

*Olive Press*  
*Research Paper*

ISSUE 4  
FEBRUARY 2009



CHURCHILL AND THE JEWS:  
AN ASSESSMENT OF TWO RECENT STUDIES  
AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

*by Michael Eldridge*

# CHURCHILL AND THE JEWS: AN ASSESSMENT OF TWO RECENT STUDIES AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

*by Michael Eldridge*

Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – the replacement for the Olive Press Quarterly. This features articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ supporters or by interested parties.

Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.

## ‘The Faithful Friend of Zionism’

Among the many tributes paid to Churchill following his death in 1965 is one from Henry Sacher in the *Jewish Chronicle* which reads, ‘We Jews are under a special obligation to Churchill, the faithful friend of Zionism.’<sup>1</sup> Sacher was one of the British Zionists who had helped with the drafting of the Balfour Declaration nearly fifty years earlier. Martin Gilbert’s recent book, *Churchill and the Jews*, seeks to show how this accolade came to be deserved, tracing Churchill’s involvement with the Jews from his opposing the Aliens Bill of 1904 which made it harder for Jews escaping the pogroms in Russia to enter Britain, to his pleading as Leader of the Opposition in 1948 for the immediate recognition by Britain of the newly self-declared State of Israel. Martin Gilbert is the official biographer of Churchill and Professor of History at Oxford; a prolific writer, he has also written books on the Holocaust and is the author of one of the major histories of modern Israel.

But for many Jews Churchill proved a great disappointment and they hold that he did little to help them. The case to this effect is strongly argued by Michael Cohen, Professor of Bar Ilan University, whose 1985 book, also with the title *Churchill and the Jews*, was republished in a second edition in 2003. Gilbert includes Cohen’s book in his bibliography but otherwise simply ignores it. Where does the truth lie?

Churchill had close dealings with the Jews, in particular, in three periods: when as Colonial Secretary 1919–21 he had special responsibility for Palestine and the Middle East; in his role in opposing both the Peel Commission’s proposals in 1937 and the infamous White Paper of 1939; and during the Second World War as Prime Minister 1940–45.

## Churchill’s Record as Colonial Secretary

As Colonial Secretary in Lloyd George’s post-war Government, Churchill was charged with agreeing the terms of the Mandates for Palestine and the Middle East to be granted to Britain by the League of Nations. One significant step Churchill took was to separate the land east of the Jordan (now known as Jordan) from the rest of Palestine and to let the Emir Abdullah rule it in

---

1 Gilbert, 2007, p. 306.

Britain's name. For some Zionists at the time this was seen as a betrayal, for they believed that with irrigation this territory had great agricultural potential; they also saw it as part of the biblical land of Israel. But in fairness to Churchill, different and, many would argue, incompatible promises had been made to the Jews and Arabs respectively in the course of the War, and he believed, I think with good reason, that he was enabling Britain to honour the promises made to both groups. Further, not all Jews took this negative view. Some thirty years later, James de Rothschild, a leading British Jew, wrote to Churchill,

*... you laid the foundation of the Jewish state by separating Abdullah's kingdom from the rest of Palestine. Without this much opposed prophetic foresight there would not have been an Israel today.*<sup>2</sup>

The Lloyd George Government was of course committed to the Balfour Declaration, but it is worth noting that Balfour himself did not mind if some other state such as Belgium or the United States was given the Mandate for Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Initially Britain simply governed Palestine as an occupying power with a military administration, but this was soon to be replaced by a civil administration with Sir Herbert Samuel as the first High Commissioner. Samuel was himself Jewish and a moderate Zionist. Essentially some of the key British policies, for example, controlling the level of Jewish immigration, were developed in a pragmatic way under Samuel's leadership. However, Britain needed a Mandate from the League of Nations to rule Palestine lawfully and the terms of the Mandate were set out in the 1922 White Paper which the League subsequently endorsed. Although in later years Churchill was to make much of the 1922 White Paper as a commitment which he personally owned, Cohen very clearly shows that Churchill made no personal contribution to its drafting, and only accepted the Mandate with great reluctance and under pressure from Lloyd George. In fact on three separate occasions, in October 1919, June 1920 and June 1921, Churchill had written to Lloyd George arguing that the acquisition of these 'new provinces' would be a mistake. Typical is the

---

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, 2007, p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, 2003, p. 85.

last such letter, part of which reads,

*The only wise and safe course would be to take advantage of the postponement of the Mandates and resign them both and quit the two countries [Palestine and Mesopotamia] at the earliest possible moment, as the expense to which we shall be put will be wholly unwarrantable.*<sup>4</sup>

Though Gilbert does indicate briefly what he sees as Churchill's initial reluctance to accept the Mandate, he quickly passes over the matter; he does not tell us of these letters, though he must have been aware of them.<sup>5</sup>

