

## Professor's Research Takes Him to Six "Promised Lands" by Janette Ballard



Imagine a Jewish homeland outside of the Middle East—in a place like Kenya, Tasmania or even New York. Adam Rovner did just that as he researched expeditions from early 20<sup>th</sup> century "Territorialism," a Jewish political movement to create a homeland for persecuted Jews, for his new book, *In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands Before Israel*.

Rovner's research took him to upstate New York, Kenya, Madagascar, Angola, Tasmania and Suriname. *In the Shadow of Zion* delves into the true stories of these six "promised lands" for a Jewish national home that never came to fruition.

"Instead of focusing on the one success—the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948—my book details the failures to forge a territorial entity for the Jewish people beyond the borders of the biblical land of Israel," said Rovner, associate professor of English and Jewish literature.

Rovner was first drawn to the stories of the writers and dreamers who pursued the Territorialist cause while working on his dissertation in 2002.

"At the time I was writing about a Yiddish author named Rachmiel Bryks. He had published an essay in an obscure Territorialist periodical called *Freeland* which I found in the Library of Congress," he said.

In 2007, he set out to learn more about each of the proposed territories and the scientific expeditions sent to these mostly remote and often hostile locations.

"I conducted archival research in each of these places, and in Israel and England as well," he said. "But equally important was to follow in the footsteps of the expeditions the Territorialist organizations sent to each of these places."

"One of the biggest thrills was the ability to trace the route of the 1904-05 official Zionist Commission sent to what was then the western region of the British East African Protectorate, today Kenya," said Rovner. "A member of the Commission kept a detailed record of the geographical coordinates of each of their campsites, so I was able to track their progress across the area they explored—the Uasin Gishu Plateau."

In 2011, with the help of the University of Denver marketing and communications department, Rovner produced a short documentary on Jewish Territorialism, *No Land Without Heaven*. The film has been screened at exhibitions in New York, Paris and Tel Aviv.

A dual American-Israeli national, Rovner earned his MA in comparative literature from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and his PhD from Indiana University. He has taught at DU since 2008, and teaches courses in Hebrew literature and American Jewish immigrant literature. He is currently working on an article about the first modern atlas written in Hebrew, which dates to 1925.

“The co-editor of the atlas was author, journalist, and right-wing Jewish nationalist Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky. I’m interested in this atlas because it demonstrates how geography was a kind of imaginative literature that projected and reflected the national desires of a diasporic minority,” he said.

Rovner received a 2015-2016 Lady Davis Fellowship, in the department of English, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “The Fellowship will aid me as I research and write about Jabotinsky’s atlas. I’ll have the financial support to work in archives in Israel, and I’ll also benefit from the institutional framework of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem while I’m on my sabbatical next academic year.”

[photo: Rovner on a research trip to Angola]