

Report

Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel and Palestine: Background and Legacy

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 25 July 2024, with Dr Peter Shambrook

Report by Nicholas Alderton

The 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israeli communities and military bases resulted in the murder of nearly 1,200 people and kickstarted a devastating war in the region. The war has seen accusations of genocide and other war crimes levelled at both sides, with Israel bearing the brunt of these accusations due to its continued subjugation of the Palestinian people and its refusal to allow its actions to be scrutinised by foreign press or the international community. The current war is the latest chapter in a deadly conflict that has been flaring up since the creation of Israel in 1948 and, following the 1967 Six-Day War, the continued Israeli occupation and expansion into former Arab Palestinian land.

However, the 1948 creation of Israel did not start the conflict. In fact, this all began at least thirty years before, as a result of British diplomacy. More specifically, the roots of the conflict(s) can be seen in the decisions made during the First World War and those of the Liberal-led wartime coalition government, which was determined to win the war by any means necessary. Accordingly, the question posed to the

Liberal Democrat History Group's guest speaker, Dr Peter Shambrook, at our meeting in July 2024 was: 'Historically, to what extent did the Liberal Party contribute to the present nightmare in the Middle East, and particularly the Israel/Palestine conflict?'

Dr Shambrook gained his PhD in Modern Middle Eastern History from the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Cambridge. He has held positions at the British-Arab University Association, Durham University and the Centre of Lebanese Studies in Oxford. He is now an independent scholar and historical consultant to the Balfour Project. His latest book is *Policy of Deceit: Britain and Palestine, 1914–1939*. The talk was ably chaired by Layla Moran MP. Layla is of Palestinian descent and still has extended family members in Gaza, many of whom have been caught up in the conflict.

Shambrook began his talk with what would turn out to be his conclusion, namely that 'the hundred year war for the control of Palestine – that we are still witnessing – started in London, in 10 Downing Street and Whitehall, during the First World War.' Britain's policies could only be

'understood in the context of its relations with other Great Powers ...' when '..."trading" territories and colonies, and dividing buffer states into zones of influence was normal Great Power diplomacy'. When the war started in 1914, there was no plan as to how the Ottoman Empire's Arabian territories would be dealt with after its defeat. General Kitchener saw a role for an Arabian Raj, styled on England's relationship with India, whilst others wanted the area to be little more than an adjunct to India. Asquith, Prime Minister until 1916, was reluctant to take more territory for the British Empire but, if other countries were to stake a claim, then he did not want to miss out.

This indecisiveness had begun to change by early 1915, with Britain promising the French that they could have Palestine. In October 1915, Britain then agreed that the Arabs, via Sharif Hussein of Mecca, could have it as part of a wider Arab state. In 1916, it was then promised that the French, via the Sykes-Picot Agreement, could have a role in Palestine, which would be governed under an Anglo-French arrangement. Then, in 1917, Britain promised Palestine to the global Jewish

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community. Shambrook argued that these promises were made because of Britain's desire to win the war and appease her allies. The 1915 promise to Sharif Hussein, which was reneged on when Britain made the promise to the Jewish community in 1917, would lay the foundations for the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Sharif Hussein was promised the land in exchange for leading a revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which he duly began in June 1916. After Lloyd George took over as Prime Minister in December 1916, the government began to move away from its previous stance and started conversations with Chaim Weizmann, the Russian-born leader of the Zionist Organisation, and other Zionists. These conversations would ultimately lead to the November 1917 Balfour Declaration, a public statement promising the establishment of a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine. As Shambrook explained, the Declaration may have been issued in the name of Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, but it was the result of many individuals including the Herbert Samuel (Liberal MP and leader of the Liberal Party 1931–35), Chaim Weizmann, Leo D. Brandeis, Lord Milner, General Jan Smuts, Leo Amery and William Ormsby-Gore – 'in prove-nance, the Declaration was a joint Anglo-Zionist initiative'.

The next part of the talk focused on the peace arrangements

after the war and Shambrook went into some detail about how the Great Powers divided up the Ottoman territories. Britain's administration of Palestine began in 1918; it was officially awarded Palestine, along with Iraq, in 1920. The choice of Palestine's Governor was a foregone conclusion, as Lloyd George, Weizmann and Sir Herbert Samuel had met in December 1918, at which the offer was made to Samuel, a committed Zionist. Samuel took over in 1920 and ran Palestine as a 'Crown colony style administration – an inflexible dictatorship – and arbitrarily passed hundreds of laws during his five-year rule of Palestine'.

