

## **Odessa, Vienna and Jerusalem: Zionism, Performative Nationhood and Multinational Empires**

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### **Citation:**

MARSHALL, Alex (2025). Odessa, Vienna and Jerusalem: Zionism, Performative Nationhood and Multinational Empires. Modern Languages Open. [Article]

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# Odessa, Vienna and Jerusalem: Zionism, Performative Nationhood and Multinational Empires

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## ABSTRACT

Early Zionism did not exist in a world exclusively composed of Wilsonian nation-states. Indeed, the centres of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian branches of the movement were both in multinational empires, as was their favoured destination of Ottoman-ruled Palestine. Rather, Zionism can be seen as a moment in the emergence of a world of nation-states when even the less likely candidates began to accept its assumptions. Prior to the certainty offered by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, Zionists by necessity made contingency plans that compromised on both location and status. This meant that despite their religious, mythological and practical significance, they envisaged forms of success even without Palestine and full statehood. The perceived impossibility of the aims of Zionism was also consciously played up by Zionists, most notably the Viennese founder of the movement Theodor Herzl in his utopian novel *Altneuland*. Furthermore, Zionist writing anticipated various forms of success even without the physical inhabitation of territory, such as improvement in the perception, culture and even physique of Jews. Examining the national demand as a performative utterance as well as a means to acquire its object, this article argues that national demands also serve to constitute national identities and consolidate them, for both insiders and outsiders. Moreover, Herzl and others were aware of the constructed and publicly performative nature of nationhood in the same way we are today, characterising their own project as the construction of a national identity, in part through literature and performance. For performative national demands, as Arendt noted, means and ends are not distinct but are subsumed into momentum within a kind of discursive economy of competing nations, whether on the international stage or within a polity.

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## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Marshall, Alex 2025 Odessa, Vienna and Jerusalem: Zionism, Performative Nationhood and Multinational Empires. *Modern Languages Open*, 2025(1): 8 pp. 1–16.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.503>

Zionism is generally understood as a Jewish national movement, certainly the best-known and most successful, and its particularities as a national movement make it a valuable case study to understand the ideology of nationalism, both under anomalous conditions and more broadly. The language of Israel and Zionism – “the state of Israel”, “Der Judenstaat”, two-state and one-state/binational solutions, national service and national-religious communities – frequently involves the language of nations and states. Yet Zionism, like many of the national movements of the same period, did not emerge in a world of nation-states. The world prior to Wilsonian nationalism following the First World War was as much one of multinational empires as it was one of nation-states. The two chief branches of Zionism each emerged from a multinational empire and aspired to a territory that was then part of a third. They did not and could not treat the nation-state as the only or default polity or identity, nor could they reliably assume that state and nation would correlate. Although the aim of the Zionist movement was a nation-state, the exact extent and character of what they expected to achieve was yet to be settled.

This article examines a national movement operating not among nation-states but between three multinational empires, and offers a theory of performative national demands. Rather than later events such as the Holocaust, the foundation of Israel or its consequences, the object of study will be what Zionism indicates about nationalism. Treating Zionism as a normative national movement that emerged in anomalous circumstances, this article presumes that tendencies identified within Zionism probably exist in nationalism more broadly. It observes first that Zionism emerged from an agonistic discursive economy of competing national claims without nation-states, and secondly that in the absence of a territory, Zionism was more prone to non-territorial expressions of nationalism, often performative. It therefore identifies a performative, agonistic element to national claims, akin to that within multinational empires, on the level of international affairs.

The article first sets out a theory that nationhood can be understood as partially constituted through performative utterances. It situates concepts of performativity derived from Judith Butler’s work and Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the “politico-symbolic” alongside Chantal Mouffe’s “agonistic politics” and Étienne Balibar’s concept of relative rights, to situate this performance within a discursive economy of performative demands.

This is followed by a brief summary of Zionism and what makes it particularly relevant and worthy of study, namely that it shows an identity that did not easily fit into the nationalist mould being adapted with no little difficulty. Moreover, it adapted with far less certainty regarding its goals and location than other nationalisms, and therefore had more scope to entertain alternatives and investigate second choices. Zionism will be situated in relation to three multinational empires, the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian and the Ottoman. These respectively contained the centres of Zionism’s western and eastern branches in Vienna and Odessa, and their putative destination, Palestine. The article highlights how Zionism, like many national movements, did not emerge in a world where nation-states or their interactions were especially prevalent, let alone the default.

The argument continues by noting that the main declared aim of Zionism, the establishment of a state in Palestine, was as such potentially negotiable. Locations outside Palestine from Argentina to Uganda were given serious consideration as possible destinations, as the branch of Zionism that aimed to use recognition to legitimate settlement was necessarily ready to compromise on location. The branch that used settlement as a means to recognition similarly was necessarily ready to compromise on statehood. Both branches therefore anticipated partial successes short of statehood in Palestine. This took place alongside other demands by national movements for recognition within, not just as, polities. Further examples indicate that this seemingly contradictory phenomenon is not an especially unusual quality in nationalism.

The article then argues similarly about Zionism and the need for territory. Since the possibility of a physical location was not a given, as was the case for most national movements, the partial successes Zionism envisioned sometimes had to be achievable independently of statehood in Palestine or even of inhabiting the territory. One such development was a change in Jewish national culture, but also in Jewish bodies, and this was often closely linked to the correct performance of gender. More interesting, however, were the explicit statements by the movement’s founder, Theodor Herzl, about what he believed nationalism was and how it

worked. He believed that motion to the destination, or the effort to acquire one, as much as continued habitation was constitutive of nationhood, as was the pageantry, performance and spectacle which shapes and propagates the idea.

Next, the article examines Herzl's unusual attempt at utopian fiction, arguing that is essentially a performance of utopian writing. Using Hannah Arendt's observations regarding the pan-German and pan-Slavic movements, the idea is put forward that the national demand serves to constitute an identity through competition with other concerns, and that as well as a means to an end, these demands were often an end in themselves. This theory will be tested against observations of Zionism in the context of multinational empires, noting that their internal national politics were analogous to the international stage.

The conclusion situates Zionism as a national movement in the context of a discursive economy of national interests, where the currency is making and reacting to national demands, and suggests further applications of this framework, for example the use of performative national demands by right-wing populists, and applying the framework of multinational empires and intra-nationalism to the dynamics of nation-states.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Despite questions of anomalousness and comparability with regard to Zionism, there are aspects of the movement that are uniquely useful for examining the rise of nationalism, which will be detailed here. The concept of performative national demands elaborated here rests on two principles: performativity and a discursive economy in which these performances take place, often through the medium of writing and literary production.

