Lucien Wolf (1857–1930): a study in ambivalence*

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Consistency is not necessarily a virtue. And there may be some inner consistency within the ambivalence. In any case, Wolf could have made a reasonable plea in mitigation via the proposition that changing times, with their new perils and opportunities, may call for new-style solutions to old-new problems.

This is neither an historical narrative nor a biographical paper. It is an impressionist portrayal of a prominent public figure who was also a particularly private man, the object being to explore Wolf’s inner contrasts and examine any threads of consistency. He wrote much. In later years, with failing eyesight, he wrote less, but his memory was sharp, his acolytes many and his commitment to his public tasks unabated.

The late Dr A. S. Diamond, one-time president of this Society, told me of his visits to Wolf in his latter years in rooms in Grays Inn, where, over cups of tea, Wolf would comment on the current scene and reminisce within a private coterie. Yet the Jewish Chronicle recorded that shortly before he died he was preparing for his normal visit to Geneva during the session of the League of Nations Assembly on the Minority Treaties, a report amply confirmed in the records of the Board of Deputies.

He was a robust defender of Jewish interests, as he saw them. He was not only a journalist, historian and communal civil servant, but a pragmatic politician with his own personal influence in political circles. This was connected with his power of articulating a case, his mastery of European languages, his vast knowledge related to issues with which he had to deal and his standing and contacts through his journalism. He had a deep and characteristically self-conscious loyalty to Britain. This was combined with an intense desire to save Jews, protect and advance their civil rights, and encourage the development of a recognizable Jewish culture. He saw the Jewish cause as part of the wider human cause.

He could not bring himself to regard the expansion of liberalism in the West as having been a flash in the pan. Had he thought that this was all it was, history would have lost meaning for him. There was nothing ‘antiquarian’ about him.

* An extended version of the Presidential Address to the Society on 11 November 1993 as part of the commemoration of its centenary. The author is grateful to Professor Abramsky for his observations.
To examine the impact of the wider opening of society on the contemporary Jewish community in Britain remained for him a continuing and significant interest. He was as much concerned to measure the intellectual capacities of modern Jews as he was, as a historian, to study the old history of the Jews in the Canary Islands. He remained a moralist in his estimate of the ends which he sought to serve – peace, individual freedom, cultural integrity and intellectual advancement.

It would not have occurred to Wolf that his emphasis on the growth of ‘toleration’ and ‘liberalism’ as hallmarks of English history were demeaning to the ‘beneficiaries’. He was a Liberal in politics, of the kind which admired Macaulay. He adhered to the view that Britain was in the van of ‘civilization’. As a child of his times he would have had difficulty in understanding the notion of any kind of anti-Jewish implication in ‘toleration’. ‘Emancipation as a Jewish aspiration’, wrote the late Professor Natan Rotenstreich, ‘was never conceived as an attempt to destroy the collective Jewish entity. It implied in many cases a reinterpretation of the nature of Jewish collectivity – for instance a shift from an ethnic to a religious orientation. . . . Assimilation . . . is an adjustment, an acculturation, a modus vivendi . . .’. While Wolf was acutely aware of the challenge represented to Jews by the emancipation, he would have fully understood those observations. He seemed to regard political Zionists as despairingly avoiding facing that challenge.

Wolf knew only too well that since the emancipation, Jews had found that neither their own ‘enlightenment’ nor the degree of the world’s ‘enlightenment’ offered any antidote against the continuing virtually universal need for the Jew to justify himself and to explain what and who he was. He also knew that with the new freedoms had come an inner Jewish erosion or an aggravation thereof. If anything, the anti-Jewish malaise had gained some momentum in the wake of the emancipation, whose success had at the same time encouraged and facilitated the tide of ‘radical assimilation’.

Wolf was regarded as the arch secular opponent of political Zionism. He was especially critical of the movement in the immediate prehistory of the Balfour Declaration. But he did not take as seriously as some of his associates the notion that there ought to be read into the civic and political emancipation an understanding or quasi-contract between British political society and the Jewish emancipationist leadership whereby in his day an attachment to political Zionism should by definition properly be proscribed. He had a genuine understanding of the antiquity of the Zionist aspiration, including the political dimension. He always had difficulty in accepting Hermann Adler’s contention that the Jewish nation had ended with the fall of the Temple. He would have wondered, like Zangwill, what on such a basis could remain of the liturgy, even allowing for the eschatological expositions presented from time to time.

In 1878, in response to pejorative public references to the international inter-
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ests of the Jews, such as over Romanian Jewry and their wish for British governmental intervention, Adler publicly declared that the Jewish interest is ‘wholly a matter of sympathy which nature establishes between those who think alike, behave alike, and hope alike’. Wolf realized that any attempted analogies with Christian protests over outrages against Christians in Turkish-controlled areas in Southeast Europe, left questions unanswered. What was the relationship between the Jewish cause and British policy in given instances? The humanitarian base of the Jewish concern was not regarded by anyone as the only facet of interest. There was an international Jewish kinship rooted in Jewish history. It was somehow related to Jewish peoplehood, and both found expression in the Jewish national idea as mutual cause and effect. Wolf did not regard these pressing sentiments as inconsistent with Jewish integration into Western society or with the loyalty of Jews as citizens.

