From Ideology to Practice: Shaping of Hebrew Education in Palestine, 1890-1918

The period from the 1880s to the outset of World War I Ottoman-Palestine saw waves of Jewish nationalist immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, who referred to themselves as ‘Hebrew’ settlers. This ‘Hebrew’ émigré came in contrast to the traditional Jewish settlers, who until this time had seen dwelling in the holy land primarily in the context of theological pursuit. The new immigrants aspired to shape Jewish life around themes of national revival, from settlement and cultivation of land to national (Hebrew) language revitalization. Some more radical immigrants sought a cultural and political rebirth of the Jewish people in Palestine, the historic national fatherland. This research aims to interrogate the relationship between the intellectual-cultural debate among some of the forefathers of this endeavour, Ahad Haam, M. Y. Berdyczewski and Y. H. Brenner, and fledgling national education, making its first steps in establishing institutions, curricula and praxis. Although much of the contemporary elite milieu has been extensively studied, the direct and indirect influence of intellectual discourse on the shaping of the educational system has not yet been established. Many studies on the emergence of nationally oriented education describe such processes throughout Europe and the Western civilization in the 19th century, however these took place usually within the context of some form of statehood or other existing national institutions. Hebrew education in Palestine developed without such a political, economic or cultural centre, and therefore by virtue of its difference constitutes an important case study, which may shed fresh light on the development of national education systems. A significant possibility is that the lack of a centre may have lent a greater sense of empowerment, creativity and leadership to educators, placing them at the forefront of the national enterprise, and allowing them to be more receptive to, and influenced by, the diverse intellectual and cultural world surrounding them.