## ZIONISM, UNIQUENESS AND COMPARISON

Described as “the last, least typical of European nationalisms” ([Trevor-Roper, n.p.](#)), Zionism possesses several traits that make it a particularly conducive form of nationalism for qualitative study. First, like many anti-colonial, subaltern or latecomer nationalisms, it represented nationalism as a response to growing oppression from nationalist movements. Although this sentiment has been expressed consistently in Zionist discourse from its origins to today, it is most neatly expressed in Leon Pinsker's *Autoemanzipation!*:

Nach unserer Auffassung besteht der Kernpunkt des Problems in folgendem:  
Die Juden bilden im Schöße der Völker, unter denen sie leben, tatsächlich ein heterogenes Element, welches von keiner Nation gut vertragen werden kann. Die Aufgabe besteht nun darin, ein Mittel zu finden, durch welches dieses exklusive Element dem Völkerverbände derart angefaßt werde, daß der Judenfrage der Boden für immer entzogen sei. ([Pinsker, \*Autoemanzipation!\* n.p.](#))

This is the kernel of the problem, as we see it: the Jews comprise a distinctive element among the nations under which they dwell, and as such can neither assimilate nor be readily digested by any nation. Hence the solution lies in finding a means of so readjusting this exclusive element to the family of nations, that the basis of the Jewish question will be permanently removed. ([Pinsker, “Auto-emancipation!” n.p.](#))

Zionism is also notable as a diaspora nationalism with geographical, territorially bounded aims, taking a population that was not centred or concentrated in a contiguous area and moving it to one. Of course, the fact of that territory being already inhabited was the most significant difficulty, and the rights and future of Palestinians was a point of contention within the movement from the very beginning. However, for Jews moving to the proposed country, there was a level of individual and collective upheaval rarely expected by national movements of their adherents. The commitment to Zionism included, in a way that other nationalisms do not, a commitment to the immense personal inconvenience of relocating overseas. Furthermore, rather than a national identity developing concurrently with the emergence of nationalism as an ideology, Jewishness was already broadly codified and widely recognised, and was rather adapted by Zionism to nationalism. As such, the movement represents a key turning point in the ascent of nationalism. It shows Jews adopting the nationalist model of identity despite their situation in diaspora being ill-suited to the nation-state form; their having a strong claim to be regular, primary victims

of nationalists; and the necessity of drastic collective, individual and geographical changes in order to constitute a nation. Zionism represents a key moment in the journey of nationalism to becoming the default arrangement of identities, territories and sovereignties.

A turning point for Zionism specifically was the Balfour Declaration of November 1917. The joyously received backing of the British Empire made the possibility of Jewish statehood in Palestine seem plausible enough to take seriously; prior to this point Zionism had been presented by proponents and mocking detractors alike as a utopian pipe-dream. This early stage is informative as one in which Zionism needed mostly to take note of European realities, with Middle Eastern realities being of less significance to its development. It is also the point where Zionism most needed to keep its options open. As such this is the point where Zionism was most about European nationalism and responses to it, and least about Palestine, Palestinians and the details of the process of colonisation. Moreover, because Zionism's prospects seemed so uncertain and unlikely even to its proponents, aspects of the Jewish nationhood they envisaged sometimes fell short of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine, manifesting as interim measures, bonus effects or contingency plans. While this does not mean that either Palestine or statehood were immaterial to Zionism, it shows that Zionists pragmatically anticipated outcomes without these elements that they would still consider a (qualified) success and that would (partially) fulfil their political aims.

Although Zionism is odd in many ways, the urge towards "allozionism" ([Becke](#)) should be resisted. This concept extends "allosemitism" ([Bauman 143](#)) – a tendency to understand Jews, whether antisemitically or admiringly, primarily in terms of their difference – to understandings of Zionism and Israel as unique or incomparable. Zionism should be understood as having emerged in unusual circumstances, but otherwise as likely to behave like other national movements, its unique conditions simply making certain tendencies more visible. Read this way, anomalous qualities of Zionism are instructive about general tendencies of nationalist movements. Due to its unusual situation and the specific set of compromises that Zionists needed to anticipate, Zionism is a form of nationalism in which performative demands are particularly visible. Multinational empires are similarly informative as environments where demands from competing national movements had to be resolved through means other than simple statehood.

## THICK AND THIN PERFORMATIVITY

"Performativity" as a concept has been popularised in recent years and has taken on a meaning that, while different from the one used in *Gender Trouble* ([Butler](#)), nonetheless seems useful. Borrowing James C. Scott's framework for models of false consciousness, here these two forms will be tentatively termed "thick" and "thin" ([Scott 72](#)). The more commonly encountered "thin" sense of performativity implies insincerity, activism which stops at "spreading awareness" and which as likely as not serves mostly to increase the performer's own social capital ([Moore](#)). The distinction could be further extended to mirror Scott's model by adding "paper thin" performativity, where activism expresses only a willingness to fulfil perceived expectations.

Butler's form of performativity is "thicker". It is derived from Austin's concept of a "performative utterance", one in which "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" ([Austin 6](#)); Austin's examples are taking another person's hand in marriage, accepting a bet, or simply saying "I apologise", thereby creating (one half of) a marriage, a bet or an apology respectively ([7](#)). Extending the argument from the interpersonal to the societal level, Butler understands gender as "performative" in the sense of a "stylized repetition of acts", which is "public" in nature, and which "must be understood to found and consolidate the subject" and articulate it into something "culturally intelligible" ([Gender 191, 201](#)). The public founding and consolidation of a subject is naturally especially pertinent to nascent national or other collective identities, and a well-established example of this kind of performative construction of nationhood is the "invented tradition" ([Hobsbawm and Ranger](#)) – usually iterative, public and heavily stylised acts that serve to consolidate a sense of national identity.

Like the national tradition, the performance of national demands also serves to consolidate a sense of national identity. From the Brothers Grimm to Walter Scott and the elusive Great American Novel, literary production in service of national identities not only creates a national canon but performs collective belief in and desire for one. It does so discursively, both through the linguistic content of the works but also through the effective speech act of publishing them.

