

FROM PALESTINE 1800-1948

Zionism began its life as a response to anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism was not a new phenomenon. The Jewish insistence on not converting into either Christianity or Islam led to policies of discrimination and animosity. The Church was particularly instrumental in adding religious imperative for these attitudes by blaming the Jewish collectively for the death of Christ. Eternal persecution was sanctioned as a rule by various popes and church leaders throughout the mediaeval times and these older attitudes fed into what one can call modern anti-Semitism.

A new wave of anti-Semitism emerged at the end of the 19th century, precisely at the time when all over Europe Jews were emancipated and were granted equal legal and political rights. Their relative affluence and the rise of romantic nationalist movements in many parts of Europe, which needed an 'enemy' from within or without, left the Jewish communities prey to policies of persecution and frequent violent attacks by their less fortunate neighbours, quite often with the complicit encouragement from the powers that be.

In the mid-19th century, the more primitive form of anti-Semitism prevalent in the Czarist Russian Empire was supported by a 'scientific' anti-Semitism inspired by Darwin's evolutionary theories of the survival of the fittest. These flourished particularly in Germany, Italy and France. The overall message to the Jews was that neither traditional life nor full assimilation were a guarantee against anti-Semitism. It seemed even that high hopes eschewed by those Jews who joined the new universal movements of socialism and communism were not a guarantee for uprooting these racist attitudes that would lead eventually to the Holocaust.

The specific wave of anti-Semitism that led to the emergence of the Zionist movement occurred between 1881 and 1917. It was woken by the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 by revolutionary forces and was orchestrated from above by his heirs, Alexander III and Nikolai II, who hoped to distract the impoverished and starved masses of the Russian people from their growing discontent. The

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persecution led to violence of all kinds: pogroms, blood libels, anti-Semitic legislation and policy of expulsion and confinement. These were three extremely harsh decades for those who insisted of remaining loyal to the traditional way of Jewish life under Czarist Russia. Assimilated Jews did not fare better, as their successful integration into a more liberalised and capitalised economy was easily exploited by classical anti-Semitic intellectuals, clergymen and politicians, to stir public animosity against them.

The principal response to this wave was immigration and mainly to the United States. However, Jews in Europe at that time did not only respond to threats but also engaged with the modernisation and secularisation that developed around them. Jewish intellectuals and activists wished to modernise Jews as much as they wanted to save them from persecution. More than anything else, the idea of nationalism seemed to provide an ideal fusion of the two impulses: creating a safe national state for Jews and a modern and secular one at that.

This led to a revival of ancient Hebrew and a new interest in the bible (the old testament) not just as a religious text, but as a history book that tells about the golden period of ancient Israel. This fusion of a search for a safe haven and modern existence did not immediately lead this new intellectual movement towards Palestine, the land of the bible. Other destinations were considered from Uganda in Africa to Azerbaijan in Russia. However, as the movement grew in numbers Palestine became the coveted destination and the first Jewish settlers arrived there in 1882. Evangelical Christians around the world also wished the movement to focus on Palestine, believing it was part of a divine scheme that would precipitate the second coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. Later on, on the eve of the First World War, European powers such as France, Germany and in particular Britain considered Jewish settlement in Palestine as a potential strategic asset. Thus by 1904, Palestine was the only destination for those who considered themselves Zionists, although they were still a very insignificant minority group among world Jewry.

The most significant wave towards Palestine was triggered in 1881 by a wave of pogroms in the Ukraine. It was a systematic series of massacres guided from above by the Czarist government. 'The Lovers of Zion' (*Hovevei Zion*) was the first formation of Zionist settlers making their way to Palestine. It included several outfits, most famous of which were the 'Biluim', an acronym that was a call for Jewish immigration to Palestine. They were the ones who founded the first Zionist colonies in Ottoman Palestine. From an Israeli historiographical perspective, they were Israel's Mayflower pilgrims.

On the border between Poland and Germany in the city of Katowice, all the 'lovers of Zion' convened in 1884 and laid the foundations to the Zionist project in Palestine. It decided to expand the colonies through financial aid and Ottoman recognition.

