Nazism, The Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948

Aaron Berman

Published by Wayne State University Press


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The exodus of Jews from Europe that began in 1933 greatly strengthened the Zionist position in Palestine. An official British census in 1931 found that 175,000 Jews comprised 17 percent of Palestine's total population. By December 31, 1935, the number of Jews in Palestine had more than doubled, and the tremendous growth of the Yishuv showed few signs of slowing. During the first six months of 1936, an additional 19,000 Jews immigrated to the Holy Land, allowing Zionist leaders proudly to claim the loyalty of 28 percent of Palestine's population. The Zionist dream seemed to be well on the way to fruition.¹

Zionists in Palestine, preoccupied with the monumental task of settling tens of thousands of Jewish refugees, generally did not worry about how the Arabs of Palestine would react to the astonishing growth of the Yishuv. For the most part, Palestinian Jewry clung to the belief that the Jewish development of Palestine would enrich Arabs as well as Jews and that a grateful Arab population would ally themselves with the Zionist campaign. Theodor Herzl was among the first Zionists to articulate this position in his utopian novel, Altneuland (1902), and succeeding generations of Zionists religiously adopted the position. Arab demonstrations against Zionists, including anti-Jewish riots that erupted in several Palestinian towns and cities in 1920 and 1929, did not destroy Zionist faith in peace through economic progress, but did lead Jews to temper their idealism with a heavy dose of pragmatism. By the early thirties, Yishuv leaders believed that the steady growth of Jewish power in Palestine would not only enrich the Arabs, but would also convince them of the futility of resisting Zionist settlement. Shortly after Jewish refugees from nazism
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began to arrive in Palestine, David Ben-Gurion predicted that the Arabs would be forced to reconcile themselves to the Zionist settlement of the country if Palestine’s Jewish population reached one-half million within five years.²

American Zionist leaders’ understanding of Arab interests and views differed little from that of their counterparts in the Yishuv. Publicly, they expressed their sincere belief that the Zionist colonization of Palestine would benefit Arabs as well as Jews. Two years before Hitler’s coming to power, Professor Felix Frankfurter of the Harvard Law School wrote that the Zionists returning to Palestine were willing to share Palestine with the Arabs; he promised that Arab standards of living would rise as a result of Jewish settlement. For the moment, he continued, Zionists demanded only the right to bring Jews to Palestine; the political future of the territory would not be determined for some time, and, when it was, the interests of the Arabs would surely influence Jewish actions. Zionism was a movement of liberation not enslavement, and Frankfurter’s credo was simple: “If the Jewish homeland cannot be built without making the fellaheen’s [peasant’s] lot worse rather than better, it ought not be built.”³

In December 1934, as the tremendous growth of the Jewish population of Palestine continued, Hayim Greenberg, a prestigious American socialist Zionist leader and the editor of the Jewish Frontier, reported on his recent trip to the Middle East. During his travels in the Holy Land he had repeatedly asked himself, “Was I justified in claiming for years that we have not harmed the Arabs economically; that the Arabs were better off with us than without us?” His answer was an unequivocal yes. He had observed that the closer an Arab community was to a Jewish settlement, the more prosperous and healthy the inhabitants were. The reverse was also true:

The farther an Arab village was situated from a center of Jewish colonization, the more dirt and mud were visible; the larger the number of blind wrecks—men in rags and women in tatters. The hungry, barefoot children suffered from sick, inflamed eyes; their camels were scrawny, their donkeys undersized—desert creatures without the romance of the desert.

Greenberg’s findings did not completely cheer him, for he, unlike Frankfurter, realized that Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine were not solely a matter of economics. An Arab, he noted, could be convinced that “he has lost nothing through Jewish colonization” and that additional Jewish immigration would benefit him. It was much harder though to prove to the Arab that he would not lose his dignity during the process. No people, the Bible taught, wished to be beholden or dependent on another. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a pot of lentils, but, after his hunger was satisfied, he wanted his birthright too. Jacob tried to persuade Esau that “he does not need the birthright; that the difference between Jacob and Esau is not the difference between greater and lower, but merely a difference in
kind." Tragically, Esau could not be persuaded, and he hated Jacob for robbing him and his children of their birthright and dignity.

Greenberg could propose no simple solution to this dilemma, which seemed to be more psychological than economic or political. The Zionist task, he concluded, was to "discover the therapeutic measures which will heal the sore spots in the relations between Jew and Arab." Unfortunately, he could not provide a more specific remedy. 4

A number of Greenberg's associates were less optimistic than he about the prospect of "therapeutic measures" insuring Arab acceptance of Zionism. They, like Frankfurter and Greenberg, believed that the Jewish settlement of Palestine benefited the Arabs, but if necessary they were prepared to deal with the Arabs in terms of power and not accommodation. In mid-1933, Abraham Goldberg, a veteran American Zionist, predicted that there would be no security problem if an additional half million Jews emigrated to Palestine. 5 In March 1934, Emanuel Neumann (then an American representative on the Zionist Executive in Palestine) happily reported: "The proportion of Jews to Arabs has increased, and if the government continues to permit the present rate of immigration, we will soon have quite a favorable representation in the country." The Jewish birthrate was growing as was the number of men capable of bearing arms. Neumann concluded that "in time, with all these factors operating, the Jews would be in an 'impregnable position.'" 6

