



## **Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England**

---

### **Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives 1917–1948**

Colin Shindler <sup>1</sup>

**How to cite:** Shindler, C. 'Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives 1917–1948.' *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2015, 47(1): 16, pp. 241–244.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2016v47.016>.

Published: 01 December 2015

---

#### **Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer review.

#### **Copyright:**

© 2015, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>, which permits re-use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2016v47.016>

#### **Open Access:**

*Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

<sup>1</sup> School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK

centres. Although the book's epilogue briefly discusses the demographic decline of south Wales Jewry throughout the twentieth century, a fuller examination of this aspect of Welsh Jewish history is needed. This is suggested by Henriques herself: "There is more to be discovered yet of the life of these people, especially during the period of the long decline" (p. ix). Moreover, contrasting the Jewish experience in Wales to its counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom would also allow us to appreciate the important role played by place in shaping British Jewish history, and shed light on the complexity and diversity of Jewish life in Britain. Despite its obvious weaknesses, *The Jews of South Wales* has provided a good basis for further enquiry into the field of Welsh Jewish history, and British Jewish history more generally.

Cai Parry-Jones

10.14324/111.444.jhs.2016v47.016

*Britain's Moment in Palestine: Retrospect and Perspectives 1917–1948*,  
Michael J. Cohen (New York and London: Routledge, 2014),  
ISBN 978-0-415-72985-7, pp. 518, £90.

This is a revelatory book, which comprehensively details Britain's contentious and anguished moment in Palestine as ruler and colonizer. In one sense this is a solid "old-fashioned" factual overview of British policy during the thirty years of the Mandate in that it revives issues that are cursorily glossed over in post-modernist literature about this period, whose authors would otherwise have to acknowledge that the servants of the British Empire and Zionist leaders did not read from the same hymn book. Neither does the central Palestinian Arab leadership between 1933 and 1945 come out of this smelling of roses – their seduction of the Nazis began shortly after Hitler's ascendancy to power in 1933.

Michael Cohen's book is unconventional in that it looks at the third side of the Israel–Palestine triangle. It examines the conflict primarily from the British side and is not simply a rendition of the evolution of the Israel–Palestine conflict from a Zionist or Arab nationalist perspective. Thus the persona of Churchill, for example, is central to this period. While sympathetic to Zionism and often hostile to Arab nationalism, he clearly placed British interests, the preservation of the Empire, and halting the advance of both fascism and Bolshevism before all else.

This work is studded with examples of the antisemitic innuendo of the inter-war British ruling class, which tried to fit the Jews into the straitjacket of the colonized – and became exasperated when the often better educated Jews refused to play the role expected of them. From the Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, to the proprietor of the Daily Mail, Lord Northcliffe, to the intelligentsia and literati, including George Orwell, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Agatha Christie, and many others, all looked upon the Jew as an alien weed planted in the garden of Western civilization. Devout Catholics like Sir Michael McDonnell, the Chief Justice in Palestine, initiated a campaign to hound the Jewish Attorney-General, Norman Bentwich, out of the country. Cohen has discovered that the private letters of Sir John Hope-Simpson were “tinged with anti-Semitism”, yet Hope-Simpson was appointed by the Foreign Office to report on land settlement development and immigration into Palestine in the aftermath of the riots and killings of 1929, known among Jews, after the letters corresponding to the Hebrew year, as *Tarpat*. He believed that the Jews in Palestine were merely the advance guard of the Communist subversion of the Empire.

Churchill plays an ambiguous role in Cohen’s narrative. He believed in the overweening power of American Jews to influence events in Washington and beyond. He detested internationalist Jews as a distinct category of Bolshevism and Jewishness, and seemingly unwittingly employed a member of the British Union of Fascists to ghost-write an article on Jews. Cohen further examines the complex nature of Churchill’s tenure in Downing Street. On the one hand, he was able to push through, against almost unanimous opposition in the cabinet (which feared the reaction of both the Arabs and the Nazis), a plan for the creation of a Jewish military division to fight the Nazis. In part, Churchill thought that this initiative would impress American Jews and facilitate the entry of the US into the war. In part, he entertained the possibility that this would release eleven battalions of the British garrison in Palestine which could then return to defend the home country against a potential Nazi invasion. On the other hand, Churchill played along with the delaying tactics of the real opponents of the Jewish Division until the crises had passed – until the USSR had entered the war and when a deep relationship had been forged with the Americans. He then offered no words of dissension when the cabinet finally cancelled the plan for a Jewish Division in October 1941.

