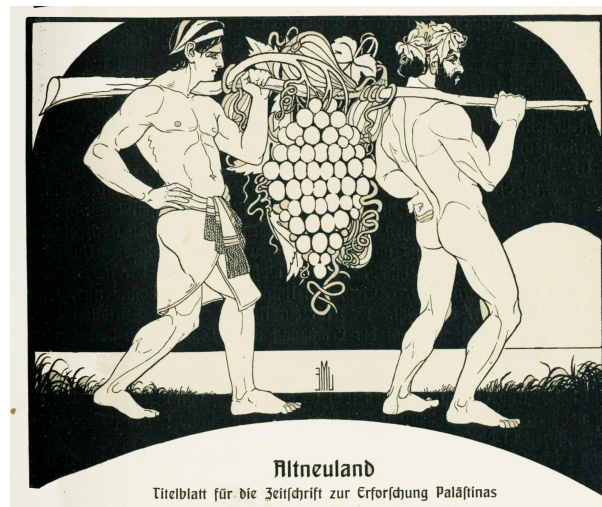


Figure 7
"Title Page of the Periodical for the Exploration of Palestine"
E.M. Lilien
1904

In this we see the height of muscular Judaism. Two larger muscled men are shown traversing the page left to right; again the movement is towards Israel from Europe. Their muscles are pronounced and very well defined, and they carry a large bounty of grapes with them to the Promised Land. The implication was that the muscle-Jews are not going there empty handed, but with a fresh new culture and people. This achievement is brought about through their muscularity. Thus, the engine of cultural Zionism are here linked together through the regenerated body.

Lilien's art sits at a key point of perhaps every dictated strand of Zionism that grew out of the first seven congresses. The themes he depicted illustrated both the current physical state of the Jewish body, contrasted with the diametrically opposed muscular race – both from antiquity and modern racial Zionism. Finally, his involvement within the WZO and use of his art in various forms by the congresses show the political side's support for his artistic creations. If Nordau created the idea of a regenerated muscular race, it was Lilien who showed what this race would look like.

Conclusion: Racial Zionism

Max Nordau's adoption of Zionism would have shocked many of his readers – both Jewish and not – who likely would not have known Nordau was Jewish. It certainly shocked Madam von Novikoff. From the beginnings of the WZO until Herzl's death, no other figure, save Herzl himself would be as critical to the organization. Despite this shocking switch in identification, as well as his instrumental power in the founding years of the WZO, Nordau has still been largely ignored in the historiography of Zionism. This has result in a loss of understanding of the many discursive forces which propelled Zionism.

What is troubling when looking at the historiography of Zionism's early years is that to this day the description of the various groups and factions within the WZO use the same bipolar model of political and cultural Zionism. This no doubt led to a creation of a history that marginalized any figure that straddled the two. The creations of Lilien, the values expressed in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, the Zionist gymnastics associations across Europe, and most of all Nordau all scream of a different form of Zionism – a nationalistic aspiration fueled by strong rhetoric, *fin de siècle* notions of race, and ideations of a muscular past. More importantly, Nordau's was a form of nationalism, based in his earlier philosophy of degeneration, that at its core diagnosed a problem within the Jewish body. It was not yet ready for statehood without the physicality needed to fight for the land. This understanding of Zionism better integrates the intellectual work of Nordau from before his Zionist agitations. The creations of muscle Jews, transmutation of race, the teleological path of world history towards war based on these nations/races, the centrality of the scientific method and the overcoming of degeneracy would all be encompassed and grow into fruition under the guise of Zionism.

Standing behind political and cultural Zionism is Racial Zionism. Primarily located in the span from 1898 to 1905, yet with larger implications far beyond. The physical rejuvenation of the Jewish race, whose apotheosis would be Jewish fighters, was central to Zionism. What began as a theoretical model for Jewish regeneration by Nordau became in many ways a corporeal reality.

Political Zionism wanted the creation of a nation. Cultural Zionism wanted the rejuvenation of the Jewish people and spirit. Behind both was racial Zionism, which believed that for either to be accomplished a regeneration of a muscular Jewish body and mentality was needed. Only a strong race could survive the impending wars of nationalism in order create a land wherein the spirit of the race could be renewed. Only a strong race could overcome degeneracy and find the answer to the Jewish question.

Epilogue: The Prophet?

At the Tenth Zionist Congress in 1911, Nordau addressed the Congress once again on the condition of Jewry, as well as the Europe-wide failure to actualize emancipation or provide the Jews a homeland. Nordau claimed:

The virtuous Governments, which work with such noble zeal for the spread of eternal peace acquiesce in the downfall of six million creatures – acquiesce, and no-one, except the victims raises a voice against it.... The administration of hero funds and the distribution of the interest is laid in the hands of authorities who favor the massacres of Jews even if they themselves do not directly instigate them.¹³⁸

Nordau's emotions expressed in 1911 were of an urgency to get the Jewish people out of Europe. The systems of power and government had not been altered enough over Zionism's fourteen-year history, and the situation of the Jewish people, whether muscular or not, was still in serious question. And the eerie echo of six million, prescient to post Holocaust readers, only further

¹³⁸ Nordau, *To His People*, 198.

speaks to the historical minimization of Nordau. Surely had Herzl said this, he would have been seen as predicting the Holocaust.

Perhaps from an obscure Zionist Congress, sandwiched between the foundation of Zionism and World War One with the consequent Balfour Declaration, this comment was minimized. But Nordau could easily be seen as a prophet of the destruction to come. Nordau was a man who “should” have received more attention as the Jewish Question went further unanswered into the twentieth century. In all of my research on Nordau, I found the above quote cited *once*, in an obscure 1949 edition of the journal *The Jewish Advocate, The Organ of Indian Jewry*. The article claims, “Had Nordau’s councils been listen to, the six million lives in Hitler’s furnaces might now be living and working in Israel... In the State of Israel and in the future of the Jewish people, Max Nordau has an immortal monument.”¹³⁹ Though hagiographic in tone, this quote is telling of the historical position of Nordau, immediately after the war. Though he was still remembered and celebrated by some, like Netanyahu and Ben-Horin, no one rushed to propel an idea such as this into the public sphere. The iconographic, idealized Nordau never became a fixture of Israeli and Zionist history like Herzl, Buber, Weitzman and many arguably “lesser” Zionists. The question remains however, what would have happened if Nordau’s views had been appreciated to a greater extent?

Since 1953 the day of remembrance for the Holocaust in Israel is called “*Yom HaZikaron laShoah ve-laG'vurah*” (Holocaust and Heroism/Bravery Remembrance Day)¹⁴⁰. The name presents the idea of idealizing a muscular and heroic myth of those who resisted and fought oppression during the Holocaust. And the date on the calendar commemorating the Holocaust is

¹³⁹ “Max Nordau, the Man Who Foresaw,” *The Jewish Advocate, The Organ of Indian Jewry*, Bombay, XVIII, No.5 (August, 1949). 10-11

¹⁴⁰ Translation mine

the date of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, an iconic and mythic moment of Jewish heroism in the face of utter destruction.¹⁴¹ Indeed it is possible when the memorial day was created in 1953 that Nordau still maintained a privileged position in the nascent state's Zionist legacy. Regardless of where historiographically Nordau stood at this point, the concept of muscular Jews remained in the equation and was idealized and even romanticized by the early state of Israel. The name of this holiday attempts to construct is one of Jews who were not only victims, but also fighters. A Jew who came back with, or on the shield, to borrow Nordau's Sparta metaphor – would be the ideal Zionist.

¹⁴¹ James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1993. 271-280