

# Introduction

On a beautiful noon in May of 2009, a crowd of about 1,000 to 1,500 congregated at a Jerusalem mountain overlooking the ancient village of Abu Ghosh. Beside the stone monument in the foreground, overlooking the wooded valley below, stood a small podium decorated with a photographic image taken by Yevgeny Khaldei of a Soviet soldier waving the flag over the Reichstag. Behind it, in anachronistic defiance of post-1991 reality, the Israeli flag flew alongside the Soviet flag. The ceremony at the foot of the monument was simple, made up of speeches in Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic and the laying of wreaths. The audience consisted mainly of young Palestinians, many of them adorned in red and bearing the image of Che Guevara; Communist youth members in white shirts and red scarves intermingling with older party members; Arabs and Jews; and the representatives of the Russian delegation in Tel Aviv. At the end of the ceremony, the participants held a mass picnic, with the youth singing revolutionary songs in Arabic while engaged in barbecuing. This mixture of ritual and mass picnic commemorating the Soviet victory in World War II is organized by the Israeli Communist Party and its affiliated organizations, and it has taken place every year since 1950. This cultural practice and others like it lie at the heart of this book, which deals with the rites of the Jewish Communist subculture of the 1920s to the mid-1960s.

The basic premise of this book is twofold. First, I argue that the Jewish Communists developed a unique subculture of their own in the years 1919 to 1965. This subculture was formed in a process of negation and absorption vis-à-vis two local political cultures: the dominant Socialist-Zionist culture of pre-1948 Palestine, to the point that the Communists participated in the political culture around them as a dissident stance in Socialist-Zionist discourse, and the statist culture of the post-1948 State

of Israel. Another influence that shaped the Jewish Israeli Communist subculture was the Soviet and East German cultures and the traditions of the European Left. Through its cultural practices, rituals, myths, and symbols, the Jewish Communist subculture disseminated its values among the members of the Communist Party and its youth movement. Second, I claim here that the cultural practices of the Jewish Communists were used to create a distinct Jewish-Israeli Communist identity, made up of Jewish traditional, Israeli local, and Soviet and left-wing European elements. This identity was created within the confines of the Communist subculture and outside the mechanisms that created a Jewish-Israeli native culture in Palestine/Israel.

The merger, in 1954, of MAKI (Israeli Communist Party) and Banki (Israeli Young Communist League) with the Socialist Left Party<sup>1</sup> led by Moshe Sneh was a watershed in both the political and cultural history of post-1948 Israeli Communism. I contend that this event upset the equilibrium between the local and universal elements in MAKI and Banki. In an attempt to give the party and its youth movement an Israeli character (in effect transforming it into a Zionist movement), the “Left Men” accelerated the adaptation of local Israeli elements at the expense of the Communist ones, thus contributing not just to the political but also to the cultural disintegration of MAKI.

### Historiography of Israeli Communism

Communism in Palestine/Israel has drawn relatively thin scholarly attention, although scholars of different stripes have debated its history and created a small body of works about its different aspects. The Israeli Communist movement has been the subject of scholarly attention since 1948, beginning with the article “Communist Tactics in Palestine” by Martin Ebon.<sup>2</sup> The historiography of Communism in Israel can be differentiated into three groups: Zionist-Jewish historians; cultural historians, some of them post-Zionist and others not identified as such; and Palestinian historians. The main paradigm dominating the field is the question concerning the relation between Palestinians and Jews within the party. Historians of Communism in Palestine/Israel depict the Communist Party as having been perpetually torn between the national orientations of its members. Zionist historians argue that Communism inevitably clashed with Zionism and that the Arabization of the party after the 1929 riots prevented the party from becoming truly binational, that is, Palestinian and Jewish.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the Palestinian historians researching Communist history in pre-1948 Palestine claim that there was an ever-growing compatibility between Palestinian nationalism and the party. Driven by a desire to locate the Palestinian national movement's origins in progressive Marxism, they argue that the Arabization of the party gained it its first Palestinian followers. This process reached its peak in the 1943 split-up of the party when the Palestinian Communists set up their own faction, in fact integrating Communism and Palestinian nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Cultural historians for their part look at Palestinians and Jews as part of the same discourse, one that, despite the conflicts between Palestinians and Jews, featured cultural concepts that drew both sides together.<sup>5</sup>

Banki, the party's youth movement, has rarely been researched. This disregard reflects the emphasis that researchers of the Israeli youth movements place on the Socialist-Zionist movements, to the neglect of a movement like Banki, which existed outside the political consensus. There is one exception, the work by Jacob Markovizky, *White Shirt and Red Tie*. Markovizky's book is the first history of Banki and, though unpublished, is to be considered the foundation for future research.

In many ways, Markovizky shares the basic assumptions of Zionist writers on Israeli Communism. Though he recognizes the contribution made by Palestinian historians, he says that "it can be argued that the weight of those [Palestinian nationalists] was negligible in comparison to the inner Jewish process in the consolidation of the Communist Party in Eretz-Israel."<sup>6</sup> Despite its Zionist bent, his summary of Communist history is devoid of the virulent anti-Communism that some Zionist scholars indulge in.