With the help of philanthropists such as the bankers of Rothschild, the number of colonies grew and were based on agricultural production. The old Ottoman Jewish community viewed the settlers suspiciously and the local Ottoman representatives perceived them as being a Russian 'fifth column'. Life was thus not easy

for the newcomers, who found it at first very difficult to become farmers without any agricultural background (Jews were not allowed to cultivate land in many parts of Eastern Europe). This first wave is called in Israel the 'First Aliyah' (the first ascendance - from the pit of exile to the peak of redemption).

Outside of Palestine, the most significant development was the internationalisation of the Zionist project through the work of Theodor Herzl, regarded in Israel as the father of modern Zionism. A failed playwright and quite a successful journalist from Vienna, Herzl was influenced both by the romantic nationalism sweeping the Germanic states and the growing anti-Semitism, epitomised for him by the Dreyfus affair in France.

The Dreyfus affair shook France for several years. It began in December 1894 when Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a young artillery officer of Jewish descent, was sentenced for life imprisonment for allegedly communicating military secrets to the Germans. He spent five years in a prison colony before he was put on a retrial, after it became clear that evidence against him was baseless. A public campaign steered by Émile Zola led to his exoneration in 1906 (after Herzl's death).

The affair consolidated Herzl's conviction of the need to secure international support for the Zionist colonisation of Palestine. He wrote a utopian novel on this, *Almeuland*, met world leaders and even tried to find money to purchase Palestine from the Ottomans. Most of his endeavours ended in failure. However, he did manage to create a movement with an international profile and in 1897 he convened the first Zionist congress in the city of Basel, Switzerland. The congress ended with the establishment of several institutions that proved essential later on for the growth and triumph of the Zionist project of colonisation in Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel. The most important of them was the Jewish National Fund (which formally came into being in 1902), channelling money from Jewish communities around the world for the purchase of land for further colonisation; a body that still exists today but is mostly preoccupied with managing the green lungs of the state, built mainly on the ruins of Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948.

Despite Herzl's enthusiasm for the idea of a mass Jewish immigration to Palestine and the creation of a republic there (while as he put it, 'spiriting the penniless [Arabs] out of the country'),¹ he was willing to consider other destinations as a haven for the Jews of Europe. One such destination he negotiated with the British Empire in 1903 was Uganda in Africa. His support for this option nearly tore the Zionist movement apart, but he died in 1904, before the debate could be concluded. After his death, Palestine became the exclusive destination for Zionist colonisation.

In 1905, a second wave of Jewish settlers followed after the defeat of Russia in the war with Japan and the failed first Bolshevik revolution. Thus, they came with a strong socialist motivation. They were not only keen on colonising Palestine, but wished to create there a socialist haven for the Jewish people and even for the world at large, and thus influence the march of global socialism.

The socialist impulse created communal settlements, some would say even communist ones. The *moshav*, *moshavah* and the most famous of them the Kibbutz

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explored all kinds of collective life in the hope of both implementing socialist ideals and the most effective way of cheap, and secure, colonisation. The Kibbutzim played, until recently, a very important part in the society: especially as a core group from which leaders of the dominant labour movement were recruited as well as the senior officers of the IDF. In fact, the second wave as a whole (1905-1914) was the core group from which the elites of Israel came from as long as the labour movement was in power, and in some sections even later.

There were various socialist streams and ideologues and under their influence, several parties sprang. Later on, most of them integrated into two major parties: *Mapai* (founded in 1930) and *Mapam* (founded in 1948). Alongside the hegemonic presence of *Mapai* in pre-Israel Mandatory Palestine there emerged a national religious group (most religious outfits, movements and rabbis regarded Zionism as an aberration and tampering with the will of God; they were present in Palestine but declared themselves as non-Zionist). The national religious rabbis and activists developed a dogma that regarded Zionism as a testament to the will of god and saw the colonisation of Palestine as a religious, and not just national, imperative. They resigned to live in a secular state provided the public space would respect their interpretation of the Jewish doctrine and law. Their movement was called *Hapoel Hamizrachi* (Mizrachi here does not mean oriental as in the case of the Jews who came from Arab counties. Here it is a squeeze of the phrase, spiritual centre, *Merkaz Rouhani*, into an acronym). *Labour nat-rel* *Revis*

The third movement, and all three are with us in one form or another today, is the Revisionist movement. This was founded in 1923 by Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, one of the leaders of the Zionist movement. He decided to cede from the main movement after the final declaration of the British mandate over Palestine in 1922. This charter left Transjordan (today's Jordan) out of Palestine. Jabotinsky, and like-minded Zionists, regarded the future Jewish state as comprising both Palestine and Transjordan. They created their own Zionist organisation, before joining the mainstream Zionist institutions as a party and founding their own youth movement, *Beitar*. *Beitar* is still active today and on its flag 'Israel' appears as a country comprising of both Jordan and Israel.

