

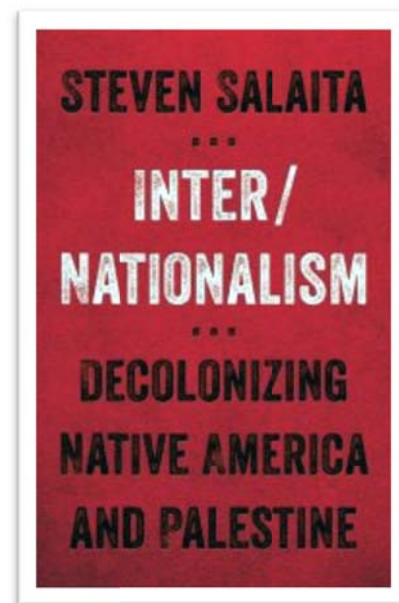
Fabricating Zionist Intentions

by Diana Muir

Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine. By Steven Salaita. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 208 pp. \$80.50 (\$22.95, paper).

Salaita, currently at the American University of Beirut, attained celebrity within the anti-Israel Left in 2014 when the University of Illinois withdrew its offer of a tenured position after learning of his intemperate, anti-Israel tweets. Based on his 2006 *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan*, in which he asserted that Zionism modeled its behaviors on the dispossession of Native Americans during the settlement of the United States, Salaita had been considered for a position there in Native American Studies.

His more recent book, *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* is a return to the well, doubling down with fact-challenged assertions that the “conquest of America ... is a geography in which numerous early Zionists found inspiration.” This time, Salaita goes after Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s seminal 1923 essay, “The Iron Wall” (See side bar, page 2) Jabotinsky, founder of the Revisionist Zionist movement (and thus ideological father to Menachem Begin and the Likud) was indeed an important Zionist figure though one whose importance was eclipsed by David Ben-Gurion and the Labor movement for much of



Israel’s pre- and post-independence years.

A scholar arguing that Jabotinsky based his attitude toward Arabs on the history of the American frontier would be expected to offer evidence of Jabotinsky’s interest in American Indians. After all, by 1923, Jabotinsky had a 20-year career as a journalist and speaker. But Salaita produces none. Jabotinsky’s long-standing advocacy for Jewish self-defense is well-documented; his interest in or knowledge of the American frontier is not. Jabotinsky exhibits only the most cursory familiarity with the people or history of the United States, Papua New Guinea, or the other peoples and places he briefly mentions in “The Iron Wall” when he

argues that there is “no instance of a country settled with the consent of those born there” in the entire history of the world.

How does such a statement morph into modeling cowboys versus Indians behavior? Salaita accurately describes Jabotinsky’s understanding of Native Americans as “attenuated” but then asserts that

the militia Jabotinsky founded was based on the stark realism of Native American resistance. He knew how the Palestinians would react to Zionism because he saw how Natives reacted to the European settlement he endeavored to rejuvenate.

The first job of a historian should be to check the dates. If he had, Salaita would have observed that Jabotinsky did not need to envision “how the Palestinians would react to Zionism” since by 1923, the year he published “The Iron Wall,” he had witnessed deadly anti-Jewish riots in Jerusalem (1920) and Jaffa (1921) and numerous attacks on Jewish farming communities in the countryside.

Even a cursory look at Jabotinsky’s career shows him arguing for muscular Jewish behaviors and a call to self-defense as early as the Russian pogroms in 1903-06. Jabotinsky had been advocating Jewish self-defense for decades when, in 1923, he made some passing references to American Indians in his essay before declaring that there “will always be *two* nations in Palestine—which is good enough for me, provided the Jews become the majority.”

Allowing his personal perspectives to get the better of him, Salaita describes Jabotinsky’s essay as “consummately dishonest,” accusing him of using “a rhetorical flourish to conceal an ethno-nationalism with no serious intention of coexistence.” But Jabotinsky’s actual text is all about the necessity of self-defense: It is the classic “good fences

Excerpted from
“The Iron Wall (We and the Arabs)”
by Vladimir Jabotinsky¹

... The author of these lines is considered to be an enemy of the Arabs, a proponent of their expulsion, etc. This is not true....