Three main themes emerge from the detailed narrative of Banki's history constructed by Markovizky. The first is the attempt by ex-members of the Left party, mainly from the mid-1950s, to endow Banki with an Israeli character that would make the movement part of mainstream Israeli society.<sup>7</sup> A second point follows from this basic point, namely, the incompatibility between the national and the international. Markovizky portrays Banki as a movement torn between the growing desire of its Jewish members to be part of the national body, the international and socialist values that were an integral part of party ideology, and the growing national feelings of the Palestinian members. When it came time to choose between these value systems, most of the Jewish members awoke from the internationalist dream and preferred a growing affinity with Jewish nationalism. The third theme is the breakdown of the system of Palestinian-Jewish cooperation within the ranks of Banki and MAKI, making "the national conflict the

main obstacle . . . in the development of the movement and its chances of surviving.”<sup>8</sup> In that sense, Markovizky positions himself in the mainstream of this field. Markovizky’s pioneering work marks the first time the full extent of Banki’s history and activity has been explored. Nonetheless, the nature of his work, which presents an overview of the movement, precludes going into the details of the unique Communist subculture developed in Banki and MAKI. Another flaw in Markovizky’s work that compels more research of Banki is his Zionist slant. In his introduction, he admits that “Rakah members who split from MAKI were reluctant to talk. Those who did talk were close-minded or developed a one-sided approach that sought to justify their historical and movement activity.”<sup>9</sup> By the same token, it can be argued that those who remained in the Jewish MAKI developed their own justifications for their historical actions.

On the contrary, this book argues that MAKI and Banki had achieved an equilibrium between forms of a non-Zionist Jewish-Israeli identity that accommodated, to an extent, internationalist Socialism. It was the drive of these elements in Banki and MAKI that came from the Left party to—in effect—Zionize the Communist movement that contributed to the destruction of Banki and its mother party.

### The History of Communism in Palestine/Israel

The identity formation process of the Jewish Communists with its rites, symbols, and myths took place as part of the history of the Communist Party—with its complicated and at times strenuous relations between Arabs and Jews. The history of the Communist Party in Palestine/Israel can be divided into five periods. The first, 1919–1924, witnessed the formation of an anti-Zionist Communist Party out of the far left of labor Zionism. The second, 1924–1929, was a period of attempts to create an Arab-Jewish Communist Party, while trying to form an effective ideology and political practice suitable for Palestine. The third stage of party history, 1929–1936, was characterized by the Comintern-ordered Arabization of the party. The fourth phase of party history, 1936–1943, presents one of the most politically unstable times in Communist history, when time after time tensions erupted between Palestinian and Jewish Communists. Unable to contain their differences, the Communists split twice in the 1930s and 1940s. This period of instability ended with the dramatic events of the 1948 War

that opened the fifth period of party history; the era of the Arab-Jewish MAKI that ended with the 1965 split of the Communist Party.

## The Rise of Communism in Palestine

The roots of Communism in Palestine can be traced to the contradiction between internationalist ideals, brought by the first Eastern European Jewish settlers, and the practices of Zionist Socialism, as seen when some members of the first Marxist party in Palestine, Po'aley Zion (Workers of Zion), voiced their concerns about the exclusion of Palestinian workers from the evolving movement.<sup>10</sup> To these local factors were added the repercussions of the 1917 October Revolution. The example of the Bolsheviks inspired those in the left-wing of Po'aley Zion to split the united party abroad between right and left:

The official starting point for the Party can be traced back to 1919, when a small group of Jewish communists led by Yitzhak Meirson, M. Khalidi, and Gershon Dau, some of whom had arrived in the Second *Aliyah*, or wave of migration (lit. ascent), broke away from the *Po'aley Zion* (Workers of Zion) movement and founded the *Mifleget Poalim Sozialistit*, or MPS.<sup>11</sup>

Renamed for the 1921 Histadrut (the all-inclusive union that organized most of the Jewish workers) founding conference the Hebrew Socialist Workers Party (MPSA), it sent six delegates to the meeting.<sup>12</sup> In the convention the MPSA presented radical demands. It called for the separation of the union's economic enterprises from its trade union ones and for opening the union to Palestinian workers.

Still, the brief stint of MPSA as a legal organization was over that same year. In a tragic coincidence, MPSA's May Day parade clashed with its political opponents just as a Palestinian mob murdered Jews in Jaffa.<sup>13</sup> The British authorities reacted by blaming what came to be known as the 1921 Riots on MPSA, arresting and deporting many of its activists. The wave of repression resulted in the termination of the party as a coherent political body. Palestinian Communism was fractured into small squabbling factions. The action against MPSA also heralded the pattern of relations between the Communists and the British colonial state for the next twenty

years. The Communist Party was pronounced illegal and became an underground persecuted organization. The relations between the Zionist Yishuv (Hebrew: "Settlement," the pre-1948 Jewish Zionist community in Palestine) and the Communists were set a year earlier. In January 1920 members of the Zionist-Socialist *Ahdut HaAvoda* (Labour Unity) had stormed the MPSA Workers Club in Haifa. In mid-February a group of students from Hertzeliya Hebrew Gymnasium violently upended a Yiddish play of MPSA's "club Borochov." The Communists became a pariah group, outcast from the formative institutions of Zionist settler society in Palestine.

