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Remembering Lucien Wolf: reconsidering his legacy

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Lucien Wolf's inaugural address to the very first meeting of the Jewish Historical Society of England (JHSE) in November 1893 offers both an emergent moment in, as well as a thoroughly compelling case for, Anglo-Jewish history. But if we were seeking grounds for celebrating Wolf himself, arguably more important still would be the hundredth anniversary next June of the inauguration of the Minorities Treaties system at the Paris Peace Conference, in which his role as Anglo-Jewish diplomat was key. Then, again, looking ahead a few more years to a further centenary event, we might equally wish to be reminded of Wolf's elevation to the presidency of the advisory committee of the League of Nations High Commission for Refugees, a committee of which he had been a co-founder and a role he was only denied from practising due to his death in August 1930.

Wolf's multifaceted career and interests go on receiving intriguing mentions in scholarly publications, year in year out, especially in relation to things Jewish and diplomatic, or sometimes in the broader field of human rights. Recent reference to his efforts as the secretary of the Joint Foreign Committee interceding with the Greek government on behalf of the Jews of Salonika, after the catastrophic 1917 fire which displaced the vast majority of their working population, as also of his unofficial postwar visits to Warsaw, Bucharest, and Prague seeking to uphold the minority guarantees required of none too enamoured national governments, are small reminders of how Wolf's diplomatic work was of international significance to the very end of his life. Yet still he has no full, well-rounded biography.

Personally – as someone who wrote not a biography *per se* but an exposition of his Great War diplomacy – I cannot help feeling that Wolf deserves better. A foreign affairs journalist of the front rank, whose regular *Daily Graphic* and *Fortnightly Review* columns on the pre-Great War chancelleries of Europe were avidly consumed not least by those

same chancelleries; head of a British, Jewish foreign affairs unit, professionalized as such by him and which, at its 1914–19 climacteric, was a major protagonist in the shaping of modern Jewish, European, and Middle Eastern history; co-founder of the JHSE and, as Cecil Roth proposed, the first serious exponent of Anglo-Jewish history, Wolf was an authentic product of that energetic Victorian era where having a positive goal was the aim – “fighting the good fight”, as he often put it – and achieving the reward. Perhaps today that makes Wolf sound altogether too one-dimensionally Whiggish. It is true that as the son of Central European emigrés from the 1848 springtime of peoples, Wolf from an early age was imbued with the spirit of democratic liberalism which looked forward to the defeat of obscurantism, antisemitism, and xenophobia everywhere. Religious freedom and tolerance of the stranger would follow on the back of a more general societal progress, enabling Jews as other minorities to assimilate, take their rightful place within the public sphere, and make their full contribution to the common weal. Although most decidedly European by dint of background, schooling in Brussels, fluency in German and French, not to say a frequent visitor to a Wiesbaden ophthalmologist for his failing eyesight, Wolf held Britain, nevertheless, as the model par excellence. One can implicitly read this optimistic, confident, expansive, even imperially romantic outlook in his JHSE address, much of his own historical writing, especially on Sephardi synergies with the Cromwellian Commonwealth, as indeed into his initial forays into Jewish issues abroad, on behalf of the patrician Anglo Jewish Association and then the hardly less patrician Conjoint Foreign Committee (CJC).

Yet by the *fin-de-siècle*, the world had not just changed but darkened. With political antisemitism on the rise, waves of Jewish immigration from Russia and Romania seemingly relentless, even the geopolitics of the era a subject for consternation, Wolf’s sympathies for Germany and Austria-Hungary and his journalistic denunciation of Russian pogroms – at the very time that Whitehall was moving towards an Anglo-Russian entente – made him a much less welcome visitor or confidante of a once friendly Foreign Office (FO). New realities demanded more pragmatic approaches to which Wolf clearly rose to the challenge. To be sure, he was hardly alone. His fellow literati in the Maccabeans as in the JHSE – Israel Zangwill, Louis Greenberg, Joseph Cowen, at one slight remove Moses Gaster, among others – all had their own opinions and recipes for responding to crisis, while often sparring openly and dissonantly with

one another. Wolf was no less or more a controversialist than the others, raising eyebrows too from his “Cousinhood” patrons when for instance he became an early if ephemeral supporter of Herzl and some years later an initial co-founder with Zangwill of the Jewish Territorial Association (ITO). It was not then that Wolf lost his enthusiasm for Jewish rights nor was this anything in his mind but part and parcel of a universal struggle for emancipation. It is perfectly clear in my mind that if Wolf were alive today he would be providing expert testimony on the fate of the Rohingyas, the Uighurs, the Yezidi, speaking out for all the dispossessed peoples of the world everywhere. Significantly, in a sharp private exchange with Zangwill during the Great War, Wolf wrote “Principle: if the Zionists establish themselves in Palestine it must be on the basis of justice and fair play. Expediency: if we evict Arabs, anti-semites in Europe will evict Jews.” For Wolf, Jewish matters were universal matters, Jewish suffering, people suffering.

