

**“Hello pacifist”
War Resisters in Israel’s First Decade**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the history, organization, networks and political outlook of the state of Israel’s first conscientious objectors (COs) in the 1950s, and the consequences they confronted, individually and as a group. Despite it being a very unlikely period for the foundation of such a movement, a small branch of ‘War Resisters’ International’ (WRI, 1921) was established in Israel in 1947. This paper discusses what can the attitudes towards COs tell of the early history of the State of Israel, especially at a time when conscientious objection was not recognized as a right almost anywhere. The history of the first Israeli COs breaks a number of assumptions, albeit contradictory ones: on the one hand it strengthens the image of Israel as a militaristic country; on the other, it shows that institutions were in Israel more tolerant towards COs than other countries; it shows that COs were the supporters of a non ethnically homogenous society and, most of all, that, even in a decade such as the 1950s, a different and deep voice was trying to make itself heard. This paper is based on primary sources from the WRI archives and on the correspondence that Israeli COs entertained with WRI in the 1950s.

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Introduction. The 1950s

In 1962 Avner Falk, a young Israeli conscientious objector (CO), described the situation around him:

Whatever the reasons, the Israeli pacifist finds he has to confront a

cold, sneering and contemptuous attitude not only on the part of indifferent people but also on that of his own friends. A fellow student stopped speaking to me upon reading a letter of mine in an Israeli paper (...). Many other who have heard of my “conversion to pacifism” have made it a point of always greeting me: “Hello pacifist” when they see me.¹

With these words, Falk revealed how COs were perceived in Israel in the 1950s – the decade of the ‘nation in arms,’ and a golden age for the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF)² – self righteous at best, traitors at worst and, in all cases, marginal in a society where pacifism was not considered a virtue.

This essay tells the history of a group of secular men - and a few women - who were total COs in Israel in the 1950s. This decade saw the consolidation of the newly established state and institutions through a very centralized form of statalism (*mamlachtyiut*) and through the immigration of about 600.000 Jews from Arab countries, a process which was by far more traumatic than the traditional expression ‘the ingathering of the exiles’ suggests.³ The 1950s was also a decade of war: it opened on the ruins of the 1948 war, it saw the border wars and then the Suez war (1956).⁴

In a context where the state, its institutions and society undertook a huge collective effort to survive and consolidate, there appears to have been very little space for non-institutional organizations to emerge and eventually challenge its pervasiveness, especially in matters such as national defence. Even more so as, at the time, nowhere was conscientious objection considered an individual human right. Few countries had provision for it - among them Great Britain⁵ - and the first non-binding international pronouncements on conscientious objection as a human right only appeared in 1967 (res. n. 337 of the Council of Europe);⁶ formal UN recognition came in 1987.⁷ In the context

¹ Avner Falk, *Conflicts of an Israeli Pacifists*, September 1962, folder 321, Collection War Resisters’ International (henceforth WRI), International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (henceforth IISH).

² See Uri Ben Eliezer, *The Making of Israeli Militarism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); *The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society* eds. Eyal Ben-Ari and Edna Lomsky-Feder, (Albany: SUNY, 1999); *Militarism and Israeli Society*, eds. Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Baraks (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

³ The literature on this topic is very vast; see Yehuda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews. A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Ella Shohat, “A reluctant eulogy: fragments from the memories of an Arab-Jew,” in *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation. Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*, eds. Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 262-76.

⁴ Benny Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars 1949-1956*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); see also Mordechai Bar-On, “Small Wars, Big Wars: Security Debates during Israel’s First Decade” *Israel Studies* 5/2 (2000): 107-27.

⁵ The Military Service Act of 1916 establishing male conscription also included a conscience clause, whereby those who had a “conscientious objection to bearing arms” were freed from military service if they successfully argued their case in court.

⁶ Folder 1287, Collection Amnesty International (henceforth AI), IISH.

of the 1950s therefore, the foundation of an organized movement of COs in Israel did not seem to stand much of a chance.

Some had started to resist draft before 1948, but a group - and an association, 'War Resisters' International - Israel Section' (WRII) - grew in the 1950s.⁸ This association, its efforts and its struggles could be seen as a possibility - in the 1950s no more than that - for the beginning of a new kind of civil-military relations and therefore, also as a possible starting point of a relationship between an embryonic civil society and the state. Not by chance, Tamar Hermann defined this association "one of the oldest NGOs [non governmental organization] in Israel."⁹

Two themes run on the background of this essay: first, the fact that indirectly - i.e. through the political, judicial and cultural reactions of the state's institutions and society - conscientious objection represents a mirror returning their image at a given time and place. The image tells of the state's strength, weakness and/or ability to handle dissenting citizens in ways other than prison or punishment; the mirror also returns an impression of a society's ability to include members who do not share the values and practices of the mainstream. Second, it is worth reminding that, today as in the past, despite their strong and deep individual motivations, COs have organized collectively, either through international or national associations and later NGOs. The right to conscientious objection was historically asserted collectively and, in the 20th century, it was defended by associations operating at a transnational level; the already mentioned WRI is a case in point, while, for a later period, Amnesty

⁷ By then, many countries in Western Europe had laws regulating alternative civil service; by the mid-1990s few countries in Europe still drafted their male citizens, with few exceptions, notably Greece. David Fairhall, "Europe falls into step on new model army," *The Guardian*, 2 March 1996, 14, 649, WRI, IISH.

⁸ Named in conscious imitation of the Socialist and Communist Internationals, WRI was established in 1921 at Bithoven, NL. Its founding declaration reads: "War is a crime against humanity. We are therefore determined not to support any kind of war and to work for the abolition of all causes of war." 319, WRI, IISH.

⁹ Tamar Hermann, "Pacifism and Anti-Militarism in the Period Surrounding the Birth of the State of Israel," *Israel Studies* 15/2 (2010): 127-148; 133. Some aspects of the early history of conscientious objection in Israel are told in Alek D. Epstein, "For the peoples of the promised land: Intellectual and social origins of Jewish pacifism in Israel" *Journal of Israeli History: Politics, Society and Culture* 19/2 (1998): 5-20; see also Anthony G. Bing, *Israeli Pacifist. The Life of J. A. Abileah*, (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990) and Michael Keren, *Zichrony v. State of Israel. The Biography of a Civil Right Lawyer*, (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2002). On grassroots mobilization in the 1950s see Tamar Hermann, "New Challenges to New Authorities," in *Israel The First Decade of Independence*, eds. Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995): 105-122. On civil-military relations in the 1950s see Moshe Lissak, "The Civilian Components of Israel's Security Doctrine: The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in the First Decade," *Ibid.*: 575-591. This article is different from these works; relying on hitherto unpublished primary sources, it allows a broader examination of the WRII's first decade, it shows the extensive political and cultural criticism of the first COs and it gives an idea of the association's network of domestic and international contacts.

International is another.¹⁰ In this respect, “one of the country’s oldest NGOs” was also a transnational one.

In this essay I discuss what can the attitude towards conscientious objection tell of the early history of the state of Israel, at a time when most COs in the world were imprisoned, and could suffer the capital punishment. Can we draw a portrait of the IDF - considered here as a founding institution of the state - through conscientious objection? And if so, is it more similar to the utopia in uniform drawn by Zeev Drori, or to the nightmare described by Yehoshua Kenaz in his novel *Infiltration*?¹¹ I thus look at some of the key members of this organization, at the development of the movement, at the ideology informing the stand and the political views of its members. I also examine some of the short- and/or long-term consequences of being a CO in Israel in the 1950s. Finally, I discuss whether any of the instances they had put forward more than half a century ago can be of any value for adding some nuance to the picture of Israel’s first decade, generally represented through images of a triumphant militarism, the time that seems to have delivered, among other things, the often heard refrain ‘there is no choice’ (but war).

The sources used here tell the history of conscientious objection in Israel through the perspective of WR II and of its members, without introducing that of the other parties to this relationship, i.e. the government, the judiciary and the IDF. Still, this hitherto unpublished material offers an original view on conscientious objection in Israel well before it became organized in the 1980s through well-known local NGOs.¹²

¹⁰ The bibliography on the history of conscientious objection is very vast, both in general terms and considering specific case studies. See Lilian Schlissel, *Conscience in America; A Documentary History of Conscientious Objection in America, 1757-1967*, (New York: Dutton, 1968); *Selective Conscientious Objection: Accommodating Conscience and Security*, Michael F. Noone, Jr. ed., (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989); *The New Conscientious Objection. From Sacred to Secular Resistance*, eds. Charles C. Moskos, John Whiteclay Chambers II, (New York, Oxford, 1993); Sergio Albesano, *Storia dell’obiezione di coscienza in Italia*, (Treviso: Santi Quaranta, 1993); *Varieties of Pacifism: A Survey from Antiquity to the Outset of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Brock, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998) and bibliography quoted therein.

