

## Joseph Heller. The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics and Terror, 1940-1949. London: Frank Cass, 1995.

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## **Book Reviews**

**Joseph Heller.** *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics and Terror, 1940-1949.* London: Frank Cass, 1995.

Interest in the history of Israel's political right-wing seems to have been limited in the early days of the Jewish state. The number of studies dealing with the Revisionist movement and the groups which emerged from it increased significantly after the right-wing Likud Party under Menachem Begin came to power in 1977. Surprisingly, however, even then the history of the radical right-wing paramilitary groups such as the IZL (Irgun) and the more radical Stern Gang were dealt with in a biased and cursory manner. This was particularly true when the historians were sympathetic to the ideology of Labor Zionism. It was quite easy to lose one's sense of objectivity when dealing with an issue which remained emotionally charged for many Israelis. Therefore, an objective book dealing with the history of the Stern Gang is a welcome addition to the literature on the topic, and Joseph Heller, a professor of International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has proven himself equal to the task.

Initially written in Hebrew, this book is a first-rate and unbiased account of the history of the Stern Gang. With an impressive array of primary source material, written mostly in Hebrew and English and including minutes, letters, pamphlets, memoirs and books, Heller traces the origins of the Stern Gang and explains the metamorphosis of its ideology from its early days in the cradle of the Revisionist movement led by Vladimir Jabotinsky, until its transformation into the feeble Fighters' Party and its eventual dissolution shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel.

With consummate skill, the author describes the origins of the movement, its platform and its goals throughout the entire period. The evolution of the Stern Gang's organization and the changes in its world view are analyzed by demonstrating the impact of the main events in Palestine on the ideological transformation of the group's leaders. Heller followed the ideological development of the Stern Gang with remarkable care and sensitivity. The impact of both domestic and foreign developments on the Stern Gang are analyzed and the Gang's reaction to them are provided in details not available elsewhere. Heller presents an in-depth analysis of the views of the group's illustrious leaders. The ideas of its founders and organizing figures, such as Abraham Stern, Abba Achimeir, Yonathan Ratosh, Israel Eldad, Nathan Yellin Mor, Yitzhak Shamir and others, are carefully and meticulously analyzed. An interesting analysis of these leaders and the ideological conflicts among them is provided with the minute details. The author's careful analysis sheds light not only on the evolution of this group at every stage of its development, but also on other groups which held similar or conflicting ideologies. Heller's analysis is objective and clearly superior to any other analysis on the topic. It complements Ya'acov Shavit's work on the origins of the Revisionist movement.

The value of the work is not limited to insights into the ideological transformation of the Stern Gang. It provides answers to questions which have long puzzled students of the Israeli right-wing. The ideology of the Stern Gang and its ever changing platform appear light years away from the philosophy of the Revisionist movement and from Jabotinsky's original teachings. The differences between the IZL and the Stern Gang, which have long confused many observers, are clearly and skillfully explained. In order to explain the difference between these groups, the author analyzes their outlook regarding the teaching of their great mentor Jabotinsky, their attitude toward Great Britain and their socio-economic views.

Particularly enigmatic questions, such as the Stern Gang's adoption of a National Bolshevik platform, are clarified. It was indeed difficult to understand how the Stern Gang, whose original ideas were anchored in maximalist Revisionism, sought to fuse nationalism and communism. Heller argues that the adoption of such a platform was a calculated move by the Gang's members who felt compelled to forge a separate identity in order to justify their existence as an independent unit, to avoid being absorbed by the IZL and to escape persecution by the left-wing organs of the Jewish community. Furthermore, he argues that the adoption of this odd platform was not a result of opportunism, but a sincere attempt to fashion a viable ideology. This attempt, he argues, failed because there was no agreement among the Gang's leaders regarding the application of this doctrine or its viability, and because the Israeli public found the contradiction between the group's radical nationalism and its newly adopted communist platform too confusing. At every stage of the Gang's evolution, the author manages to masterfully explain the difference between its various leaders and their world views.

The author's analysis sheds light on the dissension within the Stern Group, and its relations with the IZL and the Labor Zionist leadership. In this account, the leaders of the Stern Group appear more than just pragmatic leaders, but also as astute politicians. The author does not fail to criticize their political acumen whenever necessary. Heller refutes the Stern Gang's claim that its actions were responsible for evicting the British from Palestine, arguing that the British Empire was in any case in the process of withdrawal due to economic weakness. Heller throws light on the Stern Gang's moves to make alliances with Italy and Germany prior to the Holocaust. Though informative, this aspect of Heller's account is by no means complete. The author provided only a few details regarding the response of these powers to the Stern Gang's suggested collaboration. The author's use of British sources appear to be limited. There is little reference to British and Arab attitudes toward the Stern Gang. These omissions, notwithstanding, the book is a major contribution to a topic that should have long been researched. The author should be complimented for his achievement.

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