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Palestine: How Bad, & Good, Was British Rule?

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Avishai Margalit

Out of Palestine: The Making of Modern Israel
by Hadara Lazar
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The British rule over Palestine lasted roughly thirty years, from 1917 until 1948. In a country that has three thousand years of recorded history, thirty years is a tiny fraction. If we conceive of three thousand years on a scale of one day, the period of British rule takes barely eight minutes. In comparison, Turkish Ottoman rule over Palestine, which lasted four hundred years, takes an hour and forty minutes. Yet the influence of these thirty years was deep and wide-ranging.[1] Under British rule, Palestine became a political unit, not a marginal province of something else. The British made Jerusalem the capital city of Palestine; they introduced the idea of professional civil service, and they encouraged a lively civil society; they built roads and airfields, and provided sound legal institutions and reliable police.

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The King David Hotel in Jerusalem, headquarters of the British Mandate Administration, after it was bombed by the Irgun paramilitary group, July 22, 1946

The legal frame for British rule was based on a mandate conferred on Britain by the League of Nations. It was meant to be a transitory trusteeship so as to prepare the country to be a "national home for the Jews," without "impairing the civil and religious rights of the indigenous Arab people." This contradictory task is at the heart of the story of the British Mandate. It is this mandate of the League of Nations that makes us call the political and military rule of the British over Palestine "The Mandate." And it's the Mandate that revived the old term "Palestine" (already used by Herodotus in his writings) to describe the area between the

Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Before then the Ottomans divided the region into their own units, including, for example, the "Sanjak of Jerusalem."

The Mandate didn't provide collective liberty—namely, political independence. It didn't provide for elections for local administrations that would ultimately be under British control. But it did provide a great deal of personal freedom. Following the Ottoman Empire's Millet system, the Mandate left a great deal of internal autonomy to the various religious communities to conduct their life.

Hadara Lazar has written a remarkable book dedicated not so much to the British Mandate as to some of the people who were strongly involved with it. The book first appeared in Hebrew in 1990, under the telling title *The Mandatorians: The Land of Israel 1940–1948*, and has now been published in English under the rather misleading title *Out of Palestine: The Making of Modern Israel*. It consists of interviews with British, Jews, and Arabs who recount life in Palestine under the British Mandate in its last eight years.

In the heart of my childhood neighborhood in Jerusalem, so evocatively sketched by my kindergarten mate Amos Oz, stood a British garrison. On May 15, 1948, the British soldiers evacuated their barracks and went home. Jews and Arabs in Palestine were left to their own devices—the devices of a bitter war. It was a war dubbed by the two sides according to its outcome for each community: the Jews called it the "War of Independence" and the Arabs called it *Nakba*—catastrophe. The nearby British garrison, which was located in a former Lutheran orphanage, underwent a visible change: no more Scots with kilts marching to the sound of bagpipe music; no more "primrose" paratroopers with their red berets; no more perfumed soldiers with George VI hairlines; and no more curfews on our unruly neighborhood.

The Brits had gone. If the military presence of the British Mandate was very visible in my childhood neighborhood, there were hardly any contacts with the civilian side of the British administration. Even as a child I could detect a nasty tone of voice when someone was mentioned as working for the Mandate, but it wasn't as harsh as when a young woman had a British officer for a lover. She was never mentioned by her name but only as *zoti, zoti* ("this one, this one").

After the war we moved to a neighborhood that used to be the stronghold of the British civil administration. Our next-door neighbors looked familiar, in their shorts, blue shirts, open sandals, and deep suntans. They were part of a commune of kibbutz members

serving as "missionaries" in one of the socialist youth movements at the time. But the Jewish neighbor next to them looked different, utterly different. He wore a suit and a tie even on the hottest days of the year and his collection of suits was wide and varied, but his collection of gloves was even more astonishing. One day I overheard two of the kibbutzniks nattering about our exceptionally well groomed neighbor. He is a "Mandatory type," said one. Yes, yes, totally "Levantine," said the other.