¹¹ Zeev Drori, *The IDF and the Foundation of Israel. Utopia in Uniform*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Yehoshua Kenaz, *Infiltration*, (South Royalton, Vermont: Zoland Books, 2003) [ed. or. *Hitganvut Yehidim*, 1986] (Hebrew) and its homonymous cinematographic adaptation by Dover Koshashvili, 2009. Here a group of disturbed recruits is too weak to sustain training, too geographically and culturally diverse to integrate, or excessively motivated to be able to support the physical and moral humiliations relentlessly inflicted by sadistic superiors.

¹² Among them, ‘Yesh Gvul’, ‘Courage to refuse’, ‘New Profile’, ‘Shministim’, ‘Combatants for Peace’ and others. See <http://www.yeshgvul.org>; <http://www.couragetorefuse.org/english/movement.asp>; <http://www.newprofile.org/english/>; <http://cfpeace.org>; <http://www.whyywerefuse.org>. See also ‘Breaking the Silence,’ <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il>, all accessed 11 June 2013.

WRI Israel. The origins

The origins of the Israel section of WRI can be found in the pangs of conscience of David Engel, a young man who immigrated from Germany to Palestine before World war two. In 1943, when he was about 18, he contacted WRI in London to share some of the dilemmas and difficulties of a young Jew escaped from Germany who refused to join the British army, at a time when many Jews from British Palestine were enlisting. David Engel refused (voluntary) draft and, as a consequence, was expelled from Kfar Ruppim where he lived; he moved and worked for two years as an educator among Jewish children of Arab provenance in the youth village of Tel Mond, from where he was again expelled after 1945. He then found employment as a probation officer of the Mandatory government.¹³

Other COs from Palestine wrote to the WRI headquarters at this time, expressing their loneliness and doubts: they were all caught between their determination to refuse service, the uneasiness of this choice and social pressure: in 1943 from Beer Tuvia, Avraham Shimoni had written in this sense to Runham Brown, the chairman of WRI.¹⁴ Shortly after, he told of “few conscientious objectors in Palestine.”¹⁵ In 1946, he was writing again about “the difficult times” and “the heavy burdens” he had endured “because I did not join the Haganah and up to this day I persist in my refusal.”¹⁶

On January 13, 1946, David Engel announced to the London headquarters “the formation of a Palestinian group of WRI” in which “about 40 comrades from all parts of the country took part” and the election of a committee formed by Nathan Chofshi, Abraham Lisavoder and himself.¹⁷ After the third meeting on 17-18 May, Engel resigned as secretary on grounds of ideological differences over the question whether the association should be Zionist - a view he did not share, and which the association embraced - and passed the testimony over to Abraham Lisavoder.¹⁸ In this first group of COs we also find Joseph W. Abileah and Nathan Chofshi, the chairman of the WRII, the better-known COs from this first group.

Abileah’s life has been told in a biographical study, in the already mentioned articles by Epstein and Hermann, and summarized for the press by Akiva Eldar in 2005.¹⁹ Not by chance, given his central role inside the organization:

¹³ Folder (henceforth f.) ‘David Engel 1943-48’, 320, WRI, IISH.

¹⁴ Letter from A. Shimoni to Runham Brown, 26 August 1943, 321, WRI, IISH.

¹⁵ Letter from A. Shimoni to WRI, 14 September 1943, 321, WRI, IISH.

¹⁶ Letter from A. Shimoni to WRI, 16 October 1946, 321, WRI, IISH.

¹⁷ Letter from David Engel to WRI, 13 January 1946, 320, WRI, IISH. A partial list of 32 names (inclusive of adherents and sympathizers) and the Circular n. 1 containing the statute of the new organization are in Ibid.

¹⁸ Letter from David Engel to WRI, 19 May 1946, 320, WRI, IISH.

¹⁹ Epstein, “For the peoples of the promised land;” Hermann, “Pacifism and Anti-Militarism;” Bing, *Israeli Pacifist*; Akiva Eldar, “The first Israeli conscientious objector,” *Haartez*, 21 July 2005.

from 1946 until the end of the 1960 he was the Haifa secretary of WRII, and then treasurer until 1961. Abileah then gave up the former role to two younger members, Yeshayahu Toma Shik and Amnon Zichrony, but kept the latter one.²⁰ In these capacities he was for more than 20 years one of the souls, and the corresponding arm of the WRII. Among the various documents of this lengthy correspondence, we find a brief curriculum:

Born in 1905 in Austria, immigrated to Palestine in 1926, graduate of College des Freres (sic), Jaffa, professional (violin, viola), worked for Jewish-Arab cooperation since school days and objected participation in Arab-Israel war. Member of WRI-Israel since 1949 and WRI International Council since 1957. Active SCI [*Service Civile International*] and other peace movements.²¹

Abileah himself told the history of his turning to non-violence, and then making it a way of life in various instances: on the journal *The War Resister*, published by WRI in several languages (including Esperanto) and circulated worldwide, in personal correspondence, and in 1968 in a letter addressed to King Hussein of Jordan (when he was trying to push forward a post-1967 plan for a Confederation of the Middle East).²² From 1936 onwards, Abileah's choice towards non-violence stood firm and, as he himself states, he had great difficulty in finding employment. He then refused to join the 'Haganah' and, according to Hermann, he was also the first CO to be tried by a military court for refusing the draft notice he had received in 1948, at the age of 33. Despite the war, Abileah received a "mild sentence with harsh words," as Hermann wrote: "to perform duties that did not require the use of force and did not offend 'his conscience' at a time when the nation was fighting for his life" and to pay 50 liras.²³ As we learn from later correspondence, the fine was never collected, but neither was Abileah permanently discharged. In 1949 he was informing WRI that:

a few days after the session of the Supreme Court, I was dispensed

²⁰ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 17 April, 1961, 319, WRI, IISH.

²¹ 319, WRI, IISH, n.d. SCI was established in 1920 by the Swiss engineer Pierre Cérésolle; the first international voluntary work camp took place on the battlefield of Verdun and it aimed at reconstructing the war damaged village Esnes-en-Argonne as a symbol of reconciliation between France and Germany. See <http://www.sciint.org/learn-about-sci/155>, accessed 7 June 2013.

²² During a trip in 1936 (during the Great Arab Revolt) in the area of Lydda, he was confronted with locals who claimed to have "received instruction from the Imam to kill any Jewish person they would meet." To his interlocutor Abileah responded in Arabic that "if it was his duty, he should do so." The story ends with no aggressor having the courage to throw Abileah in a well, and with someone finding the practical solution of converting him into a Moslem by repetition of the necessary formula and letting him go. Letter from Joseph Abileah to King Hussein of Jordan, 4 January 1968, 319, WRI, IISH.

²³ Hermann, "Pacifism and Anti-Militarism," 144; Epstein, "For the peoples of the promised land," 11-13.

from any duty for reasons of health. The authorities had been informed that I stayed for some time in a sanatorium for nerve diseases where in fact I had been hidden by friends and relatives in order to escape terrorists' persecution in the year 1947. This was taken as pretext to declare me as chronically soul-sick and settle the matter without loss of prestige. The fine of LP 50 was not collected from me.²⁴

The matter came up again in 1951:

Regarding my refusal to do alternative service within the army, I have not had any personal trouble up till now. The matter is however, not definitely settled as yet. (...) I am likely to be called to a session before a special committee to decide if I will be granted civil alternative service and consequently be exempted from army service.²⁵

The chairman of WRII was Nathan Chofshi from Nahalal. Born in 1899, he migrated from Poland to Palestine in 1909; though coming from a religious family, he had joined 'Ha-Poel Ha-Tzeir,' which he then left in 1921 over ideological divergences.²⁶ His conscientious objection was a mixture of religious and socialist/internationalist values; he belonged to an older generation and in part acted also as theoretical/spiritual guide, often making reference to holy texts to inspire and teach younger generations of COs. As he wrote:

Judaism (...) is neither petrified nor frozen. It has many shades, and it knows ferment and struggle, (...) is interwoven with the unity of mankind and the cosmos and with world peace.²⁷

The shades, and struggles that he emphasized mentioned God scolding the angels rejoicing at the drowning of Egyptians when the Red sea opened; rabbi Akiva and rabbi Tarfon defining a court murderous should it pronounce a death sentence in 70 years; Moses fighting the Amorites only when they refused peace and "rose to make war against Israel;" the sages of the Talmud as heirs to the prophets, and Hillel who established the rule "do not do unto your neighbour that which is hateful to yourself."²⁸ Getting closer to the 20th century, Chofshi referred to Ahad Ha'Am, A.D. Gordon and Tolstoy. Most of the COs mentioned thus far were also active - or had some contact - with 'Ihud' (Unity), the organization set up in 1942 by Jehuda L. Magnes and other

²⁴ Letter from J.A. Abileah to WRI, 10 June 1949, 319, WRI, IISH.

