Shlomo Sand’s *The Invention of the Jewish People*, which appeared in Hebrew as *Matai ve’ekh humtza ha’am hayehudi? [When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?]* (1) elicited a thunderous response that has yet to abate. Beginning with an interesting and very personal introduction, Sand proceeds to engage, chronologically, the thought of Jews about their own character as a ‘people,’ ‘nation,’ and occasionally, ‘race’ (sic), largely by examining the published writings of figures known to scholars in Jewish Studies, but less familiar to historians generally – including Josephus, Isaak Markus Jost, Heinrich Graetz, Simon Dubnow, Yitzhak Baer, Ben-Zion Dinur, Hans Kohn, and Salo Baron. Sand’s preface to the English language edition states that ‘the disparity between what my research suggested about the history of the Jewish people and the way that history is commonly understood – not only within Israel but in the larger world – shocked me as it shocked my [Hebrew] readers’ (p. xi). Sand insinuates that this ‘shock’ accounts for the excitement surrounding the book – which is a more reasonable assessment regarding its reception in Israel than in the English-speaking world.

To his credit, Sand admits that there is almost nothing original in his work, as it is mainly a synthesis and counter-narrative. He writes that ‘I found myself being shaken repeatedly as I worked on the composition’ of the book.

The moment I began to apply the methods of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and others, who instigated a conceptual revolution in the field of national history, the materials I encountered in my research were illuminated by insights that led me in unexpected directions (p. xi).

But have not historians of Zionism, such as Steven Zipperstein, Derek Penslar, and David Myers, been utilizing the ideas of Gellner and Anderson, and other cultural theorists, since their appearance?(2) Indeed, a weakness in historiography, and confusion of history with historiography, render this book deeply problematic. ‘I should emphasize,’ Sand continues,
that I encountered scarcely any new findings – almost all such material had
previously been uncovered by Zionist and Israeli historiographers (sic). The
difference is that some elements had not been given sufficient attention,
others were immediately swept under the historiographers’ rug, and still
others were ‘forgotten’ because they did not fit the ideological needs of the
evolving national identity. What is so amazing is that much of the information
cited in this book has always been known inside the limited circles of
professional research, but invariably got lost en route to the arena of public
and educational memory. My task was to organize the historical information
in a new way, dust off the old documents and continually reexamine them.
The conclusions to which they led me created a radically different narrative
from the one I had been taught in my youth (p. xi).

Had Sand read more carefully Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s classic, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish
Memory (1982), he would not have been surprised. One of the themes of the book is the ongoing,
profound rift, and continuing tension, between ‘Jewish history’ as seen by scholars and ‘Jewish memory’. To
write the book Sand professes to write, and to note Zakhor only fleetingly, by citing it as support for ‘the
lack of Jewish historiography’ (p. 66, n. 4), indicates something seriously amiss in the author’s preparation
for his task. But while he may lack knowledge there is no shortage of bravado, as he laments that
few of my colleagues – the teachers of history in Israel – feel it their duty to
undertake the dangerous pedagogical mission of exposing conventional lies
about the past. I could not go on living without writing this book (p. xi).

Of all of the sins of modern Israel, putting their historians in intellectual straight-jackets and censoring their
writing is not high on the list.

Similar to the buzz that accompanied Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners (5) (and likewise
netted its author hefty returns), there are many expressing strong opinions about Sand’s book who do not
seem to have read it, and have little or no basis for offering an informed judgment as to its merits or defects.
What Sand shares with Goldhagen is the reason for their books' flying off the (actual and virtual) shelves: an
apparent willingness and passion to simplify and distort scholarly discourse in order to produce a seductive,
monocausal explanation. This fires the gut-instinct of thousands of avid readers who style themselves as
educated – yet who mainly seek scholarly sanction for their existing worldview. For both Goldhagen and
Sand this is marketing to the converted and giving them what they want which is not to say, though, that
Goldhagen and Sand are in any doubt as to the veracity of their arguments. The reception of The Invention of
the Jewish People, like Hitler’s Willing Executioners, has been dominated by emotion. We can assume that
Sand’s brisk sales (outside of Israel) primarily are of those of the ‘for’ camp – those in agreement about the
degree to which the Jewish people was ‘invented’ for Zionist and Israeli purposes. The cover of the (British)
English-language edition, in bold Zionist azure, acclaims its status as an ‘INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER’. The myth of the Jewish people, as propagated by modern Israel, in Sand’s terms, exists in inverse proportion to the authentic historical basis of Jewry’s claim to peoplehood, and even more tenuously (and disturbingly), its ancestral homeland of Palestine.