The years 1921–1923 were marked by the emergence of a fully anti-Zionist Communist Party and its admittance to the Comintern. MPSA was still in many ways linked to its Marxist-Zionist roots in Po'aley Zion. The Jewish Communists viewed themselves as "part of Zionism, members of the Jewish national movement, and they did not see a way for building Eretz-Israel and Aliyah but through the social revolution."<sup>14</sup> MPSA did not depart from its "Palestinian centered self-image,"<sup>15</sup> endeavoring to create a Zionist-Socialist proletarian culture apart from the bourgeoisie one. However, the Comintern demanded that Jewish leftists flocking to its gates shed their Zionist garb in order to be recognized. By 1922 the two main Communist groupings in Palestine, the KPP (Communist Party of Palestine) and the PKP (Palestinian Communist Party) had started that process. In the PKP congress held in 1922, the party still adhered to some Zionist-Socialist principles—mainly Aliyah. But by 1923, at the second party congress—where the two main groupings of Palestinian Communism united—the unified PKP turned decidedly against Zionism. The program of the new party had "seen in the Arab national movement one of the main factors in the struggle against British Imperialism . . . it was also proclaimed that Zionism is a movement of the Jewish bourgeoisie that linked its fortunes with British Imperialism. This movement seeks new markets while exploiting romantic nationalism for its own economic gains."<sup>16</sup> This was enough to persuade the Comintern, and in 1924 the PKP became its Palestinian section.

### In Search of an Arab-Jewish Party

When the PKP was recognized as a section of the Comintern, it was overwhelmingly Jewish. Many of its activists were former Zionists who had turned against Zionism both theoretically and politically.<sup>17</sup> The party's recognition by Moscow meant that it started to recruit Palestinians and

tried to integrate with their anticolonial struggle. The most notable incident signaling the break with the Yishuv was the Afula Affair, where the PKP “had a central role in supporting Arab *fellahin* resistance”<sup>18</sup> to Zionist land purchases. This action brought on the expulsion of the Communists from the Histadrut, greatly diminishing its ability to approach Jewish workers.

The mid- to late 1920s were characterized by a continued effort by the PKP to recruit Palestinian membership. The acceptance of the PKP to the Comintern was conditioned on the Arabization of the party—meaning the enlistment of an Arab cadre that would reflect the demographic majority in Palestine. Nonetheless, the process was met with opposition within the party and with the limited response of Palestinians to the slogans of the Communists. The party did maintain some links to some considered by the Communists to be anti-imperialist and progressive Palestinian leaders. The party also planted the seeds of Communism in Lebanon and Syria as its delegates tried to recruit local support. However, the attempts to implement the Comintern policies of cooperation with bourgeoisie nationalists against imperialism had only moderate success.<sup>19</sup> By 1925 the proportion of Palestinian members in the PKP had moved to between 5 and 8 percent.<sup>20</sup>

As for the Yishuv, the PKP advanced the theory of Yishuvism. Developed between 1924 and 1928 by the foremost leader of the party in the 1920s, Wolf Averbuch, it was “basically ‘pro-Palestinian’ covered with extreme anti-Zionism.”<sup>21</sup> Yishuvism rejected Zionism not only for being a bourgeoisie movement allied with imperialism, but because it was a hindrance to the economic development of Palestine. Immigration of Jews to Palestine was perceived as a deterministic process, an “objective necessity, the result of the political and economic conditions under which the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe live.”<sup>22</sup> Affluent as well as poor Jews arrived in Palestine, creating a Marxist process of class differentiation and capital accumulation. This capitalist project was hindered by Zionism as a result of two contradictions. One was the fact that Zionism needed “feudalism, which enables it to purchase lands and create a separate Jewish economy.”<sup>23</sup> But the emigration of Jews and the creation of the Yishuv “instigates an economic development that destroys the feudal conditions.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Zionism aligned with the British colonial ruler—wishing to make Palestine into a colonial market for British goods, enacting heavy tariffs and taxes in order to inhibit the development of local manufacturing—and stifled the development of Jewish industry. Therefore the Jewish Yishuv should abandon the Zionist nationalist project. It is to join hands with the Arabs of Palestine in an anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggle for political and

economic independence. This ideological dividing line between the Jews of Palestine and Zionism enabled the PKP to remain active in the Yishuv's elected bodies and among Jewish workers. While Yishuvism was officially condemned by the Comintern in the late 1920s, it reemerged, in different forms, among the Jewish Communists in years to come.

### Arabization

The end of the 1920s was a watershed moment in the history of Communism in Palestine. The weeklong 1929 Riots in late August of that year shook the PKP to its core. At first the party's Central Committee issued a pamphlet that deplored the violence. It viewed the disturbances as a way for the Arab and Jewish ruling classes to divert the masses from the real enemy—imperialism.<sup>25</sup> Still, by October 1929, the Comintern rejected this view, describing the riots as part of a Palestinian anti-imperialist struggle—one that the PKP failed to recognize because it miscarried the Arabization of the Communist Party. In the wake of the 1929 Riots, the Jewish leadership of the PKP was mostly recalled to Moscow—where most of them would perish in Stalin's 1930s purges—and was replaced by a Moscow-trained leadership made up of Palestinian and Jewish native cadres. In 1930 the PKP Conference enshrined the Arabization in the party's platform. The Party Central Committee—by Comintern directive—had an Arab majority and the PKP vowed to redouble its efforts among Palestine's Arabs. These acts ended the first formative stage of Communism in Palestine, when the party had been comprised mostly of Jews and led by Jews.