²⁵ Letter from J.A. Abileah to WRI, 7 May 1951, 319, WRI, IISH.

²⁶ Epstein, "For the peoples of the promised land," 6-12; Hermann, "Pacifism and Anti-Militarism," 138-41.

²⁷ Nathan Chofshi, *Peace and Non-violence in Jewish thought* [1954?], 319, WRI, IISH

²⁸ Ibid.

former members of the binational movement 'Brit Shalom' (1925-1931).²⁹

This first period in the history of WRII also saw the first dropouts: either Jews who were COs (or WRI supporters) in their home countries but felt they could not take the same stand once in Palestine/Israel; or members of the association who left Israel with their families after the 1948 war. One example of the first case is Lola Wegner, a British Jew, long-standing member of WRI in the UK. Immigrated to Palestine in 1946, she explained why she was unable to join the would-be founded WRI-Palestine:

I know that the situation in Palestine in its reality does not allow me to pledge myself for good to do away with any possible defence in a critical moment. That would mean suicide for my people who only want to build up peacefully (...). I am willing, even eager, to cooperate with our Arab neighbours, and the proposition of Magnes (...) seemed to me fair and reasonable. (...) After the slaughter of six million people, that little corner, that home, means to be or not to be, also in a spiritual sense to keep the values of an ancient people revived (...). I am deeply troubled not to be able to join. I know you faced the same problem during the war and answered it differently.³⁰

In 1950 Lola Wegner was a subscriber to the WRI's publications and a decade later she was heading the 'Women's International League for Peace and Freedom' (WILPF, est. 1915), whose groups "were established in three big cities."³¹ In 1949 there had been another dropout, Herbert Leader, who immigrated with his wife and daughter to Argentina.

In 1950, 50 people participated to the national conference of WRII³² and, as we can read in «Haaretz» in 1954, they were estimated to be about 100. The journalist described them as

strange idealists but of exceptionally high moral standard (...) ready to suffer great hardships for their stand. They refuse to serve in the army but I know some of them who are the first in every voluntary public service. Their refusal is based on a deep conviction and they cannot be taken as people who want to evade service for ease or comfort.³³

With the exception of David Engel and few others, these first COs were not

²⁹ Yosef Heller, *From Brit Shalom to Ibud. Judah Leib Magnes and the Struggle for a Bi-national State*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2003) (Hebrew); see also Hermann, "Pacifism and Anti-Militarism," 130-133; on 'Ihud' and 'Brit Shalom' see the essays by Giulia Daniele and Cristiana Calabrese in this issue, pp. 1-21 and pp. 101-123.

³⁰ Letter from Lola Wegner to Runham Brown, 14 May 1946, 322, WRI, IISH.

³¹ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 13 February 1960, 319, WRI, IISH.

³² Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 26 December 1953, 319, WRI, IISH.

³³ [n.a.], "Difficulties to Conscientious Objectors," *Haaretz*, 14 September 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

anti-Zionist. As we shall see, throughout the 1950s many of them grew increasingly critical of the state's policies in matters of citizenship legislation, of Palestinian refugees and of the progressive militarization of the educational system. Still, most of them supported the idea of a Jewish nation-state; the words of Lola Wegner speak for themselves. The *Sboab* and the 1948 war, which they painfully understood in existential terms, were too close question which kind of ethno-political implications such a nationalist idea might carry in the long-term.

Given the small numbers, it should come as no surprise if this group remained altogether unknown after its foundation; WRII kept a low profile within a society that celebrated military virtues in part out of ideology and in part out of necessity, and related more naturally to the London headquarters than to the existing Israeli political parties and groups. One exception was the small 'Thud,' which COs perceived closer to their political outlook. On a political level, WRII failed to have the right to conscientious objection included in the 1949 National Service Law, which established compulsory military service for male and female citizens.³⁴ In 1951 Abileah reported:

³⁴ The law established that males aged 18-26 would serve for 24 months; males aged 27-29 would serve 18 months. Women aged 18-26 would serve 24 months. Men aged 18-39 and women aged 18-34 would also serve reserve duty for 31 consecutive days in 1 year and 1 day each month; men up to 40 years old would serve up to 14 consecutive days and 1 each month. The law did not contemplate the possibility of refusal. f. "National Service Law 1949," 320, WRI, IISH; see also www.israelawresourcecenter.org/israelaws/fulltext/defenceservicelaw.htm accessed 22 May 2013; on this law and its later amendments from a gender perspective see Nira Yuval Davis, "The Bearers of the Collective: Women and Religious Legislation in Israel" *Feminist Review*, 14 (1980): 15-27. For a description of today's cases of service exemption see <http://www.newprofile.org/english/node/205>, accessed 11 June 2013. Haredi Jews have been exempt from military service according to the *Torato Omanuto* arrangement (The study of the Torah is his art/occupation, Hebrew, b. Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 11a) reached between Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, 'Agudat Yisrael' and Yitzhak Meir Levin during the 1948 war. This legal arrangement exempted students from Haredi yeshivas (about 400 at the time) from military service if their sole occupation was to study the *Torab*. The number of those exempt under *Torato Omanuto* grew from 800 men in 1968 to 41,450 in 2005. In 1999, 9.2% of the soldiers enlisting were exempt under the *Torato Omanuto* terms. This situation prompted Prime Minister Ehud Barak to institute the Tal Commission, which produced the so-called Tal law approved by the Knesset in July 2002 as a temporary law subject to revision. The Tal law continued the *Torato Omanuto* system with some changes, but in February 2012 the Supreme Court of Justice declared it unconstitutional. The bibliography on these themes is very vast. See Stuart Cohen, "Tensions Between Military Service and Jewish Orthodoxy In Israel: Implications Imagined and Real" *Israel Studies* 12/1 (2007): 103-126 and bibliography therein quoted.

All efforts to have the right of conscientious objection legally recognised (...) were of no avail even to this day and, though the attitude of the government towards conscientious objectors is by far more tolerant, any basis for legal recognition is lacking and depends for good or bad on the goodwill of the government. The legally unstable position looms like a steady menace above the heads of our friends, and they may be arrested any day and any hour.³⁵

Still in April 1957 Abileah was writing:

There is no consideration of providing legal protection to male COs; the Minister of Defence has, however, the power to release or transfer to non-combatant duties at his option, provided the stand is made on enrolment.³⁶

If we look at civil society as one of the sites where the power of the state and institutions is negotiated and at times re-addressed, we can conclude that WRII, as a representative of an embryonic civil society during Israel's first years, failed to have its claims recognized. Yet, the experience of these first years (and of these very first COs) seems to sketch a picture in which the state's institutions did not adopt a punitive policy against conscientious objection *per se*, unlike several other countries.³⁷ Each case was evaluated individually and, as a general rule, non-combatant (military), and eventually civil, service was given in alternative. As we read in one of the many letters that Abileah sent to WRI to describe the situation of Israeli COs, in 1950 about 20 members of WRII had applied for exemption from military service but it was only after the personal intervention of the Tel Aviv secretary, Dr. E. J. Jarus(lawski), that he was "promised that a committee will be formed to examine each case separately and provide for alternative service within or without the army as the case may be."³⁸

As we shall see below, responses by individual COs varied, given the different nature of alternative service offered, non-combatant or civil; periods of harsh reclusion were given to COs refusing one or the other, or both. In such cases WRII - and then WRI - intervened. What appeared crucial in the process was to state one's conscientious objection *before* draft and not *after* conscription. The authorities had shown their tolerance towards Abileah between 1948 and 1951, as they could afford a few COs in the framework of the *leve en masse* of that period. For other cases - Nathan Chavkin, David Kremer, Meir Lissai, Michel Posner, Michel Rubinstein (1951), David Almaliyah (1952), Chava Bloch,

³⁵ *Report of the Israel Section to the WRI International Conference at Brunswick* (27th-31st July 1951), 319, WRI, IISH.

³⁶ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 20 April 1957, 319, WRI, IISH.

³⁷ See fn. 9.

³⁸ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 7 May 1951, 319, WRI, IISH.