Some American Zionists even hoped that the mass immigration of Jews to Palestine would allow them to expand the very boundaries of the national home. For years Zionists had resented Britain's 1922 amputation of the eastern part of Palestine, which resulted in the creation of Transjordan. Many had never accepted the legitimacy of the British act and hoped that, in the future, Jewish settlements would straddle both sides of the Jordan River. 7

When Emanuel Neumann arrived in Palestine in 1932 to assume a position on the Zionist Executive, he immediately asked British authorities about the possibility of Jewish settlement in Transjordan. 8 Neumann's own interest in the matter had been reinforced by Louis Brandeis, who had asked the young Zionist leader to investigate the Transjordan situation. 9 In the fall of 1932, Neumann was intrigued to learn from Heschel Farbstein, a Mizrachi (Orthodox Zionist organization) representative on the Zionist Executive, that the Arab leader of Transjordan, Emir Abdullah, was interested in selling some of his country's land to Zionist settlers. Neumann met secretly with Abdullah and obtained an option to purchase land east of the Jordan River. In spite of an exchange of money, there was no actual transfer of land from the Arab ruler to the Zionist organization. British and radical Arab disapproval convinced Abdullah that the time was not right to conduct business with the Jewish settlers of Palestine. Nevertheless, Abdullah's offer and Neumann's negotiations stimulated the interest of many Zionists, particularly those in America. 10 Neumann himself was committed to the opening of Transjor-
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dan to Jewish settlement and confided to Stephen Wise: “I would be willing to lay down my life for the opening up of Transjordan if need be and I know there are tens of thousands who feel as I do.” After Abdullah’s cancellation of the land sale deal, Supreme Court Justice Brandeis wrote Neumann: “Even if the cancellation should prove definite and final, you have, in my opinion, achieved much for the cause. The crack in the Transjordan wall which you affected will be widened, and opportunity opened for Jew and Arab by the Jewish immigration.”

The rise of Hitler and the onset of the refugee exodus naturally fueled Zionist interest in the settling of Jews in Transjordan. Neumann reported that Abdullah’s approval for the land sale could be easily obtained if British support could be won for the scheme. Neumann planned to establish a Development Corporation for Transjordan, which would oversee the Zionist purchase and development of land acquired from Abdullah. Among the first subscribers to the corporation was Louis Brandeis who invested $25,000 in the project. Felix Frankfurter also supported the establishment of a charter development company, arguing that Transjordan and Great Britain, as well as the Zionist movement, would benefit from the movement of Jewish settlers east of the Jordan River.

American Zionist leaders attached great importance to the Jewish settlement of Transjordan. The very success of the Jewish nationalist movement seemed to depend on it. Abdullah’s decision to do business with the Zionists would be an important step in the normalization of the Arab-Jewish relationship in the Middle East. Additional land would also allow the Zionists to demand more immigration certificates from the British on the grounds that their capacity to absorb Jewish refugees had increased. The Jewish settlement of Transjordan, Zionists also realized, would allow Jews to increase the size and stretch the boundaries of their homeland. As Emanuel Neumann wrote:

[T]he success of our effort in Palestine, in the larger sense will depend ultimately upon our ability to penetrate T.J. [Transjordan] and colonize it. Without T.J., Palestine is an awfully tiny strip on the seashore—hardly a sufficient basis for any large-scale immigration settlement scheme. Unless the Hinterland is opened up, the strong immigration and development in Western Palestine will receive a check in the not distant future.

Early in the summer of 1934, Felix Frankfurter, then a visiting professor at Oxford, attempted to enter into informal negotiations with British officials on the Transjordan question. Britain at this time still maintained ultimate control of Transjordan, which did not become a totally independent state until 1946. Colonial Secretary Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister claimed to sympathize with the Zionist desire to move Jews into Transjordan, but refused to endorse any immediate Jewish movement into the territory because he feared that the Arabs of Transjordan would resist Jewish colonizaion.
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In spite of Britain's failure to support Jewish settlement projects in Transjordan, Zionist interest in the land east of the Jordan River continued, fueled by the ever-worsening plight of Jewry in Europe. By the summer of 1935, the virus of anti-Semitism seemed to be spreading beyond Germany's borders and Jewish leaders in the West worried especially about the virulent anti-Jewish policies being adopted by the Polish government. Some Zionists even feared that the persecution of Polish Jewry soon might become more severe than that of their German co-religionists. Palestine, which had proven itself to be one of the most important havens for Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, now confronted the possibility of receiving millions of Jews from Eastern Europe.