Pierre Bourdieu establishes a realm of the “politico-symbolic” where these speech acts take place, identifying a form of “performative discourse” in regionalism where sovereign powers “bring into existence the thing named” through a sort of “social magic” (223). In the same way that a husband and wife can be made by pronouncing them husband and wife, a variant or dialect can be made a recognised language by a state or sovereign declaring that they recognise it as a language. Derek Penslar, examining the Zionist movement, its aspirations and emotional tenor, notes that its character is “rhizomatic” (46), that is, consisting of horizontal, decentralised interactions between individuals and factions rather than being directed from above. Yosef Gorny even attributes Zionism’s success where other utopian movements failed to this open, decentralised nature, where “no single Zionist organization possessed the political power to impose its will on its other partners in the Zionist movement” (250). As such it is useful to apply conceptions of performative utterances usually associated with sovereign acts to a grassroots level of movements and print discussion as well. Nationalism, demands, negotiation and reconciliation are all already in the realm of the politico-symbolic, but in addition to dealing with states and sovereigns, this can potentially be scaled down to the bottom-up politics of social movements and public discourse.

The context in which these performative demands are made is one that includes several other competing demands. Chantal Mouffe posits a model of “agonistic” democracy, a model distinct from “deliberative” democracy, where issues and policies are debated until a rational consensus is reached, and from “aggregative” democracy, where conflicting interests are resolved into an acceptable compromise. Agonistic politics is driven by “affect”, “passions” and conflict over political hegemony, with different sets of ideologies and interests competing for dominance. This model of democracy aims for a resolution which “defuses potential antagonism” while remaining “compatible with pluralism” (Mouffe n.p.), and can potentially be scaled up to the level of international affairs. It does not understand politics as having ideal, fair or even stable resolutions; rather, democratic politics is necessarily marked by conflict, in a space where these conflicts, interests and beliefs can be peaceably expressed and mediated, leading to a temporary consensus. This model of agonistic politics can be scaled up to the level of international politics, both in the sense of the world stage and of relations between nationalities.

Étienne Balibar notes that rights within a polity can function or be perceived relatively as well as absolutely. So rather than certain inalienable rights being preserved absolutely, “national citizens can be persuaded that their rights do in fact exist if they see that the rights of foreigners are inferior, precarious, or conditioned on repeated manifestations of allegiance” (Balibar 37). This political process operates on the level of perception and communication and, in the case of displays of allegiance, functions through performatives. Furthermore, this understanding of politics can also potentially be scaled simultaneously up and down to the dynamics of social movements at the level of international politics, applicable to decentralised grassroots movements with aims on the international stage and bodies of imaginative and political writing, such as Zionism.

## ZIONISM, NATIONALISM AND MULTINATIONAL EMPIRES

Zionism could be said to have begun in at least three independent places. The most famous point of origin was Vienna, where Herzl published the pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* in 1896, but this was pre-dated by Leon Pinsker’s *Autoemanzipation!*, published in Odessa in 1881, and by the socialist Moses Hess, who wrote *Rom und Jerusalem* in Berlin in 1862 (Herzl notes reading both for the first time well after his turn to Zionism; *Briefe und Tagebücher*, 10 February 1896; 2 May 1901). The term “Zionism” was coined by Nathan Birnbaum in Vienna in 1890 (Bein), although as with Pinsker and Hess, Herzl seems to have arrived at Zionism before discovering his work. Born in Budapest in 1860 and given a largely secular upbringing, Herzl became a Zionist in response to rising antisemitism in France and Austria. After publishing *Der Judenstaat*, in 1897 he convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel. Leveraging his status as literary editor for the *Neue Freie Presse*, he also conducted what was essentially amateur diplomacy, using his connections as a journalist to arrange meetings and negotiations with German, Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian, British and Italian dignitaries, including Pope Pius X, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Victor Emmanuel III of Italy and Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Pinsker, however, was responding to a wave



of pogroms in the Russian Pale of Settlement in the early 1880s, and is largely only known for this pamphlet.

Apart from the ideas of Moses Hess, who will feature very little in this analysis,<sup>1</sup> there were two main tendencies and points of origin for early Zionism. The first point of origin after Hess chronologically was the eastern, “practical Zionist” branch, based in Odessa (now Ukraine) and inspired by Pinsker. The second branch was western “political Zionism”, led by Herzl from Vienna. This meant that the three key locations of Zionism were part of multinational empires – Vienna in the Habsburg Empire, Odessa in the Russian Empire, and the planned destination, Palestine in the Ottoman Empire. And while Hess was an exception in that he lived in France and Germany, that is, a nation-state and a loose confederation of micro-states, he was nonetheless preoccupied with multinational empires. His book *Rom und Jerusalem* was inspired by Italy’s independence from Austria, and Hess envisaged a Jewish state in Palestine overturning the archaic Ottoman Empire in a similar fashion. So while Hess’s personal life experience and intentions involved nation-states in a way distinct from those of Herzl or Pinsker, he was nonetheless like them in grappling with these empires as the *ancien regime* of international politics.

Of course, as a nationalist movement, Zionism necessarily concerned itself with nation-states: Herzl negotiated with leaders and diplomats from several countries and in his brief autobiography, “Meine Selbstbiographie”, he credited the Dreyfus Affair, which he covered as a journalist in Paris, with making him a Zionist ([Herzl, Werke 1: 374; Kornberg 1](#)).<sup>2</sup> Hess wrote in part from France, and essentially saw the old multinational empires as adversaries to be overthrown and little more, omitting them from his visions for the future. Even Pinsker wrote in German rather than Hebrew, Yiddish or Russian, with the goal of reaching German Jews and others who spoke the language as a de facto Jewish *lingua franca* ([Volovici](#)), although “to the extent that Pinsker felt national-territorial love, it was for his native Russia” ([Penslar 34](#)). The later Russian Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky imagined an Ottoman-style *millet* system of religious and ethnic administration ([Conforti](#)), and Edward Said’s landmark essay “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” notes that “every Zionist saw one or other of the imperial powers as patron” ([22](#)). The movement, with characteristic pragmatism, saw itself as finding a place within an international system that was, at the time, a constellation of empires. While Said naturally refers to overseas colonial (or, later, neocolonial) powers such as the USA, Britain and France, it is worth stressing the ubiquity of land-based multinational empires alongside them, especially from the perspective of turn-of-the-century Zionists.

Early Zionism essentially occurred between multinational empires. Its proponents did not yet live in, as Billig describes it, “a world of nation-states” ([15](#)), despite seeming to anticipate that one was imminent. Understanding Zionism therefore means addressing it through dynamics within and between multinational empires as well as of nation-states. Indeed, Judith Butler argues for an understanding of Jewish ethics that centres on relations with non-Jews and, in a frequently returned-to phrase from Arendt, “cohabiting the earth” ([Parting 24](#)). Nationalisms do not always coexist peacefully and, as Butler and Arendt note, their worst excesses involve selectively revoking the right to share the world. However, nationalism in part sees itself as an ideology of cohabitation, especially in its most isolationist strains, and this article argues that the multinational empire necessarily served Zionism as a model of cohabitation, as it was built on coexistence through claims addressed to a mediating power.