The Conjoint Committee of the Board of Deputies and the Anglo-Jewish Association was the direct successor to the joint foreign-affairs committee set up by the two bodies in 1878. The latter was instituted amid the then well-known reservations on the Board’s side. The personal standing of leading members of the AJA made it desirable to combine forces in the field of ‘foreign affairs’ at a time of rising anxiety over the assault on the civic rights and status of the Jews in Romania. It is difficult today to detect any democratic impulse in the creation of the committee. Yet at the time it seemed to represent a significant broadening and a welcome rationalization of the communal system, and a breaking of the old centralized oligarchic hold on communal power.

The Board did not admit Reform members into its ranks until 1886. The exclusion was ever more widely recognized as an anomaly in that the main spokesmen in the House of Commons on the ‘foreign’ Jewish issues were members of Reform. On the death of Sir Francis Goldsmid in 1878, he was in effect succeeded as the principal Jewish spokesman in that sphere in Parliament by his fellow-Reformer, Sir John Simon. Further, the Board had by some been perceived as excessively insular, little interested in joint action with Jewish representatives abroad, relying on its own standing with the British Government, and unduly precedent-bound. The founder of the AJA was Abraham Benisch, whose proto-Zionism was one of the impulses in his seeking to create firm machinery for international Jewish cooperation, in connection with which he envisaged the AJA as a likely progenitor. By the time Wolf became Secretary of the committee in 1888, that vision had not been wholly lost, but the ‘Zionistic’ element of the late founder’s thinking was no longer to the fore in any political sense.

It is said that Wolf enjoyed the company of the ‘notables’ then and later. No doubt he did. His association with them was part of his métier. But he was not, and did not become, a subordinate. He became their mentor and pursued his own initiatives. He had his own access to the world of diplomacy. The immigrant’s son came to dominate the thinking of the committee of ‘cousins’ and their
friends in the formulation of policy. When in 1917 he became director of the successor joint committee, on the dissolution of the old Conjoint Committee, Sir Anthony de Rothschild and (later Sir) Robert Waley Cohen were still among its principal members.

From his earliest days in journalism, Wolf's articles attracted special attention. This was more particularly the case with his articles (mainly unsigned) in the Jewish World, from 1880, on the modern role of the Jew. This was partly because the subject was under wide public scrutiny and partly because of their literary quality. In particular, the interest was also related to the campaigning character of the journal under its founder, George Lyon, since its inception in 1873. Lyon was a forceful polemicist of independent mind, and a regular critic both of the British Government and of the Jewish communal leadership for what he saw as their inadequate response to the Jewish cause abroad, especially in Russia and Romania. Lyon was also a persistent advocate of liturgical reform. Wolf long supported the editor's stands on these issues.

There was an inherent irony in the quality of his personality as well as in the versatility of his expertise. The motive for his involvement in nurturing the movement for the foundation of the Jewish Historical Society was directly connected with his concern to preserve and strengthen among Jews the sense of the Jewish historical legacy. This purpose was not predominantly 'apologetical', nor was it related to any desire to enhance the picture or authority of the old families. His attitude was similar to that which led him to take a leading role in the development of the Jewish Literary Society movement and of the Union of Jewish Literary Societies, of which he became an active President. The annual reports of the Union carried, under its English name on the outer cover, its Hebrew name in Hebrew script – Agudat Dorshei Da'at, 'Union of Teachers [or Seekers] of Knowledge'. Its constituent societies in London and beyond were more than social. Lecturers included the leading Jewish scholars in Britain. To Wolf the societies were necessary agents in adult Jewish education. The lectures were often reported at length in the Jewish press, and many appeared in the Anglo-Jewish Annual, published by the Union.

In January 1896, in a public address to an assembly of Jewish youth in London, Wolf defined 'the chief duty of the rising generation of Jews'. It was, he said, 'to cultivate the Jewish historic spirit'. He added: 'There will be no future for Judaism or rehabilitation of the race without it. I earnestly appeal to you for the study of our inspiring traditions, for the loving care of our great heritage.' Wolf never wavered in that stance, or in his view of the importance of such admonition, which went beyond communal polemics. The lecture, extensively reported, was in line with his life-long special interest in the objects and proceedings of this Society. His expressions go beyond putting on a brave show against the detractors of the Jews.

Making allowances for any resort to rhetoric engendered by the occasion, one
notes with particular interest his hopes for the Society as set out in his inaugural lecture in 1893. ‘I hope’, he said, ‘that we shall do something . . . to study the social, political and intellectual life of the [Jewish] community, not the biographies of leading but not always representative men but . . . the complex ramifications of the entire organism, to conceive of our own past not as a shallow village tale but as an integral part of that greatest epic of human strivings which is the history of Israel’. There is no reason to think that Wolf was not expressing his genuine sentiment and aspiration. It was a consistent theme with him.

He was concerned that Jews should know their history and that it should also be read by others. This was directed not only to telling the world about ‘the Jewish contribution’ to Britain or the world (in order, as many felt was desirable, to demonstrate the value and the justice of Jewish emancipation), but also because of his own inborn attachment to the task of cultivating interest and pride in the distinctive elements of the Jewish past. In his own way he was an active Jewish educationist. He would certainly have agreed with Burke that ‘a people will not look forward to posterity who never look back to their ancestors’. I imagine that he would also have agreed with Rabbi Simeon Singer’s dictum, in a different context, that ‘divines are so human’. His Jewishness was less theological than historical.