When we come to the terms of the White Paper itself – these are the legal obligations which Britain by Parliamentary approval undertook to fulfil – there is much that fell short of Zionist aspirations. While its provisions affirmed that the Jewish community 'should know that it is in Palestine as of right and not on sufferance', they specifically dissociated Britain from such phrases as 'Palestine is to become as Jewish as England is English', and made quite clear that the development of a Jewish national home in Palestine is not to be 'the imposition of a Jewish nationality upon the inhabitants of Palestine as a whole'. The Balfour Declaration itself said nothing about the rate at which Jewish immigration should be allowed. The White Paper ruled,

*It is necessary that the Jewish community in Palestine be able to increase its numbers by immigration. This immigration cannot be so great in volume as to exceed whatever is the economic capacity of the country at the time to absorb new arrivals.*<sup>6</sup>

In 1921 there were 83,000 Jews living in Palestine; by the end of 1935 the number had become 355,000: this was the outcome of the policy set underway by Churchill's 1922 White Paper.

### **The Peel Commission**

1936 saw the beginning of what is now known as the Arab Revolt. This was a concerted insurrection, first taking the form of a general strike, followed by

---

4 Cohen, 2003, p. 96.

5 Gilbert, 2007, pp. 35 -36.

6 The provisions are well summarized by Tessler, p. 173.

the Arabs taking control of several important towns. It took the British three years to restore order completely, some 20,000 troops being tied down in the operation. Following the first phase of the rebellion, the Peel Commission was set up 'to ascertain the causes of the disturbances, to ascertain whether either the Arabs or the Jews have any legitimate grievances, and to make recommendations for their removal.' Lord Peel had been Secretary of State for India, and it is generally agreed that he and the Commission he chaired brought to their task an objective, impartial approach free from political pressures. Because Churchill was responsible for the 1922 White Paper under which Palestine was being administered, he was naturally called to give evidence. However, under questioning Churchill made some very anti-Arab statements, and he asked for his testimony to be excluded from the published report, which was done. Nevertheless his evidence was recorded and provides some valuable insights into his thinking about the Mandate.

Asked about the meaning and aim of the Jewish national home, Churchill indicated that if Jewish immigration, as controlled by the 'economic absorptive capacity' test, combined with natural increase, were to lead to a much larger Jewish population, 'that population should not in any way be restricted from reaching a majority position.' Indeed 'some day, far off in the future' he envisaged there being 'a great Jewish state numbered by millions'. Asked to clarify when this might be, Churchill replied, 'Over the generations or the centuries'. He was later asked whether this would not be an injustice to the Palestinian Arabs. Churchill protested, 'Why is it injustice because there is more work and more wealth for everybody? There is no injustice.'<sup>7</sup>

From his replies it may seem that Churchill was adopting the 'gradualist' form of Zionism associated with Weizmann, but by speaking of 'generations or centuries' to come, he may in fact have been doing little more than asserting Britain's right to hold the Mandate and control immigration indefinitely.

In the result the Peel Commission concluded that the conflict was 'inherent in the situation from the outset'. The Mandate had been founded in the belief of 'the conciliatory effect on the Palestinian Arabs of the material prosperity which Jewish immigration would bring to Palestine as a whole.

---

7 Gilbert, 2007, pp. 112-13.

That hope has not been justified, and we see no hope of its being justified in the future.’ Instead ‘an irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country.’ The Commission therefore recommended a two-state solution accompanied by a transfer of populations.<sup>8</sup>

When the Commission’s Report was debated in the Commons, Churchill spoke against it on the ground that it was against the spirit of Balfour. From now on Churchill was constantly to declare his commitment to the Balfour Declaration and his own 1922 White Paper, and to attack anything he saw as betraying such commitment. On the other hand Weizmann along with Ben Gurion for the Zionists were prepared to accept the Peel proposals even though the part of the land allocated to the Jews was quite small. They realised that once the Jews had a state of their own, expansion would come in due course as unlimited Jewish immigration would then become possible. ‘The Jews would be fools not to accept it, even if the land were the size of a table cloth’, declared Weizmann.<sup>9</sup>

### **The 1939 White Paper**

The Government did not accept the Peel proposals but instead appointed another Commission, the Woodhead Commission, to consider their feasibility, but their report too was not accepted. The matter returned to Parliament once more when the 1939 White Paper was debated. Britain was on the eve of war with Germany, and Neville Chamberlain was concerned about British strategic interests in the Middle East, including control of the Suez Canal, the oilfields in Iraq and the pipeline to Haifa. He frankly stated, ‘It is of importance to have the Moslem world with us. If we must offend one side, let us offend the Jews rather than the Arabs.’<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Macdonald, who had been appointed Colonial Secretary almost exactly a year before issuing the White Paper, was originally regarded by the Zionists as a friend, but he must have known that at a time of great peril for Britain he might have to take some, for him, distasteful and highly problematic actions. On being congratulated on his appointment,

---

8 For selections from the Peel Commission report, see Smith, pp. 161-63.

9 Morris, p. 138.

10 Cohen, 1978, p. 84.

he had declared ‘Within twelve months I shall be the most bitterly criticized Colonial Secretary in modern times.’<sup>11</sup> That proved to be the case.