Yet there is a bizarre symmetry to this book, as a phenomenon, and Sand’s argument about Israel. Sand infers that Jews are not an authentic people (compared to other nations), and Israel, contrary to the old tourist slogan, is not ‘real’. With a little critical distance, it is possible to criticize this book as a far cry from a ‘real’ work of scholarship. It is flimsy, haphazardly built, slap-dash. There is no foundation in archival research, and Sand does not seem to have fully read (or understood) many of the secondary works on which his thesis relies. He apparently has never heard of Aviel Roshwald and George Mosse, who are among the first names that should spring to mind in any consideration of Jews and nationalism. Shlomo Sand may be a genius for cultivating and managing the hype for his book. But its success as a ‘bestseller’ is no more indicative of the insight of his argument than, he might say, Israel’s military prowess reflects a humane and democratic national character.

With some exceptions, The Invention of the Jewish People has been ardently embraced by those who wish to either weaken or totally undermine the relationship between Jews, Zionism, and the territory that became the State of Israel. Interestingly, it is not as hostile to Zionist ideology and the foundational legitimacy of the State of Israel as are two recent books published under the same imprint: The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics, and Scholarship in Israel by Gabriel Piterberg and Plowshares Into Swords: From Zionism to Israel, by Arno J. Mayer. Sand’s book is superior to those of Piterberg and Mayer. The Invention of the Jewish People also is more serious than From Time Immemorial by Joan Peters, which tried to do to the Palestinian Arabs what Sand does with Israeli Jews – show that they aren’t really a ‘people’ and that their claim to Palestine is dubious.

With somewhat less exuberance compared to those calling for the outright destruction of Israel, The Invention of the Jewish People has been championed by those who share the author’s demand for a dramatic shift in the way that Israel defines itself, and its treatment of those who do not fit Israeli officialdom’s increasingly narrow concept of the proper constitution of the state and its highly contested occupied territories. One suspects that that are many more who support the aims of the book than are impressed with its execution. Sand is not, as one might think from much of the clamor, asking for Israelis to fold their tents and go elsewhere –as much as this sentiment may propel the robust sales of the book. He is slightly more circumspect, at least in terms of rational expectations: ‘if it is senseless to expect the Jewish Israelis to dismantle their own state, the least that can be demanded of them is to stop reserving it for themselves as a polity that segregates, excludes, and discriminates against a large number of its citizens, whom it views as undesirable aliens’ (p. 312). But there are any number of books with similar underlying sympathies that comprise more formidable contributions to scholarly discussion, and lead to greater comprehension of how the current state of affairs came to be. Sand is not in the same league with the best of Israel’s ‘new historians’ such as Avi Shlaim, Gershon Shafir, and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and he has not excavated the deep structures of Zionist politics and Israeli culture as have, say, Meron Benvenisti, Mitchell Cohen, Yael Zerubavel, Derek Penslar, and most recently, Arieh Bruce Saposnik.

To a much lesser extent than high-pitched praise or condemnation, The Invention of the Jewish People has been subject to more mundane academic scrutiny about whether or not it is a good book – although these reviews often reveal political overtones as well. It is indeed possible, however, to sympathize with Sand’s politics, while simultaneously calling into question the book’s merits as a contribution to scholarship. Perhaps the fundamental problem with this book, which also applies to the above mentioned works of Goldhagen, Piterberg, and Mayer, is that the thesis runs way ahead of the supposedly dispassionate investigation (despite Sand’s protest to the contrary), and therefore the book assumes the character more of a legal brief than a scholarly monograph.

In another respect Sand’s book belongs to a self-consciously incendiary, or gadfly-like trend in Jewish
studies – which ironically, is rather quaint. What's more Jewish than a Jewish intellectual saying that everyone else has got it wrong? The Jewish studies field is no stranger to books that style themselves as audacious. Almost every few weeks works appear that aspire to debunk, or aggressively challenge some aspect of received wisdom concerning the Jewish experience. One of the most successful of the recent, intentionally destabilizing books in Jewish history is Yuri Slezkine’s *The Jewish Century*. Slezkine attacked the notion that Jews in Europe and the United States had largely assimilated, acculturated, or otherwise accommodated themselves to the powers-that-be and dominant mind-sets of their host communities. No, Slezkine writes, they helped make the world into something they thought would be amenable to themselves – which had, however, unforeseen consequences. As much as Slezkine’s book was strongly criticized by many experts, it stands on far sounder footing than Sand’s *Invention of the Jewish People*. It is truly brilliant, while Sand’s book is, well, plodding and dull.