In the Jewish World Wolf also carried the old theme of Jewish mission beyond the traditional ambit of furthering human moral enlightenment, into the realm of practical social service for the wider society and not only within his own community. This was in line with Lyon’s undogmatic and undenominational principles of social progress – as well as with what became a central feature of Hermann Adler’s publicly proclaimed practical Jewish philosophy. Wolf also welcomed what he conceived to be the ‘purifying’ effect of the progressive modernization of the Jewish faith, which, he considered, would facilitate the Jewish task in the world. While Wolf’s expressions coincided with Lyon’s concern for practical and equitable devices for social organization and improving the lot of mankind, they also related to Wolf’s own understanding of a Jewish purpose and duty. For him it was part of the business of preserving a Jewish particularity within integration.

If his form of modernism detached him from the rabbinc tradition, his historical sense detached him no less from some of those with whom Adler had his own philosophic and theological differences. From the early 1880s Wolf was engaged in a series of public disпутations with Claude Montefiore. Their exchanges concerned the nature of Jewishness and the Jewish role in society. In the Contemporary Review, in September 1882, Montefiore cited with approval Adler’s statement that ‘the great bond which unites Israel is not one of race but the bond of a common religion’. This was part of Adler’s response to allegations that Judaism was a ‘tribal religion’. Wolf dissociated himself from Adler’s dictum, which he called ‘very dangerous’, and was no less opposed to Montefi-
Montefiore envisaged at the time an ‘extension’ of Judaism ‘beyond the Jewish race’.

Montefiore considered that at that period that out of a ‘denationalized [his word] Judaism’, working in association with a reformed Christianity, there might emerge a unified and widely acceptable creed of ethical humanism. In an editorial in the Jewish World in September 1882 Wolf wrote that ‘to denationalize’ Judaism would be ‘to lose it and with it the work of fifty centuries’. In Judaism, he declared, ‘the religion’ and ‘the race’ are ‘almost indistinguishable’. He seemed unable to divest himself of the conviction that the historicity of Judaism was an essential ingredient of its essence.

Wolf charged Adler with retaining, through his form of rabbinic Judaism, some elements of faith and practice which he thought gave colour to what Gentile critics regarded or described as tending to excessive Jewish isolation and detachment. When Montefiore seized hold of Adler’s contention that Judaism was not synonymous with race or nation, Wolf chided him for in effect exploiting Adler’s theme and subverting it. He rebuked Montefiore for implying a concession to those who spoke of the alleged ‘Jewish tribalism’, which it was Montefiore’s wish to exorcise.

What precipitated the Wolf–Montefiore exchanges was the public invitation in 1880 by a prominent Christian conversionist cleric to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi to meet in order to examine the present and future connection between the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem and their conversion. Wolf scoffed at the suggestion. Montefiore was less hostile to the idea of a meeting. Wolf’s sense of and regard for Jewish particularity, however it might be defined and explained, detached him from Montefiore’s standpoint. Whether that particularity was providential or historical or, in some light, both, may not in practice have seemed as important to him as to other Jews on the ‘right’ or ‘left’ of the religious spectrum. This for him was probably a question on which he treasured a private agnosticism. He seemed to retain it as an open question, which he may have preferred not to strive to resolve.

While guarding against seeking to enclose his career into an unchanging philosophic framework, one may be permitted to enquire whether early principles, or remnants of his early thinking, might be detected in his later outlooks and policies. There is a line of similarity. He retained his stress on the ethnic element in Jewish history, old and new. This did not mean that he adopted any sort of ‘purist’ view of ‘Jewish race’. He saw in Jewish observance a positivist factor making for Jewish survival, and for a sense of superiority, without arrogance, over the civilizations within which they have lived.

Wolf’s article in the Fortnightly Review in August 1884 entitled ‘What is Judaism? A Question for Today’, lengthily presents his then answer to that query. It was in that year that he had published his pietistic biography of Sir Moses Montefiore. Earlier articles by him, including his exchanges with Claude
Montefiore and his own responses to allegations of ‘Jewish tribalism’, were now exceeded in scope and depth of argument. Describing himself as ‘orthodox’, and without rejecting contentions relating to the ‘legalism’ of Judaism, he asserted that it was the observances which had ensured Jewish ‘separation’. Judaism is ‘a positivistic system differing only from the latter-day Positivism of Auguste Comte in that it has operated during some thousands of years with results which raise it altogether out of the region of empirical philosophy’. He adds: ‘The proper method of ascertaining the nature of Judaism must be not by a collation of biblical texts but by an induction from the phenomena of fact that in Judaism the religion and the race are almost interchangeable terms. The rigid observance during long centuries by a peculiarly exclusive people has necessarily resulted in the people becoming the manifestation of its laws. . . . the most striking phenomenon in Jewish life is the survival of the race.’