The 1939 White Paper on the face of it took up a minority opinion in the Peel Commission’s report that had recommended a unitary bi-national state for Palestine. Yet in reality the White Paper served as a device to ensure a permanent Arab majority in Palestine. For the White Paper limited Jewish immigration to 75,000 in total over the next five years with an Arab veto allowed thereafter. Churchill, now a rebel Conservative backbencher, bitterly opposed the proposals in the Commons as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration, describing them as another act of appeasement, and asserting that even the Arabs would say, ‘They’re on the run again. This is another Munich.’ This was one of Churchill’s finest and most effective speeches, for, although the Government had a large majority and had no difficulty in gaining Commons approval, there were more than a hundred abstentions and the Labour MPs and a number of Conservatives voted against the White Paper. However, the unspoken sticking point for Churchill, as Cohen brings out, was not the limitation on the rate of immigration but the ending of such immigration for good after five years. After the vote MacDonald reported to Chamberlain, ‘He told me in the lobby that he would have supported us, if it hadn’t been for the Arab veto on Jewish immigration after five years.’<sup>12</sup>

## **The Second World War**

Following the outbreak of war, Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1939; later, in May 1940, he became Prime Minister of the Wartime Coalition Government. He was now in a much stronger position to help the Jews but many Zionists were very disappointed that he did so little for them. He tried to create a Jewish Brigade to serve with Allied forces but this was not achieved until towards the end of the war. Although he never personally accepted the 1939 White Paper, its provisions restricting Jewish immigration into Palestine remained law and were enforced.

Both Gilbert and Cohen discuss the interventions made by Churchill

---

11 Cohen, 1978, p. 85.

12 Cohen, 2003, p. 184.



in relation to ‘illegal’ Jewish immigration, that is, of Jews escaping from Nazi persecution and trying to enter Palestine without the necessary permits. These interventions arose in connection with the tragedy of the *Patria*, an ocean liner into which the ‘illegals’ who had arrived in three smaller ships were to be transferred and transported to Mauritius. In June 1940 the Haganah (unofficial Jewish army) blew up the *Patria* in Haifa harbour as a protest, but too much explosive was used and there was much loss of life. At Churchill’s intervention, the survivors were allowed to settle in Palestine, but the ‘illegals’ in the third ship, *SS Atlantis*, who had not been transferred to the *Patria*, were not allowed to stay in Palestine and were in fact transported to Mauritius. Subsequently, by way of mitigation, Churchill insisted that the ‘illegals’ sent to Mauritius should not be caged up in prison camps, with barbed wire, prison guards and the like.

Gilbert portrays these interventions as generous acts; Cohen as amounting to next to nothing. One must agree with Cohen, but I am doubtful about his more general contention that Churchill with all the power of a wartime Prime Minister could have seen that the White Paper restrictions were not enforced. The White Paper had proved highly controversial and was now part of British law. Further, on becoming Prime Minister, Churchill had pledged to do ‘everything for the war, whether controversial or not, and nothing controversial that is not *bona fide* needed for the war.’<sup>13</sup> Later, in 1944 when the White Paper provisions expired, Churchill was able to secure through bureaucratic arrangements that any Jew who had managed to reach Istanbul would be allowed to continue on to Palestine regardless of Palestinian certificates and quotas.

Of course, as the war progressed, the possibility of Jews escaping from the Nazis became more remote, and the existence of the concentration and death-camps began to come to light. In June 1942 the *Daily Telegraph* was the first London newspaper to give some details of the extent of the Nazi persecution. The following year Miss Eleanor Rathbone, a gentle humanitarian activist, besought Churchill to intervene, but he did not give her an interview. This is noted by Cohen but not by Gilbert.<sup>14</sup> In July 1944, when

---

13 Cohen, 2003, p. 207.

14 Cohen, 2003, p. 267.

10

the details of Auschwitz-Birkenau became known (previously the Allies knew it only as the unknown destination ‘in the East’ where Jews were being sent by train), Weizmann appealed to Churchill to try to bomb the camps and the railway lines leading to them. There were then British forces in Northern Italy and Auschwitz was within reach of the RAF. On 7 July, Churchill in response instructed Anthony Eden, ‘Get anything out of the Air Force you can, and invoke me if necessary.’ Churchill never followed this up, and despite Eden’s efforts nothing materialised.<sup>15</sup> Yet only a month later, between 8 August and 20 September 1944, when the free Polish forces were being attacked by the Germans at Warsaw and Stalin deliberately was holding back the Red Army that could have saved them, Churchill made sure that sorties of British aircraft dropped supplies over Warsaw.

