

Britain, Palestine and the Liberal Party

Peter Shambrook, *The Policy of Deceit: Britain and Palestine, 1914–1939* (OneWorld Publications, 2024)

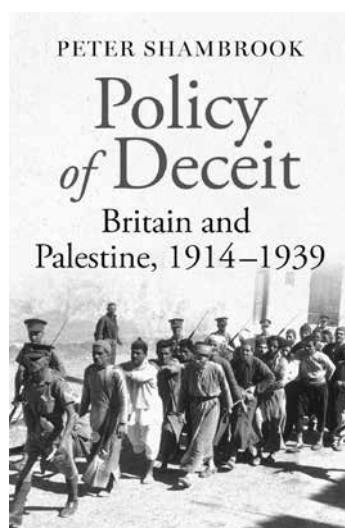
Review by Eugenio Biagini

This widely-acclaimed study offers a critical analysis – or an indictment – of the British Empire’s role in the making of the modern Middle East. The relevant policies were initiated by Liberal governments or governments led by David Lloyd George. Prominent Liberal politicians, including Winston Churchill and Archibald Sinclair, continued to be actively involved in shaping the future of the region well until the Second World War. This in itself justifies our reviewing of the book in this journal. The main question at the heart of *The Policy of Deceit* is whether or not successive British governments were in good faith when they claimed that they had never meant to include Palestine within the Arab state promised to Sharif Hussein of Mecca, in exchange for his support for the war effort. The British government has refused to publish the full documentation behind the negotiations, but Shambrook insists that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Palestine had indeed been promised to the Arabs in 1915. However, from as early as 1917, successive ministers and officials equivocated on the terms of the original agreement in an attempt to establish the claim

(famously articulated by Lord Balfour in his eponymous Declaration) that Palestine would provide ‘a national home for the Jewish people’. Hence the ‘deceit’ in the title. Apart from the author’s repeated attempts to dismiss the views of the historians with whom he disagrees on the basis of their Israeli or Jewish backgrounds (e.g. p.6), which is not an argument, the book offers sufficient solid evidence ‘that the Sharif was indeed entitled to conclude from the correspondence [with British officials] ... that the Palestine region was included by the latter as within the area assigned for Arab independence’ (p.9).

One may question whether the British – or anyone else – had the power to dispose of land not theirs on the basis of more-or-less secret negotiations with non-recognised leaders of foreign movements. However, such agreements were frequently made in the nineteenth century and during or after the First World War – and were often regarded as ‘treaties’. In any case, the real point is that, in 1914, the population of the region was overwhelmingly Muslim, with a minority of Christians and a Jewish population

accounting for about 7 per cent of the total. By 1918 these proportions had already started to change: out of a total of 639,000 people in the area, 80 per cent were Muslims (512,000), 10 per cent Christian Arab-speakers and 10 per cent Jews. Of the last of these groups, 15,000, or little less than one-quarter, were European settlers. This was the beginning of a trend that, within a generation, dramatically changed the demographics of the region and aimed at creating a Jewish majority. The change did not happen without backlashes, with ‘riots’ from 1920 to 1929 (resulting in the killing of many Jewish settlers and a much larger number of Arabs) and the revolt of 1936–39,



which the British Army brutally crushed.

The author scrupulously records these uprisings but is primarily concerned with the high politics in London and Paris. In a fascinating and painstaking analysis of the trail of documents which went from one office to the other over twenty years, Shambrook establishes that, until the end of the First World War, the area of 'Arab independence' comprised the lands 'west of the line Aleppo–Hama–Homs–Damascus' (pp. 56–7). This might include Palestine, though the area where the Jewish settlements were and were to be further expanded was decidedly *south*, not west, of Damascus (the southern-most city in the 'line' described in contemporary documents). Shambrook argues that the point was clarified by the negotiators' reference to the *vilayets* of these towns. The expression in Arab refers to a large administrative district, and the Arab leaders had reason to understand it as including Palestine; however, British officials often rendered the expression as 'districts', which identified a much smaller territorial unit. To make confusion worse, not all the towns listed in the 'line' had formed *vilayets* under Ottoman rule (pp. 46–8, 140–1, 283–4 and 336–7).

What mattered in the end was the support that Lloyd George, Balfour and Churchill were determined to offer to the Zionist

project – a support inspired by personal religious views and imperial expediency. A key dimension of all these calculations and policies was that 'in 1917, in the minds of both the British cabinet and Zionist leaders, Palestine was inhabited by people, but not by *a people*; natives who, for the most part, did not warrant "serious consideration"' (p. 70, emphasis in the original). Such a dismissive attitude to Arabs reflected contemporary understandings of the hierarchy of cultures and civilisations on which all empires – including the British one – were based. For London, Europeans counted more than others; Jews were actual or putative 'Europeans', the Arabs were not. The 1919 Covenant of the League of Nations took a different, much more democratic view, and Balfour was both aware of the contrast between the Covenant and his Declaration, and dismissive of the Covenant's applicability to Palestine: 'The ... Great Powers', he noted in 1919, 'are committed to Zionism, and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land' (p. 98).

Shambrook has produced a well-documented and tightly argued analysis. Its value and significance are in unpacking the working of the imperial

mind in the 1920s and the extent to which Zionists took advantage of it – in a situation, it should be added, in which they had no alternative strategies open to them, especially from 1933 (when Jewish immigration from Europe increased for well-known reasons). The author would like the book to bring about some official admission by present-day or future British governments that their Middle Eastern policies in the inter-war years were based on deliberate deceit at the expense of the Arabs. Whether this would have any impact on 'wounds that have festered for so long' (p. 352) is another matter. Moreover, it should be noted that the Arabs – or the majority of them – secured the creation of various kingdoms – including Syria, Iraq and Transjordan – which may have been of little consolation to the Palestinian Arabs, but was certainly a way to redeem the 1915 British pledge to Hussain of Mecca. That the Arab kingdoms were under the protection or control of western powers is hardly an argument: for London wished the same for the 'Jewish national home' and ensured that this was indeed the case until 1948. ■

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