The intensified pace of Arabization can also be attributed to a change of policy of the Comintern. In the wake of the 1920 Second Comintern Conference that ordered cooperation between Communists in the colonial world and non-Communist nationalists, the PKP attempted to contact those Palestinian nationalists it deemed progressive. As Stalin took over the Comintern—as part of his drive for absolute power—the organization directed the Communist parties outside Europe to undergo a process of indigenization. As a result, colonial Communists were to relinquish their ties to local nationalists. Palestine was no exception.

The formative era of Communism saw the official founding of a Communist youth movement in Palestine. Early in 1925 a plan was laid for a Communist youth section of the party by a young activist named Haim Davidovich. The young Communists were mostly preoccupied with



attempting to radicalize members of Zionist-Socialist youth movements. The Communist Youth, as will be detailed later, attacked the attempts to create a Zionist secular culture, offering to replace Zionism with Marxist class theories. However, given the conditions of an underground organization, large-scale activities of Communist Youth were impossible. Only in the wake of World War II and the legalization of the party did a coherent and active youth movement appear.

The first half of the 1930s were marked with an increased surveillance and arrests of Communists. The British viewed the activity of the Communist Party as part of Soviet preparations for war against Britain. Palestine, with its strategic location on the road to the Persian Gulf and India, was an extremely valuable part of the empire. For these reasons, the British increased their repression of the PKP. In 1932, for instance, they arrested 210 suspects for Communist activity.<sup>26</sup> While Communism in Palestine was being repressed, the Soviets plunged into the bloody upheaval of Collectivization, the Five Year Plan, and the Moscow Trials. The PKP, for its part, continued to commend the “Socialist construction” in the USSR. The Soviets, in contrast, while controlling the affairs of the PKP, were not pleased at what they saw as the failure of the party to implement the Comintern’s directives. The continued pressures on the party resulted in its political ineffectiveness. In fact, it failed to play a significant part in the 1933 wave of Palestinian protest. Some measure of stability was reached with the 1934 appointment of the first Palestinian general secretary of the party, the Moscow-trained Radwan al-Hillou, known by his nom de guerre Musa. Yet a new wave of arrests that included the new party leader furthered internal party volatility. Still, despite all the turmoil, the PKP started to make inroads into the then still small Palestinian working class, recruiting new members and penetrating the fledgling Palestinian labor movement.

### The Breakdown of the Arab-Jewish PKP

The Arab Revolt (1936–1939), the largest anticolonial rebellion in the history of Palestine, raised, again, the tensions within the party. Since the forced Arabization of the late 1920s and early 1930s, tensions between the Jewish and Palestinian comrades had simmered beneath the surface. For instance, one Palestinian party member, Amin Aref, approached the Comintern in March 1935, asking to expel the Jewish members from the party. He argued that some of the Jewish leaders had “said that the Arab

masses did not attain a sufficient consciousness in order to retain revolutionary ideas.<sup>27</sup> The outbreak of rebellion in Palestine was accompanied by yet another change in Soviet policy. Alarmed by the rise of Fascism in Europe, the 1935 Seventh Congress of the Comintern ordered the Western Communist parties to form Popular Fronts with Social Democrats and Liberals. In the colonial world, the Communists were directed to resume collaboration with nationalist forces. In Palestine that meant the Palestinian national movement.

At first the PKP sided with the Palestinian rebels, considering them anti-imperialist and progressive. The Jewish members—although some had indulged in sporadic acts of violence<sup>28</sup>—were directed by the Central Committee to assume political work in order to weaken Zionism. The Palestinian Communists participated in armed actions against the British. The increasingly radical views of the party alienated some of the Jewish Communists. A few retired altogether from political activity, others were expelled from the party. Another group of Jewish Communists traveled to Spain—away from the political and ideological complexities of home—to fight on the Loyalist side. Still, a number of Jewish Communists organized in 1937 into the Jewish section of the PKP. This group, known as the Emet (Hebrew: truth) group (for its newspaper), had by 1940 split from the party's Central Committee. This Jewish section developed some ideas that had reverberated among Jewish Communists since the 1920s. It argued that the Jews of Palestine had developed, as a product of capitalist socioeconomic changes, a national character. This new national group therefore deserved national rights within a unified Arab-Jewish Palestine. The Communists' immediate political task was to cooperate with some progressive groups within the Yishuv.

As the differences between Jewish and Palestinian Communists started to manifest themselves, the British Peel Commission offered the first of many partition plans for Palestine. The Communist Party rejected partition—oddly making common cause with the Revisionist Right and parts of the Zionist Labour movement—arguing that only reconciliation would solve the Palestine problem. The end of the Arab Rebellion consequently found the party fractured along national lines. Conversely however, the sorry state of the PKP changed when World War II started. At the outbreak of the war, the Communists blindly followed the Moscow line. In the wake of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact the PKP defined the war as an imperialist one—a war between two predatory imperialist groupings. The party's opposition to the war naturally unleashed on it the full fury of the

British, who were mainly concerned with the Communist efforts to disrupt recruitment to the British Army. This position was shared by the Haganah (Hebrew: defense), the main underground Jewish military organization in Palestine. Thus, to British suppression were added the Yishuv's own forms of exclusion, as "beatings and firings became day to day occurrences."<sup>29</sup>

The desperate state of Communism in Palestine/Israel changed dramatically on June 22, 1941. The Nazi attack on the USSR signaled the legalization of the Communist Party by the British—for the first time in twenty years the Communists emerged into the open. With the onset of legalization the Jewish section and the Central Committee patched up their differences. Consequently, from 1942 until 1943, Arab and Jewish Communists were part of the same organization.