I rushed to my mother for a social gloss. She gave a sanitized account of these two expressions. Well, she said, he is from Halab (Aleppo) and Halab is, so to speak, the northern capital of the Levant so that's why he speaks such good French and, needless to say, Arabic. So much for the "Levantine." As for the "Mandatory type," she added, on top of French and Arabic he speaks English fluently, and already worked as a chief receptionist at the King David Hotel during the Mandate. This explains the way he dresses. Finally, she said, the kibbutzniks probably meant that he is not an *Undzerer*. My mother could never refrain from inserting into her Hebrew this Yiddish expression, which means: he is "not one of us." From very early on, therefore, I had to grasp that "Mandatory type" is, in the exasperating cliché of today, "The Other."

In her book Lazar succeeds in turning the Mandatory types into actual persons with stories to tell. Some of those interviewed in Lazar's book weren't receptionists in the King David Hotel, but rather its quintessential clients. This is what Nasser al-Din al-Nashashibi, who worked in the Arab Office in the last years of the British Mandate and became in the 1950s the editor of the Cairo-based newspaper *Al-Gomhuria*, tells Lazar: "I don't know whether a day passed in which I was away from the King David." He adds: "It was my favorite place, the best hotel in the Middle East, it was paradise. It was very clean, very snobbish, and my headquarters. I had my hair cut there, my drinks there. I met my friends there, foreign friends, visitors too."

Gabriel Zifroni, a correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* in the 1940s and later the editor of the Hebrew daily *Haboker* (and a rather ironic right-wing Zionist), tells her: "When the British asked, 'Gaby, where were you born?' I used to say, 'Born in Tel Aviv. Educated in the King David.'" For him, the King David Hotel "was the gathering place between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans."

Indeed, the King David is a beautiful hotel built in the 1930s of "red-rose" stones, in contrast to the "saintly-grey" stones of Jerusalem. The southern wing of the hotel was rented by the British to accommodate the chief secretariat of the British Mandate Administration. On July 22, 1946, the Irgun paramilitary group, headed by Menachem

Begin, blew up the southwestern corner of the hotel, killing ninety-one people—a mélange of Jews, British, and Arabs working to carry out the Mandate. There was more to the British Mandate than the King David Hotel, of course, but having tea at the King David became for some Mandate employees what dipping the madeleine in tea became for Proust: a wellspring of involuntary memories.

The term "nostalgia" was coined by a Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, in a dissertation submitted to Basel University in 1688. It was meant to be used as a medical term to describe a depressed mood caused by intense longing to return home. The disease was noticed among Swiss mercenary soldiers yearning to return from flat Europe to their Alpine mountainous perches. Just over two hundred years after Hofer coined the term in Basel, the first Zionist congress was convened there with the idea that Jews should return home and satisfy the old exilic longing to return to Eretz Yisrael—the Land of Israel in Palestine. Indeed, the metaphor of homecoming (*nostos*) is the metaphor that formed Zionism.

Baron Martin Charteris, who was the head of British Military Intelligence in Palestine between 1945 and 1946, tells Lazar: "The Jews were united in their passion to return to Palestine, something pushed them there." But at the same time, he acknowledges: "In a certain way the Arabs belonged there more than the Jews. Most of the Jews came from outside, not so?" When Charteris tries to account for what that "something" was that pushed the Jews to Israel, he finds that it was the "romantic element" of the Zionist idea. "The Arabs, too, are a romantic people," he says.

Romanticism is, to borrow Shelley's description of love, "one word…too often profaned." The baron may have found it to be the antonym of "calculated," "prudent," "bourgeois," or "emotionally detached." He may have also meant it as an idealistic aspiration, with a fine disregard for reality.