## ZIONISM AND STATEHOOD

Statehood was to some extent optional for the Zionist movement. This does not mean that Zionists were opposed to, rejected or had aims that were contrary to statehood, but rather that at various stages Zionists showed either that a state as such was an aim that they were

1 Hess’s 1862 proposal for Jewish nationalism, *Rom und Jerusalem*, although earlier, had very little influence in his lifetime and still less in the years following his death, and he is mainly known through Zionists having discovered him later on. Herzl, for example wrote that everything his movement was attempting had already been written by Hess, hailing him as a forgotten genius (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 2 May 1901). Although Hess could easily be considered the first Zionist and clearly impressed Herzl, by the time he read *Rom und Jerusalem* he had already founded a global Zionist movement.

2 Herzl’s annual review of events in Paris in 1894 did not, however, mention the Dreyfus Affair ([Avineri 70](#)), and this self-mythologisation is also troubled by the assertion that Herzl’s motivation had at least as much to do with antisemitism in Vienna.

prepared to compromise on, or that they anticipated forms of success that could be achieved independently of statehood in Palestine. The First Zionist Congress in 1897 agreed to phrase its goal as *eine öffentlich-rechtlich gesicherte Heimat*, a “homeland secured under public law” (Nordau 108). The Balfour Declaration worded it as “a national home for the Jewish people”. Both phrasings describe a nation-state, but not exclusively or explicitly. This vagueness had strategic value, since by specifying neither form nor location, alternatives to a nation-state and/or Palestine were conceivable as a Plan B.

## ALTERNATIVES TO PALESTINE

Before the Balfour Declaration made Palestine not just a possibility but the most realistic one, multiple alternatives were entertained both by Herzl and by sections of the Zionist movement more broadly. The most famous such example was the so-called “Uganda Proposal” in 1903, when the British Empire offered the movement land in Africa (in what is now Kenya). This caused the Territorialists, who were prepared to accept the offer of statehood in any location, to split off from the Zionist movement, which remained committed to Palestine (Friedman). This schism was so fierce that an assassination attempt was made on Herzl’s deputy Max Nordau simply for entertaining the offer, the attacker shouting “death to the African Nordau” and firing a pistol before the situation was amicably resolved with an apology (Avineri 242). For Pinsker, Turkey and North America were weighed as equal options. Herzl also considered other locations, dedicating a section of *Der Judenstaat* to Argentina, and he briefly considered Mesopotamia and the El-Arish peninsula in his diaries, should the option arise (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 29 December 1899; 27 April 1903).

## PRACTICAL ZIONISM

The key difference between eastern “practical Zionism” and western “political Zionism” was one of approach. While both branches of the movement ultimately aimed for a state in Palestine populated by Jews – unremarkable as national demands go – political Zionists aimed to negotiate recognition in order to legitimate settlement, while practical Zionists prioritised settlement in the hope that an established Jewish majority would earn this recognition. This distinction reflected the events that motivated the two branches – practical Zionism emerged during a wave of pogroms between 1881 and 1884, while political Zionism was largely a response to delegitimation and the failure of assimilation. Recognition of the movement alone, and especially escaping the Russian Empire, were, then, forms of success in themselves.

The most explicit variation came from the Odessa-based *Ahad Ha’am*, known as a gadfly within the movement, with a tendency to break rank, notably by recognising the impracticality of forming a state in a land that was already inhabited. His “cultural Zionism” was more focused on changes within Jewish culture, and did not envision more than around 1% of the world’s Jewish population actually inhabiting Palestine. Rather, this small minority would form a “spiritual centre” to ground a cultural revival. Like most national movements at the time, the outward demand for a nation-state was accompanied by a project of cultural transformation and revival, with the aim of gaining recognition as a nation by achieving this; even within Palestine, Zionists could anticipate positive results independently of statehood.

## HERZL’S NEGOTIATIONS

Herzl’s initial plan, simply to buy land in Palestine, was met with a flat refusal as soon as he entered negotiations with Abdul Hamid II, on the grounds that the land belonged to the Sultan’s people and was not his to sell. Herzl seemed genuinely impressed with this sentiment. Instead, he attempted to negotiate *halbsouverän* (“semi-sovereign”) status as a *Vassalenstaat* (“vassal state”) to the Sultan (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 19 June 1896). Pinsker too assumed that a Jewish national presence in Palestine would have the status of a “suzeranes [...] Paschalik” (“sovereign Pashalik”) within the Ottoman Empire (*Autoemanzipation!* 28). In the end Abdul Hamid’s insistence that Jews arriving from Europe be dispersed throughout the Empire rather than settling in Palestine proved a sticking point on which Herzl could and would not compromise (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 17 February 1902). Herzl’s 1902 novel *Altneuland/The Old-New-Land* is very vague about the official international status of the “New Society” (Herzl uses the English term) that the book describes, except to make explicit that it has no state as such.



Whatever Herzl's motives and levels of commitment, this shows that the pioneering Jewish nationalist was in fact quite willing to entertain alternative frameworks for national existence alongside independent statehood, and recognition as a *millet* (religious community) within the multinational Ottoman Empire was among them.

## INTRA-NATIONALISM

It is worth noting here that, rather than Zionism being exceptional, there are several other examples of national demands being made within, rather than in pursuit of, polities, including within multinational empires. (While these would often be called “sub-national” claims, “intra-polity” makes more sense in a context where the claims are not internal to nation-states, but are nonetheless very much national.) The General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia was an explicitly anti-Zionist, but also diaspora-nationalist, Jewish socialist movement. Indeed, it was at least partly Lenin's struggles with the Bund that prompted him to commission Joseph Stalin to write “[Marxism and the National Question](#)”, the question being the rights of nationalities within the Soviet Union, and one of the results being a Jewish Autonomous Oblast bordering China.

Intra-polity nationalist demands and movements, that is, those arising within a polity representing one of the nationalities comprising it, also emerge within nation-states. Black nationalism and white nationalism in America are in most ways incomparably different, and both have separatist elements. However, both explicitly national movements also have very clear aims and demands within the USA. While Ulster Unionism in Northern Ireland certainly resembles a national movement, it explicitly rejects separatism from the UK as an aim. Intermediate options such as federalism or full fiscal autonomy (“DevoMax”) are among the aims of Scottish and Welsh nationalists.