In reply to criticism that he had underplayed the role of ‘theological doctrine’ in Judaism, Wolf wrote in the Jewish Chronicle, on 15 August 1884, that he differs from Orthodoxy in its ‘more speculative teachings’. To practise a distinctive legalism from moral considerations of purity and holiness, he went on, ‘is arrogance which directly invites the attacks of our enemies.’

In his essay entitled ‘The Queen’s Jewry’, written on the occasion of Victoria’s jubilee in 1897 and reprinted in Cecil Roth’s edition of Wolf’s writings, Wolf stated: ‘The best characteristics of the foreign Jew have been cultivated; the worst has been got rid of. . . . So far from the foreign Jew degrading the English community he has been raised very nearly to his level. . . . in the next generation no trace will remain of the foreign Jew which caused so much anxiety between 1880 and 1890 . . . .’ Such passages reflected Wolf’s desire to present the Jewish community as part of England, rejoicing with fellow-subjects on the royal occasion. In some respects, as he must have known, the article was out of date. The community was ever more divided, the tensions between old and new were increasing in intensity and political Zionism was already one of the major issues.

However, there was more to his objective in 1897 than his desire to present a calm ‘English’ exterior in his image of the Jewish community. He felt that schools (Jewish day schools in the immigrant areas as well as municipal schools everywhere), example and force of fashion and the tide of social aspiration would assure some merging to a sufficient extent to create a cohesive English Jewish community. There was an ethnic bond which was part of and also went beyond the then current patronizing air. He harboured no illusions about the leaders of the emancipation campaigns. ‘The agitation against the Jewish disabilities’, he wrote in 1891, ‘was . . . a struggle for the privileges of the rich men, and the disabilities which were contested did not weigh on the daily rank and file’. Like Lionel Louis Cohen and others, he had no doubt that the old and new would profoundly influence one another’s thinking and forms of Jewishness, whatever sharp differences would remain in some quarters.
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Typical of the background occasioning anxieties on the part of the established Jewish leadership was the attack on the Jews in the Liberal Daily Graphic in October 1897, on the issue of their inward-lookingness and separate interests. In the Contemporary Review later that year, Herzl commented that ‘the Gentile has never yet disputed our nationality. That role has been reserved for the Jews.’ What gave added significance to the controversies was Arnold White’s later proposals in the Contemporary Review for the sponsoring by the Powers, especially Britain, of a Jewish state in or near Palestine. This critic of unrestricted Jewish immigration into Britain commented that Adler defends ‘the patriotic idea for English Jews as though this were incompatible with the creation of a home secured by public rights for those Jews who either cannot or will not be assimilated in the country of their adoption’. Wolf might silently have shared in that criticism of Adler, but was also aware of an issue which had been raised in some quarters, notably by the historian and Liberal, Goldwin Smith, as to whether a Jew can be a patriot. It had long been the task of Hermann Adler to rebut that insinuation, for which charge vocal opponents of the immigration were ready to find support in what Wolf regarded as the implication of the homelessness of the Jews in Zionist declarations and polemics. On the issue of Jewish immigration, Wolf’s attitude was a mixture of humanitarian sympathy, Jewish fellow-feeling and concern over the reactions to the social and economic effects of a large influx. He seems to have remained in a state of embarrassed ambivalence on the question. It sharpened his hope for the liberalization of the Russian system of government.

Both of Wolf’s articles in the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1911, on ‘Anti-Semitism’ and ‘Zionism’ respectively, demonstrate the pull of his strong Jewish historical consciousness. In substance and tone they are in line with his role in his public exchanges of earlier years. He wrote in the latter article: ‘Zionism is the lineal heir of the attachment to Zion which led the Babylonian exiles under Zerubavel to rebuild the Temple and which flamed up the heroic struggle of the Maccabees. The idea that it is a setback for Jewish history is a controversial fiction. The great bulk of the Jewish people have throughout their history remained faithful to the dream of restoration of their national life in Judea. The Zionist movement is today the greatest popular movement that Jewish history has ever known.’

No one in Wolf’s lifetime had a sharper awareness of Wolf’s ambivalence than Leopold Greenberg. Whatever their differences, they had a high mutual regard personally for one another as journalists and as practical men of affairs. Greenberg formed the impression that Wolf’s dissent from Herzlian Zionism reflected at least in part a ‘personal predilection’, and was ‘quasi-religious’. Greenberg wrote in the Jewish Chronicle on 29 August 1930 that he had asked Wolf a number of times to explain inconsistencies between his opposition and
his article in the *Encyclopaedia*. He added: 'He never seemed to be disposed to do so at all freely’. He had ‘a strong religious bias’.

In his article in the *Encyclopaedia* on ‘Anti-Semitism’ he declared that that movement ‘so far from injuring the Jews, has really given Jewish racial separatism a new lease of life’. The agitation had coincided ‘with the revival of interest in Jewish history’ and ‘has helped to transfer Jewish solidarity from a religious to a racial basis’. He added: ‘The bond of a common race, vitalised by a new pride in Hebrew history and spurred on to resistance by the insults of the anti-Semites, has given a new spirit and a new source of strength to Judaism at a moment when the approximation of ethical systems and the revolt against dogma were sapping its essentially religious foundations’.