Gilbert in his *Churchill and the Jews* covers Weizmann’s request for military intervention in just a few lines. He claims that in the event ‘Churchill’s emphatic instruction did not need to be carried out’<sup>16</sup> because the deportations of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz was halted under the orders of Admiral Horthy. This is a quite extraordinary statement since the reports being received about Auschwitz-Birkenau never suggested that this was a disaster only for Hungarian Jews. Gilbert’s sleight of hand here is the more remarkable in that he himself has written extensively on the Holocaust and on Auschwitz in particular. In an earlier book, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, Gilbert gives a full account of the matter, and, while still exonerating Churchill, concludes,

*From a map in Churchill’s papers the flight paths to Warsaw can be seen passing just to the West of Cracow, virtually over Auschwitz itself. But it was the agony of Warsaw, not the agony of the Jews, that had come to dominate the telegraphic exchanges of the Allied leaders.<sup>17</sup>*

The future of the Jews in Palestine was not left entirely on hold during the War. Already by 1942 Churchill was coming to the view that partition was the only practical solution. Lord Cherwell, whose views Churchill greatly respected, had written a memorandum which concluded,

---

15 Cohen, 2003, p. 342.

16 Gilbert, 2007, p. 212.

17 Gilbert, 2000, p. 322.

*Either we give up the whole idea of a National Home for the Jews in Palestine, or we must carry through some form of partition, giving them their own state, in which they can do what they like and accept as many immigrants as they like.*<sup>18</sup>

In July 1943 the Cabinet decided to establish a committee ‘to work out a long-term solution to the Palestinian problem’. It is intriguing to speculate what might have come from such a committee, but on 6 November 1944 Churchill’s friend, Lord Moyne, was assassinated in Cairo by Jewish terrorists, and from that point Churchill shelved all debate on Palestine indefinitely. In spite of repeated requests from Weizmann, Churchill would not even meet the Zionist leaders again.

### **Taking Stock**

Clearly Gilbert and Cohen have very different views on what support Churchill really gave the Jews. On the central issues Cohen’s case is the more convincing. This is partly because Cohen has written a carefully reasoned, scholarly book, whereas Gilbert has provided simply an interesting narrative with very little analysis, but more importantly because Cohen frequently provides highly relevant information which Gilbert must be fully aware of yet keeps from the reader.

Neither author differs over the fact that Churchill for the most part had friendly relations with Jews and in broad terms wanted to do whatever he could for them. Yet, as Cohen underlines, Churchill was not a committed Zionist, that is, he was not committed to Herzl’s vision of the Jews freeing themselves from endemic anti-Semitism in their host countries through establishing a state of their own. Understandably, therefore, he saw himself under no obligation to facilitate the Zionist politicians’ plans in the manner and at the time they required. In his earlier political life Churchill had even objected to Britain accepting the Mandate that would implement the Balfour Declaration. It was only many years later that he vigorously supported the Mandate but only in association with his opposition to the appeasement policy of the Chamberlain government.

During the Second World War Churchill did little to help the Jews

---

18 Cohen, 2003, p. 249.

apart from striving for the success of the Allies. It is nevertheless true, as an unnamed colleague of Cohen's put it, 'Although Churchill did much less than he should have done if he were really a friend of the Jews, he still did much more than many others.'<sup>19</sup>

It remains to consider what motivated Churchill in his dealings with the Jews. If Churchill was not committed to the Jewish Zionist cause, neither did he lean to what *La Guardia* calls 'that peculiarly British form of gentile Zionism which believed that the return of the Jews to Palestine would presage the return of Jesus', in other words he was not a Christian restorationist.<sup>20</sup> Rather, it seems that Churchill simply had a genuine affection and admiration for Jewish people, probably stemming from his being in close contact with Jews as a child: his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, used to be chided for having only Jewish friends. Beyond that, political considerations clearly came into play: both Gilbert and Cohen show that Churchill well understood the importance and influence of the Jewish constituency in the United States. Churchill recognised that the Balfour declaration was issued in part to induce America to enter the First World War, and that in the first part of the Second World War American Jewry must not be offended if Britain was to procure the Lend-Lease agreement.