In short, Sand wishes to convey the message that Jews, as a collective entity in the modern world, have an unusually slender claim on people-hood, or status as a nationality, and even worse, a particularly questionable tie to Palestine and the Land of Israel. Didn’t Hobsbawm and Ranger tell us, some time ago, that all of modern nationalism, and claims on tradition since the 18th century, were ‘invented’? Is there anything new or different in Sand’s grab-bag? Even the establishment Zionist historians such as Walter Laqueur and David Vital were emphatic that the nationalist impulse was largely dormant, if not moribund, until Herzl came on the scene. Carl Schorske, in his seminal essay on ‘Politics in a new key’ reminded us how Herzl thought to ‘shake the tree that fantasies had planted’, conspicuously drawing on the example of Bismarck’s appropriation of myths and symbols in his creation of a unified Germany. But Schorske, and even Herzl, evince infinitely more historical savvy than Sand. Although there were obviously different preconditions, including shockingly few prerequisites for Jewish statehood in 1896, Herzl saw that his own effort at nation-building demanded practices akin to those of Bismarck.

Sand does not seem to understand the complex relationships and tensions between Central European nationalisms and Zionism, as illuminated by scholars such as Mark Gelber, Steve Aschheim, and Adi Gordon. Sand likewise falls flat in several comparisons with France. Sand, appropriately, cites the foundational work on the erection of the French nation by Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France*. Yet he fails to appreciate that nationalization, as expertly detailed in Weber’s classic, is a process. What makes *Peasants Into Frenchmen* so remarkable is its survey of how remote most Frenchmen were to national ideals, even well into the nineteenth century. Given Sand's old-fashioned type of 'history of ideas' that favors 'great men' (as much as he means to criticize them), it is little wonder that signal moments are given short shrift. To give but four examples: James Renton has shown, in his analysis of the politics surrounding the inception and early implementation of the Balfour Declaration (1917), how much Zionism was shaped by British perceptions of race, nationality, and empire. Regarding the United States, Marc Dollinger argues that American Jewish expectations and ideals concerning Zionism came to be bifurcated with their liberalism at home, beginning with the rise of Hitler. Zeev Mankowitz, and later Avi Patt discuss how Zionism came to be seen as agreeable to a broad Jewish consensus in the aftermath of the Holocaust, in part through the agency of Jewish Displaced Persons themselves. In terms of understanding how modern Israel, after 1967, emerged as it did, Sand might have turned to the trenchant analysis of Gideon Aran, who examines how the ideology of Gush Emunim (literally, the ‘Block of the Faithful,’ a combination of religious fundamentalism and integral, right wing nationalism) infiltrated the Zionist mainstream. These were critical junctures where, it may be said, the Jewish people were 're-invented'.

Generally speaking, the author also underestimates the radicalization of Zionist Revisionism (the right-wing, anti-socialist, militaristic branch of the movement) during the Second World War, as recently illuminated by Colin Shindler, and too easily subsumes their luminaries, Joseph Klausner and Vladimir Jabotinsky, into the mainstream. Zionists continually defined themselves over and against each other. None of this is to deny that Israel, especially since the 1990s, has lurchèd toward policies normally associated with European right-wing nationalism, Christian and Islamic religious extremism, and racist xenophobia. Sand paints this as part of a long-term, intentional progression, as largely a reaction against its ephemeral people-hood. In
this he misses or undervalues a great number of salient points. The study of accommodation to right-wing ideologies in the name of consolidating power (especially during and after wartime), the piecemeal integration of religious fundamentalism, restrictions on liberties of individuals and minority groups in the name of national security, and greed under the guise of national self-interest may not be sensational, or sexy ways to move books – but they remain a large part of the story.

In Sand's bizarre concoction, nearly everyone who written about the Jews, in any collective form, has contributed toward the venal fiction of a Jewish nation. If not, the engines of nationalization have done their utmost to muzzle or force-fit them into the mold. He includes a few generous assessments of Israel's 'new historians' and 'post-Zionist' thinkers, despite the harsh appraisal of his colleagues at the book’s outset. He relies too heavily, however, on Paul Wexler’s controversial linguistic theory of ‘relexification’ in order to historicize the growth and sustenance of medieval and early modern Jewish communities. The shining example of a counter-narrative, which Sand sees as decisive, is the 'Khazar' theory, asserting that European Jewry was largely the consequence of a mass conversion in the 8th century. As much as some aspects of this episode have been substantiated, the scale of conversion suggested by its proponents is highly questionnable, and the theory is still too reliant on supposed similarities between ‘Khazars’ and European Jews. But it remains an extremely attractive theory to those who maintain that there is no connection whatsoever between Jewry, historically, and Palestine. This is one of numerous segments of the book that can be easily picked apart. Likewise he pays too little attention to the interplay between rootedness in the diaspora and the sense of a primordial, national homeland of ‘Zion’ in Jewish discourses; that ‘exile’, consciousness of ‘Zion’, and belongingness in the diaspora could exist simultaneously, as opposed to being mutually exclusive.