The war brought with it far-reaching economic and social changes to Palestine. The needs of the British Army fighting in the Mediterranean theater of war stimulated an immense growth of Palestine's industry. The needs for foodstuffs and industrial goods heralded the industrial revolution in both the Palestinian and Jewish sectors of the economy.<sup>30</sup> Palestinian peasants became factory workers, giving the Palestinian Communists an opportunity to work among them in unions and cultural clubs. In addition, the growing prowess of the Red Army on the battlefield attracted a new wave of Palestinian activists, mostly Christian-Orthodox intellectuals. The Jewish comrades, on their part, turned to intensive activity in support of the war effort and the Soviet forces.

However, the legalization of the PKP and the reunification with the Jewish section did not end the tensions between Palestinian and Jewish Communists. In May 1943 they burst again into the open when the Palestinian members refused to support a strike of the workers in the British Army camps. The Arab members argued that the strike was announced by the Histadrut—a Zionist organization—and was therefore not to be supported. The issue came to a head on May 29, 1943, at the party's conference. Radwan al-Hillou ordered the dissolution of the PKP branches in Haifa and Tel Aviv that supported the strike, but weakened by the dissolution of the Comintern, leaving him with no real political base, he could not impose his will on the party. This move—part of the Soviets' efforts to placate their Western allies—deprived him of the organizational clout that had enabled his leadership. It also allowed Communist parties outside the USSR and Eastern Europe to accentuate their national character.<sup>31</sup> Despite attempts at reconciliation, a leaflet circulated in Haifa in the name of the Central Committee of the Palestinian Communist Party, asserting that

“the Palestinian Communist Party is an Arab national party that includes within its ranks those Jews that agree with its national program”<sup>32</sup> and making the break final.

For the next five years Communism in Palestine was split between two national Communist parties. The Palestinian section formed the National Liberation League (*Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani*, NLL). The organization grew out of the involvement of the Palestinian Communists in cultural clubs and the Palestinian trade unions. While in its founding manifesto the NLL was not outright declared a Communist organization, its structural characteristics and reliance on urban workers and intelligentsia pointed to its orientation. The NLL positioned itself at the left-wing of Palestinian nationalism. Like the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), it objected to Jewish immigration to Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state. Instead, it demanded an Arab national state in Palestine. However, in sharp difference to most Palestinian nationalists, the NLL insisted that the Jews of Palestine would have full civil rights. In contrast, the AHC maintained that all Jews who arrived in the country after 1918 should leave it. But the NLL was never entirely incorporated into the Palestinian political class. The leftist intellectuals with their workers constituency never entirely fit in with the traditional notable leadership. Part of the problem apparently lay in the demands of the NLL for democratization of Palestinian political life, directly criticizing the traditional autocratic ways of Palestinian leaders in patriarchal families that controlled Palestinian politics as heads of clientele and clannish networks.

The Jewish Communists reformed the PKP along the ideological lines of the Jewish section. The Jewish Communists recognized that the Jews of Palestine were developing into a nation with national rights. They called for the fulfillment of these rights in an Arab-Jewish democratic state. Still, the politics of the PKP showed an increased co-optation of the Communists into Yishuv institutions. In 1944 the party was readmitted into the Histadrut, after the organization lifted the ban on acceptance of individual Communists. The Communist Party participated in the elections to the Yishuv's elected bodies, becoming an integral part of the political scene. Naturally, also, the news of the Holocaust—personally touching many of the Jewish Communists, most of whom were from Eastern Europe—aroused national feelings among many of them.

As the Communist Party emerged out of illegality, a Communist youth movement was reestablished. In February 1942, at a conference in “Napoleon's Hill” in Ramat Gan, the Communist Youth was reestablished

in a militantly anti-Zionist atmosphere.<sup>33</sup> The anti-Zionist zeal of the young Communists was not the only prevailing trend in the Communist Youth. Out of the youth movement's seniors emerged groups that even wished to harmonize Communism and nationalism. The most notable of these groups was officially named the Educational Communist Association in Eretz-Israel, or by its unofficial name, the Hebrew Communists.<sup>34</sup> It was established in 1945 by young Hebrew-speaking Palestine-born youth from the PKP. This was the first case where young Israeli Communists led a process of nationalization of Communism—which, as later events showed, led to a split from the Communist Party.

