

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Henry Near** . *The Kibbutz Movement: A History*. Volume II: <cite>Crisis and Achievement 1939-1995</cite>. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. London/Portland, Oregon: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997. xii + 418 pp. Tables, appendices, map, glossary, references, and index. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 1-874774-06-4.

Reviewed by Alan F. Benjamin, Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.  
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This book examines "the kibbutz movement," a relatively amorphous designation, never defined precisely by the author. It includes kibbutzim (plural for kibbutz), kibbutznikim (members of kibbutzim), and those affiliated with or inspired by kibbutz ideologies -- many of whom were in youth movements. They reside in the Yishuv (the pre-State Jewish settlement in Palestine), in the State of Israel, and in the Jewish Diaspora. Primarily, however, Near is concerned with a variety of formal organizations through which individual kibbutzim are planned, coordinated, and nurtured, and through which they act in concert in their articulations with non-kibbutz institutions.

In complex and rich discussions -- that draw on, but scantily report archival material -- Near presents crucial questions that those who have been involved with the kibbutz movement have been forced to consider. Is the kibbutz movement central or ancillary to the Zionist movement? If central, is its purpose to serve the Jewish people as needed or to bring democratic socialism to Jews? If the kibbutz movement is ancillary to Zionism -- whether always or only recently -- then what is the purpose of living on a kibbutz? In addition, should kibbutz resources be deployed in consumption and lifestyle improvements, or toward a greater mission; and, if toward a mission, then what should that be?

Near's focus is on patterns in the kibbutz movement that transcend individual kibbutzim and individual kibbutz leaders. Most of the chapters are devoted to a specific "crisis," often one that illustrates an aspect in the patterns of kibbutz articulation with the non-kibbutz world. The major points of articulation discussed are the role of the kibbutz movement in the following areas: defense of Jewish settlement and of the State of Israel, the Holocaust, Jewish immigration and settlement, and

State and Yishuv political parties and debates. In addition, significant attention is paid to political-ideological processes and to social-economic-settlement trends within the kibbutz movement. Kibbutzim, in retrospect, primarily were a means for Jewish settlement of Palestine, and served the aims of Zionism in whatever task was most critical at the time.

Near generally portrays the kibbutz movement as having achieved from little to significant, and partial, success in fulfilling its goals. This is not surprising if one considers the variety and extent of the tasks the kibbutz movement set out to achieve, especially in light of its continuing shortages of manpower and capital. With the decline of their military and settlement roles since the 1950s -- accelerated by the Likud's rise to power in the elections of 1977 -- the kibbutz movement has lost much of its shared purpose. Individual kibbutzim and the kibbutz movement respond to this crisis of purpose in a variety of ways. Second and third generation children now are crucial in meeting manpower requirements essential for survival; and, participating in a "communal experience" currently seems to motivate people to remain kibbutznikim.

Near presents the kibbutz movement as a product of its time, place, and circumstances. The kibbutz movement cannot be understood outside of larger historical processes among Jews and in the world. This point is well demonstrated in the text, and reveals a central disappointment that the kibbutz movement was shaped by the outside world more than it shaped the State of Israel. For example, Ben-Gurion's disbanding of the Palmach in November 1948, a complex issue that is discussed in detail, reflects a key dilemma for the kibbutz movement. The Palmach was a military organization that, like kibbutzim, was voluntary and elite. It inherently clashed with the national

interests of the nascent State of Israel, with what Near terms "mamlachtiut" or sovereignty of the state.

Another instance of external forces affecting everyday life in the kibbutz movement was the split of the Ichud from the Kibbutz Me'uchad movement in 1951. Cold War ideologies and conflict inspired though were not entirely responsible for this passionate, dramatic event -- in Ein Harod tensions became so high that barbed wire was erected to divide the kibbutz. Prior to the split, classroom curricula, for example, became a site of conflict in the kibbutz movement: should children be taught to serve the class struggle or to serve the Jewish people? There is little sense of everyday life on a kibbutz in this volume, but the experience of this split for ordinary kibbutznikim is conveyed powerfully.

Near's general tone is sympathetic to the kibbutz movement -- he is a member of a kibbutz, a professor at a college affiliated historically with the kibbutz movement, and has an impressive resume of scholarly publications about kibbutzim -- but he is not a propagandist for kibbutz achievements.

This volume concentrates on the years 1939 through 1977 and adds a twelfth chapter on developments from 1977 to 1995. Primarily organized in chronological order, the first eight chapters cover 1939-1954, two chapters discuss 1954-1977, and chapter 11 reviews the major issues ("crises") of the first 70 years of the kibbutz movement. Volume I looked at the origins of the kibbutz movement, from 1909-1939. Although often cited in the text, it is not included in the references.

The writing is accessible and reasonably taut. As a narrative, it should keep readers intrigued. Sub-headings clearly mark the volume's organization. These qualities, combined with the overviews in each chapter, make the volume useful for novices and for those moderately familiar with the topic. However, the many political parties and organizations mentioned throughout the text, with little description except in the glossary, will make the text somewhat difficult to follow for those completely unfamiliar with the kibbutz movement.

Although the perspective and the range of topics addressed are broad, this is a history in a fairly traditional sense. More attention is paid to institutions than to experience, to leaders than to

ordinary people, to economic organization than to social relations of gender or power, and to overall patterns rather than to individual kibbutzim. Palestinian Arabs are discussed from the perspective of the kibbutz movement -- as neighbors, enemies, victims, and so on.

Within these parameters, the strength of this volume is the way in which it places the trends and conflicts within the kibbutz movement and between the kibbutz movement and the Jewish world into perspective. This is Near's main task, and he does a fine job of it.

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