### **Contemporary Relevance**

It is impossible to read these books without being drawn into our contemporary world. The problem over the division of the territory still remains unresolved; there are still impassioned, often bitter, debates both in Israel and among Christians over the partition of the Land and the possibility of now the Palestinians – it was then the Jews – having their own fully-independent state. Can we learn anything from the Mandate period, even from Churchill himself as one of the lead players in that fast receding era?

### **Churchill and the Arabs**

Churchill's low view of the Arabs is well-known. I have already referred to his remarks before the Peel Commission which he did not want published.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, 2003, p. 323.

<sup>20</sup> *La Guardia*, p. 121.

Yet Churchill was not unaware that the Palestinian Arabs had some legitimate grievances stemming from Jewish immigration into the Holy Land. Significantly, on one occasion, when speaking on the report of the Woodhead Commission, Churchill acknowledged the Arabs' grievance over Jewish immigration:

*They wonder whether a halt is ever going to be called to it, and they fear that it is going to be their fate in the land of their birth to be dominated by the energetic, new-coming people, dominated economically, politically, completely.*<sup>21</sup>

Neither Gilbert or Cohen give much background information as to why from time to time Arab frustration erupted in riots and insurrection, in particular in 1921, 1929 and especially in 1936 with the beginning of the Arab Revolt. The same is also true of Gilbert's own history of modern Palestine/Israel, *Israel, A History*. Here there are indeed descriptions of Arab violence but one looks in vain for any discussion of the underlying causes. For example in the Chapter, 'Threats and Dangers, 1929 -1937', there is a short discussion about Arab objections to the Jewish land purchases but simply in relation to the Zionists' fears of future curtailment of Jewish immigration: 'The Zionists were dismayed.'<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Howard Sachar makes some considerable effort to understand the causes of the Arab disaffection. In particular, he points to the unprecedented Jewish immigration of the Fifth Aliyah: this reached a peak in 1935 with over 66,000 arrivals in Palestine.

Sachar then turns to the question of Jewish land purchases. 'The Jews may not have owned more than 20 per cent of Palestine's cultivable soil ... but the Arabs knew only what they saw, and what they saw was an unquestioned increase in Jewish land purchase'. In this connection Sachar points out that 'to the typical Arab, the family plot of land had an almost mystical quality.'<sup>23</sup> Much of the land was purchased from absentee Arab landlords<sup>24</sup> and resulted

21 Cohen, 2003, p. 179.

22 Gilbert, 1999, p. 65.

23 Sachar, p. 198.

24 But there were also many land sales by members of the leading Arab families within Palestine (for details see Tessler, p. 174). The absence of social cohesion was one of the main reasons for the downfall of the Palestinian Arabs.

in the displacement of a substantial number of Arab tenant farmers<sup>25</sup>. A famous episode is the purchase from the Sursock family in Beirut of a very large holding in the Jezreel valley: some 8,000 Arab farmers were displaced, being given only minute compensation.<sup>26</sup>

As well as the Zionists' 'conquest of land', the Palestinian Arabs were also faced with their 'conquest of labour'. Whereas the first wave of Jewish immigrants from 1882 onwards formed family-based settlements and employed local Arab labour to work their farms, in the Second Aliyah many of the settlers were socialists or revolutionaries who in their *kibbutzim* applied the concept of 'the conquest of labour'. This meant that only 'Hebrew' labour was employed, so denying employment to the local Arabs. The intention was to overcome 'the Jews' traditional remove from agricultural labour', helping them to become the 'new Jews'.<sup>27</sup>

Benny Morris considers the varying attitudes of the Jewish settlers to the Arabs, from the arrogance and brutality typical of colonial settlers to benign paternalism and genuine cooperation, and conversely those of the Arabs to the *Olim*, mainly of hostility and suspicion. Morris brings out how a few Jews recognised and grappled with the 'Arab question', citing Yitzhak Epstein,

*We have forgotten one small matter: there is in our beloved land an entire nation, which has occupied it for hundreds of years, and has never thought to leave it.*<sup>28</sup>

A prominent settler, Shmuel Tolkovsky, also urged consideration:

*We Jews who ourselves suffered from persecution and ill-treatment for thousands of years... from us a minimally humane approach could have been expected, not to beat unarmed and innocent people with a whip, out of mere caprice.*<sup>29</sup>

---

25 There were also other fundamental economic reasons for the increasing impoverishment of the Arabs, including the inability of traditional methods of agriculture to sustain their increasing population (see Benvenisti, pp. 92-96), and the lack of a concerted British policy to improve the economy of the Arab villages and their lands (Pappe, pp. 97-102).