### The Rise and Fall of MAKI

For five years—from 1943 to 1948—Communism in Palestine was divided along national lines. However, the escalating conflict between Palestinians and Jews brought another historical change: both Palestinian and Jewish Communists objected to the establishment of a Jewish state. However, this long-standing position changed in November 1947. At the United Nations General Assembly the Soviet delegate, Andrei Gromyko, supported partition if a unitary state could not be established in Palestine. The new Soviet attitude was further clarified by the Soviet consul in Washington, Semyon Zerfkin, who unequivocally supported the UN Partition Plan. The change in Soviet policy was adopted by the Jewish PKP that had already developed an ideological affinity with the Yishuv's national aspirations. The NLL, on its part, was torn between a majority that accepted the Soviet position and a minority that objected to it. In December 1947, in a dramatic meeting of the NLL secretariat in Nazareth, it recognized the UN Partition Plan. Those who opposed partition "were deposed from the Party and formed a more militant organization 'The National Liberation League, Northern District.'"<sup>35</sup> The official acknowledgment of partition by the Palestinian Communists led to reunification with the Jewish Communists approximately a year later.

As Palestine descended into wide-scale conflict, the Jewish Communists aided the Yishuv's war effort, using their connections in Eastern Europe. The Palestinian Communists turned to oppose the invasion of Palestine by the armies of the neighboring Arab states. But the war left the NLL in shambles. The mass deportation of Palestinians left it without many of its followers, its newspaper had been closed by the British at the outset of

the war, and its activists were arrested by the Arab armies and later by the IDF (Israel Defense Forces), leaving it with only one choice. In October 1948, the NLL and PKP formed MAKI.

The unified party enjoyed some sympathy as a result of Soviet and Eastern Bloc support for Israel. However, with the worsening of Soviet-Israeli relations MAKI lost many supporters. In its eleventh conference in 1949 MAKI's platform combined a limited loyalty to the State of Israel and "support for the right of Arab refugees to return to the country and the right for self-determination of the Palestinian People."<sup>36</sup> Loyalty to the Soviet Union was reaffirmed when MAKI—in a move that eroded much of its support among Jews—uncritically followed the Moscow line regarding the Prague Trials and the 1953 Doctors Trial. Domestically, MAKI was concerned with supporting workers' struggles for the betterment of their work conditions in the context of the emergence of Israel's state capitalist system. Other campaigns the Communist Party was involved in were against the military government imposed on the Palestinians in Israel. By doing so the party became the lone voice that expressed the suppressed national yearnings of Palestinians in Israel. Yet when the party adopted the Soviet misgivings about Gamal Abdel Nasser's Pan-Arab nationalism, its Palestinian voters turned against it in the 1959 elections. Not until Soviet-Egyptian relations improved, in 1961, did MAKI regain and even increase its Palestinian electorate.

The reintegration of the Palestinian Communists into the Arab-Jewish Party did not mean that the recurring tension between the two groups was gone. Even though after the eleventh party conference the divergences between Jewish and Arab Communists were muted, they still existed. MAKI seemed to construct a consensus that enabled it to reflect the national feelings of both Arabs and Jews—advocating Palestinian nationhood and loyalty to the Israeli state with objection to Zionism. Nevertheless, a chain of events, regional and global, shook this agreement, shattering it to the point where the party could not contain the two nationalisms.

The first seeds of the division of Israeli Communism were sowed as early as the October 1948 unification. The Palestinian leaders had to undergo self-criticism repudiating the ideological doctrines of the NLL. This process was most harshly applied to Emile Touma, one of the most gifted Palestinian intellectuals of MAKI. Due to his objection to the partition plan, he was obliged to perform a humiliating self-criticism. In it he strongly renounced his prior principles and was removed from leadership positions

within the party until the 1960s. Such events no doubt left their mark on future relations between Arab and Jewish Communists.

MAKI unity started to explicitly unravel after the mid-1950s, precipitated by a number of events. First were the shockwaves created by Khrushchev's speech and the resultant Destalinization leading to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution; its suppression by the Soviets brought about crises in all the Western Communist parties. Second was the growing split of World Communism between the Chinese and the Soviets, dividing Communist parties into Maoist and pro-Soviet ones, mainly in the developing world. Although both factions of MAKI remained loyal to the Soviet Union, the cracks in the Communist political and ideological monolith also enabled the cracks in Israeli Communism.

Nonetheless, local reasons played the more prominent part in the breakdown of MAKI. Moshe Sneh and his men joined the party in 1954. While numerically his followers were not many, they came from the cultural and political core of Zionist Socialism. As such, they arrived with symbolic capital that captivated many Jewish Communists. While they all ideologically rejected Zionism, their cultural and political inclinations remained in their original hearth. In their eleven years in the Communist Party, they tried to mold the party, and mainly Banki, the youth movement, in their own image. This attempt—in fact the Zionization of Communism—shook MAKI's core values, nationalizing it to the point that it lost its anti-Zionist uniqueness.

Next was the awakening of national feelings among the Palestinian Communists. Here regional events played an important part. The 1956 Sinai War ended with the political victory of Egypt and its president, Nasser. The wave of Arab Pan-nationalism that swept the region, culminating in the unification of Egypt and Syria in the 1958 UAR (United Arab Republic), effected the Palestinians in Israel. The growing nationalization of the Palestinian Communists and the growing inability of the party to embrace it was first indicated in the thirteenth party congress in 1957. The Palestinian leaders of the party pushed for a resolution recommending "that Israel will retreat to the 1947 Partition borders."<sup>37</sup> Under pressure from the Jewish leadership, a more moderate resolution was adopted where MAKI recognized the Palestinians' right of self-determination to the point of separation from Israel. The party also recognized the right of the refugees to return to their homes. To balance these radical demands, the Communist Party insisted on the Arab states' recognition of Israel and on a peaceful solution to all pending issues between them.<sup>38</sup>