This form of communal politics was certainly prevalent in the Habsburg Empire and Herzl was aware of it. Alongside the success of Hungarian nationalists in 1867, as the Austrian Empire became the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was political controversy over the language of officials in Czech-speaking regions, which Herzl followed closely, envisaging a *väterliches Eingreifen* (“fatherly intervention”) by the Kaiser to resolve it (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 31 May 1899). The many national movements in the region included Austro-Slavism, which aimed for the unity and liberation of Slavic peoples within the Habsburg Empire, in direct opposition to the pan-Slavic movement which aimed for statehood ([Hantsch](#)). As a student Herzl was also forced to retract a patriotic speech because his patriotism as a German (as German-speaking Austrians saw themselves) conflicted with loyalty to the Austrian Kaiser ([McGrath](#)). Herzl's development as a nationalist seems to have been marked by shifts between three slightly conflicting types of patriotism. National-political life in multinational empires was as marked as international affairs by competing claims and conflict, and was clearly part of the political backdrop of early Zionists' lives.

## ZIONISM AND TERRITORY

Like statehood, territory was partly optional, insofar as Zionists frequently declared aims that could be achieved independently of inhabiting territory. As much as any national movement, Zionism was a cultural revival, inward-looking at the same time as it made outward demands. However, where [Ahad Ha'am](#) required a “spiritual centre” in Jerusalem, many elements of the Jewish national Renaissance did not require even 1% to inhabit a centre, and indeed many were either indifferent to or actively opposed to Zionism.

## THE NEW JEW

Part of this desired cultural transformation independent of state or territory was the wish to effect a change in individual Jews. The Zionist movement often had concerns about the state of Jewish culture, language and even bodies. Herzl, for example, expressed disgust at a Yiddish theatre group and depression at the cultural state of the Yiddish-speaking masses (*Jargonmassen*) (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 15 October 1898). In his speech to the Fifth Zionist Congress, Herzl's deputy and later successor in the Zionist movement, Max Nordau, embarked on a lengthy critique of Jewish culture in the Diaspora, talking about the *Luftmenschen* (literally “air-people”, which he translated as “loafer” in English), while their conditions were turning the

Jews into a nation of loafers (*Luftvolk*). He described Jews as being proletarianised with the education of the aristocracy. He also condemned the health effects of early marriage and the conditions in *cheders* (Jewish primary schools), arguing for the abolition of both, as well as for better organisation of the labour market than the “anarchy” he observed (118).

Herzl was less preoccupied with reforming Jewish culture and bodies than Nordau, but nonetheless anticipated improvements being brought about by Zionism. For example, his utopian novel imagines changes in Jewish women, with them becoming both masculinised – when a young ophthalmologist insists she can do the job as well as any man – and feminised – when a petite, black-haired Jewish character is described as cutting no mean figure next to a tall, blonde, Parisian-outfitted Englishwoman (Herzl, *Altneuland* 381). Herzl even seems to anticipate changes in the Jewish national sense of humour, portraying diasporic characters who use densely layered irony and self-deprecation critically, while sympathetic characters in his imagined Jewish state are given to more anodyne, straightforward jokes (Marshall). However, the Zionist “New Jew” is mainly a masculinisation of Jewish men. Daniel Boyarin illustrates this by quoting Freud, imagining a child growing up healthy, authentic and self-assured by saying “If he is a boy, he will be a stalwart Zionist”, noting “it was not actually necessary to participate in the building of a Jewish national home in order to solve the Jewish problem; merely being a stalwart Zionist was enough to transform the Jewish man” (236). Zionism, then, could serve in certain contexts as a byword for masculinity, and institutions such as Jewish football clubs and the Maccabee Games sprang up as the Zionist movement developed.

The most explicit advocate for this masculinisation was, again, Nordau, who wrote consistently about *Muskeljudentum* (muscle-Judaism), and the beneficial effects that fresh air, sport and exercise both literal and figurative would have on feeble Jewish constitutions. He compares Jews to the helots enslaved by Sparta, arguing that Zionism demonstrates and would inculcate a more Spartan attitude (Nordau 118). This change in self and self-perception was anticipated to produce changes in perception on the part of non-Jews, whereby Jews who chose to remain in the lands of their birth would no longer be seen as foreigners or an enemy within, but as having proven their loyalty, while those who returned would be seen as simple visitors from abroad (Herzl, *The Jewish State*). Nordau extends this principle even further and argues not so much that antisemites would disappear, but rather that the enemies of the Jews would be explicit in their enmity, wearing it like a cockade on the open field (Nordau 154). Essentially, Zionism would not only improve the Jews, normalise their position in the world and bolster their self-perception, and not even just improve them in the eyes of others – it would also win them a better, more normal class of enemy. All this it would achieve with or without Palestine, simply by its existence as a movement.

## IMPONDERABLES IN THIN AIR

After the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Herzl famously declared “In Basel habe ich den Judenstaat gegründet, vielleicht in fünf Jahren, jedenfalls in fünfzig wird es Jeder einsehen” (“Today I founded the Jewish State. It will take you fifty years to see it”) (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 30 August 1897) (he was out by less than one year). Herzl claimed that he had achieved this by having “worked the people into the mood for a State and made them feel that they were its National Assembly” (“Ich hetze die Leute allmähig [sic] in die Staatsstimmung hinein u. brachte ihnen das Gefühl bei, daß sie die Nationalversammlung seien”) (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 3 September 1897). This involved requiring delegates to wear white tie, which gave the proceedings a tone of solemnity (“gemessener Ton”), since “[p]eople should get used to seeing the Congress as a most exalted and solemn thing” (“Die Leute sollen sich daran gewöhnen, in diesem Kongreß das Höchste und Feierlichste zu sehen”) (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 3 September 1897). Herzl was clearly aiming for effects from Zionism that would take place with or without Palestine, and with or without statehood. By having a character in his novel declare “this ship is Zion”, Herzl understood the journey to, and by extension the struggle for, a Jewish state as constitutive of nationhood (Shumsky).