Sand's handling of investigations into Jewish heredity and genetics, which he conflates with 'race science', is likewise ham-handed. He does not, for instance, grasp the extent to which much of this work, such as that pioneered by Tudor Parfitt, explicitly contradicts the absurd notion of a 'Jewish race'.

It is indeed true that it took a great amount of effort to nationalize Jews in the form of modern politics. Such activities were creative and borrowed heavily from the cultures Jews knew, as the historiographical investigations of scholars such as David Myers and Natalia Aleksin have shown. But one of the things upon which Jews generally agreed is that they, somehow, comprised a people – not exclusively a fragmented religious community. Rather than ‘religious’ and ‘national’ being distinct categories and diametrically opposed, many facets of Jewish life and culture embodied both. The challenge to the national-minded among the Jews was to make the national dimension vital, meaningful, and the pretext for action. Zionism was, after all, but one of several manifestations of nationalism, while the Bund, which envisioned national-cultural autonomy in Europe based on Yiddish culture, was a more popular alternative in late 19th and early 20th-century Eastern Europe. When Herzl proclaimed in Der Judenstaat ‘we are a people, one people’, he fervently believed it to be true. The problem was not whether or not Jews were a people – but what kind of people they should become, and the specific means by which they should transform themselves. According to Sand, though, the Roman Empire, Christendom, and Islamic civilization must have suffered fantastic common delusions in recognizing Jewry as a people, as well as members of a religious community. The modern nationalization of Jewry was a process that began late, and proceeded with fits and starts. Yet the notion that a Jewish nationality, per se, was something that had to be conjured from thin air makes little sense.

Certainly Zionism and other varieties of Jewish nationalism did not have to materialize as they did. In 1982 David Weltl, a colleague of Sand’s from Tel Aviv University, asserted that Zionist historiography suffered from perceiving the ascendance, and dominant institutions of the movement, as fait accompli and more generally, from Zionist and Hebrew-centered parochialism. But the idea that Jewish society would, in different times and places, come to assume various national forms, is not shocking. That there should be dissonance between what academic historians understand as the emergence of a nation, versus the way that that nation chooses to represent itself, is not in the least bit surprising. Nations are supremely guilty of reading backwards, and seeing continuity and consistency where it does not belong – making the peoplehood of its own nation a dominant motif, as well as a value unto itself. Sand himself says: ‘Every large human
group that thinks of itself as a people, even if it never was one and its past is entirely imaginary, has the right to national self-determination’. But then he qualifies: ‘This does not, of course, give a particular group that sees itself as a people the right to dispossess another group of its land in order to achieve its self-determination’ (p. 282). Sand seems to have missed the point: that this is, far too often, what nationalism has been about.

Notes

1. Matai ve’ekh humtza ha’am hayehudi? [When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?] (Tel Aviv, 2008). Back to (1)


3. It appeared originally as the Stroum Lectures with the University of Washington Press (Seattle 1982). Back to (3)

4. Although not considered a ‘new historian,’ the work of anthropologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda, a former Dean of the Hebrew University, may be seen as iconoclastic; see Nachman Ben-Yehuda, Sacrificing Truth: Archaeology and the Myth of Masada (Amherst, NY, 2003); Ben-Yehuda, Political Assassinations by Jews: A Rhetorical Device for Justice (Albany, NY, 1993). Back to (4)


6. Aviel Roshwald, The Endurance of Nationalism: Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas (Cambridge, 2006); George L. Mosse, Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism (Hanover, NH, 1993); see also Mosse’s foundational The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich (New York, NY, 1964). Back to (6)

7. Both published by Verso, London, 2008. For a polemic from across the divide, likewise appealing to a predictable subculture, see Yoram Hazony, The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul (New York, NY, 2001). Hazony alleges that Zionism was undermined by the founding professoriat of the Hebrew University and leftists in its midst, and that ‘real’ Zionism as conceived by Herzl and Nordau was regenerated in the right-wing variety advocated by Vladimir Jabotinsky and the Revisionists; see David N. Myers, “‘Hazono Shel Hazony’: or ‘Even If You Will It, It Can Still Be a Dream’”, in Israel Studies, 6, 2 (Summer 2001), 107–17. Back to (7)


11. Published by Princeton University Press. [Back to (11)]

Other reviews:
Verso
Independent
Guardian
Sunday Times
http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article6912556.ece [5]
New York Times
Solidarity
Information Underground
Cato Institute
http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php [9]

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/973

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5036
[5] http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article6912556.ece