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Liora Halperin, *The Oldest Guard: Forging the Zionist Settler Past*
(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 368 pp., \$28.00
(paperback).

In her book, *The Oldest Guard: Forging the Zionist Settler Past*, Liora Halperin embarks on an extensive study of how the memory of the late-nineteenth-century, private Jewish agricultural colonies, moshavot, and their founders has been etched into Israel's national narrative. Known in Zionist and later Israeli history as the First Aliya (1882–1904), this period would become both an object of “disdain and commemorative discourse” (238). At times, prominent figures in the First Aliya were eclipsed by their successors, members of the Second Aliya (1905–1914), who became the hegemonic political power in the pre-state years and the first leaders of the nascent

Israeli state. Even so, the First Aliya continued to provide a sense of pride to the descendants of the founders of these colonies.

Halperin argues that, despite initial attempts by the first leaders of the state—such as the dominating first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion—to minimize the historical contribution of the moshavot, the founders of these colonies and their children succeeded in placing their mark on Israeli history. According to Halperin, “as Labor Zionists built both their political strength and a commemorative apparatus that would consign moshava farmers to the past, second-generation farmers found new ways to promote capitalist Zionist agriculture and defend the historical legacy of the moshavot” (50).

During the British Mandate era (1918–1948) and the early decades of the Israeli state, “hierarchical coexistence” with the Palestinians and “apoliticism” would become markers of the moshavot. In contrast with the ‘Hebrew Labor’ practices of the more staunchly ideological members of the pre-World War I Second Aliya that prioritized hiring Jewish immigrants, the members of the moshavot and their children would continue to hire Arab labor into the British Mandate period. For the descendants of the First Aliya, coexistence, albeit a hierarchical one, was a model for good relations. Halperin shows how this initiated relationships between Jews and Arabs, much different than the more familiar one defined by conflict.

A particularly strong part of this book is how it depicts the commemoration of the Zionist settler past. Through descriptions of Purim parades, local museums, and the life of Avraham Shapira, an iconic figure in the First Aliya, Halperin does a brilliant job keeping the reader connected throughout. Through Shapira’s story, we learn about how a new generation of Israelis, who felt disconnected from his accented Hebrew, a mixed of Yiddish and Arabic, alternately praised, sidelined, and even ridiculed him. In other words, this book provides a nuanced image of how perceptions of historical figures shift and transform over time as new generations gain power in shaping the narrative.

A major critique, or even ridicule, voiced by the hegemonic leaders of the Zionist Labor movement about the First Aliyah’s moshavot was their apparent lack of a clear political agenda. Unpacking the centrality of this claim, throughout the book, Halperin grapples with the First Aliyah’s legacy of what she calls the politics of apoliticism. According to her, this “presumes that nationalist economic activity, technological development, and the pursuit of economic growth undertaken outside of a partisan political structure are not political” (22). She adds that: “[m]apping the First Aliyah as a twentieth-century paradigm also helps us map the history of an ostensibly apolitical Israel ‘beyond politics,’ whose political importance is often in plain sight” (23). With their non-rigid ideology appealing to

a wide-range of Israeli Jews, once-small moshava farming communities eventually became some of Israel's largest cities, such as Petah Tikva, Rishon LeZion, Rehovot, and Kfar Saba, to name a few. In fact, these communities helped realize "nurtured middle-class Jews' desire to own property . . . and did not restrict Jewish settlement on ideological grounds, as some Labor Zionist settlements did" (15).

Halperin points out that even if socialist Zionists were critical of the First Aliyah's capitalistic and religiously conservative ways, members of the moshavot and their descendants were able to make a claim of "firstness," reserving for them a special place in national history. To understand the dynamics of what Halperin calls "firsting," she branches out into a theoretical comparison between the historicization of the Jewish Yishuv and that of American settler colonialism. In fact, throughout the book she uses American historical narratives as a lens through which to understand how Zionist settler colonialism is written into Israeli narratives. While this is useful at times, I sensed it was not always necessary and may limit our understanding of the Jewish Yishuv's first years within the Ottoman context.

While this book has numerous historical accounts, it is not a history of the First Aliyah. Rather, it is an in-depth look at how memory is constructed. At times, it seems as if the author works within the parameters of a post-Balfour Declaration historical framework, which she herself recognizes was greatly shaped by the hegemonic Labor Zionists. I would argue that by bringing in a more nuanced view of the late Ottoman era and by placing the First Aliyah within that historical context, we may see that it was not that its members were apolitical per se, but that they were working within a very different political scene, which would subsequently change during World War I.

For example, in the section entitled "Performing Firstness for the British," Halperin argues that the "young men and elder statesmen of the moshavot were signaling their own firstness against the upstart Labor leadership" by providing a tour of their communities to the former British foreign secretary, Arthur James Balfour (54), and Lord Herbert Plumer (57). However, in 1912, the moshavot leaders showed off their success to the Ottoman governor, Mehdi bey, and an entourage that included Jerusalem's Palestinian mayor, Hasan al-Husayni. When considered alongside the earlier visit, the tour for the British officials may represent continuation rather than "firstness." Moreover, that local Palestinian officials joined Mehdi bey perhaps shows that the emphasis on coexistence with Palestinians by leaders in the First Aliya was not based necessarily on hierarchies, but rather stemmed from an Ottoman worldview.

While she does touch upon how the moshavot were “showed off” to Ottoman officials during World War I, had she further explored the 1912 visit, a picture of staunch Jewish patriotism to the Ottoman Empire would emerge. This patriotism would, in fact, lead some of the children of the moshavot to become Ottoman army soldiers and officers in the Balkan wars and World War I. Halperin thus indirectly minimizes the importance of the Ottoman context. Additionally, Halperin defines Gad Frumkin (85) as “a judge born into the community of religious Jerusalemite Jews,” but does not recognize that he actively promoted Jewish agriculture in Istanbul, together with his father-in-law, Aaron Eisenberg, one of the founders of Rehovot. Claims of his apolitical stance in the 1930s could be compared with his very political past in Istanbul.

This critique is not meant to undermine the colossal work Halperin has undertaken. The book presents a stellar narrative, providing a key to understanding how the political character of historical narratives greatly shaped Israeli society and how the legacy of the moshavot, oddly enough, has outlived the settlements built by the more ideological members of the Second Aliyah. It also explains how the original leaders’ apolitical stance led to their exclusion from historical scholarship. This book has done a great service in helping fill this gap. It joins a growing number of books that reassess the period of the First Aliyah and aims to puncture the hegemonic narrative constructed by the Labor Zionist leaders of the state, a narrative that fills the pages of Israeli children’s history books. As we gain distance from many of these events, new understandings of the past will emerge, some of which may provide us with contradictory narratives of what we think we know of history. We should welcome the challenge.

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