Abba Hillel Silver told the annual ZOA convention in July 1935 that they were not involved in building little settlements in Palestine, but a "great Jewish nation." He prophesied that the influx of millions of refugees would stretch the boundaries of the Jewish homeland, noting that: "The little land now known as Palestine will be too small for the hosts of our people who will go there. And we will become in that land stretching beyond the Jordan, stretching north and stretching south on the shores of the Mediterranean, one of the great imperial, one of the mighty spiritual and not only physical peoples of the coming world."18

Abba Hillel Silver could not know in the summer of 1935 that within a year his dream of an expanding, vibrant Jewish homeland would lie in shambles. Even as he spoke, Arabs were becoming increasingly fearful about the consequences of the expanding Jewish population of Palestine.

THE ARAB UPRISING OF 1936: DEFENDING THE JEWISH HOMELAND

Zionists in the United States and Palestine had seriously underestimated Arab opposition to the growth of the Yishuv. Jewish settlement, as Zionists predicted, had provided Palestinian Arabs with one of the highest standards of living in the Middle East, but as Hayim Greenberg had reported, many Arabs, from all class and social backgrounds, feared that they would soon become second-class citizens in a Jewish-dominated land. Even as the influx of Jewish refugees into the Holy Land gave Zionist leaders a false sense of security, Arab notables from Palestine's elite landowning class were using the fear of Jewish domination to recruit peasants and city workers into a Palestinian-Arab national movement. Haj Amin Muhammad al-Husseini, the Mufti (Moslem religious leader) of Jerusalem, was the most prominent of these Arab nationalist leaders. Husseini, an Arab nationalist since 1919, was ardently anti-British and blamed the Mandatory Power for encouraging and fostering the Jewish "take over" of Palestine.19

Arab resentment about Zionist advances in Palestine finally resulted in violence
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on April 15, 1936, when a group of Arabs intercepted a bus and killed two Jewish passengers. The murders set in motion a tragic chain reaction of retaliation and counter-retaliation. On the night of April 16, Jews killed two Arabs and set off a number of Arab riots and protests throughout Palestine. The Mufti and other nationalist leaders in Palestine seized the occasion to declare a general strike aimed at forcing Great Britain to prohibit further Jewish immigration to Palestine. The general strike, which lasted almost seven months, was not the only form of Arab resistance to growing Zionist power. In the hills of Palestine, Arab guerrilla bands, with the covert support and guidance of the Mufti, attacked nearby Jewish settlements. Violence raged until October 1936, when the British were finally able to defeat the Arab rebels. In this first round of fighting, 197 Arabs, 80 Jews, and 28 British soldiers fell.

The Arab revolt created a serious dilemma for the British authorities. Arab violence could not be tolerated, but Arab goodwill was an essential ingredient of British imperial policy. At the same time, Mandatory officials also found themselves under increasing pressure from Jewish community leaders to suppress violence and restore law and order. British leaders tried to follow a balanced policy. They refused to halt Jewish immigration to Palestine, but also would not take drastic measures to repress the Arab strike and revolt. London administrators hoped that the Arab “disturbance” would run its course quickly, and they tried to encourage Arab restraint by pledging to investigate Arab grievances and the causes of Arab unrest as soon as peace was restored. However, ongoing Arab resistance forced the British to take stronger measures. By the end of the summer of 1936, the British had doubled the number of Jewish policemen in Palestine and had recruited the assistance of 2,700 Jewish supernumerary police. The British also rushed military reinforcements to Palestine, including Royal Air Force detachments, which carried out bombing and strafing attacks on Arab guerrilla bands.

In Palestine, Jews responded to the Arab revolt by taking up arms themselves. The Haganah, the quasi-legal underground defense force of the Jewish Agency, expanded in size and strength during the Arab revolt with the encouragement of the British. Following a policy of Havlagah (self-restraint), the Haganah organized the defense of threatened Jewish settlements, but refrained from carrying out acts of counterterrorism against Arab civilians. The Jewish community of Palestine imposed taxes on themselves to pay for defense measures, and financial donations from abroad also contributed to the increased military strength of Palestine’s Jews. Among the most prominent of these foreign contributors was Louis Brandeis of the United States.

Besides sending money to Palestine, American Zionists during the early stages of the revolt also mounted efforts to encourage the British to take a firmer stand against Arab violence and protest. In May 1946, the Pro-Palestine Federation, a Zionist-sponsored support group of prominent Christians, sent a petition to the
British asking for a stronger pro-Jewish policy in Palestine. Congressman Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn, a supporter of the Zionist cause, attacked the British for failing to adopt "stringent measures" to defend Palestinian Jewry. Celler supported David Ben-Gurion's charge that the Arab revolt was caused by Great Britain's failure to demonstrate its full support of Jewish settlement of Palestine. Had the British fully embraced Zionism, the Arabs would never have felt confident enough to violently resist the return of the Jews to Palestine. Celler urged Britain to "punish the foul wrongdoers, suppress the agitators and do all in its power to prevent a recurrence of the evil."