Baruch Friedman, Michele (Michael) Tagliacozzo, Itzhak Weiss (1953) just to quote a few names - alternative civil service was generally negotiated individually with the authorities. However, as the example below demonstrates, confronted with individuals who objected *after* recruitment, the IDF and the authorities were much less tolerant.³⁹

The Amnon Zichrony affair

In the context of the WRII's early history this case is important for various reasons. It was the first time that the authorities faced a CO objecting after starting service; he was described as “one of the difficult cases of a soldier on active service when his conviction is formed and strengthened while experiencing the war machine face to face.”⁴⁰ Unlike Chofshi and Abileah and others, he had been born in Israel, a fact that also changed the authorities' perception of this association, i.e. a group of foreign-born eccentric individuals. Abileah's case had been settled on (mental) health grounds after all. The Zichrony affair functioned as a tester of the authorities' attitude and of the WRII's ability to negotiate the case of one of its younger members; it presented a test for the Israeli press and society too, as Zichrony and the association received a broad publicity both in Israel and abroad. At the time Meir Rubinstein, another CO, commented: “a wave of sympathy has surged up but also hostile attitudes nourished by fear, and narrow-mindedness come not unfrequent.”⁴¹

The history of Zichrony's enlistment, refusal to bear arms, imprisonment, hunger strike and trial, the defense strategy of his attorney Mordechai Stein, the press coverage of the case, the family's involvement, and the movement of public opinion in Israel in favor or against this case are known and are detailed in Keren's biography of Amnon Zichrony.⁴² In brief, Zichrony was drafted on July 20, 1953 but he refused to take the IDF oath and to carry arms. In November he was transferred to (non combatant) medical duties, which he also refused; in March 1954, while on leave without permission, he made contact with WRII. His trial was scheduled for June 1, but a few days before, Zichrony started a hunger strike that lasted for 23 days. The military judges did not recognize his “deep pacifist conviction,” nor acknowledged his objection on grounds of conscience as a counterweight for his responsibility as a soldier, and they condemned Zichrony to seven months imprisonment for insubordination. Zichrony was hospitalized as he suffered some injuries leaving the courtroom, and in hospital he continued his hunger-strike. A few weeks later, Abileah informed WRI in London on the developments of this case:

³⁹ See also the cases of Joseph Chabaz, David Kremer and Benjamin Gut, described by Abileah to WRI respectively in 1949, 1951 and 1956, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁴⁰ As appears in WR [*The War Resister*], n.d. [Haifa, 28 April 1957], 319, WRI, IISH.

⁴¹ Letter from Meir Rubinstein to WRI, 20 June 1954, 320, WRI, IISH.

⁴² Keren, *Zichrony v. State of Israel*, 31-53

Today I have some better news: Amnon's sentence has been cancelled by the army authorities and he has received a month's leave from the army service for rehabilitation and final clarification of his position. He still refuses to do any alternative service within the army as offered to him but has stopped the hunger strike after having completed his 23rd day.⁴³

This case tested WRIF's ability to mobilize its national and international networks. In June 1954 Abileah wrote that the members had "all been very active throughout the period of Amnon's hunger strike." Such activity consisted in "writing letters to various authorities" and "applying for the intervention" of well-known personalities, such as Rejendra Prasad (President of India), Albert Einstein and to the Israeli President and Prime Minister; the replies of the latter two were considered "rather discouraging." More effective was the press conference organized by attorney Mordechai Stein with Nathan Chofshi, Joseph Abileah and E. J. Jarus(lawski), the Secretary of WRIF's Tel Aviv Section.⁴⁴ In *The War Resister* this conference was described as the event that, for the first time, interested Israeli public opinion to the case of a CO. WRIF organized a worldwide protest and the members of WRIF made a one-day hunger strike of solidarity.⁴⁵ In August 1954, we find Zichrony "working (...) as a civilian in the ARP without uniform, without pay and having his meals at home," i.e. in alternative civil service, a condition that he maintained until December of the same year when he was released.⁴⁶ In September 1955, Zichrony obtained his discharge from the army on grounds of conscience.⁴⁷ We find him again in 1957 protesting the treatment of French COs in front of the French embassy together with another CO, Shalom Zamir.⁴⁸ In the early 1960s he briefly volunteered at the WRIF's administration.⁴⁹ As a lawyer, he then worked with the younger generation of COs (and with many other more - or less - famous defendants).⁵⁰

In September 1954, «Haaretz» had written how "the general public became aware of the existence of COs in Israel after the fasting of Amnon Zichrony;"⁵¹

⁴³ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 20 June 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁴⁴ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 20 June 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁴⁵ As appears in *WR [The War Resister]* [Haifa, 28 April 1957], 319, WRI, IISH.

⁴⁶ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 30 August 1954 and 25 December 1954, IISH, WRI, 319.

⁴⁷ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 25 September 1955, IISH, WRI, 319. In 1963 Zichrony was "summoned for service in the reserve forces." For the correspondence relating to this second stage see *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 20 April 1957, IISH, WRI, 319.

⁴⁹ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 21 July 1962, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁵⁰ See Michael Keren, *Zichrony v. State of Israel. The Biography of a Civil Right Lawyer*, (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2002).

⁵¹ [n.a.], "Difficulties to Conscientious Objectors," *Haaretz*, 14 September 1954, IISH, WRI,

his long hunger strike received wide press coverage in «Haaretz», «Davar», «Al Ha-Mishmar», «Maariv», «Zmanim», «Ha-Olam Ha-Ze», raising a number of questions: was Zichrony just a young man playing the hero in fields other than the battlefield, as the sentence he received implied? Was he ready to accept hardship, but only in a hospital bed, as some of the articles' titles recited? Had the state actually proclaimed a death sentence (by hunger) on one of its young citizens by not recognizing conscientious objection as an individual civil right? Could “the Israeli public not accept this small number of people whose conviction does not allow them to carry arms but are ready to serve society voluntarily in any field of social activity and with fidelity to be praised?”⁵² The next paragraph will try to answer, at least in part, to these questions.

Beyond draft refusal. A broader critique

Being a CO in Israel the 1950s did not mean just to refuse draft, to support fellow war resisters *in loco* or abroad, or to do alternative service; it also meant keeping in touch with similar organizations elsewhere, or with associations that functioned as coordinating agencies between national branches: the London headquarters of WRI, but also the ‘American Friends Service Committee’ (AFSC, the Quakers), SCI and others. Locally, Israeli COs maintained tight connections among themselves and with ‘Thud.’ Unlike the latter, WRII was not necessarily for a binational state but, analyzing the individual and collective stands of many COs at the time, and some of the themes they debated, it is obvious that draft refusal was just one aspect of a broader political vision which sharply contrasted with that of the majority.

There are at least four questions under which we can divide such broad criticism: first, the issues binationalism and Israel’s nationality law; second, the theme of Palestinian refugees (called at the time Arab refugees) and of their properties: these were both externally and internally displaced Palestinians; third, the spreading militarism of Israel’s society, with a special focus on education. Finally, several members of WRII adopted fiscal objection against taxes that supported the war effort, the IDF or related institutions.

A. Binationalism and Israel’s nationality law (1952)

These were two very different issues, but, as we shall see, they were connected through an idea that the country (and its population) should not be divided, whether through partition, war or legislation. WRII had been against partition in 1947; in its report for the WRI triennial conference of 1951, the organization drafted a manifesto in Arabic and in Hebrew inviting “to preserve the integrity of our country and to stop the fraternal strife and to save as long as there is still something to be saved.”⁵³ The publication of the manifesto was followed

319.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Report of the Israel Section to the WRI International Conference at Brunswick* (27th-31st July 1951), 319,

by a small pamphlet entitled *Letter to friends* that propagated the binational idea and the creation of a forum for both Palestinian Arabs and would-be Israelis. In the meantime the whole country turned into the front, and binationalism drowned. However, throughout his life, Abileah returned on this idea: in 1947 he had obtained an interview with the UNSCOP commission to push forward a plan for a confederation of the Middle East on the Swiss model; in the immediate aftermath of the Six day war, he again devoted much of his time and energies to a similar plan. The London headquarters of WRI, the Quakers and other internationally accredited agencies helped him at that time.⁵⁴

Reporting to WRI on WRII's activity in 1951-54, Chofshi anticipated the approach of some historiography on territorial partitions, by making a comparison between bodily integrity and national unity, whereby the partition of a country (and the moving of populations) closely resembles the physical dismemberment of a body, or loss of limbs. In 1954 Chofshi was describing Israel as a wounded country, as "one body representing an organic unit and which has been devided (sic) into two sections, one Jewish sovereign state and a part annexed to the Kingdom of Jordan."⁵⁵ As he wrote, the war "between Israel and the neighbouring Arab countries" had left "its negative print on the country's life in every respect;" the situation of the Palestinians - "hundreds of thousands of Arab farmers who fled (...) from fear of war or who had been expelled by the Israel authorities" - was dramatic; they had left a void in the country, in its landscape, in the professions and in the chain of production, and no one could take their place. Although Chofshi did not analyze the social composition of Palestinians, he nevertheless acknowledged their dramatic fate as refugees and the terrible consequences of this situation for Israel too. In this context, he foresaw quite accurately the dynamics of the upcoming border wars:

Hundreds of thousands of refugees living on the boundaries are a continuous source of infiltration of desparate (sic) people deprived of all means and who endanger the peace of the country. Attacks on life and property by infiltrtees (sic) and bloody acts of revenge from both sides in particular between Israel and Jordan aggrevate (sic) the situation gradually and it will not be a surprise if some day the war will flare up again with Jordan and other Arab states.⁵⁶

Binationalism was equally unpopular in 1947, in 1951 and in 1954, but WRII as

WRI, IISH. *An Appeal April 1948 by the Palestine Section of the War Resisters' International to the Arabs Jews and Christians in Palestine and the world*, 321, WRI, IISH.