‘The great bulk of the Jewish people’, observed Wolf on Zionism, ‘have throughout their history remained faithful to the dream of a restoration of their national life in Judea’. But the ‘growth of toleration’ and the development of emancipation provided ‘alternatives’ to nationalism; and ‘the narrow nationalist spirit everywhere yielded before the hope or the progress of local emancipation’. It was at this point that his close readers might have detected some element of ambiguity in the author’s own position. ‘Mendelssohnian culture’, he went on, by its promotion of the study of Jewish history, ‘gave a fresh impulse to the racial consciousness of the Jews’. What he termed the ‘new Judaism’ had ‘only reconstructed [the Jewish nationalist tradition] on a wider and more sober foundation’. This ‘new race consciousness was fed by a glorious martyr history which ran side by side with the histories of the newly adopted nationalities of the Jews and was not unworthy of the companionship’. It was from this ‘race consciousness’ that there came ‘a fresh interest in the Holy Land – an ideal rather than a politico-nationalist interest’.

Wolf’s subsequent language might have seemed to some to translate the historical nature of Zionism into a movement of modern legitimacy. The ‘spread of anti-Semitic doctrines throughout Europe’ raised doubts as to whether ‘the Mendelssohnian denationalisation of Judaism possessed elements of permanency’, and thereupon ‘the Jewish nationalist spirit reasserted itself in a practical form’. Wolf dwells on what he sees as the ‘impracticability’ of political Zionism, in the light of the attitude of Turkey, the rivalry of the Powers, and the heightened tension between ‘Orthodox’ and ‘secular’. But in 1911, regardless of his continuing repute as an opponent of political Zionism, his article must have struck some as setting out a case for the naturalness and legitimacy of the Zionist movement. Impracticability would, for Zionists, be a future matter for politics, awaiting opportunity and Jewish effort.

Wolf no doubt appreciated the possible implications of his argument, for he adds that ‘with the passing away of anti-Semitism Jewish nationalism will disappear’. Surveying the European scene, he expressed the belief that ‘nationalities
are daily losing more of their racial character’ under the influence of ‘religious toleration’ and their naturalization laws. ‘The coming nationality’, he comfortingly asserts, ‘will be essentially a matter of education and economics, and this will not exclude Jews as such’. Thus it was that he was able to conclude that ‘modern Zionism is vitiated by its erroneous premises . . . [namely] that anti-Semitism is unconquerable’.

It is clear that Wolf did not regard the Jewish national idea or the Jewish nation as at an end. The national ethos and history pervaded the lives of Jewish communities and individual Jews, but he averred that in the active practical form of political Zionism it was otiose and need not be the only outlet. His presentation was consistent with the proposition that (despite Wolf’s liberal optimistic prophecy – part of the Victorian inheritance) hostile contingencies might well render an active Jewish nationalist spirit natural and necessary. Herzl had thought that such time had arrived. Later Wolf might well have shared that conviction, but for the feared implication which he read into Zionism, that is the implication of the homelessness of the Jews of the West, which he deemed ran counter to and even threatened the policy and philosophy of integration which he considered to be the unalterable central theme of all Jewish public relations in the West.

Wolf’s prewar opposition to a British alliance with the Tzarist regime had been connected with his belief that the Jewish plight in Russia was part of the plight of the Russian people. He saw the régime as an effete but entrenched autocracy, to bolster which would in no way encourage or facilitate any liberal solution. The overthrow of the Tzar was seen by him as the prelude to the liberalization of the whole governmental system, in which the relief of the Jews from special pressures and discriminatory legislation would form a natural part.

The contrast between the integrationist Wolf advocating civil rights, and the later quasi-autonomist Wof advocating links with the philosophy of Dubnow and with elements of Bundist ideology, is no less striking for being explainable on the grounds of imperative expediency. It is sufficiently striking to render it legitimate to ask whether this ‘radical shift’, as it has been called, does not reflect to some degree Wolf’s inner and early expressed attitudes. The ideas behind his later attitude did not represent lines of thinking unnatural to him. His readiness to change tack was tantamount to a readiness to identify himself with a scheme of things which was reconcilable with significant facets of his own earlier, if theoretical, analysis of Jewishness and its development.

In his paper tellingly entitled ‘Lucien Wolf’s efforts for the Jewish Communities of Central and Eastern Europe’, Professor Abramsky comments that Wolf ‘held contradictory points of view on the issue’ of whether the ‘notion of nationality as an ethnic and cultural status’ could be combined with the search for the civil rights of Jews as citizens.\(^5\) Not surprisingly, Wolf’s advocacy was opposed both by Zionists and by the various brands of assimilationists. Yet there was
some consistency between on the one hand Wolf’s role in the formulation of the postwar minority clauses (a role now famously explored and presented by Dr Mark Levene) and, on the other hand, Wolf’s much-cited article in the 
*Edinburgh Review* in April 1917 and much of what he wrote before the First World War. 

What Professor Abramsky describes as his ‘extraordinary elasticity of mind’ can perhaps reasonably be qualified by attributing to Wolf a certain inner consistency. As Professor Abramsky observes, Wolf did indeed remain an anti-Zionist. Be that as it may, he did not abandon at any time his attachment to the reality of the Jewish national idea, whatever language he adopted in anti-Zionist polemics at given moments. His span of years saw rapid and fundamental changes in the fortunes and prospects of the Jewish people. He was the product of the unique combination of his own cultivated intellectual interests, his own historical instincts and assessments, his perception of the different Jewish needs in the West and in the East, and his encounters with political opportunities and challenges which improbably presented themselves to this communal civil servant and international politician. He can only be judged as classically *sui generis*. 