Herzl was quite explicit in seeing nation-building and other processes as taking place independently of land or statehood, writing “Wer Grosses will, ist in meinen Augen ein grosser Mensch – nicht, wer Grosses erreicht. Beim Erreichen spielt das Glück mit” (“He who wills something great is in my eyes a great man – not he who achieves it. For in achievement luck plays a part”) (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 5 May 1900), and praising Cecil Rhodes as “ein phantasievoller

Praktiker oder praktischer Phantastist” (“a visionary politician or a practical visionary”) (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 11 January 1902). Almost a century before the term “imagined communities” was coined (*Anderson*), Herzl identified nationhood as taking place in the arena of the notional and imaginary:

Wissen Sie, woraus das deutsche Reich entstanden ist? Aus Träumereien, Liedern, Phantasien und schwarzrotgoldenen Bändern. Und in kurzer Zeit, Bismarck hat nur den Baum geschüttelt, den die Phantasten pflanzten.

Believe me, the policy of an entire people – particularly when it is scattered all over the earth – can be carried out only with imponderables that float in thin air. Do you know what went into the making of the German Empire? Dreams, songs, fantasies and black-red-and-gold ribbons – and in short order. Bismarck merely shook the tree which the visionaries had planted. (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 3 June 1895)

Herzl understood nation-states as political constructions, popular fictions built of symbol, myth and ritual. Herzl, who saw himself as a *Dramatiker* (“dramatist”) working with real human beings from the street (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 10 June 1895), not only acknowledges the socially constructed nature of nationhood, but seems to admire its effectiveness in Germany. “Imponderables that float in thin air” is a common metaphor in Herzl’s writing, best elaborated as follows:

Grosse Dinge brauchen kein festes Fundament. Einen Apfel muss man auf den Tisch legen, damit er nicht falle. Die Erde schwebt in der Luft. So kann ich den Judenstaat vielleicht ohne jeden sicheren Halt gründen und befestigen. Das Geheimniss liegt in der Bewegung. (Ich glaube dahinaus wird auch irgendwo das lenkbare Luftschiff gefunden werden. Die Schwere überwunden durch die Bewegung, und nicht das Schiff, sondern dessen Bewegung ist zu lenken).

Great things need no solid foundation. An apple must be placed on a table, to keep it from falling. The earth floats in mid-air. Perhaps similarly I can found and stabilise the Jewish state without a firm support. The secret lies in motion. I believe that the dirigible airship will be invented on this principle. Weight overcome by motion; and not the ship but its motion is steered. (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 12 May 1896)

This recurring image is elaborated further in his *feuilleton* “Das lenkbare Luftschiff” (The Dirigible Balloon [*Philosophische Erzählungen*]), which uses an insoluble technological conundrum of the day as an allegory for the daunting and implausible project of Jewish statehood. Contrary to Kornberg’s argument that he “played down the [...] aesthetic politics” (53), Herzl’s understanding of nationhood as existing in the symbolic, theatrical sphere was directly put into practice, right down to the costume of the Congress delegates. So, while Avineri observes that changes to Jewish character and self-image “hardly provided the very concrete answer that Herzl was desperate to find. Where, in fact, should the Jews go? Palestine? Argentina?” (97), the destination itself was of less importance to Herzl. The analogies and imagery that he consistently returned to treat the drive towards a destination as no less effective for nation-building than the destination itself.

A controversial study of the ideological construction of a Land of Israel indicates that a putative homeland was chosen to serve the national movement rather than the other way around (*Sand*). Indeed, exactly this argument is also made in Zionism’s defence: that Palestine’s importance to Zionism can be justified, not because the mythology ties Jews to the land, but because nations need myths, and a Jewish national mythology can be tied to Palestine (*Gans* 240). When Herzl entertained the possibility of Mesopotamia in his diaries, he explicitly stated that, as the land of Abraham’s birth, a mythological connection could be attached to it (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 29 December 1899), suggesting that the same principle elaborated by Sand and Gans occurred in some measure to Herzl too.

Although Zionists talked no less about homelands than any other national movement, the land must be understood as a means to national legitimacy as much as the other way around, and one that by pragmatic necessity was potentially optional. Potentially, simply the *appearance* of weightiness and respectability was all that was necessary in the world of modern mass politics (*Beller*), the solid foundation in Herzl’s analogy compensated for by this perceived greatness.

Isaiah Friedman notes how, despite opposition to Britain's offer of land in East Africa, there were Zionists who considered this recognition of the movement alone to be an achievement. Wegner lists one function of Utopian writing as "teaching its audiences how to think of the spaces they already inhabit in a new critical fashion" (17). The explicitly utopian *Altneuland* serves to instruct both Jews and Gentiles, friendly and unfriendly, not to think of Europe as a place where Jews are intruders who do not belong, but as a place where Jews do not belong because this holds them back from potential.

The Zionist project as a whole could be said to issue the same instruction, and amid accusations that Jews had no desire for self-sufficiency, Zionism announced that Europe was not even where the Jews wanted to be. Karl Kraus's mocking comparison of Zionists to someone who, on hearing a drunk German shout "Hinaus mit Euch, Juden!" ("Out with you, Jews!"), replies "Jawohl, hinaus mit uns Juden!" ("Yes, out with us Jews!") (27) is pertinent here – not just the literature but the demands and actions of the Zionist movement served a communicative function. They answered antisemitic statements, not necessarily by refuting them but by changing their implications from something degrading and hostile to a national programme. Recognition as a nation was to be partly achieved by the fact of achieving statehood, but also by simply being seen to aspire to it.

## ZIONISM AND PERFORMATIVITY

### UTOPIANISM AND ANTI-UTOPIANISM

The clearest version of a performative national demand is Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland*, alongside his rougher blueprints in *Der Judenstaat* and his diaries. *Altneuland* mainly follows the stock structure of the genre, although with two travellers, one Gentile and one Jewish, being shown round by a Jewish guide. Herzl referred to *Altneuland* on one occasion as a *Staatsroman* ("political novel") rather than a "utopian novel" (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 9 December 1902), and he was frequently sceptical of utopian writing in print. He rejected the insinuation that his plan itself was utopian, and was careful to distinguish form from function, writing to Lord Rothschild that "There will, of course, be stupid people who, because I have chosen the form of a utopia which has been used by Plato and Thomas More, will declare the cause to be a utopia", and to German Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow that he "wrote the Utopia only to show that it is none" (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 5 October 1902). In the notes to *Altneuland* he says that he considered writing *Glücksland* ("Happyland"), a stage comedy satirising another utopian novel entitled (confusingly enough) *Freiland* ("Freeland") by Theodor Hertzka (Peck 318). Khalidi notes that "Many of the utopian ideals Herzl advocates therein", for example collective socialism, "are ones he either explicitly or implicitly disavows elsewhere" (60).