⁵⁴ 319, WRI, IISH.

⁵⁵ WRI-ISRAEL Section, *Report to the WRI triennial conference at Abbaye du Royaumont near Paris (29.7-3.8.1954) of activity covering the period summer 1951 to end of April 1954. Introduction by Nathan Chofshi*, 319, WRI, IISH. See Johnathan D. Greenberg, "Generations of Memory: Remembering Partitions in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25 (2005), 89. For a later view on territorial partitions, see the essay by Cristiana Calabrese in this issue, pp. 101-123.

⁵⁶ WRI-ISRAEL Section, *Report to the WRI triennial conference*.

an association, and COs as individuals, continued to see it as the only way to stop the strife between brothers, as they used to write. This was one of the contexts that saw WRII and 'Ihud' cooperate: through the latter, they entertained common activities with "some Arab friends," some of whom had even registered with WRII. However, broadening their shared activities was recognized as almost impossible in 1951 especially for "the difficult conditions in general and the military rule imposed on the Arab villages and towns."⁵⁷

The promotion of binationalism in Israel in the 1950s might strengthen the idea that these groups were quite out of touch with the region's socio-political and international situation. Still, WRIIs' methods recall at least one of the two conditions outlined years later by Johan Galtung as founding of any peace-building work. Galtung saw bottom up peace-building as made of two successive stages; he termed the first "dissociation," i.e. deconstructing ideological and social structures that help build oppression and perpetuate violence, and the second "association," i.e. constructing movements and activities that can confront social and political inequalities from within societies.⁵⁸ In this respect, WRII and 'Ihud' tried to build a framework where to realize the first stage, and eventually move on to the second. The battle to change certain sections of the Nationality Law (1952) represents an example of such attempt.

The criticism of WRII towards the Nationality Law was not directed at that part known as the Law of Return, i.e. the immediate granting of citizenship to a Jew "the moment he puts his foot on Israeli soil," as mentioned before, those who did not believe that WRII should be Zionist left or maintained a low profile. Criticism was raised towards the exclusion of non-Jews from citizenship, i.e. Palestinians who had been in the country (art. 3) when the law was passed.⁵⁹ On this matter the journal *Ner* (mouthpiece of 'Ihud') presented the words of Samuel Ussishkin, attorney and son of Menachem Ussishkin:

Even if we could justify our stand with regard to the distinction (made by the Law) between the naturalization of Jews and the naturalization of non-Jews, we could under no circumstances justify such distinction with respect to those (Jews and Arabs) who are already in Israel. There is no way of cleansing the defilement of discrimination...⁶⁰

In 1952, when these words were written, the Nationality Law was one of the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Johan Galtung, *Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means (the Transcend method)*, (New York: UN, 1998). Also available at http://www.transcend.org/pctrcluj2004/TRANSCEND_manual.pdf, accessed 1 June 2013. On Galtung see the essay by Erin Dyer in this issue, pp.162-184.

⁵⁹ See <http://www.israellawresourcecenter.org/israelaws/fulltext/nationalitylaw.htm> accessed 19 August 2012.

⁶⁰ *Highlights of the Yiddish and Hebrew Press*, Vol. III, n. 40, 320, WRI, IISH.

few basic laws of the state (for lack of a constitution) and, for this reason too, it was considered crucial in peace circles that it would be “extremely liberal, in fact the very example of liberality.” In this instance *Ner* recalled the same framework that Chofshi used, invoking the words of Hillel on the one hand (“whatsoever is hateful unto thee, do not unto thy neighbour”), and the history of Jewish persecution on the other. The Talmudic idea of Israel as a “light unto the nations” - of doing better than others once the opportunity is given, (i.e. once Jews have a state) - was at the foundation of such reasoning.⁶¹ For a group that maintained a direct relationship between their conscience and their political stand, it was therefore quite untenable that

an Arab, then, wishing to become a citizen of Israel must first produce proof that he had been a citizen of Palestine (during the Mandate rule) and even then he will be granted citizenship papers only when the Minister of the Interior so wishes....⁶²

On April 4, 1952 an association called ‘Jewish-Arab Assembly’ organized a protest meeting in Haifa that “saw the participation of all sections of the population” and which rejected the clauses, which it did not hesitate to define racial, “incorporated into the law of citizenship which the Knesset adopted on April 1st 1952.” In particular, this assembly demanded the revision of paragraphs 3, 6 and 11 “so as to grant automatic citizenship to all Arabs who were in Israel on the day of the adoption of the law, the same as is granted to Jews.”

The Assembly demands that the Law permit acquisition of Israeli citizenship through marriage. We should be mindful of the tragedies that were caused, and are being caused, to thousands of Arab families in Israel through the separation of husbands and wives. The power to unite families now rests entirely with the Government which is exploiting it as a political means.⁶³

Unable to participate to the meeting, Chofshi protested against “the insult and the wrong new law imposed upon our brothers and neighbours”:

This law is not only a heavy blow for the indigenous Arabs who will be the direct sufferers from it; it is also a great insult to the concepts of democracy and freedom. It is an insult to every true Jew who, generation after generation, has fought against discrimination and all forms of national oppression, racial or religious. And it is a great insult also to the Jews of all countries in the Diaspora. Let us Jews and Arabs continue our work together, for the abrogation of this discriminatory

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Highlights of the Yiddish and Hebrew Press*, Vol. III, n. 40, 320, WRI, IISH.

law and for the full and absolute equality of all citizens of our land.⁶⁴

The absolute equality of all citizens before the law remained one of the objectives of WRII to promote peaceful coexistence. As the following paragraph shows, this was particularly important in the case of Palestinians, whether internally displaced or external refugees.

B. Internally and Externally Displaced Arabs (Palestinians)

The WRII denounced the issue of refugees as fuelling conflict. In this context we have to place Abileah's visit to the village of Migdal Gad (one of the temporary names in the transition from Majdal to Ashkelon) on 8 October 1950, and the quite long and tough report he delivered to WRI in London. The history of the departure of this last group of internal refugees towards Gaza, the ways in which it was engineered, and the question of how many refugees were left in Israel after the 1948 war (who was granted refugee status, who received Israeli citizenship and who was forced to leave), have been discussed by historiography at length.⁶⁵ In this respect Abileah's report - who visited the place just before the last group of about 600 was exodused towards Gaza - does not add much to the already existing knowledge today. At the time it certainly did, and it still provides a dramatic first hand account of the situation, revealing also how different was the outlook of a CO on the politics and on the events of their times.

The report pointed out that "before the Arab-Jewish war Migdal was a township of 12000 inhabitants" and that "2700 were left when it became part of Israel;"⁶⁶ it also suggested some of the reasons for the population's feeble resistance:

Every inhabitant had to fill in a questionnaire stating whether he intended to leave for Egypt or Jordan or to stay in Israel. In the latter case, he was to be transferred to Galilea (sic) or another place where he was to live as a refugee. Under these circumstances they all replied that they wanted to go to Egypt or Jordan and had to sign an application asking the military governor to allow them to leave Israel. Having done so, he was permitted to take all his belongings or cash (Israel pounds to be exchanged against Palestine Pounds on the frontier) and was also granted transport to the frontier. (...) The property is administered by the custodian of abandoned property. Rent or income from other sources will be registered in their name. Of course, administration fees and taxes nearly equal the income and no noticeable amounts will

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Benny Morris, *1948 and After. Israel and the Palestinians*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 345; see also Alexander Bligh, "Israel and the refugee problem: from exodus to resettlement 1948-1952" *Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (1998), 123-47, 125; see also Ilana Feldman, "Home as refrain: remembering and living displacement in Gaza" *History and Memory* 18 (2006) 10-47.