Wolf traced two important results to ‘the anti-Semitic agitation’. One was the ‘strong revival of the national spirit among the Jews in a political form’. The other was ‘the recent movement which seeks to unite the Jewish people in an effort to raise the Jewish character and to promote the higher consciousness of the dignity of the Jewish people’. Both movements, he commented, are ‘elements of fresh vitality to Judaism and they are probably destined to produce important fruit in future years’. 

There is an apparent inconsistency between, on the one hand, Wolf’s expressed belief that in the new age ‘racial’ prejudice and national xenophobia were on the wane and that, with their going, Zionism would lose its impetus and would likewise wane, and, on the other hand, his statement that Zionism (like the intellectual and ‘literary’ Jewish responses to anti-Semitism) was ‘probably destined to produce important fruit in future years’. He may have meant that while political Zionism might wane, Zionism as a movement for Hebraic revival would persist and achieve significant cultural results for the Jewish people. Whatever view one may form as to his meaning, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for him the Jewish national ethos – reflecting a common history, an enduring kinship (international yet bonded), common religious and cultural sources and common aspirations – was a distinctive feature of recognizable Jewish existence. It was an ethos which for Wolf, no less than for avowed Zionists, rendered unreal the contention that the sole bond was the religious one. To him the complex nature of the reality would somehow have turned such a proposition, in the sense in which it was presented by anti-Zionist polemicists, into one that was palpably misleading. 

There was some possible ambiguity of perhaps deeper import in his attributed
motivation or source for the literary revival. He was aware of the growth in Anglo-Jewish society of an interest in Jewish history and literature, including Hebrew study. It was partly of immigrant origin and to some extent 'natively' Anglo-Jewish. He was conscious of the value of his own role in this degree of 'renaissance'. He considered the creation of the Maccabaeans Society in 1891 as a prime illustration of the emergence of a new Jewish intellectual level in Anglo-Jewry. He saw it all as an element in the Jewish intellectual fervour springing from the European Mendelssohnian revolution and a wider interest in the nature of Jewishness in the face of modern science and philosophic speculation. How far was it a reaction to anti-Semitism? How far was it self-generated, especially in the wake of the increasing number of university-trained Jewish professional men and women? How far was it the result of the instinctive as well as the considered efforts to westernize the Jewish community? Such, after all, had been a major part of the leadership’s programme since the early Victorian years.

While these reasons are not mutually exclusive, there may be some special significance in the statement in Wolf’s article on Zionism, that without the ancient ‘national spirit’, Zionism ‘could never have assumed its present formidable proportions’. He was at pains to emphasize the continuing impact of the national spirit, independent of this or that political or any Zionist form. He had no difficulty in recognizing it in the contemporary intellectual scene, independent of political form. He gives the impression that this spirit, as an inherent product and quality of Jewish experience, was for him a proper source of pride in its own right, a creative ingredient in Jewish life, a part of what was the distinguishable character of the Jewish people. How far he related it to Jewish religious belief, how far he perceived the Jewish religion, in whatever form, as being cause and/or consequence of it, only he (if indeed he) could have made clear, if that were possible. When Greenberg referred to his attitude to Zionism as being ‘quasi-religious’ that close observer of Wolf was giving some expression to that imponderable.

While one must pay attention to the tactical political context of Wolf’s statements to British Ministers in 1916–17, one notes the concession which he, in the name of the Conjoint Committee, was ready to make in order to ward off a governmental declaration in a form sought by the Zionists – which in his view would reflect on the status of the Jews in Britain, both those who deemed themselves integrated and those whom it was sought to integrate. He advised Balfour in January 1917 that there was no objection to the Jewish community in Palestine developing into a ‘local Jewish nation and a Jewish state’, the latter not claiming ‘the allegiance of the Jews of Western Europe, who are satisfied with their local nationalities’.

In his much-discussed article in the Edinburgh Review in April 1917 on ‘The Jewish National Movement’, Wolf observed that the Jews in Russia 'constituted
a nationality only third in rank among the peoples which will claim emancipation after the war. Their ‘national consciousness’ was ‘intense’. He added: ‘Nor is their . . . national aim less definite than that of any other race in Eastern or South East Europe. Two thousand years of European history [had] made of the Jews a European people with new ideas, new relationships, a new culture and a new language and literature of their own. To sweep all this away and forget it was impossible.’ While Wolf was attributing this approach to Jewish leaders in the East, it is clear that he was also reflecting his own thoughts on the reality. Nor was the language of the philosophy which he thus enunciated necessarily limited to ‘secular’ Jews. ‘This Jewish secular nationality’ in the East, he wrote, ‘admirable though it be in many ways, is a new and utterly revolutionary departure in Jewish life. It is not necessarily bound up with Judaism.’

