Books

# Review: "Churchill's Promised Land"

*Zionism and Statecraft*, by Michael Makovsky (Yale University Press).

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Winston Churchill and Herbert Samuel, high commissioner of Palestine, walking toward the site of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, March 1921. (Courtesy of Central Zionist Archives)

**Winston Churchill** is not usually regarded as one of the leading British statesmen responsible for Britain's backing of the Zionist movement and the resurrection of the Jewish national home. The names of Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, who authored the Balfour Declaration, or his prime minister, David Lloyd George, more readily come to mind. Indeed, Churchill, who in the early 1920s became colonial secretary,

is more associated with the 1922 decision to cut off 75 percent of the territory of British Palestine from the proposed Jewish national home to create Transjordan, in order to give the Hashemite dynasty from Arabia a consolation prize of sorts after their loss of Syria to the French.

Michael Makovsky helps dispel this perception of Churchill in his highly readable *Churchill's Promised Land: Zionism and Statecraft*. He discloses how Churchill already expressed his support for restoring Jewish nationhood in Palestine in 1908, nine years before it became British policy. In a written message to the English Zionist Federation in Manchester, which was read aloud in his absence, Churchill in fact wrote: "I am in full sympathy with the historical traditional aspirations of the Jews."

Churchill opposed the idea of seeking an alternative Jewish homeland in East Africa, which was under consideration in certain Jewish circles at the time, and instead focused on Palestine, even while it was still formally part of the Ottoman Empire. He concluded his 1908 remarks as follows: "Jerusalem must be the only ultimate goal. When it will be achieved it is vain to prophesy; but that it will some day be achieved is one of the few certainties of the future."

Churchill's Zionism did not come out of a vacuum. Like others in his era, he became a believer in Jewish restorationism - reestablishing the Jewish people as a sovereign nation. His father, Randolph Churchill, was cut from the same philoSemitic cloth, championing Jewish rights in his public addresses. Both were inspired by the great British Conservative leader and former prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, who, though born into a Jewish family, was baptized as a child and became a member of the Church of England.

Disraeli visited Jerusalem in 1831 and later wrote a novel about a Baghdadi Jew who dreams of leading his people back to Jerusalem to restore their "national existence." It was a time when Lord Palmerston, the British foreign secretary, was pressing the Ottoman sultan to allow the Jews to return to Palestine. Makovsky delves into this history to better understand the milieu in which both Churchills received their political education, for after DisraeliÕs death in 1881, Randolph Churchill tried to claim his political mantle.

As Makovsky details, Winston Churchill was fully aware of the Randolph ChurchillÐDisraeli political connection. Protesting the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia

in 1905, Winston Churchill would cite Disraeli with the remark: "The Lord deals with the nations as the nations deal with the Jews." This was a double-edged comment promising difficulties for nations that would oppress their Jewish populations, as well as a blessing for those that would defend them.

Churchill's story recapitulates a whole school of thought that was prevalent in the early 20th century in England that would provide the eventual political support for the rise of the Zionist movement. After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the First World War, the League of Nations approved the mandate for Palestine based on the Balfour Declaration's support for creating a Jewish homeland.

The Palestine mandate gave recognition to "the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine." It did not create a new national right, but rather acknowledged a preexisting right that was broadly accepted in international circles within the League of Nations at the time. Although Makovsky does not specifically deal with the legal background of how the Palestine mandate was drafted, it becomes clear when reading his work how British diplomats would come to adopt this kind of language.

In fact, in June 1922 Churchill would declare that the Jews had returned to Palestine "as of right and not by sufferance, and that this was based on their ancient historical connection." Speaking before the Peel Commission years later in 1937, Churchill snapped at a commission member who referred to the Jews in Palestine as a "foreign race." For Churchill, the Jewish people were the true indigenous population of the land: "The Jews had Palestine before that indigenous population [the Arabs] came in and inhabited it."

Anyone reading Makovsky's book who thinks that Churchill backed the rise of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine because of his concerns with protecting the British Empire's strategic interests will be surprised. In some Western academic circles, where the rise of the Zionist movement is seen as a manifestation of Western imperialism, it is just assumed that Britain's motivation for sustaining its wartime support for the Balfour Declaration in the interwar years came out of imperial calculations: Britain sought to safeguard the approaches to its imperial jewel, India, which required control of the Suez Canal in the west, Cape Town in the south, Singapore in the east, and Palestine along the eastern Mediterranean.

But in the 1920s, when Churchill was Britain's colonial secretary, his primary consideration was finding ways of containing the expansion of the newly formed Soviet Union. Initially he even opposed the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and eventually focused on strengthening British-Turkish ties for the same reason. He was hardly enthusiastic about Britain assuming new imperial responsibilities in the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire.

Makovsky explains how Churchill wrote in 1920 to Lloyd George: "You are up against a shocking bill for Mesopotamia, Palestine & Persia. More will have to be spent in these countries next year than the Navy is demanding to save our sea supremacy." His view was summarized a year earlier when he insisted that, "The need of national economy is such that we ought to endeavor to concentrate our resources on developing our existing Empire instead of dissipating them in new enlargements."

It becomes clear, reading Makovsky, that for Churchill a peace treaty with post-Ottoman Turkey was Britain's paramount Middle Eastern interest. Had the new Turkish state not relinquished sovereignty over its former Arab provinces and created a vacuum for the claims of various national movements, one wonders how Churchill's whole view of the Zionist enterprise would have changed. Still, what emerges from Makovsky is that Churchill never lost his fundamental sympathy with the restoration of Jewish sovereignty. Enraged at the Attlee-Bevin government's hostility toward the new state, he declared in the House of Commons in 1948 that Israel's independence was "an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective, not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand or even three thousand years."

Realpolitik tempered many of Churchill's public statements, but never diluted his faith in Israel's cause.

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