Shambrook explained, under the Ottomans, Palestinians had enjoyed a traditional style of government, with political parties, taxes, newspapers, schools and a judiciary. These systems were quickly eroded by Samuel's rule. While most of the Palestinian land was owned by the Palestinian Arabs, many of the new laws that Samuel passed saw an increasing dispossession of Arab tenant farmers. Samuel's priority was 'to create the conditions, political, legal and . . . economic necessary for the Zionists themselves to carry on their work'. Furthermore, Samuel actively encouraged the creation of the Jewish state through increased Jewish immigration, a language act that made Hebrew an official language and the recognition of the Va'ad Leumi (the Jewish

National Council) as a representative Jewish body in Palestine. At the same time, the British refused to accept the legitimacy of an Arab Executive that claimed to represent the views of the majority. Lloyd George and Balfour informed Weizmann that 'by the Balfour Declaration they always meant an eventual Jewish state'. Even the British Mandate for the administration of Palestine, which was ratified by the League of Nations on 22 July 1922, was contradictory. It called for a Jewish national home while instructing the 'Mandatory Power, Britain, to prepare Palestine for self-government'.

Shambrook ended his talk by examining how the actions of the Liberal government, which came to an end in 1922, shaped British policy for the next century. The Liberals' (in particular, Lloyd George's and Samuel's), insistence on a Jewish homeland 'unambiguously painted all future Conservative and Labour governments into a corner'. These policies led to the mass immigration of Jewish people into Palestine during the mid-1930s, fleeing Nazi persecution, and the Palestinian Arab revolt that started in 1936 as a direct consequence of this immigration and continued British rule. Between 1936 and 1939, the revolt was brutally suppressed; it was disturbing to hear that water-boarding was being used 60 years before the Iraq invasion. Shambrook described the 1948

British withdrawal from Palestine as akin to Pontius Pilate washing his hands.

In conclusion, Shambrook was damning of Britain's historical role. There had been no acknowledgement, by successive governments, of the role that Britain had played in its 'one-sided, often deceitful Mandate policies, which led inevitably to the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948'. Since 1967, British governments had been focused on the special relationship with the USA, arms sales, intelligence-sharing and oil security. At the date of the talk in July 2024, there had been very little criticism of Israel. Shambrook believed ultimately that there would be meaningful negotiations to end the conflict.

Responding to a question on why Britain did not recognise

the rights of the Arab Christians, Shambrook argued that the British did not see Palestine as being made up of one people but of different sects and religions. Layla Moran disagreed with the British attitude, pointing out that in Palestine, you are Palestinian first and your religion is secondary. This is why the dismissal of the Palestinian delegation was so egregious – they were Palestinians and did not differentiate between themselves.

Moran was encouraged by the fact that the 2024 Liberal Democrat position on Palestine had been carefully developed over many years, had not split the party and had not been watered down in the election manifesto. She was heartened by Foreign Secretary David Lammy's change of tone, compared to the previous government.

Shambrook's talk was an eye-opener and well worth listening to in full. As both he and Moran argued, history viewed in the region is very different from the history we are taught in Britain. Shambrook was adamant that Britain needs to face up to its historical role and its part in the continued history of Palestine and Israel. Like so many aspects of British Imperialism, an honest conversation needs to happen.

Dr Nicholas Alderton is Deputy Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History* and a committee member of the Lloyd George Society. His first book, *Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberal Party 1962–79*, will be published in 2025.

The recording of the meeting is available at <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/lloyd-george-herbert-samuel-and-palestine-background-and-legacy/>

Reviews

A Prime Minister's Love Affair

Robert Harris, *Precipice* (Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024)

Review by Alan Mumford

This journal would not usually review a novel, but this book is accompanied by assertions about Venetia Stanley which may be taken as fact by some readers of the book and accompanying interviews.

Robert Harris has received justified praise for his historical novels on political personalities – Cicero, Dreyfus, the Cromwellian regicides and an anonymised version of Tony Blair. *Precipice* is based primarily

on more than 600 letters H.H. Asquith, Liberal Prime Minister 1908–16, wrote to Venetia Stanley, a young woman of the landed upper class. These are supplemented by letters she exchanged with Edwin