26 Tessler, p. 176.

27 Morris, p. 50.

28 Morris, p. 56.

29 Morris, p. 53.

But others were, at any rate in private, open about their expansionist plans. David Ben Gurion wrote to his son, Amos:

*Our possession is important not only for itself... Through this we increase our power, and every increase in power facilitates getting hold of the country in its entirety.*<sup>30</sup>

There is no indication that Churchill took very seriously his apparent awareness of the anger and frustration of the Palestinian Arabs. He seems to have remained unmoved by what David Hirst calls,

*all the pathos of a people who never quite gave up the struggle, but have been doomed, through their own shortcomings, as well as their enemy's superiority, always to lose, and who subconsciously seem to know it.*<sup>31</sup>

But what of us? Many Christians – I include myself – are deeply conscious of the suffering borne by the Jews down the ages, often at the hands of Christians and often through the denigration encouraged by a gentile-centred theology. We rejoice that the Jews now have a homeland in the Holy Land, and many of us see their return to the Land as highly significant, whether as the fulfilment of prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures; or as marking the point when ‘the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’ and ‘Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles’ no more (Luke 21.24); or simply as the outworking of God’s strange and wonderful dealings with his people, Israel. Yet, for all that, we cannot simply turn our eyes away from the Palestinian Arabs who are also dear to the heart of God and for whom Jesus also died.

The heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict is put succinctly by La Guardia writing of the Jews who fled from persecution in Europe:

*The refugees looked for another home; they needed another home. The tragedy is that their new homes in Israel were Arab homes.*<sup>32</sup>

Those who follow Christ are called to be peacemakers: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’ (Matthew 5.9 NRSV).

---

30 Morris, p. 138

31 Hirst, p. 201.

32 La Guardia, p. 200.

Whatever else this may mean, peacemaking requires us to get under the skin of each participant, to try to see the situation as they see it, to enter into their feelings about it. It is relatively easy for us, as human beings, to sympathise with and support one party in a conflict; very difficult, however, to understand and sympathise with the other party at the same time.

### **Political ‘Solutions’**

16 One consequence of Churchill’s insufficient regard for the interests of the Arabs were arrangements – the 1922 White Paper – in which, at least so the Peel Commission concluded, conflict was ‘inherent in the situation from the outset.’ But could better arrangements have been devised, given the commitment to provide a national home for the Jews in Palestine? And, what about the present situation in which the Jews now have an independent state with a small Arab minority, alongside the ‘occupied territories’ that are predominantly Arab, but increasingly penetrated by Jewish settlements and their connecting roads. The present situation is further complicated by the higher birth rate of the Arabs, and the two million or more internal and external Arab refugees who want to return to their homes and their homeland. As Benvenisti reflects, ‘And that is the twist of irony: after fifty years of struggle for the landscape, the Arabs have now become the last of the Zionists.’<sup>33</sup>

Those who would be friends of both Jews and Arabs have to wrestle in prayer with these intractable issues. It may surprise some but in this connection I suggest that the thinking of Ernest Bevin deserves to be taken seriously. Bevin has often been accused by Zionists of being anti-Semitic. This is in part because of his limited involvement<sup>34</sup> in trying to stop the entry of Jewish displaced persons into Palestine after the War pending an international settlement, but more importantly because of his consistent unwillingness to agree to the partition of Palestine. In fact, far from being anti-Semitic, some fifteen years earlier Bevin had taken up the cause of the Jews: he protested on behalf of British Jews against the Passfield Report that was issued after the 1929 Arab Riots. In due course he obtained assurances from the Government

---

33 Benvenisti, p. 332.

34 Bullock, 1983, p. 448. Bullock points out that Bevin was attending meetings in Moscow when the Cabinet took the key decisions on Palestine immigration policy.



that Jewish immigration would not be stopped or limits set on the expansion of the Jewish national home in Palestine.<sup>35</sup>

Bevin's objection to any proposals involving partition was that he saw no solution in the establishment of what he called 'racial states' in Palestine. His own solution, essentially that recommended by the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946 (but not proceeded with), was for a bi-national state under the trusteeship of the United Nations.<sup>36</sup> It should be understood that Bevin was an admirer of Lord Durham's bi-national model that gave self-government to the French and British in Canada, and likewise of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's similar solution for South Africa; this brought peace and reconciliation between the British and the Boers.<sup>37</sup> Bevin saw these two Commonwealth precedents as the best way forward for Palestine. Under the bi-national model there would be one state but each constituency, Jewish and Arab, would preserve its own identity and culture. Further, both Jews and Arabs would have equal rights and opportunities in the State as a whole.

