

PINHAS RUTENBERG'S INITIATIVE TOWARDS THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF JEWISH BATTALIONS AT THE
BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR I

by Mattityahu Mintz

Jewish and Zionist historiography has always woven the story of the Jewish battalions in World War I around the personality of Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Yet Pinhas Rutenberg's role in promoting the idea is of considerable interest.

As early as August 1914 Rutenberg conceived a programme based on two assumptions: 1) that an Allied victory was of vital importance to democracy and socialism; 2) that wartime circumstances must be utilized for the promotion of Jewish national interests, chiefly by creating a basis for negotiations between Jewish representatives and the Allied Powers through the enlistment of Jewish volunteers to fight on the Allied side.

A study of the relevant files in the archive of the Paris branch of the Russian Okhrana revealed – rather unexpectedly – that Rutenberg's proposal must be seen in the context of his ongoing

ties with the Russian Social Revolutionaries. The Okhrana documents indicate that Rutenberg's activity in August–September 1914 was closely coordinated with his party colleagues, who supported the policy of defending Russia and whose international connections facilitated Rutenberg's activity on behalf of the Jews. Rutenberg at the same time presented a memorandum on behalf of the Social Revolutionaries in which he set out to define the framework for discussions between his party and the Allies with regard to the future Russian regime. The author assumes that the interest in an Allied victory brought forth the thought that it was impossible to reduce the Jews' hostility towards Russia and their growing sympathy for Germany without involving a direct Jewish interest in the outcome of the war. In addition, there was the problem of Russian Jews in Allied and neutral countries who refused to serve in the Russian army. A similar sentiment prevailed among Russian *émigrés* in the West, for whom the establishment of Russian units for service on the western front was being considered. A like solution for the Russian Jews naturally came to mind, leading to the idea that their enlistment might be undertaken on condition that it be carried out as part and parcel of a general understanding between the Allied Powers and official representatives of the Jewish people.

The author traces Rutenberg's efforts to promote his ideas, his diplomatic contacts and the circumstances underlying the plan's weakness, as well as Rutenberg's reasoning for the inclusion of Jabotinsky in the initiating team.