The intensity and longevity of the Arab revolt physically challenged Zionists in Palestine, but ideologically and intellectually challenged supporters of Jewish nationalism in the United States. Widespread Arab violence made it difficult for Zionist spokesmen to claim that there was no basic conflict between Jews and Arabs and that material progress would create Jewish-Arab friendship in Palestine. Stephen Wise even feared that the Arab attacks would strengthen the position of those Jews who supported the Soviet-sponsored Jewish homeland in Birobidzhan. Suddenly, American Zionists, who had been concentrating their efforts on proudly portraying Palestine as the most effective solution to the refugee crisis, found themselves having to defend the very right of Jews to build a national home in the Holy Land.

Six days after the Arab revolt began, the New York Times, whose assimilated Jewish publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger was one of the most prominent American Jewish opponents of Zionism, editorialized that the clash between Arabs and Jews disclosed the "irreconcilable" conflict between the two peoples. The newspaper explained that: "The inertia and conservatism of an economically backward people intensify their natural resentment against the thrust of expanding, energetic newcomers, some of whom are not responsive to the sensibilities of their Arab neighbors." The Times' editors believed that peace in Palestine could be achieved only if Jewish and Arab leaders stressed the need for practical cooperation. Neither Jews nor Arabs, the paper argued, "no matter what the pretensions of extremist leaders, can reasonably look forward to sole control over Palestine."

Journalist Albert Viton (a pseudonym) concurred with the Time's gloomy analysis of the Palestine situation. Traveling in the Middle East at the height of the riots, Viton wrote back to the Nation that nationalism was gripping the whole Middle East as it had gripped Europe in the nineteenth century. The Jews came to Palestine to escape anti-Semitism and paid dearly for every piece of land they bought, but despite some good intentions, there was little Arab-Jewish cooperation in the country. Viton gloomily predicted that bloodshed was inevitable because: "An Arab nationalist sees in a Zionist his mortal enemy who comes to rob him of his fatherland. . . . Every good Zionist sees the Arabs as an unnecessary obstacle to his homeland dream."
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William Ernest Hocking, a professor of philosophy at Harvard University, advanced a strongly pro-Arab argument in the pages of the Christian Century, a prestigious liberal Protestant periodical. Hocking, an anti-imperialist, portrayed the general strike and violence in Palestine as a desperate attempt by the Arabs to resist Jewish domination. He then went on to challenge the very basis of the Jewish claim to Palestine, claiming:

Palestine does not belong to the Jews. It does not belong to them on historical grounds. They had full possession of it for less than five hundred years. The Arabs have had it for thirteen hundred years. The Jews were not driven out of Palestine by the destruction of Jerusalem under Titus. Their dispersion for several hundred years had been a voluntary diaspora.

If Zionists truly wanted to aid persecuted Jewry, Hocking concluded, "let it above all refrain from forcing them into Palestine under the shelter of British guns."29

Arab-Americans tried to assist Hocking and other opponents of Zionism in explaining the Palestine situation to the American public, but their ability to shape public opinion in the United States was limited. While pro-Arab supporters outnumbered Zionist sympathizers in the State Department and American missionary societies, there simply was not a large enough Arab population in America to support a major anti-Zionist propaganda campaign. Shah-Mir, an Arab living in Brooklyn, could only write a letter to the New York Times complaining about the anti-Arab bias of most of the New York press, which did not understand that the Arab nation was struggling against an invasion of foreigners. No matter what Zionists maintained, he wrote, no Arab welcomed the penetration of Palestine. He sympathized with the suffering and persecution of European Jewry, but condemned as hypocritical those who wanted to help refugees reach a safe haven as long as it was on somebody else's territory.30

Zionist spokesmen responded to the doubts and attacks of their critics. Jacob de Haas, the English-born Jew whom Theodore Herzl selected to spread the Zionist gospel in the United States, argued that Jews were not really the cause of Arab unrest. In a letter to the New York Times, he explained that the Jewish pioneers in Palestine had become pawns in the struggle between Arab nationalists and the British authorities. He claimed that the British used the Jews as their "goat" because the legal basis for the British presence in Palestine was their undertaking to develop the Jewish national home, and he argued that "there are fair reasons for assuming that a Zionism minus British overlordship would be compatible with the Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic movements."31

Unlike de Haas, most Zionists in the United States and Palestine were not willing to do without the British. Moshe Shertok, the head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, a post roughly equivalent to that of a foreign minister in a legitimate state, attempted to convince an American audience that
the issue in Palestine was not between the Jews and Arabs of the Holy Land, but between the Jewish and Arab peoples in general. Palestine was the only country in the world where the Jewish people could achieve "national salvation," but "the national existence of the Arab race as a whole, its political self-determination and the prospect of its achieving the full stature of independent nationhood" did not depend on Palestine. Zionists had brought prosperity to all Palestinians, and, Sher-tok promised, the Jewish nationalist program would make no Arab suffer. The same could not be said of the Arab nationalist movement in Palestine and he warned that: "If the claims of the Palestine Arabs were granted, if Jewish immigration were stopped, not only would Jews in Germany, Poland and other countries for whom Palestine offers the only possible refuge be doomed, but the hope of the Jewish people to become again a nation rooted in a homeland would become extinct." 32

