

Hillel Kook, alias Peter Bergson, was a famous Revisionist Zionist and humanitarian activist. Born in Lithuania in 1915, he emigrated with his family to Palestine in 1924. Kook's father, Dov Kook, was a prominent Palestinian rabbi, and the family was intimately involved in Zionist politics. Kook himself joined the Haganah at the age of fifteen, and helped found the paramilitary Irgun a year later. He became a disciple of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, whose ideology of Revisionist Zionism helped inspire Irgun's creation. From 1938 to 1939 he worked in Poland, helping to organize Polish Jews for emigration to Palestine.

When war erupted, Kook relocated to the United States, adopted the nom-de-guerre Peter Bergson, and began to lobby for the creation of a Jewish Army as a necessary prerequisite for a Jewish state. Kook, now Bergson, and his circle soon became known for their flamboyant campaigning, which, over the years, included making speeches, organizing rallies, and lobbying politicians. The Bergson Group proved particularly adept at running newspaper ads. This upset much of the more conservative Zionist establishment, who believed Bergson's aggressive approach would exacerbate anti-Semitic sentiments in America. The Bergson Group did, however, maintain close relations with many other Zionist organizations, and drew the support of many prominent Jews and non-Jews alike.

Bergson's activities altered dramatically in late 1942, when he began hearing reports of the Nazis' systematic genocide against Jews. He and his group immediately dropped their Zionist agenda, which they acknowledged was politically hair-splitting, and focused instead on gaining support for the rescue of the Jews of Europe based on simple humanitarian compassion, a concern which Bergson called the 'lowest common denominator'. He formed the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe, a coalition of Jewish organizations including his own circle. His group's efforts were massive in scale, and they succeeded in enlisting widespread support from celebrities, politicians, and some Jewish leaders. The temporary abandonment of the Zionist agenda, however, further angered many other Jewish leaders—in particular, Rabbi Stephen Wise—who moved to obstruct many of the Bergson Group's efforts, again fearing anti-Semitic backlash. Bergson enlisted Ben Hecht, the prominent Jewish screenwriter and journalist, to collaborate on a dazzling newspaper advertisement campaign, and together the two staged a highly-attended pageant commemorating the loss of two million (thus far) European Jews.

Altogether, the Bergson Group was hugely successful in garnering publicity for the systematic extermination of Jews by the Nazis. It continued to lobby Congress and pressure Roosevelt into taking specific actions to halt the carnage, such as the bombing of gas chambers, the evacuation of Jews to Romania and Israel, and threats to Hitler. In the end, however, due to the inertia of the U.S. government and obstructionism of prominent Jewish leaders, the group proved unable to prevent the deaths of four million more Jews. The government maintained that the only way to save the Jews was to defeat Nazi Germany in battle; no other actions were taken.

Following the war, Bergson resumed his Revisionist Zionist activities, which included the transportation of Jewish immigrants to Palestine and arms shipments for the Palestine underground. Following its establishment in 1948, Bergson himself emigrated to Israel and changed his name back to Hillel Kook. He joined the Herut Party and served in the Knesset (Parliament). Disappointed in the new state's governance and attitudes, he left both Israeli politics and Israel in 1951, returning to the United States for nearly two decades. In 1968 he returned to Israel, settling for good in 1970, and lived in Tel Aviv until his death in 2001.