The compromise achieved in 1957 did not put an end to the revival of a more assertive Palestinian national identity and the Zionization of the Jewish comrades. An incident in 1958 demonstrates this process. In a meeting of the Palestinian Communists at the veteran NLL leader Emile Habibi's house—recorded by Israel's Security Agency and presented to the Jewish leaders—the participants supposedly discussed an Algerian-style guerilla war. They also attacked the Jewish leaders personally.<sup>39</sup> Considering the fact that Jewish leaders were made aware about the meeting by an organization that kept surveillance on them and was adamantly anti-Communist, that Palestinians in Israel never attempted massed armed resistance, gives credence to the assertion that the alleged contents of the meeting is fabricated. At the same time, the whole affair points to the increased tensions that fragmented MAKI. While the 1961 MAKI fourteenth conference presented a more moderate platform and the party did well at the polls that year, the changes in Israeli politics in the 1960s accelerated the rift in the party. In 1963 David Ben-Gurion resigned as prime minister, to be replaced by Levi Eshkol. The departure of the staunchly anti-Communist Ben-Gurion was perceived as an opportunity by Sneh, who assumed that alliances with the Zionist left would increase the party's power. The Palestinian Communists, in contrast, held that the electoral future of the party lay with Arab voters, which meant a more pronounced anti-Zionist line. The mounting disagreements became an open division in 1964, when the party's general secretary Shmuel Mikunis tried to publish an article criticizing the speech of Algerian president Ahmed Ben Bella. In the speech—given when Ben Bella was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize—he called for the destruction of Israel. When *Al-Ittihad* (The Union), the Arabic newspaper of the party, refused to print the article, the divisions in MAKI became public.<sup>40</sup>

By the summer of 1965, the rift in MAKI had grown into an abyss that prevented the convening of a united fifteenth party congress and the two factions of Israeli Communism held separate conferences. The Jewish faction assumed the name MAKI while the Arab-Jewish section became Rakah (New Communist List). The Jewish MAKI drifted toward the Zionist mainstream, dissolving into the Zionist left by the mid-1970s. Rakah in its different manifestations is rooted in Israel's Palestinian electorate. The party remains the main far-left party in Israeli politics today.

Along with MAKI's rise and demise, we can also note the Communist youth movement that emerged after the 1941 legalization of the PKP and was reorganized after 1948. In contrast to the blue-shirted movements of labor Zionism, whose membership ended at the age of eighteen, Banki



members remained in the organization until their student days, wearing white shirts and red ties. The movement was organized into seven districts, each with a regional committee elected by the district's conference. The district was subdivided into individual branches, each headed by a committee elected by the members of each chapter.<sup>41</sup> The highest institutions of the Communist Youth were the national convention, which elected the central committee every three to four years; the central committee ran the day-to-day activities of the movement. Importantly, all of Banki's institutions were elected democratically—in stark contrast to the Labour Zionist youth movements.

Differing also from the Zionist-Socialist youth movements, who set the ultimate goal of their members to establish a new kibbutz or to become members of an existing one—Banki concentrated on the plight of the downtrodden and of working youth, new immigrant youth, and Palestinians. The movement was unique in being an educational organization of Arabs and Jews. While most branches were not mixed, the interaction of Jewish Banki members with their Palestinian comrades was unprecedented. The internationalist ideology and practice of the young Communists were most evident in the struggle against the military government (1948–1966). Banki members were the first to oppose this travesty and pioneer a struggle that, by the mid-1960s, swept many on both the left and the right. Still another important area of activism for the young Communists was the ever closer relationship between West Germany and Israel. Banki members led the Communists' protest against the reparations scheme in 1952, up to the arrival of the first West German ambassador in 1965.

Obviously though, the Communist youth movement was not impervious to the tensions that split MAKI. The attempt at what was in fact the Zionization of Banki by Sneh's men, headed by his protégé Yair Tzaban, was a contributing factor to the demise of Banki. Out of the unified Banki two Communist youth movements emerged: one linked with the Jewish MAKI, the other with Rakah.

## Written and Oral Histories of Israeli Communism

One of the problems that bedevil the scholarship concerned with Communism in Israel is the absence of primary documents that can reveal the inner workings of MAKI and Banki. Particularly lacking are those from the governing bodies of Communism, as well as local branches.

The deficiency of primary sources has been noticed by Markovizky. He noted that some party members were not interested in their party's history, so they did not take care of preserving it. Others "were used to underground conspiratorial types of activity."<sup>42</sup> Therefore they kept quiet about their activities, even destroying records. Another reason for the scarcity of primary sources is the result of the historical reality in which the party operated. Hence, "the persecution of the authorities . . . the arrests of activists"<sup>43</sup> disrupted any attempt to keep ordered accounts of the party. Furthermore, the dearth of archival documents can be traced to MAKI's place in Israeli politics. The Communist Party was a small party that moved from illegal underground to marginalized opposition. Unlike the Zionist Labour movement and its kibbutzim—most of the documents of MAKI and the PKP are located in their archival collections—that were either ruling parties or a part of coalition governments, the Communist Party lacked the resources to build and preserve its written history. In contrast to ruling Communist parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Israeli party lacked the state resources to build its own archive.