Albert Viton's Nation article published on June 3, 1936, infuriated several Zionists who rushed to refute his contention that "every good Zionist sees the Arab as an unnecessary obstacle to his homeland dream." The Jewish Frontier dismissed his claim as distortion and "poppycock," and Marie Syrkin, the daughter of the prominent socialist-Zionist theoretician Nahman Syrkin, condemned him for failing to discuss the great benefits Jewish development had brought to all of Palestine's residents. 33

The attacks on Zionism by William Hocking and other anti-imperialists troubled those Zionists who were themselves critical of colonialism. Maurice Samuel, a Zionist author and a student of Yiddish literature, spoke for those "radical Zionists" who at "first glance" seemed to be allied with reactionary British interests. Socialist Zionists, he wrote, dealt with Great Britain not by choice, but out of necessity, because the League of Nations had made London responsible for Palestine. Why, he asked, if Zionism furthered imperialism as some claimed, did not British authorities adopt a stronger pro-Jewish position in Palestine? Why hadn't Mandatory officials immediately taken drastic steps to crush the Arab general strike and revolt at its inception? Going on the offensive, Samuels charged that the real reactionaries in Palestine were not the Zionists, but the elite leaders of the Arab national movement. 34

Samuels was not the only Zionist to attack the legitimacy of the Arab nationalist movement. Hayim Greenberg had pointed perceptively to some of the sources of Arab anti-Zionism sixteen months before the outbreak of violence in Palestine. The Mufti's militant demand for a cessation of Jewish immigration, which, if fulfilled, would have denied many refugees a haven and have doomed the Zionist dream of building a homeland, significantly diminished his ability to empathize with the Arab experience. In June 1936, while Arab workers and peasants continued their general strike and guerrilla attacks, Greenberg wrote that the Arab masses had absolutely no reason to oppose Zionist development, which economi-
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cally benefited Arabs as well as Jews. Earlier, he had recognized that economic progress would not ease the Arabs' fear of becoming second-class citizens in a Jewish-dominated Palestine, but now he argued that the Arab masses had become the unknowing tools of reactionary leaders like the Mufti. "Peaceful Jewish colonization is the Industrial Revolution of Palestine," he explained, and "the Jewish cooperatives and communes are the cells of a new socialist economy." Arab peasants and workers were prospering as a result of Jewish settlement, and they were learning the virtues of efficiency, democracy, and equality from their Zionist teachers. "The present Arab chauvinist leaders seek to head off and destroy this resolution," Greenberg wrote, and he scolded American critics of Zionism for having "hitched their wagon to the Grand Mufti's counter-revolution." 35

In December 1936, the debate over Palestine intensified as Albert Viton, in a two-article series for the Nation, attacked the Zionists for refusing to recognize the existence of Arab nationalism in Palestine. Although Zionists claimed to be a "movement of liberation" for the native Arab population, they were increasingly playing a "reactionary role." He accused Jews of relying on British protection instead of trying to reconcile themselves with the Arabs and concluded that there could be no peace in Palestine as long as Zionists clung to their dream of a Jewish state. Millions of Jews might have to escape European persecution, he added, but Palestine would not be able to offer them security. 36

Viton, by this time, had earned the deep ire and hatred of many American Zionist leaders. Philip Bernstein, a Rochester, N.Y., rabbi and a rising young leader of the ZOA, assumed the task of doing battle with Viton in the pages of the Nation. Before the Arab revolt, Zionists had conceived of Palestine as the means through which the Jewish refugee problem could be solved. Now, Bernstein altered the equation and used the refugee crisis as a weapon to defend the Jewish position in Palestine. He began his essay by pointing to the horrible condition of Jews living in Germany, and he forecast that their problems would continue even if Hitler's regime was to be overthrown because Nazi authorities had thoroughly indoctrinated German children, so the conditions that produced anti-Semitism would continue to exist. Emigration offered the only immediate salvation for European Jewry, but where, he asked, would Jewish refugees go if denied access to Palestine? No nation in the world was willing to extend the victims of Hitler's persecution the same degree of hospitality and generosity as the Yishuv did. Once in Palestine, he continued, Jews, the victims of countless persecutions, sought to elevate not dominate others. Finally, he accused Arab nationalist leaders of opposing Zionism because it threatened to undermine their feudal status, a view that was becoming increasingly popular among American Zionists. 37

Sensing a victory, Zionists and their allies rushed letters to the Nation to reinforce Bernstein's rebuttal of Viton. John Haynes Holmes, a prominent New York minister and a close friend of Stephen Wise, wrote to say that he had seen genuine
cooperation between the Jewish and Arab masses in Palestine. He claimed that the tensions in the Holy Land were caused by British imperialists and "feudal landowners" who saw "a rapidly growing Jewish population refusing to go 'native' or take the status of 'natives.'" With time, Holmes believed, Jews and Arabs would solve Palestine's problems peacefully. Stephen Wise congratulated Bernstein, and the socialist editors of the Jewish Frontier celebrated the appearance of a pro-Zionist tract in the Nation, a journal that seemed to be hostile to the Jewish nationalist cause.