The Zionists' yearning for homecoming was to a place where they believed Jews had once led authentic, independent, and pristine lives, of simplicity and purity: a pastoral kind of life, with the golden city Jerusalem as its center. They were clueless about the landscape of Palestine before they arrived, and they projected onto it the landscape they knew from Europe, much like Flemish painters located the return of the holy family to or from Egypt in a bluish, mountainous Renaissance setting.

Meron Benvenisti stresses in *The Dream of the White Sabra*, his insightful new book (available only in Hebrew), the almost erotic attitude the Palestinians had toward the

landscape of Palestine—a landscape that was lost.[2] This lost landscape is more important for many Palestinians than the lost community. Indeed, landscape is the main character in their nostalgic tale. I am always struck, whenever I meet the dwindling number of Palestinians who remember life in Palestine before 1948, by how often one hears how sweet the figs in Palestine once tasted; how delicious the apricots were in season. This intense intimacy with the pre-1948 landscape of Palestine resonates strongly with the Jewish natives of pre-1948—the landscape Canaanites, if you will—like Lazar and Benvenisti.

Pre-1948 memories became part of the heritage of the two communities, and they figured strongly in the struggle between them. The olive tree became a cliché to describe the rural land and its traditions and the intense sense of loss became couched in the abstract language of rights as the "right of return." Both Lazar and Benvenisti try to touch on the raw reality that existed before the phrase "right of return" was buried by hackneyed expressions and abstractions.

If Jews and Arabs were as romantic as the British baron depicted them, then romanticism has a bitter lesson to teach them because, more than anything, romanticism is about the tragic failure of "homecoming." For Homer, a successful return home was still a possibility. Agamemnon's homecoming from Troy ends with him being killed by his wife's lover; but Odysseus was still a man of Ithaca. Moreover, his wedding bed, rooted in a growing olive tree, remained intact, as did his faithful wife, Penelope. But a certain kind of romanticism tells us that there are no successful returns. Despite the wanderer's acute longing for home as a place of redemption and spiritual salvation, in reality he cannot step into the same place twice—home is not the same and neither is he.

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym draws a useful distinction between "restorative" nostalgia and "reflective" nostalgia.[3] Restorative nostalgia concentrates on the *nostos*—returning to the lost home; while reflective nostalgia concentrates on the *algos*—the longing and the sense of loss. Zionist nostalgia transformed the Jewish nostalgia derived from religion and exile from the reflective to the restorative. The Palestinians whom Lazar interviewed and for whom the memory of lost Palestine was still a memory had what seems to me a reflective nostalgia.

How did the British administrators view the two sides when they returned home to Britain? Sir Harold Beeley, who was, among other things, a Middle East adviser to then Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and who, like his boss, was a staunch anti-Zionist, tells Lazar: "The majority of people who went to Palestine when it was under British rule

went on the whole with sympathy for the Zionists, who were progressive, modern, European, and came home with sympathy for the Arabs." He added:

> I suppose they thought that the Arabs were the indigenous people and that the Jewish claim was historically not terribly convincing. This is the big divide. The Jewish people on the whole take the connection with Palestine for granted. They regard it as a basic truth that it is wrong to challenge.

I think this description of a shift is an accurate assessment of what happened to most British high officials, with one glaring exception noted by Beeley himself: Richard Crossman. Crossman was one of the most articulate leftist intellectuals of the Labour Party and a minister of housing in Harold Wilson's government in the 1960s. At the time he was perhaps the most important member of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which examined the situation in Palestine in 1946. "Crossman was a friend of mine," says Beeley. "He set off without strong feelings for either side, and he came off rather a convinced Zionist. What converted him was, I don't think it was the camps, what determined Crossman's final attitude was the kibbutzim, the socialist character of the Jewish community."

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1. 1
   I cite Sir Harold Beeley's testimony as it appears in the Hebrew version of Hadara Lazar's book. ↩
2. 2
   Halom Hatzabar Halavan (Jerusalem: Keter, 2012). ↩
3. 3
   Basic Books, 2001. ↩