

REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Gilbert, Martin. *Exile and Return*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London, 1978), 364 pp.

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Constitutional history is the most basic type of modern historiography focussed as it is in the dialectic between moral and legal authority and the physical and intellectual factors leading to the emergence of a nation state and its subsequent development. Martin Gilbert has put together a fascinating documentary study of the role of Great Britain in the emergence of Israel as a Jewish State. *Exile and Return* is not an economic history. It does not answer the question whether the 1922 British policy of restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine in accordance with the economic capacity of the area to absorb new immigrants was consistent with economic realities; did Jewish immigration in increasing numbers stimulate the economy as some spokesmen and scholars alleged or did it create economic hardships as policy-makers feared? Nor does the book analyze whether the Jewish Agency policy of hiring exclusively from a Jewish labour pool was economically harmful to Arabs. Was Arab immigration in large numbers into Palestine encouraged by Jewish economic development and did Arab landowners go to work for Jewish landowners at higher wages using lower paid new Arab immigrants to work their own farms?

If the volume is not an economic history, neither is it a sociological history. How many Arabs immigrated to Palestine? How many Arab farmers were displaced by Jewish agricultural land purchases and development? Though sources are quoted referring to the high numbers of Arab immigrants and the low numbers of Arab farmers displaced, the book does not provide any factual analysis to resolve these questions.

Nor, finally, does the book attempt to adjudicate between the competing Zionist ideology aimed at restoring the land of Palestine to Jews so that a majoritarian Jewish state might emerge having Hebrew as an official language and the ideology of granting self-determination to the current inhabitants of a political region.

In the introductory historical survey of the Jews in the diaspora prior to 1914, the first two chapters establish a major

premise: Jews were not aliens coming into Palestine but exiles returning. Jews for three thousand years kept their contact with their homeland in every single century. Jews made continuous attempts to return to their homeland, and some continued to reside there through all those centuries of exile.

If the major theme of those first two chapters is that Jews are exiled from and not aliens to the land of Palestine, the minor theme is that Jews remained aliens wherever they settled in Europe, Asia and Africa. They were a nation without a home, living at risk. If they prospered in one part of the world at one time, they suffered in another part or in a subsequent age in regions where they once flourished and rose to the highest offices. There never was a haven for the Jews in the diaspora of Europe, Africa, or Asia, though, generally, Jews suffered less under Islam than under Christendom.

The final five chapters of Part I outline the rise of Zionism in the century before the outbreak of World War I as a resurgent Jewish attempt to return to their homeland. The sketch parallels David Vital's *The Origins of Zionism* (1975) in rooting the renewed effort to a combination of factors. The continuing national loyalty of the Jews to their homeland was reinforced by the emergence of Christian Zionists in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the philanthropy of a few very wealthy Jews in Western Europe, the intellectual leadership of educated Jews, the rise of nationalism in general, the continuing antisemitism in Western Europe in spite of the Enlightenment, the increased persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia and Rumania and, finally, and, most importantly, actions by Jews themselves to re-establish their language and their roots in the land of their ancient homeland.

Part II begins with the War Years, 1914-1917 leading up to the Balfour Declaration. The primary motivation for British policy in the Middle East is clearly documented—British self-interest reinforced and inhibited by the actions and anticipated reactions of other groups and nations and shaped by the values of key decision-makers. In the process answers are provided to a number of key questions. Did the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration betray promises made to Arabs in the McMahon proposal? Did the Balfour Declaration merely promise a home to which Jews could return, or did it envision the eventual emergence of a Jewish State cover-

ing all of Palestine, including present day Jordan, in which a majority of the inhabitants would be Jewish, and Hebrew would be an official language? What was the pattern of British foreign policy during the thirty years of the Mandate and, to what degree was that policy consistent with its original undertakings and the League of Nations mandate?

The McMahon proposal recognized and supported the independence of Arabs by the British under two conditions: the receipt of active Arab military support and the exclusion from the independent Arab area of territory vaguely referred to as the portions of Syria lying to the west of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo. McMahon in a later written memo, clearly noted that the territorial modifications were intended to exclude Palestine and what is now Lebanon. The second condition was rejected by the Arabs and the first condition was not acted upon immediately as intended when the Allies were still trapped in Gallipoli.