THE PEEL COMMISSION AND THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE

In November 1936, as American Zionists struggled to present their own interpretation of the Arab revolt, a Royal Commission of Inquiry arrived in Palestine to determine for itself why Arab Palestinians so violently resisted Zionist settlement. The commission, headed by Lord (Earl) Peel, chairman of the British Wheat Commission and a former Secretary of State for India, thoroughly investigated the social, political, and economic conditions of Palestine. American Zionists did not have the opportunity to give testimony to the commission, but the Jewish nationalist position was presented by very able witnesses.

Professor Maurice Hexter, director of the Jewish Agency's Colonization Department, detailed Jewish agricultural and industrial achievements in Palestine, aiming to prove that the territory had enough resources to absorb large numbers of additional Jewish immigrants without economically displacing the native Arab population. David Ben-Gurion told the commission that the Zionists wanted to bring as many Jews as possible to Palestine, but did not seek to dominate the Arabs. He was even willing to share political power with the Arabs provided that they end their opposition to Jewish immigration. Chaim Weizmann's testimony was particularly eloquent. He reviewed the history of the Balfour Declaration for the commission and went into a lengthy description of the deteriorating condition of Polish and German Jewry. For many European Jews, he said, "the world is divided into places where they cannot live and places they may not enter." Only Palestine offered the refugees the possibility of redemption. Weizmann, like Ben-Gurion, asked the commission to support the continuance of mass Jewish immigration to Palestine.

Arab nationalists also appeared before the Royal Commission. Kahil Totah, headmaster of the Quaker school at Ramallah and an associate of the Mufti, blamed British administrators and Zionist leaders for the alienation and despair of many of his students who felt cut off from the rest of the Middle East. The Mufti himself appeared before the Peel Commission, barely concealing his contempt for
its members. His prescription for peace in Palestine was simple: he demanded that all Jewish immigration cease and that the British withdraw from the territory and grant its Arab inhabitants independence.46

After weeks of private and public hearings, the Peel Commission returned to Great Britain in January 1937 to draft its report. Commission members knew that the task of reconciling Jewish, Arab, and imperial interests in Palestine would be difficult, if not impossible. Ben-Gurion, Weizmann, and the other Jewish witnesses were clearly willing to have Great Britain continue its rule over the Holy Land provided that large-scale Jewish immigration continued. Arab nationalists, on the other hand, seemed to be convinced that a Zionist-British conspiracy existed to displace and "imprison" them. Stephen Wise feared that the commission might resolve this dilemma by denying the Arabs independence, while at the same time drastically limiting, or even suspending, Jewish immigration to Palestine.47

There seemed to be good reasons for Wise to expect such a serious British act. On November 5, 1936, the day the Peel Commission left England, London announced a new six-month immigration schedule that gave the Jewish Agency only 17 percent of the labor certificates it had requested. The New Palestine, the official journal of the ZOA, correctly analyzed this action as a British attempt to win Arab support.48 British policymakers, particularly Foreign Office officials, hoped that the reduction in Jewish immigration would convince Palestinian Arabs that Britain was concerned about their interests in spite of its violent response to Arab guerrilla attacks.49 Most Zionists believed that the British action would just be a temporary setback. Eliezer Kaplan, treasurer of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, confidentially confided to Hadassah leaders that in spite of the British action, "enormous possibilities" for further immigration continued to exist.50 The editors of Jewish Frontier, believing that the British reduction was just a temporary action, praised the British for not giving in to terror tactics and for allowing at least some Jewish immigration to continue.51

The editors' good cheer ended in May 1937 when Great Britain announced a new four-month immigration schedule that gave the Jewish Agency so few certificates that the Zionist body refused to accept them as a matter of principle.52 Zionists knew that British immigration restrictions threatened to limit their ability to respond to the Jewish refugee crisis. Jews caught in Hitler's Germany would be the immediate victims of such a development, but the Zionist movement would also suffer a loss of prestige and power. The American Zionist response to the British reduction was not particularly intense, however, because the attention of Jewish nationalists was occupied by a crisis that seemed even more serious.

In April 1937, three months before the publication of the Peel Commission's report, Zionists learned from friendly British sources that one of the plans the commission was considering called for the division of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. The rumor did not surprise Chaim Weizmann, the London-based
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president of the World Zionist Organization. During one of its closed meetings, the Peel Commission had asked him how he would respond to the partition of Palestine. At the time, Weizmann's response was negative, but by April 1937 his opposition was wavering. An independent Jewish state, he reasoned, would allow the Zionist movement to determine its own immigration policy in Palestine, freeing both the Jewish nationalists and the refugees from the burden of endless negotiations with British officials who controlled all their futures. The surrender of territory would be a high but not disastrous price to pay for autonomy.