Wolf could not exclude the religious impulse from the nationalist sentiment, whether old or new. The secularist character of Dubnow’s aspiration for national autonomy, or the socialism of the Bundist forms of proposed autonomy, did not exhaust in his view the categories of Jewish nationality. Nor did that phenomenon, in old or new forms, hold for him the instinctive terrors which beset some of those Anglo-Jewish communal figures whom he ‘served’ in London. His interpolation – ‘admirable though it be in many ways’ – is redolent of some degree of regret that ‘Jewish secular nationality’ is ‘not necessarily bound up with Judaism’. And when he wrote of the effects of two thousand years of European history, he could not have failed to be conscious that those effects had no less impressed themselves on Jewish immigrants to the West. Those effects had their role in strengthening (perhaps, more accurately, reviving) the inner Jewish life of his own Jewish community.

On 24 May 1917 there was published in The Times the well-known letter from the Conjoint Committee as a riposte to the Zionist efforts to influence the expected governmental declaration. The letter expressed readiness to cooperate in ‘making Palestine a Jewish spiritual centre by securing for the local Jews and the colonists who might join them, such conditions of life as would best enable them to develop the Jewish genius on lines of its own’. The Committee, while crucially repudiating any implication that the Jews of the world constituted ‘one homeless nationality, incapable of complete social and political identification with the nations among whom they dwell’, declared that it had no objection against ‘a local Jewish nationality establishing itself’ in that land. The letter, drafted by Wolf, thereby made a kind of acknowledgement of Jewish nationality, in the hope of preempting official acceptance of the fuller Zionist case.

For Wolf, such acknowledgement, albeit in a local context, was not new. For some of his colleagues it might have seemed a desperate compromise in the face of the mounting Zionist pressure on the Government and the Government’s own reasons for viewing with favour a declaration which, within limits, went significantly far to meet the Zionists’ demands.
Wolf’s opposition to the Zionists differed in nature from that of other critics. For example, the school of Judah Magnes perceived any notion of a Jewish nationality, local or otherwise, as a plain threat to Judaism. Among his own Jewish associates with whom he discussed issues posed by the rise of political Zionism, Wolf took a path of his own. However much he shared some of their conclusions, he did not necessarily share their outlook, nor always the policy implications which they drew therefrom. He could not accept as a basis for policy or guidance any idea of some Jewish duty or need to endure affliction pending better times at the end of days. And in his own way he was as concerned as Ahad Ha’am about the content of Jewishness as distinct from political striving for statehood as a solution for the ills of the Jews of the West.

When the vision of a new liberalized Russia faded, he did not see in that disappointment any reason for dismissing the vision of integration as merely a mirage elsewhere, nor for ceasing to search for a system of rights in quasi-autonomous Jewish regions where numbers and circumstances required and permitted it. His multiple or double policies did not constitute or reflect any inner contradiction on his part. No inhibitions were aroused in him. It represented a realistic programme in the Jewish world as he found it. To the non-ideological pragmatist, the image or argument suggestive of Jewish homelessness was far more disturbing. He saw such imputation as plainly contrary to reality for large communities of Jews, and as going to the root of emancipation, injurious to integration, and a marked weakening of Jewish counter-arguments against the charges of ‘international’, ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘irretrievably alien’. Such a prospective (as was thought) image was considered to put at risk the achievement of the nineteenth century. For all his understanding and sophistication, Wolf retained the optimism and anxiety whose combination was a feature of Victorian Jewish public relations. His ambivalence was part of the ambivalence of ‘the Jew’.

When Greenberg wrote in his 1930 obituary notice of Wolf’s ‘strong religious bias’, he had in mind his assessment of the later Wolf whom he knew. It is also an assessment consistent with Wolf’s early approach to the nature of Jewishness. He did not emulate Lyon’s close interest in theism, the creed of the Judeophile, Charles Voysey, who founded the Theistic Church in the 1870s. He also publicly distanced himself from Montefiore’s theology on the grounds that it was an avenue to theism.

Wolf, the pragmatist, well read in current literature on the scientific and philosophical revolutions, might not have resolved the problem of reconciling his thinking with any kind of dogmatic system. He remained drawn to the belief in the worthwhileness of sustaining a recognizable form of undogmatic Judaism, a topic related to his conception of a Jewish particularity born of historical experience. From his declarations of the 1880s and 1890s, through to his support for movements for the racial, religious and linguistic rights of Jewish communit-
ies in the successor states (together with their civil rights), there is detectable an intellectual (and to some degree emotional) line of consistency. Requirements in the West and remedies in the East, reflecting the different contexts and opportunities, were not mutually incompatible in an overall Jewish policy. He saw the Jewish people as living at different levels of experience.

Where Zionists such as Greenberg were ‘political’, Wolf would have considered himself ‘cultural’, a concept which Greenberg might from his standpoint have deemed an off-shoot of ‘religious’. To Adler it would have seemed the product of the ‘secular’. To Montefiore it would have seemed gratuitously ‘particularist’. Wolf was content to perplex them all.

NOTES

1 In addition to his regular articles in the Jewish Chronicle, Wolf wrote extensively in the Jewish World from 1874, becoming its senior leader writer, and was from 1905, until its incorporation into the Jewish Chronicle in 1908, its editor. For twenty years from 1890 he was the foreign editor of the Daily Graphic, and then and later a frequent contributor to the national political and literary journals, notably as Diplomaticus in the Fortnightly Review. His presentation of the Jewish plight in Russia attracted wide attention, as did his exposure of the myths of ‘Jewish menace’ fostered by the so-called Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Among journalists he was a scholar of immense erudition. Among politicians he was a well-equipped man of affairs. He had a prismatic quality.