Such a vision must not be ruled out as simply beyond the imagining of those on either side of the conflict. These ideas have already been mooted down the years by both Jews and Palestinian Arabs. In the mid-1920s a small Jewish group called Berith Shalom (Covenant of Peace) came together in Jerusalem. It included some notable academics, including Jehuda Magnes, the first Chancellor of the newly established Hebrew University, also Hugo Bergmann and Gershom Scholem, both of that university; its most famous member was the mystical Jewish thinker, Martin Buber. The group also included Arthur Ruppin, a prominent Zionist politician who led the project to turn the early Jewish community in Palestine into a modern society. This group opposed the exclusivist direction in which Zionism was being taken by Ben Gurion; they simply wanted to maintain Jewish life in a Palestine in which Arab and Jew enjoyed equal rights. The group was never more than two hundred members, but Magnes, its leader, worked tirelessly for the cause.<sup>38</sup> Shortly before his death in 1948 his efforts were

---

35 Bullock, 1960, pp. 456-57; Sachar, p. 253. Sachar's account of Bevin's approach as British Foreign Secretary is both perceptive and fair (pp. 252-54).

36 Smith, pp. 181-82.

37 Louis, p. 2.

38 Gilbert, 1999, p. 62 ; Sachar, p .180.

rewarded: a leading member of the Husayni family, Fawzi al-Husayni, joined the movement. (The Husaynis were one of the two leading Jerusalem families who during the Mandate period competed for the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs; the Nashashibis were the other.) Sadly Fawzi was assassinated soon afterwards at the instigation of more nationalist members of his family.<sup>39</sup> That these ideas are not wholly forgotten among the Arabs is apparent from some comments made to La Guardia by Salah Ta'Amari. In his earlier years Ta'Amari had been a senior PLO military officer in Jordan and the Lebanon; at the time of the interview he was an independent member of the Bethlehem town council. In his view, the two-state solution was but an interim step:

*I have not forgotten my dream of a democratic state in all of Palestine [Israel], where Palestinians [Israelis] – Jews and non-Jews – will live together.’<sup>40</sup>*

Christians may perhaps see here a counterpart to ‘the commonwealth of Israel’ in which Christ, ‘our peace, has made both groups into one’ (Ephesians 2.12-14).

A ‘pipe-dream of earnest intellectuals without backing’<sup>41</sup> or a vision of what God really wants for his Land? I suggest the latter, but, if so, what formidable ‘mountains’ stand in the way! There are the wrongs suffered by each people over successive generations – they still rankle but have to be forgiven and as far as possible redressed; the fear of being outnumbered and dominated by the other nation; the antagonisms fed by religious militancy of all kinds. Those who pray must trust that God can remove mountains; must continue to long for many more Jews and Arabs to yield their lives to the welcoming embrace of Messiah Jesus; must long to see the subtle, hidden influence of the gospel permeate the values of whole communities, as Jesus said, like yeast as it leavens all the dough (Matthew 13.33).

**Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; may they prosper who love you. For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will now say, ‘May peace be within you.’**

Psalm 122 vv. 6, 8 (NASB).

39 Pappé, p. 115.

40 La Guardia, p. 162.

41 Gartner, p. 390.

## **APPENDIX: General Note on the Histories of Modern Israel**

In his address at the dedication of the new CMJ UK headquarters, George Cassidy, the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, pointed to the lack of a sense of history as one of the great weaknesses of the Church today. Failure to ask, 'How did we come to be where we are now?' leads to hasty judgements and badly informed, often needlessly angry, debate. Nowhere is this more true than when the State of Israel and the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict are being discussed. I hope this article will encourage readers to explore the issues for themselves. I therefore feel an obligation to give some guidance as to the books available and where I stand in relation to them.

The vast majority of the books on modern Palestine/ Israel can be put to one side as being unashamedly partisan. My attention has been confined to books that make some claim to be scholarly in approach. Writing history is a scholarly discipline that requires the collection and assessment of relevant data and source material, the consideration of differing interpretations, and an openness to the perspectives of other historians. Nowadays there will be few scholarly historians who will claim complete objectivity for their work. For the way they select and assess the material they see as relevant, as well as the judgements they form thereon, will inevitably be influenced by their own background and personal convictions. So it has become increasingly common for professional historians to disclose at the outset where they come from. That is helpful. But while complete objectivity is never wholly possible, even when striven for, proper scholarly methods should not be relaxed. That has been the guiding principle in my selection.

There are two further considerations to bear in mind that specifically relate to the history of Palestine / Israel. First, the histories of two peoples, the Arabs and the Jews, have to be recounted. Only a few histories attempt to let the stories of both peoples be heard. Secondly, as regards the history of the State of Israel, there is a divide between those Zionist historians who bolster the foundation myths that newly-formed states tend to spawn, and the Jewish post-Zionist historians in Israel who in recent years have critically investigated some hitherto 'untouchable' subjects. The post-Zionist movement was influential in the 1990s and moved outwards from the universities to infiltrate films and poetry, even for a period changing the teaching materials used in

Israel's schools. In part the post-Zionist movement was a protest against what was coming to be seen as a militaristic state establishment that was turning its back on the liberal, democratic values that mark off Israel from most other states in the Middle East.