All this points, disconcertingly, to Theodor Herzl as a committed anti-utopian, who intended his work as "ein Märchen, das ich gleichsam bei den Lagerfeuern erzähle, um meine armen Leute auf der Wanderung bei gutem Muthe zu erhalten" ("a fable which, as it were, I am telling by the camp-fire to keep up the good spirits of my poor people while they are on the march") (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 5 October 1902) – a literary work with aesthetic intent rather than a serious blueprint for a hypothetical better society. Several readers, including contemporaries, have characterised Herzl's vision as a relatively realistic utopia that he was seemingly serious about achieving (Peck; Conforti; Ahad Ha'am, "Altneuland"). Herzl even appended the subtitle "Wenn Ihr es wollt, ist es kein Märchen" ("If you will it, it is no dream") to the cover of *Altneuland* (*Werke* 5: 129). Yet however much Herzl might have critiqued utopias, he did still write one, and so we can assume that he meant at least *something* by it. We can, however, surmise that Herzl's intentions and the novel's function were unusual for the genre, and that these functions were something other than a tentative social thought-experiment.

The visions that Herzl outlines in his diaries and in *Der Judenstaat* differ substantially from those in his utopian novel, with very little overlap other than a seven-hour day. Furthermore, he consistently borrows institutions (usually crediting sources) not just from existing countries but from other utopian novels. Newspapers run as cooperatives owned by subscribers, an organised army of labour and shopping consolidated into department stores are all recognisable from the 1887 utopian novel *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy, while the seven-hour day and having no standing army due to there being no risk of invasion are found in Hertzka's *Freiland*.

Herzl mentions both of these works by name elsewhere in the text (*Altneuland* 268–9), so it is clear that this is not plagiarism but intertextual reference. This is, however, unusual for a genre more commonly used as a vehicle for showcasing far-fetched social innovations and personal philosophies. Conforti's comment that, for Herzl, "The Zionist realist Utopia enabled the implementation of the Zionist vision but did not dictate a comprehensive utopian model" (78) is correct, despite the precise stipulations of *Der Judenstaat* and *Altneuland*. Herzl's vision lays out a comprehensive utopian model whose contents are ultimately arbitrary and replaceable: while a typical utopia makes serious propositions but is noncommittal about the plausibility of their realisation, Herzl is noncommittal about his own proposals, but seems entirely serious that *something* can be realised. *Altneuland* functions, not through the content of the utopia and its proposals, but through the performative speech act of its publication.

## DEMANDS, MEANS AND ENDS

Zionism emerged alongside two other unusual, cross-border, unifying nationalist projects: the pan-German and pan-Slavic movements. These aimed to unite all the Germanic and Slavic peoples respectively into single nations. As well as identifying them as the titular origins of National Socialist and Stalinist totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt (688) understands these movements as analogous to the expansionist drive of imperialism that characterised Europe in this era. That these movements often understood each other as eternal enemies equally mirrors the constant competition between rival empires. Arendt sees this expansionism as subsuming means and ends into one another, leaving the pan-nationalist movements driven not by the clear goals and objects of their demands but by "momentum". As with Herzl's analogy of earth, apple and balloon, it is movement that keeps the nation afloat. Although Arendt portrays this as a trait of the pan-nationalisms, it is potentially applicable to national movements more broadly, particularly in contexts where a concrete demand is unclear, unrealisable, or for whatever reason not available, such as in the multinational empires where these movements took off.

It is possible to draw indirect, albeit not direct, parallels between early Zionists and their pan-nationalist contemporaries. Herzl, in his diaries, records a daydream of duelling with one of the various antisemitic demagogues in Vienna (who included the pan-Germans Alois Lichtenstein and Georg Ritter von Schönerer) for the honour of the Jewish people, considering scenarios for both victory and defeat (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 12 June 1895). Birnbaum, after coining "Zionism", shifted to a more diaspora-based national revival project which he termed *Alljudentum*, a "pan-Judaism" to balance *Alldeutschum*/pan-Germanism (Goldsmith 107). Though the level of seriousness of either is hard to gauge, even as jokes or fictional scenarios they illustrate that both thinkers saw a parallel between the movements, and were conscious of acting within the same discursive economy of competing pan-nationalisms in a world of multinational empires.

## IMPOSSIBILITY

Both pan-Germanism and Zionism were characterised by implausibility and lack of realism. "The Pan-Germans' most controversial project", Roger Chickering notes, was "that the borders of the German state were to expand to include all areas of the European continent in which Germans were the dominant ethnic element" (78). Naturally, this contained too many obvious contradictions to be practicable – many German-speakers were interspersed with other ethnicities and nations, who could not be included in a contiguous territory unless it ceased to be monocultural. Essentially, other nations would get in the way simply by existing, meaning that taken together, the strong foreign policy that the pan-Germans demanded could not be realised except at the direct expense of their neighbours. As with Herzl's utopia, the content of the national demand is less operative than the speech act of issuing it.

Similarly, and as previously stated, the implausibility of Zionism made it a frequent punchline, portrayed in a scene in *Altneuland* describing a fashionable Jewish dinner party. An old Moravian rabbi, after complaining about how bad antisemitism is getting out in the provinces, makes the absurd suggestion of Jewish emigration to Palestine and is viciously mocked by the other bourgeois and metropolitan characters. Herzl also notes a colleague's joking suggestion, in response to an article wondering if the planet could be inhabited, that he should set up the Jewish state on Mars (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 28 January 1897). As noted earlier, Herzl



was equally given to comparing Zionism to unsolved technological conundrums of the day, or exploring it through the deliberately implausible genre of utopian romance. Far from refuting the seeming impossibility of Zionism, Herzl seems to have played it up as an asset rather than addressing it as a flaw, indicating that it was part of an intentionally performative strategy.

## TOWARDS A PERFORMATIVE READING OF NATIONHOOD

Impossible demands, it seems, were a feature, not a bug, in these two related forms of nationalist politics and the discursive economy in which its advocates were writing. The impossible demand seems to be an effective form of national demand, a form of performative utterance that can be constitutive of nationhood itself. Zionism, ridiculed from the start as impossible, offers a prime example.