If these universalist traits, however, were common currency among his JHSE peer group, what made Wolf stand out was both the level of foreign affairs expertise he could muster in defence of Jewish rights abroad and the ability to deploy it, tactically, even strategically, in what amounted to extremely unfavourable circumstances. At the outset of the Great War, the entente with Russia ensured that the last thing the FO wanted to hear about was the increasingly perilous plight of Russian Jews. And Wolf was personally in trouble, having lost almost the entirety of his journalistic work following open – though totally calumnious – newsprint accusations that he was in the pay of Wilhelmstrasse. The major paradox of this moment is the way – albeit effectively subsidized by the CJC’s two presidents, Claude Goldsmid Montefiore and David Lindo Alexander, to run the committee and prepare for it an Anglo-Jewish foreign policy agenda for the expected peace conference – Wolf sought to turn the tables on the FO by “playing” the Jewish card in order to win the United States for the Allied cause. This in a nutshell is where the great controversy over the origins of the Balfour Declaration began. It was neither Chaim Weizmann nor Herbert Samuel who got the FO not just interested but active on Palestine. Instead, it was Wolf who in proposing a non-Zionist “formula” in March 1916 for British support for Jewish settlements there sought to convince the FO of the propaganda value of such a public announcement with US Jewish voters. To be sure, this suggests that, like Weizmann, Wolf was prepared to play to widely held elite notions of not just international

Jewish solidarity but actual tangible Jewish power – where it otherwise did not exist. Later, indeed, Wolf's study *The Jewish Bogey and the Forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1920) confirmed the degree to which he fully understood the calumny of an international Jewish conspiracy and how it operated. If this was undoubtedly for Wolf, as for Weizmann, a dangerous game playing for the highest stakes, the complication in Wolf's case is that Palestine was no more than an opening gambit, effectively a subterfuge by which to steer the FO towards more concerted support for Russian Jewish rights. With hindsight, one can probably read it as a little too clever by half. And not surprisingly, once the "formula" became common knowledge within the British Zionist camp, accusations of betrayal were manifold. The great irony is that Wolf's incipient manoeuvre paved the path by which Weizmann, the apparently authentic voice of Russian Zionism within Britain, was approached by Sir Mark Sykes, the authentic driver of the Balfour Declaration. Their alliance also ensured that whatever press Wolf received thereafter for his role in the affair would be always negative.

If one might argue, then, that one of the key reasons that Wolf has never received the serious historical treatment he has deserved is because of his sullied reputation as both *agent provocateur* and then failed saboteur of the November 1917 declaration by the British government on Palestine, perhaps it is high time that that momentous event itself is put into a wider historical context. Not least because instead of Wolf's diplomatic career coming to an abrupt end at this point it actually cleared the decks for him to pursue the more immediate and vastly more urgent issue which was impacting not just the vast majority of Jews but also vast swathes of other Eastern and Central European peoples – the shatter-zoning of empires and their replacement by nation-states. The way this new dispensation pitted homogenizing state builders with their monocultural agendas against a plethora of marginalized ethnic groups who henceforth became almost by definition problematic "minorities" on one level should not have disturbed a Wolf versed in the merits of assimilation. It was his recognition that the latter could not suffice to protect vulnerable minority groups – in part garnered through his observation of the realities of the 1912–13 Balkan wars and more keenly through tutoring by his Russian Jewish adviser, David Mowschowitch – which led him instead to reformulate the now Joint Foreign Committee peace agenda to include guaranteed rights of cultural autonomy as well as political citizenship for all minorities. Wolf, in other words, in pursuing a path acknowledging the need for

“group rights” in nation-states, not only broke with the historic Anglo-Jewish assimilationist narrative but also put himself in the camp of those, like Raphael Lemkin (later advocate of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention), who disputed that paper offers of national “equality before the law”, or charters of human rights alone, could ensure the well-being, survival, and security of marginalized ethnic and religious minorities.

Again there is to be sure an irony. Wolf’s efforts to create a *rapprochement* between himself and members of the British delegation to the Paris Peace conference, in order to press the urgency of this case, did ultimately lead to a breakthrough. And Wolf himself in his still lamentably yet to be published “Paris Peace Conference diary” was aware that his critical role behind the scenes in formulating what became the Minorities Treaties, constituted his finest hour. Yet if Wolf had an eye to posterity in recording the fact, the truth is that the Minorities Treaties, like the League of Nations which was meant to oversee their implementation, were casualties not simply of the interwar blast of totalitarianism but a more general *sacro egoismo* of a Western-led international system of emerging nation-states. In this sense, Wolf’s 1919 victory was a pyrrhic one. The struggle against minorities infringement as the struggle for the rights of refugees became one of long-term retreat, even before the advent of Nazism. After the Second World War there was no return to the Minorities system.

Does that ultimately leave us with a figure stranded like an antediluvian crab on a receding shoreline; a tribute to the good old days of Anglo-Jewish “humanitarian” pull in the corridors of power; to the notion perhaps of a “Great” British-Jewish synergy historically and contemporaneously at home and – à la Cromwell, Palmerston, and Disraeli – abroad but in every other sense out of synchrony with the harsh, unforgiving realities of the twentieth century? It is certainly true that Wolf’s initial, roseate enthusiasm for a future shaped and determined by a British-led liberal system had to be vastly tempered by Whitehall’s alliance with tsarism at the high-water mark of the latter’s antisemitic reaction, moderated further to the realities of mass Russian Jewish immigration in the era of the Aliens Act, and then finally recalibrated to the urgency of countering the national chauvinism of the post-1919 era. Nor could Wolf’s reasoned analysis of the “Jewish Bogey” hold back the floodgates of hate and violence. In these terms, Wolf was undoubtedly “yesterday’s man”. Yet what precisely does that mean? In our troubled contemporaneity, Wolf’s vision of a Britain, a Europe, a wider international order, founded on an

inclusive citizenship, respect for multicultural difference, and the rights of asylum are surely not so old hat as to be utterly risible. It is surely time for a proper reassessment of this multifaceted Anglo-Jewish treasure.