Consequently, the primary sources that inform this work originated from a number of sources. First are the archives of the Communist Party. Housed at the Yad Tabenkin archives that hold the documents of the Israel kibbutz movements are MAKI's documents from 1948 until the disappearance of the rump party in the mid-1970s. A second collection is the archives of the Israeli Labor movement located at the Lavon Institute. This archive includes collections of pre-1948 Communism.

With the flaws of the archival record in mind, the archives housing the documents of the PKP, MAKI, and Banki still provided vital sources for my research. Instructors' brochures, written by Banki members, detailing the texts and rites that were used to celebrate the holidays, contributed to my understanding of their roles. Handbills circulated by Communist activists—despite their public nature—gave me a revealing look into the inner beliefs of party members. Wall posters—both imagery and announcements of Communist events—offered profound comprehension of the day-to-day workings of Communist culture.

In order to offset the relative scarcity of archival materials, I approached other sources that added to the textual base of the book. The main subject matter of *Holidays of the Revolution* is the Communist holiday cycle in Palestine/Israel. These events were not private family events. Rather, Communist rite was public both within MAKI and Banki circles and in the public sphere beyond them. As such, they left their mark on the party's press.

*Kol Ha'am* was the public face, in Hebrew, of Israeli Communism in Palestine/Israel from 1937 to 1965. Its pages are filled with a wealth of information about the rituals of Israeli Communism. The newspaper carries detailed accounts of the public celebrations of the Communists—mainly the anniversary of the October Revolution, the celebration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, and the most public of Communist ceremonials—May Day. An extensive documentary analysis covering all newspaper articles concerned with these holidays was achieved. The details gathered from the study of *Kol Ha'am* became—with the available archival papers—the basis for the reconstruction of the history of November 7, May 9, and May Day. Furthermore, MAKI's official daily did not just carry articles detailing the public holidays of Communism. It also provided important data concerned with the conduct of events that were not at the forefront of Communist political ritual. The attitude toward such Jewish holidays as Passover and Hanukkah was recorded in the culture section of *Kol Ha'am*, giving important insight into the way Communist intellectuals comprehended Judaism and its holidays.

To give more depth to the documents found in archives and the party's press, I turned to the memoirs and accounts written by Israeli Communists. Markovizky has pointed out the problematic nature of such texts. He describes “the first historiographical works about the Communist Party . . . [as] mainly apologetic and subjective. [They were] written by activists and close associates.”<sup>44</sup> He notes that the writings of party members were partisan attempts at persuading the reader of the just aptness of the party. In contrast, I do not judge the texts penned by Communists harshly at all. There is no doubt that these texts were written from a subjective, at times misleading, point of view. At the same time, they represent an authentic voice. Marginalized and often persecuted, it was only natural that the Communist writers tried to justify their ideas forcefully. (One could just as well argue that works by Zionists concerned with local Communism were also written from a slanted partisan point of view . . .).

Beyond the written sources, I have endeavored to expand my knowledge of Communist festivity by using personal interviews with former or present members of the Communist Party. Using a snowball sampling, I located and approached several men and women. Their words gave the dry written accounts of rituals a “living tissue,” representing themselves and others who took part in these events. They were, indeed, a tool to recreate the day-to-day minutiae of Banki and MAKI members. They described how party ideology, translated into ritual acts, consecrated the values of the

Communist Party in the minds and lives of its members. Most pertinently, these interviewees gave me access to documents absent from the archives. This element is mostly manifested in the chapters dealing with May Day and the celebration of the victory over Germany. With the courtesy of veteran Communists Tamar and Yoram Gozansky, I was also given rarely seen photographs that depicted May Day processions in the late 1940s and 1950s and an exceptional view of the party's victory parade in 1945. This visual evidence, some of which was seen neither in Israel nor outside of it, opens a window into the history described in this book.

Primary and secondary sources originating from archives, written accounts by present and past Communists, the Communist Party's newspapers, and personal interviews together constitute the empirical basis of *Holidays of the Revolution*. Taken together, interpreted, and analyzed, these sources were used to verily reconstruct the world of the Jewish Communists.

### Continuity and Innovation in Research of Israeli Communism

One of the few historians to research the history of Communism in pre-1948 Palestine defined it as empty space in the research of Israeli history. There is a hint of exaggeration in this assertion, which deals primarily with the history of Communism in Palestine/Israel. However, the entirety of their efforts pales in comparison to the vast literature on European Communism in Germany and the Soviet Union. It is therefore indicative that in the recent histories of world Communism Israeli and Middle Eastern Communism merit not even a footnote.

This exclusion is unwarranted. After the introduction of Communism to Palestine in the 1920s, Communist parties sprang up in almost every major country of the Middle East. Among Palestinians, before 1948, Palestinian and Jewish Communists modernized and democratized Palestinian politics. After 1948, the Communists forged among the Palestinians left in Israel after the Nakba (Arabic: the Catastrophe; the Palestinian name for the 1948 War) a Palestinian community fighting for its rights within the framework of an exclusive Jewish state. Among Jews, the Communists are the oldest anti-Zionist political body in Israel. In the wake of the March 2020 election, the Communist Party, through its front Hadash (an acronym for the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), is a vital political force and part of the Joint List (an amalgamation of all the Palestinian parties