During the days of the second wave the colonisation project expanded its presence in Palestine with the establishment of more colonies in the Galilee in the north of Palestine. The takeover of land there, purchasing it from landlords, many of whom resided outside Palestine, pushed out Palestinian tenants who lived on it. The frequent clashes, and the romantic national ideology, led the leaders of the community to build a para-military power – the first famous outfit was called *Hashomer* (The Guardian). The outfits were instrumental later on in dispossessing the Palestinians from the Galilee and other parts of Palestine.

Lastly, the second wave is cherished in Israel as a period in which the war of languages was decided. The Hebrew language was revived both in Europe and among the old Jewish community in Palestine in the mid-19th century. Herzl for one wished the new community to parlay in German, others wanted Yiddish (the German Jewish dialect spoken by most religious and traditional Jews) to prevail.

However, most of the *Haluzim*, the pioneers as they called themselves, wished Hebrew to be imposed as the new national language and succeeded in creating a whole culture around it (I will return in more details to this 'war' in the chapter on the Israeli culture).

The cultural centre slowly also became the political and financial centre – the city of Tel-Aviv. Built near the town of Jaffa circa 1904, this new town replaced the collective settlements as the motor of the Zionist colonisation of the land. With time, it proved more attractive to the next wave of settlers, who came from European middle-class and urban backgrounds.

The First World War

The main task of the Zionist movement was to secure international recognition and the First World War proved to be the ripe historical moment for such a move. Several leaders of the settler community aligned themselves secretly with the British army on the eve of the war, while in London, the political leadership of the Zionist movement strengthened its ties with the British Empire.

This alliance bred the Balfour Declaration given on November 2, 1917. This was a letter read in the House of Commons by Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary and addressed to Lord Rothschild (who was considered to be one of the leaders of the Anglo-Jewish community), in which the British government pledged its support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The letter also promised to ensure that this pledge would not undermine the aspirations of the native population of Palestine.

Even today in hindsight it is hard to assess how binding this promise was. However, what mattered was not its international standing, but the fact that on the power of British bayonets, the Zionist project developed and consolidated, once Britain occupied the country in 1918 and stayed there until 1948. By and large, Britain remained loyal to the pledge but found it hard to keep the part which promised to protect the rights of the indigenous people. During all its thirty years of rule, the British government was preoccupied with the attempts to reconcile the two contradictory pledges made in the declaration, but to no avail.

The British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, who was a pious Christian, epitomised what one would call today Christian Zionism and was motivated by this dogma when deciding on the future of Palestine. For evangelical Christians like himself, the 'return' of the Jews to Palestine was part of a divine scheme that could precipitate the second coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. This millenialist and apocalyptic view still informs an important support group for Israel, on both sides of the Atlantic, among Christian Zionists. Lloyd George also expressed a wish to see a non-Muslim 'sedentary' as he put it on the way to Britain's most precious possession in the Arab world in those days: Egypt.

Other considerations played a role here too. The Bolshevik revolution threatened to take Russia out of the war effort against the axis powers, and the large number of Jews in the revolutionary movement erroneously led the British policy makers

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to believe that satisfying the Zionist movement would gain them influence in the Bolshevik one. Similarly, but with more foresight, the British strategists believed the Jewish voice was crucial in determining American policy. The United States only entered the overall military effort in April 1917 and there was a wish to secure its further involvement in the attempt to defeat Germany and its allies. It was premature at that time to assume such a powerful Jewish hold on American policy, but there was the potential for this, as we know.

Some scholars suspect that anti-Semitism also played a role in this strategy. The persecution of Jews in central and Eastern Europe prompted a mass immigration to the United Kingdom. Lord Balfour himself was known to hold some negative views about this immigration and it is quite likely that re-directing them to Palestine was a favourable solution in his eyes.² More important was the fact that, compared to other problems in the British Empire at the time, Palestine did not seem a huge issue and therefore not much thought was put into the declaration. For the Zionist movement, however, the practical implications were huge once Palestine became a League of Nations mandate.