Bearing these considerations in mind, I commend the following as good and reasonably even-handed presentations, certainly in their coverage of the Mandate and pre-Mandate periods (for full bibliographical details, see the Bibliography):

**Anton La Guardia**, *Holy Land, Unholy War*.

Written by a professional journalist rather than an academic, this book provides a very readable account of the historical background to the Arab-Israeli conflict, taking great pains to be fair to both sides. La Guardia was Daily Telegraph correspondent in Jerusalem for eight years.

**Lloyd P. Gartner**, *History of the Jews in Modern Times*.

This book takes 1650 AD as its starting point, a time from which the Jewish diaspora, whose traditional institutions had remained intact since the Middle Ages, began to experience the Enlightenment, emancipation and modern forms of 'anti-Semitism'. It also traces the origins and history of Zionism. A valuable feature is its treatment of the religious currents within Judaism in the last three hundred years. On the Mandate period it provides only a brief presentation from a Jewish perspective, but is excellent for the broader pre-history of the State of Israel.

**Howard M. Sachar**, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*.

Writing from an essentially Zionist perspective, Sachar nevertheless takes pains to understand the situation and grievances of the Arabs. A most comprehensive yet readable account.

**Benny Morris**, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict 1881-1999*.

Benny Morris is one of the pioneer post-Zionist historians. His work on the reasons for the departure of most of the Arab population in the 1948 War of Independence disclosed a variegated and not entirely co-ordinated pattern of displacement, a picture that did not fit in well with either Zionist or Palestinian polemics. This is one of the most even-handed of the longer histories.

**Charles D. Smith**, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History of the Documents*.

A good balanced account, this work centres on the key documents, the 1922 White Paper, the Peel Commission Report, etc.

**Mark Tessler**, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*.

Somewhat similar to Smith but Tessler's distinctive is to pay special attention to the raw data on which historical judgements are made, for example, immigration statistics, land sales, etc.

**Ilan Pappé**, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*.

Pappé is one of the most radical and controversial of the post-Zionist historians. But his book must not be ignored because it is virtually the only one that sets out deliberately to give equal weight to the histories of both peoples in the Land. It is as much a social as a political history. Valuable features include its account of pre-Mandate Palestine in the Ottoman era between 1856 and 1918; its stress on the history of economic development in the land and its bearing on events: the attention paid to the development of education and to the evolving status of women; and its recounting of recurring instances of 'co-habitation', that is, social and economic co-operation between the two people groups.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Benvenisti, Meron

- *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (trans. Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

### Bullock, Alan

- *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin: Trade Union Leader 1881 – 1940* (London: Heinemann, 1960).
- *Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, 1945 – 1951* (London: Heinemann, 1983).

### Cohen, Michael J.

- *Palestine: Retreat from the Mandate, the Making of British Policy, 1936–45* (London: Paul Elek, 1978).
- *Churchill and the Jews* (London: Frank Cass, 2nd edn, 2003).

### Gartner, Lloyd P.

- *History of the Jews in Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

### Gilbert, Martin

- *Israel, A History* (London: Black Swan, 1999).
- *Auschwitz and the Allies* (London: Pimlico Press, 2001).
- *Churchill and the Jews* (London: Simon and Schuster UK, 2007).

### Hirst, David

- *The Gun and the Olive Branch* (London: Faber and Faber, 2nd edn, 1984).

### La Guardia, Anton

- *Holy Land, Unholy War: Israelis and Palestinians* (London: Penguin Books, 3rd edn, 2007).

### Louis, Wm. Roger

- 'British Imperialism and the End of the Palestine Mandate', in Louis, Wm. Roger, and Stookey, Robert W. (eds.), *The End of the Palestine Mandate* (London: Tauris, 1986).

### Morris, Benny

- *Righteous Victims: A History of Zionist–Arab Conflict, 1881 – 1999* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

### Pappe, Ilan

- *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 2006).

### Sachar, Howard M.

- *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time: Vol. I* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2nd edn, 1996).

### Smith, Charles D.

- *Palestine and the Arab–Israeli Conflict: A History of the Documents* (Boston: St. Martin's, 6th edn, 2007).

### Tessler, Mark

- *A History of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

This issue, #4 February 2009

© Michael Eldridge 2009

The right of Michael Eldridge to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

Editorial team: *Michael Eldridge, Alex Jacob*

Concept and design: *www.thirteenfour.com*

Printed through A-Tec, Broxbourne, England

*Olive Press*  
(a CMJ ministry)

EAGLE LODGE, HEXGREAVE HALL BUSINESS PARK,  
FARNSFIELD, NOTTS. NG22 8LS  
REGISTERED UK CHARITY NUMBER 293553