3 Cecil Roth (ed.) Essays in Jewish History by Lucien Wolf (London 1934) 54.

4 He referred to Adler as one of the ‘modern rabbis’ who have made this ‘false analogy’. He explained that ‘all Hebrew politics were theocratic’, but this did not mean that ‘on that account [they] were less practical or less disposed to express themselves in active political form’. At the same time he opposed any implication that the Jews were everywhere a homeless people, since huge numbers had established their homes in free societies and were not minded to uproot themselves or put their status at risk.


6 On 24 February 1911 the Jewish Chronicle described the Society as ‘a voluntary association in the main of professional men for the purpose of putting forward our best side from the intellectual point of view, to the world and showing the Jews are not entirely a commercial community but have another aspect to their existence’. This represented a long-standing feature of Victorian Jewish public relations. I am not sure Wolf would have adopted that language, though there was some ambiguity in his grounds for his particular welcome at that
Israel Finestone

time for the Society. He was at least as much concerned with the desirable impact on the level of Jewish life culturally as on outside image. In the 1890s to draw a distinction between the two motivations would have had a curious air.

7 In 1917 the Zionist Organization published a twenty-four-page Reply to the Case of the Anti-Zionists by (later Sir) Leon Simon. That selected group comprised Sir Philip Magnus, Laurie Magnus, Claude Montefiore and Lucien Wolf. Simon was dismissive of what he called Wolf’s ‘parade of learning and objectivity’ and pronounced him ‘ignorant of the considerable body of modern Hebrew literature in which the ideas of Jewish nationalism were developed and crystalised’. Simon refers to Wolf’s ‘sympathetic article on Zionism’ in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He charged Wolf with later ‘representing the Bundists as being the true Jewish nationalists’. In his trenchant criticisms of all four protagonists, Simon’s critique of Wolf is, by reason of Wolf’s ‘changing nuances and standpoints, somewhat different from that of each of the others, equally sharp though it is. Simon contrasted Wolf’s apparent contention (which Simon rejected) that ‘the Jews were always primarily a religious community’ with his later apparent attachment to the idea of a secular Jewish ‘nationality’ of the Bundist type. In fact there was always in Wolf’s conception of the Jews as a religious community an inextricable element of nationality. Simon was not alone in finding Wolf’s duality of thought perplexing. At the bottom of it all one may wonder whether Wolf ever wholly lost the impression made on him by his father’s tales of the latter’s boyhood when, as Wolf wrote, his father ‘had felt the heart-ache of the Jewish people’; his father’s ‘recollections of home . . . made me love the symbols and spirit of Judaism’ (Cecil Roth (ed.) Essays [see n. 3] 52).

8 In 1916 Wolf publicly warned the Jewish community of the ‘danger’ which he thought would accrue to the community if the Jews of the East End (and comparable areas) achieved weight in determining communal policy commensurate with their numbers. What he had in mind was the degree of support from those quarters to the political Zionist movement. This concern reinforced the desire of the Conjoint Committee and himself to expand the ‘representative’ base of the Committee. The plan was to co-opt nominated ‘representatives’ from other communal bodies. The plan was considered at the AJA Council in January 1916. Moses Gaster was the sole critic. The immediate question arose from the invitation extended to the important Jewish Friendly Society movement to send representatives for co-option. It was made clear in the general plan that those co-opted were to be in a minority on the Committee and were to be in agreement with the Committee’s policy. The AJA had received a letter of protest from the National Council for Jewish Rights, a largely East End association, of which Wolf had agreed to be President on its formation in 1915. The National Council, of which Gaster was now President, objected to the acceptance of the ‘representatives’ nominated to the Committee by the United Council of the Jewish Friendly Societies, on the ground that the latter had accepted the invitation on condition, not fulfilled, that the Committee would be enlarged on a democratic basis. The Committee remained no more representative than it was before; the abortive plan being no more than an unreformed extension of the old system. Wolf cultivated the friendship of Jewish figures and institutions in the East End. He was a kind of bridge, notwithstanding his strong affiliations. He knew that the East End was divided – with many gradations within the spectrum – between those who regarded the leadership of the Board of Deputies and the AJA (and indeed the leadership of the United Synagogue) as constituting a wholly unacceptable elitist oligarchy whose hold they wished to break, and those who, through fashion, social aspiration, personal interest or conviction, sought to ally themselves with, or take their cue from, the upper echelons. Although he was seen as a loyal and indispensable coadjutor by his immediate associates, and as a fixed opponent by the leading political Zionists, this son of the Bohemian-born liberal who fled to England in the wake of the 1848 revolutions and reactions thereto, was, on many divers sides of communal debate, perceived as an ambiguous personality. From the report of the AJA Council meeting in the Jewish Chronicle of 12 January 1917, it appears that Wolf had some difficulty in justifying the attendance of the two ‘representatives’ from the United Council on the Conjoint Committee in the light of the clearly unfulfilled condition.

9 Stein (see n. 5) 444.