My political relationship is characterized by two principles. First: the expulsion of the Arabs from Palestine is absolutely impossible in any form. There will always be two nations in Palestine—which is good enough for me, provided the Jews become the majority. Second: I am proud to have been a member of that group which formulated the Helsingfors Program. We formulated it, not only for Jews, but for all peoples, and its basis is the equality of all nations.

I am prepared to swear, for us and our descendants, that we will never destroy this equality, and we will never attempt to expel or oppress the Arabs. Our credo, as the reader can see, is completely peaceful. But it is absolutely another matter if it will be possible to achieve our peaceful aims through peaceful means. This depends, not on our relationship with the Arabs, but exclusively on the Arabs' relationship to Zionism....

As long as there is a spark of hope that they can get rid of us, they will not sell these hopes, not for any kind of sweet words or tasty morsels, because they are not a rabble but a nation, perhaps somewhat tattered, but still living. A living people makes such enormous concessions on such fateful questions only when there is no hope left. Only when not a single breach is visible in the iron wall, only then do extreme groups lose their sway, and influence transfers to moderate groups. Only then would these moderate groups come to us with proposals for mutual concessions. And only then will moderates offer suggestions for compromise on practical questions like a guarantee against expulsion, or equality and national autonomy.

¹ *The Jewish Herald* (S. Africa), [Nov. 26, 1937](#).

make good neighbors” argument. He argued that Zionist communities could survive only if defended by an “iron wall” of military, political, and economic strength because only when “there is not a single breach in the iron wall ... will [Palestinian Arabs] start honest negotiations with us” that can lead to the two peoples being “able to peacefully live together like good neighbors.”

Misrepresenting Jabotinsky would be bad enough for any serious scholar, but Salaita’s entire argument—and its tenuous link to the decolonization movement—depends on his view that the concept of an Israel “dating to antiquity” goes “against available historical evidence.” He supports this fringe assertion—which flies in the face of enormous archaeological and historical evidence—with three wholly inadequate sources: Eyal Weizman’s *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*¹ a book about contemporary Israeli architecture and urban planning; Shlomo Sand’s notoriously unreliable *The Invention of the Jewish People*;² and *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*³ by Keith W. Whitelam, a British academic, who accuses his colleagues of participating in a Zionist conspiracy to “silence” Palestinian history by calling the Amorites, Moabites, Israelites, and other ancient peoples by the names used in antiquity rather than “Palestinian.”

Salaita also veers into conspiracy theory and innuendo when discussing the boycott-Israel movement. Without specific citations, he reports on pro-Israel

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“organizations that maintain dossiers on pro-Palestine activists ... [and] work closely with surveillance agencies” while pro-Israel campus activists “are well-funded by outside interests” and “take their cues from on high.” Without offering evidence, he holds that

Zionist pressure has long affected hiring decisions, curricula ... tenure and promotion reviews within academia. Much of this activity happens behind the scene [*sic*].

Zionism is even joined in this “repressive activity” by “hundreds of other forces.” Salaita’s agenda does not stop with support for intellectual attacks on the Jewish State. He speaks approvingly of Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon’s assertion that decolonization “can only occur through physical resistance” to “expunge ... a foreign occupier from one’s ancestral land.” Salaita denies that targeting the Jewish State for destruction is anti-Semitic; such characterizations are, he claims, “insidious.”

Salaita has built his book on an incorrect paradigm. The conceptual gaps between the settler colonialism of great empires and the Zionist experience are almost as wide as the gap between his assertions and the evidence he cites.

Diana Muir is the author of *Reflections in Bullough's Pond: Economy and Ecosystem in New England* (University Press of New England, 2000).



¹ London and New York: Verso, 2012.

² *Matai ve-Eich Humtsa Ha'am Hayehudi* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008).

³ London: Routledge, 1997.