In contrast, initiative of the NILI espionage group of Jewish Palestinians, led by Avshalom Feinberg and the Aaronsohn family, in providing crucial strategic information to the British in the fight with the Turks, and the organization of the volunteer Zion Mule Corps, helped win the favour of important British politicians and civil servants at this critical juncture. Further, the British felt that support for the Zionist program was necessary to influence Jews both in Russia and in the U.S.A. to stimulate enthusiasm for the war effort at a particularly critical juncture. (The Russians, for example, had suffered a series of defeats and, in response to a recent series of Russian antisemitic outbursts and pogroms, Jews of the Pale welcomed the German occupation.) When it was widely rumoured that the Germans were about to usurp the British and come out with a pro-Zionist policy, the British had an additional incentive.

But the greatest obstacle to a British pro-Zionist policy was led by anti-Zionist Jews. Edwin Montagu, the most senior Jew in Lloyd George's government, argued that Zionism threatened the role and perceived loyalty of Britons who were Jews by religion and held no other national loyalties, and would lead to a renewal of antisemitism against the 'alien' Jew. Supported by the Foreign Office, the French and American governments, Balfour argued against Montagu that assimilating Jews into England and providing a national home for Jews was no more inconsistent than Englishmen enjoying a national home while other English-

men became Americans.

The crucial motivating factor, however, overriding personal attitudes, sympathies and ideological arguments, was a unique conjunction of the long term needs and aspirations of Zionism and the urgent immediate needs of war. The British government openly declared its support to the establishment in Palestine (which included all of present day Jordan) of a national home for the Jewish people under two conditions: the *civil* and *religious* rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine and the *political* and other rights of Jews in other countries were not to be prejudiced.

Did the declaration endorse a Jewish State in Palestine? No. But the intention was clearly to endorse the idea of a Jewish Palestinian State *eventually* emerging when an administrative structure emerged and if Jews immigrated in sufficient numbers to constitute a majority of the population (minuted in the minutes of the War Cabinet of 30 October, 1917). Jews then made up 20% of the population of the whole mandate of Palestine and had constituted a majority of the population of Jerusalem since the latter half of the nineteenth century. (By 1936, at the time of the Peel Commission, and in spite of both restrictions on Jewish immigration and continuing Arab immigration into Palestine, Jews constituted 33% of the population). Arnold Toynbee's foreign office memo of December 19, 1917 was, however, more equivocal than Gilbert interprets it to be, for Toynbee and Lewis Namier (a Galician-born Jew) refer not to a majoritarian Jewish population, but an *adequate* population fit to govern the country on European democratic lines. Toynbee,

however, referring to the whole of the mandate, does argue that the Zionists 'have as much right to this no-man's land as the Arabs, or more', a position he later contradicted in the famous Herzog-Toynbee debate in interpreting the intention behind the Balfour Declaration.

The local Arabs of Palestine immediately protested and set a pattern of intemperate language by accusing the Zionists of dragging humanity into a World War to serve their own interests. Prince Feisal, on the other hand, managed to conclude an agreement of co-operation with the Zionist leadership which provided for a commission to settle the boundary between the Arab state and Palestine while preserving Muslim holy places under Muslim control and enlisting Zionist support in developing the economic resources of the Arab State. Feisal described the two movements as complementary, both national and non-imperialist with room in 'Syria' for both; he welcomed the Jews home. Since a condition of carrying out Feisal's agreement was the acquisition of Arab independence, subverted at that time by the French deposition of Feisal in 1920, but re-established in part in Iraq where Feisal was made King by the British, it is an open question whether the conditions had been fulfilled.

In general, however, in terms of explicit British undertakings to the Arabs, Gilbert clearly implies that Britain did not destroy its agreements with the Arabs but sought to fulfill them. The Arab response, however, was increasing physical and verbal violence as extremist elements took charge and moderate Arab leaders were assassinated.