Among American Zionists, the rumored British division of Palestine met with almost universal derision. Hadassah immediately informed British and American officials that it would oppose any attempt to limit the Jewish claim to Palestine. Hayim Greenberg of the socialist Jewish Frontier condemned any "Balkanization" of the Holy Land, which would severely reduce the number of refugees who could find a haven in Palestine, while the orthodox Mizrachi Zionist Organization announced that the British division of Palestine would be a crime as heinous as the "Italian rape of Ethiopia." The ZOA vowed to fight any partition plan and warned Great Britain that Zionists would not repeat the error they had made fifteen years earlier when they had failed to mobilize against the 1922 British division of Palestine that established Transjordan. To reinforce their threat, the ZOA decided to switch its summer convention from Baltimore to New York City in order to hold a massive anti-British demonstration at Madison Square Garden.

Several American Zionist leaders doubted whether the anti-partition consensus within the American Zionist community could long endure. Robert Szold and Louis Brandeis both knew that Chaim Weizmann was flirting with accepting the British partition proposal, and they feared that Louis Lipsky would eventually adopt the views of his mentor.

Despite Szold's concern, the Fortieth Convention of the Zionist Organization of America, held ten days before the official release of the Peel Commission plan, reached an unusual consensus on the issue of partition. Stephen Wise, ZOA president, declared that the commission was appointed to investigate the Arab disorders, not to "consider the problem of partition or division or cantonization or amputation." Palestine's partition would bring new disorders, not peace, and Wise, thinking of Weizmann, criticized those Zionists who were sympathetic to the plan. He wondered whether "partition has not made too lurid an appeal to some histrionic hotheads among us who are more avid to the name 'Jewish State' than the reality of a Jewish National Home." He passionately maintained that "a partitioned, divided, truncated Palestine would no more be Palestine than England would be England without Scotland and Wales, without Yorkshire and Northumberland."

Robert Szold seconded Wise's position and reminded the assembled delegates that there had already been one partition of Palestine in 1922. Partition, he explained, was even worse than a temporary halt of immigration because "partition
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means a permanent cutting off of the land.” Partition would be “geographically impossible, economically infeasible and morally suicidal.” Drawing the applause of his audience, Szold asserted that the fate of all Jewry, present and future, was jeopardized by the division of the Holy Land and that no Zionist organization had the right to surrender any part of the Jewish birthright.62

Louis Lipsky, to Szold’s satisfaction, joined in the anti-partition clamor saying: “The Sovereignty we thought we were to have a chance at is now being broken, halved and quartered, to serve the needs of Empire—the Empire of the British and the soon-to-be Empire of the Arab people.”63 Morris Rothenberg, a past president of the ZOA, and Senator Robert Wagner, one of Zionism’s most important congressional supporters, also opposed the partition of Palestine. Rothenberg argued that in a time of “unprecedented Jewish homelessness,” England should not restrict immigration to or reduce the size of Palestine.64 Senator Wagner told the ZOA convention that Palestine was an “outpost” of “civilization” and freedom, and concluded: “The colonization of Palestine must be encouraged. The promises made for Palestine must be kept. That is the test of fair treatment toward the Jewish people. That is the test of wisdom and humanity on the part of the civilized world.”65

The case against partition was presented most eloquently by Abba Hillel Silver. Silver, a Reform rabbi with a prosperous Cleveland congregation, was a brilliant orator with a forceful personality that at times angered his associates. Zionists, Silver told his audience, had transformed a “wilderness” into a “flowering land.” He agreed with Szold, Wise, and Brandeis, predicting that a Jewish state in a partitioned Palestine would be a political and economic “absurdity.” The Zionists had not “conquered” Palestine with a sword and bloodshed, but with “labor.” The Arabs had prospered as a result of Jewish settlement and were no longer “illiterate” and oppressed by a “semi-feudal oligarchy.” The partition of Palestine, Silver warned, would do incalculable harm to the Jewish people because a divided Holy Land would not be able to absorb masses of Jewish refugees and the “Jewish problem” would never be solved:

The aim of Zionism, my friends, is not to shift the diaspora. It is to put an end to it. The aim of Palestine, if we cannot put an end to it, is to transform the diaspora through the establishment of a large scale Jewish National Home which will be enabled to draw in millions of our people. The aim of Zionism is not to take masses of our people from one place where they are an insecure minority and put them in another where they will continue to be an insecure minority. The aim of Palestine is to create somewhere on this God’s footstool a place where the Jews will finally be masters of their own political destiny—at home.

Jews were a people with a culture who needed a land “into which our culture can sink its roots and from which it can draw sustenance.” Silver pleaded with
those Zionists who were willing to accept the principle of partition not to “sacrifice the ultimate ideal for the sake of a few seeming concessions and rewards. Think of the ultimate. We want a Jewish homeland.” Silver asked his audience to “rededicate” themselves “to this ancient covenant, to rebuild, if not tomorrow, if not by ourselves, . . . by our own children and our grandchildren, the land in its historic boundaries, the Jewish land.”