⁶⁶ Joseph Abileah, *My trip to Migdal Gad on 8.10.1950*, 319, WRI, IISH.

remain for these people in Israel. Besides, they had to sign a declaration that they do not intend to return to Israel. To my question, what would happen, if a citizen of Migdal refused to sign the application for forced migration, he replied that the military governor “advised” every one to sign, for after 15th October 1950 all the remaining inhabitants would be forcibly removed by the army and expelled from the country without any property and after that date he would not be able to help anybody. (...) Within 3 months, 2100 inhabitants left the place. Tomorrow 400 will leave and next week the remaining 200. After that, the place will be “Araber-rein.”⁶⁷

This description is at times disturbing, in particular for some of his terminology: Israel as an “Araber-rein” state, the Arab area as a “ghetto,”⁶⁸ the “preparation for an exodus” for a population group forced to migrate by means of psychological pressure, humiliation, financial coercion and for lack of endogenous political guidance. Altogether, Abileah returned from Migdal Gad/Majdal with a “very depressing picture.”⁶⁹ The use of such expressions in this context remains problematic, even more so just a few years after they had an application against Jews. At the same time, these were fairly common at the time, as in the well-known case of Lydda for example.⁷⁰ The second part of this report, subtitled *Glimpses*, seems a group portrait one minute before it fades from the picture. Despite some sentimental overtones, it represents an important testimony.

Walking through the Ghetto streets you see a few shops still open and a few coffee houses where some men play cards or *tawla* and the radio blares gay tunes as if it wanted to hide and make forget the bitter reality. Old men who had spent the days of their childhood here and rejoiced their grandchildren, tomorrow have to leave the place where they lived for seventy or more years. At the gate of the mosque, the keepers and other believers sit motionless. The miller submits the list of his property to the military governor in the presence of the mayor. Here there is still a weaving shop of which Migdal had so many in the past, and two workers toil as if nothing has happened. How long? Perhaps another week, and then they will have to close the shop and go abroad. At the other end of the street about 300 meters from the Ghetto, are the offices of the military governor. At the doors a signboard: Housing

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ The bibliography on the use of *Shoah*-related words in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very vast; see Gerald Cromer, *A War of Words. Political Violence and Public Debate in Israel*, (London, New York: Frank Cass, 2004); see also the classic Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991).

⁶⁹ Joseph Abileah, *My trip to Migdal Gad on 8.10.1950*, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁷⁰ See Michel Khleifi, Eyal Sivan, *Route 181. Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*, 2004, esp. ch. Lydda-Lod.

commission. Here the new immigrants are queuing up to be allotted the flats which will be vacated tomorrow. (...) There are 1100 new immigrant families, altogether some 4000 souls. A great part are (sic) from oriental communities. The villages nearby as Isdud, Yibna, Julis and other places have been laid in ruins and the new immigrants have been settled in new settlements near the destroyed villages. Not so in Migdal, to which nearly no new houses have been added and where the immigrants have been put up into the houses of the former inhabitants, into their houses and on their forcibly abandoned land...⁷¹

Pressure on Palestinians to leave was also a way to acquire, and eventually incorporate, new estates to house thousands of Jewish immigrants arriving in Israel from European or Arab countries, one aspect of the ‘ingathering of the exiles’ mentioned above. WRII denounced this situation that, in their opinion, was laying the foundations for new wars.

As it is known, the claim that the “hundred of thousands of refugees living on the boundaries” were “a continuous source of infiltration,”⁷² and thus a danger for the new owners who then sought revenge, was right. This circle of violence was leading to bloody fights, loss of life and was aggravating the relations between Jordan and Israel. Moshe Dayan, in his famous eulogy on the grave of Roi Rutenberg on 19 April 1956, indeed described this very same situation. In a masterpiece of political rhetoric, he fed fear in the population together with the myth of the “brutal destiny of our generation”- that of the peasants turned into warriors against their will (Israelis) to react against the murderous (Palestinians) who have a “burning hatred for us.” In the very words of Dayan: “for eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate.”⁷³

Recognizing the immediate power to mobilize the population for war, WRII denounced this rhetoric and called attention to the refugees’ real situation. In March 1955 Professor Arthur Bruenner, in a lecture to younger COs, listed a few points that, unless addressed, would in his opinion deepen “the abyss between the two people and frustrate every peace endeavour.” Among them, the release of the funds of Arab refugees frozen in Israeli banks, the return of the property taken, the settlement by peaceful means of frontier incidents, and the stop of retaliations by both sides, as many of them ended hitting innocent people.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Joseph Abileah, *My trip to Migdal Gad on 8.10.1950*, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁷² WRI-ISRAEL Section, *Report to the WRI triennial conference*.

⁷³ Nissim Calderon, “All that we have left,” *Haaretz*, 14 September 2006. The A. compares Dayan’s eulogy for Roi Rutenberg to David Grossman’s eulogy for Uri Grossman, considering both as formative and enduring texts of the identity of each generation. See <http://www.haaretz.com/all-that-we-have-left-1.197279>, accessed 11 May 2013.

⁷⁴ As in many of the operations of the 1950s along (and over) the Eastern and Western borders;

WRII thus recognized the Palestinian refugee problem not only in terms of citizenship (above), but also in terms of property loss/restitution. Like Chofshi, also Bruenner belonged to WRII's older generation. It was clear to them that "peace will not be possible without returning of a least a part of the Arab refugees;" at the same time, they also used a repertoire of images and a language that oscillated between orientalist overtones - Palestinians as *fellabin* - and the recognition of their role in the country's economy (agriculture). They were the ones "who know the special character of the Palestinian soil for hundred of years,"⁷⁵ a statement that hit the myth of the Zionist transformation of Palestine's presumed desert into a garden. In this framework one should also see the mobilization of WRII against the Land Requisition Law of 1953. This allowed Government to claim the property of lands which were not in the possession of its owner as of 1 April 1952, in practice legalizing expropriations of Palestinian land for military purposes or for the establishment of Jewish settlements.⁷⁶

Some of these ideas were taken up by the new generation of CO that met in Tel Aviv in November 1955 and organized a 'National Conference of Conscientious Objectors.' Here, they released a short manifesto in five points. Point n. 3 remarked their awareness of the "terrible fate of hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees" and demanded "that a great part of them be returned to our common fatherland."⁷⁷ The Conference also underlined the rejection of "war and violence as means to settle differences" and the need to adopt a mentality open to "renunciation for the sake of peace."⁷⁸

Despite the small numbers, two generations started to co-exist in WRII in mid-1950s, at least until 1961 when Shik became national Secretary.⁷⁹ He represented the younger members, who maintained a more outspoken political approach and did not defend objection only on religious or moral grounds.⁸⁰ However, in both generations we find a belief and a determination that stood in stark contrast to the emerging Israeli security and national discourse: all of them saw the uselessness of "bellicose speeches by both sides" and considered it "impossible that Israel should remain indifferent to the great misery of Arab

see the incursion at Beit Jala (January 6, 1952), the Qibya incident/massacre (14 October 1953), the various other operations by IDF Unit 101 (among them Operation Black Arrow - February 1955), the Qalqilya police station attack (October, 1956). Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949-1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁷⁵ Arthur Bruenner, *First Steps to peace in Middle East*, 9 March 1955, 320, WRI, IISH.

⁷⁶ See <http://www.israellawresourcecenter.org/israellaws/fulltext/landacquisitionlaw.htm>, accessed 11 May 2013.

⁷⁷ Summary of deliberations at the National Conference of Conscientious Objectors, Tel Aviv, Nov. 19, 1955, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ The whole Shik archive (5 boxes) is not yet indexed at IISH.

⁸⁰ Yeshayahu Toma Shik, *WRI meeting on Prisoners' Day*, [1961?], 321, WRI, IISH.

refugees.” Helping them was seen as a way “to put the wrong right and to remove the causes leading to fratricide,” because “the good example will awake the good which his dormant also in the camp of the ‘enemy’.”⁸¹

C. Military training in schools - gadna

In 1953 WRII initiated a campaign against *gadna* (“youth battalion courses” arranged by the Department of Education) fearing that the militarization of youth would begin before the age of 18, when conscription started.⁸² As Ben-Yehuda wrote, although *gadna* emphasized values like trekking and scouting, some *gadna* forces had fought actively during the 1948 war and, in general, the aim of this kind of programs helped youth familiarize with the military before conscription.

WRII saw the establishment of *gadna* as the wheel of history moving backwards, i.e. the potential return - in the very country that in the 1950s symbolized the living defeat of Nazi-Fascism - of regimes that, among other things, not long before had built their consent also on the militarization of youth.⁸³ In 1953 Nathan Choshfi protested the establishment of *gadna* with the Israeli Minister of Education and Culture.

