

Background to Jews Who Opposed Zionism

What did the Austrian Leopold Weiss, the Dutch Jacob de Haan, and the members of the American Council for Judaism all have in common? They were Jews who spoke out against Zionism. Zionism was a Jewish nationalist movement that began in the late 1800s and called upon Jews to return to Palestine in order to re-establish a Jewish state. Following decades of violence (with more decades of violence to come) and despite tremendous outrage in the Arab world, the Zionists proclaimed the new nation of Israel in 1948.

In 1922 Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) moved to the British Mandate of Palestine, staying with his uncle who headed a mental hospital in Jerusalem. The uncle's house was located just inside the Old City of Jerusalem. Having some experience as a journalist, Weiss found work with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*—a German newspaper, one of the most outstanding in Europe—to which he sold articles about Palestine on a freelance basis. Assessing the situation firsthand, Weiss concluded that Arab opposition to Zionism made perfect sense, both morally and historically. (Four years later, in 1926, Weiss would convert to Islam and change his name to Muhammad Asad.)

One of Weiss's acquaintances in Jerusalem, whom he writes about, was Jacob de Haan (1881-1924). de Haan had arrived in Jerusalem in 1919 as a passionate Zionist, but after his arrival he underwent a personal transformation and became much more religious. He then joined the Haredi Jews, an ultra-Orthodox community, thus becoming staunchly anti-Zionist. Haredi Jews held that only the Messiah—when he comes someday—is sanctioned to establish a Jewish state. God alone, therefore, will decide when the Jews as a people should return to their ancestral homeland, and human effort to expedite this process is actually a grave sin. de Haan, possessing both legal and literary talents, became the political spokesman for the Haredi Jews in Jerusalem and turned out to be very good at swaying international opinion against Zionism. In June 1924 he was planning to travel to London to ask the British government to reconsider its promise—made in the Balfour Declaration of 1917—to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The day before he was to leave, two Zionist assassins, working for the Jewish paramilitary organization, Haganah, shot him dead as he emerged from a synagogue on Jaffa Road in Jerusalem.

In 1942, a number of Reform rabbis founded the American Council for Judaism, the only American Jewish organization ever created to oppose Zionism. Three years earlier, in the midst of events leading to World War II, the British had renounced their commitment to a Jewish homeland in Palestine. To complete their quest for a Jewish state, the Zionists turned to the United States and sought the backing of its Jews, its general public, and its government. The American Council for Judaism countered the Zionist campaign with one of its own but lost the struggle because of the sympathies aroused by the Holocaust and the effective use the Zionists made of those sympathies. With broad American support, the Zionists announced the formation of the "State of Israel" on May 14, 1948. Defined as "Jewish and democratic," it remained to be seen whether this new nation could maintain both of those characteristics at the same time. Five years before, in a public declaration issued on August 30, 1943, the American Council for Judaism had contended that a Jewish state would be unworkable and self-defeating—a position it still has not relinquished.