Both pan-Germanism and Zionism performed national demands that were constitutive of national identities. These functioned in part as demands for validation through the suppression of other, competing priorities. In the case of the pan-Germans this validation by and large came by superseding competing national interests: pan-nationalist demands were impossible to reconcile with the demands and sometimes even the existence of their neighbours. Herzlian Zionism, however, consciously emphasised the impossibility of its own demands in general. While by the 2020s there have arisen nationalist demands, such as Palestinian liberation and pan-Arabism, with aims at odds with those of Zionism, in the 1890s there was no rival national movement with competing interests to push into second place. Most of Zionism's battles at this stage were with competing assimilationist, diasporic or religious models of Jewishness over who were the true representatives of the people, rather than national rights, and if Palestinians received any mention it tended to be through imagining a harmonious coexistence that barely entertained the idea of their objecting. Rather, early Zionism, a laughing stock in an age of utopian crazes and constant, radical transformation, and one which used literary output to emphasise its impossibility, derived validation through the suppression of political realism. An impossible demand implies a momentous one and a momentous demand implies an important one. Rather than being anomalous, this might be a normal tendency of nationalism and simply be more visible in Zionism.

The validation and constitution of identities though demands comes not just from their indulgence or fulfilment but from the act of demanding itself. Whether enthusiastically granted, reluctantly ceded, endlessly deferred, outright refused, casually dismissed or ignored completely, any possible outcome can aid in forming and consolidating that identity, though the collective emotional reaction may vary depending on the case. Making demands and anticipating responses on behalf of a collective identity serves to form and consolidate that identity by performing it. Performing an identity in the context of competing national demands also performs it as national. This is particularly useful to Zionism in its efforts to normalise a diasporic identity into a territorially bounded one. And an impossible demand, as well as being the loudest and most uncompromising, can be performed for longest without suddenly losing momentum by being fulfilled.

This performance seems to have been a success. Herzl did meet many senior diplomats and heads of state, from the Pope to the Kaiser, in his capacity as amateur ambassador for a state that would not exist for decades. Abdul Hamid II even offered him an audience, partly as an influential journalist, partly as "Chef der Juden" ("leader of the Jews") (*Briefe und Tagebücher*, 8 May 1901), implicitly recognising Jews as a singular collective able to have a singular leader. Zionism illustrates how recognition as a nation can be achieved, both externally by other nations and internally by its own members, by behaving as a nation. This can be achieved independently of statehood or even the inhabitation of national territory, and is most visible where one or both of those possibilities is out of reach. Behaving as a nation is a deliberately and conspicuously public act.

## CONCLUSION

Prior to the Balfour Declaration, Zionism lacked realistic prospects for statehood or claims to specific land on the level usual for other national movements, and as such operated without these. Although at the time there were Jewish émigrés in Palestine, this was also true of Argentina, and



though various diplomats and heads of state had expressed support for Zionism verbally, this was nothing compared to the explicit, potentially material backing of a global empire. And while the Uganda proposal divided the movement, by explicitly naming Palestine the Balfour Declaration ended these divisions at the stroke of a pen. A highly diverse and disparate movement in terms of motives, objectives and methods, this “multiplicity” only “hardened into a monolith” (as one of this article’s reviewers elegantly phrased it) when the multiple proposals and negotiations of a national movement hardened into the reality of a nation-state. As such Zionism offers an opportunity to examine nationalist aims independently of statehood. Multinational empires, the context in which the movement arose and operated, offer another unusual model of national politics, where national movements fight for recognition *within*, not just *as*, polities. The internal politics of multinational empires – also observable in some nation-states – can be productively viewed as analogous to international politics, with the world stage as one big Austria-Hungary or vice versa. Certainly, the national movements that emerged at the tail-end of the big multinational empires did so in a world without defaults, where sovereignty in the form of a nation-state might have been the preferred option, but was not necessarily the only one.

National demands, whether presented to the Tsar or to the UN General Assembly, emerge within and navigate a discursive economy. Left to its own devices this is symbolic and performative, agonistic and competitive; its currency is demands and the suppression of rival interests, and among the most valuable demands are arguably the impossible and the unreasonable ones. Zionism, attempting to transform and integrate itself to fit into this world of nations, and at least initially without rivals to suppress, joined in with the effective practice of unreasonable performative national demands to constitute, consolidate and give momentum to a collective subject, and applied it in the ways that were available.

Zionism can be understood as reacting both negatively and positively to the rise of nationalism in Europe. On the one hand, it was a flight response to the threat of antisemitism and an expression of frustration at thwarted attempts at assimilation. On the other, it took genuine inspiration from the successes of the national movements that had emerged before it. However, Zionism was also a neutral, normative response, one which observed the way nation-states, collectives in multinational empires and other identities functioned, then set out to integrate itself within those systems. It represents an acceptance of nationalism not as good or bad but as inevitable, a system on the rise and one whose teething problems were usually best solved with more nationalism. In this case, we see Zionism integrating itself into a discursive economy driven by performative national demands, often large, unreasonable or outright impossible.

The thick performativity of these demands as a dynamic within nationalism shows significant potential to explain the dynamics of populist, especially right-wing, politics. These observations about Zionism and pan-Germanism are visible, too, in the nationalist causes of today. Sobolewska and Ford observe that the Brexit vote was a “moment of awakening” in which the conflict over and the emergence of concrete nationalistic demands became constitutive of two “tribes of antagonists” (217–18). Meanwhile Eatwell and Goodwin identify parallel tendencies among Trump supporters, such as a definition of a supposedly “fair” system as one where, paradoxically “the national group is prioritized over immigrants in fields like employment and welfare” (276). Demands are both agonistic and constitutive of identity. Performativity is especially recognisable in slogans such as “Get Brexit Done” or “Make America Great Again”, where there are no clear goals (especially where Brexit simply “means Brexit”), or “build the wall”, where the demand is meaningless (having already been fulfilled along key sections of the US–Mexico border before the slogan emerged). It is not the content but the speech act of the demand that is operative. Understanding these not as precise policy requests, but as demands for recognition, exclusivity and guarantees about whose side the state will take, gives some explanation as to why they are so effective despite being so vague, open-ended and difficult to satisfy.

Key questions to be investigated in the field of nationalism studies include how these assimilatory moments, such as Zionism, understood the systems of nationhood that they were attempting to integrate collective identities into. The aims and demands of national, or nation-like, identities where full statehood is either unavailable, uncertain or inadvisable also offer a productive avenue for research, especially into how far claims within polities and on the international stage are comparable. Finally, to the extent that identities such as nationhood are discursively constructed and often in environments of conflict, it is worth examining the mechanics of this construction and why nationalist demands are capable of remaining unsatisfied even when fully granted.

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#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Marshall, Alex 2025 *Odessa, Vienna and Jerusalem: Zionism, Performative Nationhood and Multinational Empires. Modern Languages Open*, 2025(1): 8 pp. 1–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.503>

**Published:** 22 September 2025

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