Years ago, we and the civilized world witnessed with horror how the most wicked and vile dictators of the gentiles poisoned the youth of their countries with the venom of militarization: we saw the terrifying fruits of the doctrine of the sword grown by the military education of Fascist Italy’s and Nazi Germany’s children. (...). We parents, brothers and sisters demand: hands off these children! (...) Let the Jewish schools imbue its pupils, young and old, with the teaching “love thy neighbour” with the sublime role of Hillel “That which is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow man.” Let the school teach the children the words of our great prophets on the redemption of Israel and the return to Zion in peace, friendliness and non-violence.⁸⁴

In 1954, it became clear that participation to *gadna* had not been sanctioned by law, and that students who refused to participate would be dismissed from

⁸¹ Summary of deliberations at the National Conference of Conscientious Objectors, Tel Aviv, Nov. 19, 1955, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁸² On *gadna* see the traditional Joseph W. Eaton, “Gadna: Israel’s Youth Corps” *Middle East Journal* 23/4 (1969): 471-483; on the Masada myth and the *gadna*, see Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “The Masada Mythical narrative and the Israeli Army,” in *Military and Militarism in Israeli Society*, eds. Eyal Ben-Ari and Edna Lomsky-Feder, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999): 57-88, 81-83.

⁸³ The bibliography on these themes is very vast; see Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010); Carmen Betti, *L’opera nazionale balilla e l’educazione fascista* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1984).

⁸⁴ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 12 February 1954, [translation of Nathan Chofshi’s letter to the Minister of Education and Culture dated 13.12.1953], 319, WRI, IISH.

school on grounds of breaking discipline, rather than of breaking the law. No such law was ever passed anyway⁸⁵ and no such dismissals had occurred in 1954, with the exception of a controversy surrounding two girls, Hagar and Ruth Lisser, daughters of a CO. Of this controversy Abileah informed WRI:

Two girls, aged about 16 and 17, daughters of our devoted member Lisser, maintain a strong stand against conscription and will make us busy in the future. One of them, Hagar (about 16) refused to do the compulsory youth training in school. She was threatened by the director of the school that she will not be accepted for final examinations which will deprive her of the possibility to go to university. She replied quietly and simply "I do not go to school for certificates but to acquire knowledge" whereupon she was released from "Gadna" training.⁸⁶

Two years later, when called up for conscription, Hagar and Ruth Lisser became COs. In 1956 Hagar declared under oath that "reasons of conscience restrain[ed her] from serving in the Security Service" and that she could in "no way kill, no matter from which side the order to kill [was] given (...)." ⁸⁷ As for Ruth Lisser, she was allowed to "do alternative service as a school teacher as soon as she (...) finish[es] her studies at the seminary."⁸⁸

D. Other issues

Political criticism and personal commitment were expressed also in other ways, i.e objecting to taxes that supported the war effort, directly or indirectly. For example, Abileah had the amounts due redirected to maternity funds of the National Insurance or to orphanages. WRI acknowledged this as a sign of a "liberal attitude on the part of the Israeli Government which (...) no other Government has shown."⁸⁹

Another way to struggle was to maintain an international(ist) network and political horizon. Many COs participated to SCI work camps. In 1952 WRRI supported the establishment in Israel of international work camps sponsored

⁸⁵ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 26 March 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁸⁶ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 28 April 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁸⁷ Joseph Abileah, "War Resisting Sisters" *The War Resister* 70 1st Quarter, (1956): 13, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ On 18 December 1955 Abileah reported on a letter to WRI the application he had made to the National Insurance office: "I am an objector to military service for reasons of conscience and as such have not served (and will not serve in the future) in the reserve forces in the Israel Army. (...) I cannot support as a matter of principle, a financial institution which is financing directly the army and therefore ask you to release me from payment to your cash but thereagainst oblige me to pay it to another institution (social or national). (...) Please consider my application seriously and do not compel me to act against my deep belief and conviction that war (be it war of defence or offensive), preparations for war and anything connected with it, is a crime against humanity." 319, WRI, IISH. See also the letter of reply, dated 1 November 1955 in Ibid.

by the AFSC and UNESCO.⁹⁰ COs regularly mobilized for Prisoners' of Peace Day (1 December), established by WRI in support of war resisters imprisoned all over the world.⁹¹ Abileah was in contact with the already mentioned WILPF headed by Lola Wegner.⁹² Many COs participated in joint strikes and demonstrations with Palestinian Israelis: these were against unemployment, organized by the Communist party, as in Nazareth in 1950. Or they could be demonstrations for peace, as in the case of the march that took place in Tel Aviv on 11 March 1950 following the 1st Israel Congress for Peace “organized by the Mapam (left wing of the Labor Party) and the Communists.”⁹³ It had been attended by more than 5000 “Arabs and Jews from all parts of Israel” with “all Arab towns and villages (...) represented.”

As mentioned above, most CO were in favor of binationalism. Their meetings often saw the participation of “Arab friends”⁹⁴ and contacts with ‘Thud’ were constant; Nathan Chofshi was associated editor of *Ner*; Bahais were also in contact with WRI;⁹⁵ some references are found also to the ‘World Peace Brigades’ and to the ‘Partisans of Peace,’ the two organizations connected to WRI through the ‘International Liaison Committee of Organisations for Peace’ (ILCOP, est. 1949).⁹⁶

These are just few examples of the national and international networks, and of individual and collective stands, that placed these early COs apart from the generally nationalistic mainstream in Israel in the 1950s, both considering the political scene and the population’s attitudes. As we shall see below, an international(ist) horizon was essential for many COs to find some respite from isolation and, at times, ostracism.

⁹⁰ WRI-ISRAEL Section, *Report to the WRI triennial conference*. See letter from Meir Rubenstein to Grace M. Beaton, WRI, 321, WRI, IISH; See also American Friends Service Committee – Israel Unit, Patricia Hunt, *Final Report of Kfar Vitkin Work Camp* (August 1 to September 15, 1952), f. ‘Shimshon Marcus’, 321, WRI, IISH.

⁹¹ See just for a few examples up to 1961, *As appears in WR [The War Resister]*, [Haifa, 28 April 1957]; letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 9 February 1958; letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 13 December 1958; WRI ISRAEL section, *Report of the activity covering the period 1.5.57-31.8.60*, Haifa, 30 August 1960; letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 3 November 1960; letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 7 October 1961; letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 21 November 1961; letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 13 December 1961, all in 319, WRI, IISH; Yeshayahu Toma Shik, *WRI meeting on Prisoners’ Day*, f. ‘Yehashayahu Toma Sjik 1962-77’, 321, WRI, IISH.

⁹² Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 13 February 1960, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁹³ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 17 April 1950 and 24 April 1950, 319, WRI, IISH. See the classic Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); see also the essay by Giulia Daniele in this issue, pp. 1-21.

⁹⁴ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 26 December 1953, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁹⁵ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, Haifa, 9 February 1958, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁹⁶ www.santibox.ch/Peace/Peacemaking.htm#5.%20A%20New%20Start, accessed 9 June 2013.

Beyond the military. Other consequences of being a CO

Being a CO in Israel in the 1950s felt claustrophobic, even only considering the non-military consequences. In 1954 «Haaretz» reported:

The Department of Defence have (sic) recently refused the grant of exit permits to two conscientious objectors who intended to go abroad in order to work in international work camps sponsored by the Quakers. The University refused to accept an application from a young CO who was not in possession of army papers. Government departments and various institutions do not accept COs for work.⁹⁷

Denial of exit permits was fairly common; in case of COs, it hindered their attendance to international meetings, SCI or AFSC working camps, the WRI international conferences, or their work or study specialization abroad, just to mention a few examples. Many COs encountered this prohibition, which made it difficult for them to be active in that international(ist) movement of which they felt part, even if from afar. In 1955 Abileah explained how the granting of exit visas worked in Israel:

Any man or woman in military age has to submit his or her army booklet or release while applying for an exit permit. (...) As most of conscientious objections have no army booklet at all (and also no official exemption) no application for an exit permit is accepted from such members of our group. Young people who are not pacifists are denied permission to leave the country according to need and urgency of their services in the army. Ration booklets are issued for food only. They are not permanent and are renewed to the population at irregular periods of time (every one or two years). Last time the procedure was like for exit permits. Every person liable for army service had to present his army booklet.⁹⁸

These words highlighted the centrality of the army in Israel, as an institution regulating individuals' study, travel, work and food distribution, issues that Abileah defined "civil rights." Such centrality emerges more clearly looking, only briefly for reasons of space, at three examples; they sum up some of the questions mentioned thus far. Among them, how the state of Israel scored in comparative perspective with other countries in its dealing with COs.