Churchill was much more critical in his postwar writings, which, of

course, were intended for public show. In his memoirs, he was persuaded to drop the following paragraph: "All our military men disliked the Jews and loved the Arabs. General Wavell was no exception. Some of my most trusted Ministers like Lord Lloyd, and, of course, the Foreign Office, were all pro-Arab, if they were not actually anti-Semitic" (cited p. 85).

Yet during the war he bowed to Foreign Office hostility to the idea that Jews from occupied Europe should enter Palestine for fear of offending the Arab world – an often pro-German Arab world. Thus, as Henry Morgenthau Jr, the US Secretary of the Treasury, records in his diary, Churchill refused to abrogate the 1939 White Paper or to raise the ceiling on the immigration quota. This blocked the possible passage of Hungarian Jews into Palestine in August 1944, an endangered community then under recent Nazi occupation.

What Churchill's real beliefs about Jews and Zionism were remains unclear. Were they static or did they change? Was support for the Zionists merely attached to the ebb and flow of British national interests? If he was able to overrule opponents of Zionism on some occasions, why not on others?

Cohen devotes several pages to British knowledge about the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jewry, both before and after the Wannsee conference. He and others have argued that antisemitism was rife within the British establishment and that any early attempts to negotiate an exodus of Jews were frowned upon since they might result in Britain being swamped by Jewish immigrants. Cohen closely examines the refusal to bomb the railway lines to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1944. He takes issue with the accepted view that this proposition had not come within the purview of Churchill's "daily scrutiny". Cohen points out that a week after Churchill had instructed Eden "to get what you can out of the RAF", he also sent identical letters to the Archbishop of Canterbury and to Lord Melchett in which he repeated the official mantra that the killing of Jews would only be ended by a speedy victory of the Allies. But what if by then there were no longer any Jews to liberate? Cohen writes: "Had Churchill been willing in August 1944 to divert to Auschwitz-Birkenau just a handful of the RAF planes that flew to Warsaw (under his personal orders and supervision), the moral history of World War II would have been radically different" (p. 353).

The Zionists were therefore decidedly disillusioned by the war's end. The Allies may have won the war, but the Jews certainly lost it. Cohen further dissects Churchill's views after the war. In a debate in the House of

Commons on 1 August 1946, Churchill argued that “a vast dumping of the Jews of Europe into Palestine” would not solve the Jewish problem – and that the idea that the survivors should remain in the countries in which they grew up should still be entertained.

Two chapters are devoted to “The Arabs and Nazi Germany” and to the Mufti during his wartime sojourn in Berlin. This certainly adds to our knowledge as delineated by the work of scholars such as Francis Nicosia and the late Zvi Elpeleg. Cohen asks the vexed question of what would have happened if Rommel had been successful in defeating the British at El Alamein. SS Lt. Colonel Walter Rauff, an experienced exterminator of Jews, and his Einsatzgruppe were on stand-by, ready to fly to Palestine. His orders were to continue “the destruction of the Jews begun in Europe with the energetic assistance of Arab collaborators” (p. 426). Cohen points out that some eight thousand Arabs – seven thousand from Palestine – had deserted from the British forces and gone into hiding with their weapons. They waited for Rommel to arrive – but then how would they have treated the Jews of occupied Palestine? After all, the British had no plan to evacuate the Jews.

The Mufti met both Himmler and Eichmann in Berlin. The latter even gave the Mufti a detailed talk with maps and statistics about the progress made in solving the Jewish problem in Europe. Himmler agreed that once a Nazi victory had been attained in the Middle East, one of Eichmann’s aides would accompany the Mufti to Jerusalem “in order to deal with outstanding problems” (p. 425). One member of the Mufti’s staff was given a two-hour guided tour of Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the outskirts of Berlin. Cohen states that there is also unsubstantiated testimony that the Mufti visited Auschwitz, and records that such visits created “a very favourable impression” (p. 425).

Michael Cohen has written an incisive, comprehensive and controversial book that upsets both popular and academic apple carts. His factual approach notwithstanding, an impressionistic approach strongly pervades the book when factual evidence is missing. He certainly promotes the twin notions of “perfidious Albion” and the “abandonment of the Jews”. There are occasional slip-ups – Josiah Wedgwood was not “a Conservative imperialist” (p. 25) but a Labour MP. Even so, this is an important work which certainly serves up intellectual food for thought and will no doubt disturb many future students of Middle East studies.

Colin Shindler