It took another six years before this vague British pledge became a new reality in Palestine. By 1923, after trials and tribulations, Palestine became a mandate committed to the Balfour Declaration with clear political boundaries (which resemble Israel's borders today, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but without the Golan Heights).

The British Empire had to take into consideration the American insistence on principles such as the right for self-determination and hence the new international body, the League of Nations, gave Britain a mandate over Palestine with the view of allowing it independence after twenty-five years of foreign rule. However, the Balfour Declaration was included in the mandate and therefore it was clear that before independence could be granted a political settlement between the settler community and the natives of Palestine would have to be reached.

The Zionist leadership, although engaged in these attempts, was far more pre-occupied with two other aspects of life in Mandatory Palestine. The first was building an infrastructure for a Jewish state and the other contemplating how to overcome the demographic majority of the Palestinians in the country they deemed as their exclusive homeland. Israel today, in fact, still is concerned with these two issues.

The first British High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel (1919-1925), was crucial in translating the British pledge in the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate Charter into new reality in Palestine. He allowed the community to receive in open hands a third wave of immigration, the Third Aliyah, to build a significant para-military power and other necessary institutions, which turned the community in effect into 'a state within a state'. This included, for example, the opening of the Hebrew University, while refusing adamantly to open a Palestinian one.

For the future development of the settler community, the most important institution that emerged in that period was the Histadrut, the general trade union that found jobs for the masses who began to immigrate to Palestine penniless and

with few qualifications for the hard work demanded of them in the agricultural collectives or in building more settlements and neighbourhoods. It is not coincidental that the secretary general of the *Histadrut*, David Ben-Gurion, became the undeniable leader of the community and later of the state of Israel. The trade union covered through its various outfits all aspects of life: health, education and welfare.

Herbert Samuel's successors were more careful in their policies and more involved in trying to reconcile the conflicting aspirations of the settler community and the native population. Their efforts ended in failure and it became more and more difficult for the British Empire to maintain Palestine as peaceful possession.

Successive British governments tried to curb Jewish colonisation and therefore encountered a two-fold resistance movement against them (the Palestinian and the Zionist ones), fighting also each other. However, while they were there, they allowed the Jewish community to grow into a significant number – through two additional waves of immigration; adding to the mix the Jewish Central European middle-class with its capital and industrious approach to life.

Before the mandate ended, the community of settlers strengthened its military power, through its underground movement, the *Haganah* and its offshoots, the *Irgun* and the *Stern Gang*. The *Irgun* was close to the Revisionist movement led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky (however before he died in 1942, he was replaced by Menachem Begin).

In the last years of the mandate, the Jewish community lived under the shadow of the Holocaust. The Israeli historiography debates how much the Jewish community knew about the genocide in Europe and how much it did and could have done to save the Jewish communities there.³ For our case, what is more relevant is the impact that the Holocaust had on the international perception of the Zionist project in Palestine. This became evident during the deliberations of the Anglo-American inquiry commission on Palestine convened in 1946. This was almost the last international attempt during the Mandatory period to find a solution to the conflict between the native Palestinians and the Jewish settler community. The difference between this attempt and those preceding it was that the members of the committee also visited the refugee camps in Europe where the holocaust survivors were housed pending their decision where to move to.

The Zionist policy was very clear. The survivors should come to Palestine (although recent research showed most of them preferred to immigrate to the USA)⁴ and their fate, as that of the rest of the Jews in the world, should be directly linked to the future of post-Mandatory Palestine. That future laid in the hands of the British, the UN, the Arab world and the parties themselves.

Notes

- 1 Theodor Herzl, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, Volume 1, New York: Herzl Press and Thomas Yoseloff, 1960, pp. 88.
- 2 Jonathan Schneer, 'How Anti-Semitism Helped Create Israel', *Foreign Policy*, 8 September, 2010.
- 3 See Pappe, *The Idea of Israel*, pp. 153–178.
- 4 Yosef Grodzinsky, *Good Human Material*, Or Yehuda: Hed Artzi, 1998 (Hebrew).

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