Together with Zichrony, Yitzhak Weiss (Halivni) belonged to the new generation of Israeli-born COs that the authorities were not ready to let go

⁹⁷ [n.a.], "Difficulties to Conscientious Objectors," *Haaretz*, 14 September 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

⁹⁸ Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 18 December 1955, 319, WRI, IISH.

unchallenged.⁹⁹ In 1954 Weiss was unemployed, as it had proven difficult to “find work in any institution factory or government office without army certificates” and thus he could not pay his own defense.¹⁰⁰ In 1955 he had to struggle for admission at the Hebrew University (HU) “because of his status as a CO” and three years later his permission to specialize at the University of London was withheld for the same reason.¹⁰¹ Once admitted to the HU, he did not receive a food ration booklet without presenting papers from the army.¹⁰² In 1953 Chofshi had already denounced how distribution of food rations had been made dependent on the fulfillment of military duties, as an attempt of the government to pressure COs.¹⁰³ The second case is that of Meir Rubinstein who, in 1954, wrote a first hand account of his experience. His testimony shows the frustration of a CO who wanted to maintain an international(ist) personal and political perspective:

I have left no stone unturned; have spared no time, no effort, no money – yet my travel documents are not ready. (...). Now it is certain that I will be unable to attend the conference and, as to the participation in work camp abroad, the prospects are not favourable either. I had agreed to the formalities of registration and medical examination, but refused to swear the oath of allegiance to the army, even in its modified form especially arranged to meet the demands of a CO in their view; the consequence, no exit permit. The ministry of education, as well as the ministry of foreign affairs, both in some ways concerned with the work camps, were unfriendly and declined to be helpful. I have the impression (...) that the officials of both ministries do not favour an independent work camp movement where people like we (sic) are active to prove the sincerity of our convictions, to promote Arab-Jewish friendship and where young people come in touch with us and might learn about peace in the ways by which it will be achieved as we think.¹⁰⁴

In 1953 the case of Michele (Michael) Tagliacozzo came up. A Roman Jew who had survived the Nazi raid of October 1943, he had joined the Zionist Italian youth movement *Hechalutz* after the war. Once in Israel, he settled in a religious *kibbutz*. In 1953 we find him among COs threatened of expulsion with his family of three from the religious *kibbutz* where they lived “if he does

⁹⁹ Letter from J. Abileah to WRI, Haifa 26 March 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from J. Abileah to WRI, Haifa 30 August 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

¹⁰¹ *Extract from letter from Joseph Abileah dated 10.5.58*, 319, WRI, IISH.

¹⁰² Letter from Joseph Abileah to WRI, 25 December 1954, 319, WRI, IISH.

¹⁰³ Letter from Nathan Chofshi to WRI, 19 August 1953, 320, WRI, IISH. On the austerity regime imposed by the government in April 1949 and its social and political effects throughout the 1950s see, Orit Rozin, *The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel. A Challenge to Collectivism*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Meir Rubinstein to Grace Beaton, WRI, 20 July 1954, 320, WRI, IISH. See also the previous letter of 20 June 1954, *Ibid*.

not change his views.” His story is not particularly different from that of other COs; however, the correspondence about him shows that, in a comparative perspective, the headquarters of WRI considered Israel to be a better place for a war resister than others, in this case of Italy, where Tagliacozzo was apparently planning to return:

I note you say Michael Tagliacuzzo (sic) intends to immigrate to Italy, from whence he comes, but surely he will confront greater difficulties in Italy than in Israel. You of course know the feelings against war resisters in Italy, where there is no kind of recognition of conscientious objection, and where if a man refuses, the first sentence is usually a year, and he is called up again for military service as soon as the first prison sentence has been completed. I think our friend should be told this.¹⁰⁵

Conclusions

In 1962 Avner Falk, the pacifist mentioned in opening, described Israel as “a terribly militaristic country” turned into a “nation of soldiers out of an essentially peaceful and harmless (though much-harmed) Jewry in European, African and Asian exile.”¹⁰⁶ He also told how difficult it was to hold on to the principles of Gandhi, Tolstoy, Bertrand Russell and Albert Schweitzer, whose words appeared to fall on deaf ears in Israel in the 1950s.

Israeli COs in general, and the few cases that I could present here, not only objected to conscription; they had a more articulated socio-political outlook that was deeply critical of the mainstream’s views. Most of all, they cultivated the image of humanity as a family/close knit community of brothers sharing the same (humanistic) values and thus proposed an idea of citizenship that was not based on ethnical homogeneity. For this reason too, their cultural and political horizon was that of the internationalist organizations, conferences, peace camps, an international reality that was developing after World war two in Europe and elsewhere.

If we were to draw a portrait of WRII in the 1950s we would see an organization that operated in circles: a very active core, a cohesive membership, a group of sympathizers, and many subscribers to the publications that WRI regularly sent over. There were also some women, but their number was small. In the 1950s – and for two other decades at least, members of WRII were total/absolute objectors. Most of them refused draft, to wear a uniform while doing alternative civil service, to carry and use arms, army pay and army food,

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Grace Benton to Joseph Abileah, 4 March 1953, 319, WRI, IISH. The law (n. 772, Marcora Law) allowing and regulating conscientious objection was approved on 15 December 1972. See www.caritasitaliana.it/caritasitaliana/allegati/524/Legge%20772-72.pdf, accessed 11 June 2013. Before this date conscientious objection equalled draft dodging or desertion. See Alberto Albesano, *Storia dell’obiezione di coscienza in Italia*.

¹⁰⁶ A. Falk, *Conflicts of an Israeli Pacifist*, September 1962, 320, WRI, IISH.

even in prison. If doing alternative civil service, some of them refused to sleep in army buildings. Several of them refused to serve in medical corps (non-combatant service), an oft-offered compromise between duty to serve and conscientious objection. Some of them were vegetarian and spoke/corresponded in Esperanto. Others were *Sboab* survivors, or their children.

Overall, WRII remained a rather isolated group with a limited political impact. Still, its purpose had not been to fight a battle of principle, to oppose nationalism/Zionism as such, or to convince others to join. This association defended those who objected, and tried to negotiate the best possible conditions that would allow them to assert their stand as an individual civil right, and thus not go to jail. In this respect, it responded to one of the features expected from civil society, i.e. negotiating with the state for the transformation of political reality.

The situation of Israel's first CO was difficult, but it appeared to be better than that of others elsewhere, as WRI in London often remarked; and even if such attitude changed over time when numbers increased, such initial tolerance, especially if compared to other national cases, should be noted.

In their study on comparative conscientious objection, historian Charles Moskos and sociologist John Chambers identified three stages in the evolving relations between war resistance, military service and the state. In stage one (pre-industrial, early modern society) the state grants official recognition to conscientious objection, limiting such recognition to the “churches that came out of the Protestant Reformation.” At this stage, peace churches hold the leadership of COs movements, and the state grants the right to serve in non-combatant capacity as a compromise. Stage two belongs to industrial, late modern Western societies: the state accepts religiously based objection as a criterion, and alternative civilian service under military aegis is offered to COs. A change in the quality and quantity of conscientious objection occurs in the transition between stage two and three, which is characteristic of post-modern and post-industrial Western societies: the leadership of the movement for conscientious objection now includes secular groups, objection is not based on religious grounds, selective conscientious objection is contemplated, numbers of objectors swell, and the state offers civilian service under a civilian aegis.¹⁰⁷

Considering Israel's COs in the 1950s – even if only through the sources of their only association – we find ourselves in stage two, with some overlap into stage three. In the objection and leadership of Chofshi, Abileah, Jarus(lawsky) and others there was a religious element that this first generation tried to pass on, without success. Chofshi did not miss an opportunity to quote from the holy texts to explain his stand. So did Bruenner, when he discussed issues of citizenship law. Despite this initial religious overtone, the WRII in the 1950s was, and remained, secular.

¹⁰⁷ Moskos and Whiteclay Chambers II, *Conscientious Objection*: esp. from p. 197.

As for the state of Israel, it never recognized conscientious objection as an individual right by law. However, at the time, it recognized a broader criterion than religious objection only; it did not set up an alternative civil service, but it demanded either non-combatant (military) or civil (non-military) duties from COs, obtaining very different reactions. Provided objection had been declared before conscription, it offered non-combatant duty to be performed under military aegis, which many of Israeli COs still refused; only after substantial mobilization, did the state authorities offer civil service, as the Zichrony case shows. Not offering male COs alternative civil service to be performed under civilian aegis, the state of Israel had not at the time - and has not today - passed the threshold between stage two and three, despite having well entered a post-industrial, a post-modern, and being in long transition towards a post-Zionist phase.¹⁰⁸ On the contrary, several NGOs of Israeli COs crossed this very same threshold in the 1980s, for example upholding the right to selective conscientious objection, which also led to a swelling in their numbers. However, this part of the history of conscientious objection and war resistance in Israel will be told elsewhere.

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¹⁰⁸ Laurence J. Silberstein, *The Post-Zionist Debates. Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).