How did Britain respond to the vio-

lence? By appeasement. At the same time as British-Zionist co-operation reached its pinnacle by granting the Zionists the exclusive right to develop the electric resources of Palestine and the Balfour Declaration was endorsed by the League of Nations, 1922 also witnessed the first concession to Arab violence in Sir Herbert Samuel's temporary suspension of Jewish immigration and introduction of the policy of linkage of immigration to the capacity of Palestine economically to absorb new immigrants. Herbert Samuel, a Jew, had been an early supporter of Zionist requests. But it is clear from the documents that he did not endorse the intention of the Balfour Declaration that a Jewish State should evolve in Palestine but only that a home for Jews should be established there.

The pattern of Arab and Jewish response, nevertheless, was set. The Arabs rejected negotiations with the Zionists and urged the total repeal of the Balfour Declaration. The Zionists acquiesced in the modification of the Balfour Declaration. Over the next 25 years the British retreated step by step from the Balfour Declaration, only to be met with the same absolute demands of the Arabs and further violence, while the Jews increasingly reluctantly accepted each new modification until finally the majority of Jews turned to illegal means to subvert the British policy while a minority of Jews turned to violence against the British following the White Paper of 1939 in which the Balfour Declaration was completely betrayed with the proposal to limit arbitrarily and severely Jewish immigration to Palestine with a total closure envisioned in five years; all this in the face of the perilous condition of Jews through-



out Europe.

Why did the British enter into this pattern of retreat from a clear commitment endorsed by the League of Nations? Were the Palestinian Arabs economic victims of Jewish immigration? The only evidence the 1930 Shaw Commission of Enquiry, following the Arab riots of 1929, found was the claims the Arabs made based on reproduced extracts from the discredited *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Yet that same report criticized the Zionists for departing from the 1922 regulation that immigration should be correlated with the economic capacity to absorb new immigrants. The real source of the shift in British policy does not appear to be economic, whatever the actual economic facts were, but a shift in British public opinion, noted in the report, away from the Zionists, and a desire not to alienate the newly founded Arab states and the large number of Moslems within the British Empire. A British Palestinian official, Andrews, testified before the Peel Commission that there was little evidence that Arab farmers were displaced by Jewish immigrants and, as a result of such testimony, Andrews was subsequently assassinated.

When Jewish political influence in Russia and the U.S.A. had been crucial to British war interests, before Jewish economic power in Western Europe had been undercut by the rise of Nazism,

before independent Arab states had an international voice and potential economic clout, before Moslem pressure increased, particularly in India and threatened the stability of the Empire, British politicians could regard Jews as exiles returning home. But when the humanitarian need of Jews to find a home was greatest immediately before, during and after the Second World War, Jews were again pictured as an alien race interposed into the Arab body politic, on the analogy of a germ infecting the harmony of the human body.

Sir Horace Rumbold, former Ambassador to Berlin and deputy commissioner to the Peel Commission, in questioning Churchill in 1936 raised the issue of an indigenous population subjected to the invasion of a foreign race. Though Churchill defended the Jews as returnees and not aliens, the next stage of the retreat was set with the recommendation of the Peel Commission in 1937 both to partition Palestine, reserving a mini portion as a majoritarian Jewish State, and to restrict immigration.

In the face of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany, *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi takeover of Austria and the clear Nazi ambitions over the Sudetenland, the Jews acquiesced and accepted the proposals, though demurring from the actual boundaries. The Arabs rejected the proposals and resumed their violence. The

British Cabinet moved towards the final repudiation of the Balfour Declaration and envisioned Jews as a permanent minority in Palestine with an eventual total ban on Jewish immigration. The Arabs as well as Hitler were to be appeased.

The British did not achieve their goal of appeasing the Arabs, and the cost was high: the surrender of British moral and legal authority as humanitarian concerns turned into empty rhetoric and inaction, and legal commitments became worthless. Actual and threatened violence counted for more in influencing British policy than the creative use of power in restoring the reproductive potential of Palestine by the Zionists.

Gilbert has written constitutional historiography in the genre of an epic, a struggle of Jews, contrary to all forces and odds, who, by sheer will to survive in spite of declining political and economic fortunes, forge their own State. If the Jews are the heroes of the narrative, his own countrymen are portrayed as engaged in a cowardly retreat while both parties and Arab moderates were being shot at by extremist Arabs from the sidelines. The real value of the book is Gilbert's use, against a backdrop of Jewish history, of key British political and diplomatic documents to answer a number of crucial questions about British Palestinian policy.