The ZOA delegates rose, applauded vigorously, and sang the Zionist anthem *Hatikvah* (The Hope). The convention then adopted resolutions strongly opposing partition and requested that the United States intercede with the British on their behalf.

Not everyone was happy with the ZOA’s actions. During the proceedings, Chaim Weizmann telephoned from London to tell Stephen Wise, Louis Lipsky, and Felix Frankfurter that the Peel Commission would definitely recommend Palestine’s partition. Weizmann felt that the commission’s suggestion might be better than a continuance of the status quo, and he unsuccessfully tried to convince the ZOA leadership not to take a stand against the partition issue. He also wrote Frankfurter that if the partitioned Jewish state was big enough to allow growth and included Jerusalem, “we have gone a long way towards realization of a dream, which might compensate us a little for the nightmare of Jewish life at present.” Weizmann hoped that all Zionists would remain united and calm. He told Frankfurter that “it is our destiny to get Palestine, and this destiny will be fulfilled someday, somehow.” Once a Jewish state existed the problem of its “expansion” could be left to “future generations.”

On July 7, 1937, the Peel Commission finally published its long-awaited report. The commission’s detailed analysis of the Arab-Jewish conflict reflected the remarkable sensitivity and objectivity of its members. Lord Peel and his associates found that many of the Zionist claims about Palestine were in fact accurate, and they praised the economic and physical accomplishments of the Yishuv. The Arabs, the report acknowledged, “have shared to a considerable degree in the material benefits which Jewish immigration has brought to Palestine,” and enjoyed a substantially higher standard of living than they had in 1920. The commission determined, however, that Zionist-inspired economic progress had not succeeded in winning Arab acceptance of Jewish settlement in Palestine. Arab nationalism was a much more powerful movement than Zionists recognized, Peel reported, and Arab opposition to Jewish immigration was intense and widespread.

The Peel Commission sadly concluded that the status quo could not continue in the Holy Land. Both Arabs and Jews had legitimate rights to Palestine, but their programs and goals were irreconcilable. The continued settlement of refugees in Palestine would exacerbate Arab fears of Jewish domination and would surely result in renewed violence. Ending Jewish immigration to Palestine would enrage the Zionists and condemn thousands of Jews to a miserable existence. The com-
mission reported that it could recommend only one solution to this quandary: the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The Jewish state, much smaller in size than the Arab, would encompass those regions of Palestine with heavy Jewish settlement: the coastal plain stretching from Tel Aviv to Haifa and part of the Galilee. Great Britain would retain control of several small strategic areas including Jerusalem, a holy place for Christians, Jews, and Moslems, and Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. The rest of Palestine, including Transjordan, would constitute an independent Arab nation.

Peel and his colleagues knew that their partition proposal would be controversial and that neither Jews nor Arabs would be pleased with the sacrifices they would have to make. They hoped, however, that both Zionists and Arab nationalists would ultimately be satisfied with a partial victory. Peel notified his superiors: “Partition seems to offer at least a chance of ultimate peace. We can see none in any other plan.” He added that it would be necessary to restrict (but not to end) Jewish immigration to Palestine until partition could be affected, so as not to provoke new Arab attacks. He warned that if the partition proposal was not accepted, England would be forced to allow only twelve thousand Jews to enter Palestine annually for the next five years.

The British government of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (Conservative party) accepted the Peel Commission’s suggestions, although Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden objected that the establishment of a Jewish state would incite anti-British sentiment throughout the Middle East. In an official policy statement, Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore, a major proponent of the Peel plan, wrote that the “irreconcilable conflict” between Jewish and Arab “aspirations” made it impossible for Britain to continue its present mandate in Palestine and that, “a scheme of partition . . . represents the best and most hopeful solution to the deadlock.” During parliamentary debates on the Peel plan, opponents of the Conservative party took the opportunity to attack partition and the Chamberlain government. Liberal party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair condemned the Peel proposal for according the Jews much too small a part of Palestine. Tom Williams, speaking for the Labor party, objected to the partition proposal, calling it “hopelessly inconclusive” and “hazardous.” Conservative party maverick Winston Churchill, regarded by many Zionists as one of their closest allies, also objected to the division of Palestine. The opposition of these impressive individuals was not strong enough to defeat the government’s plan, although the House of Commons refused to commit itself totally to partition and instead authorized Chamberlain to continue negotiations on the plan before submitting it for final approval.
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THE CONTINUING BATTLE OVER PARTITION

The Peel Commission's recommendations outraged many leading American Zionists, including Hayim Greenberg, Louis Brandeis, Louis Lipsky, Stephen Wise, and Abba Hillel Silver. Wise confessed, "I never dreamed that we would fare so badly at Britain's hands." Brandeis and several of his disciples, whose distrust of Chaim Weizmann was rooted in the factional disputes of a decade and a half earlier, feared that the president of the World Zionist Organization would accept the British plan. David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the powerful Labor Zionists of Palestine, had initially condemned the British offer, but the Brandeis cohort suspected that he might "be carried away by the lure of an immediate Jewish state." 79

Following the publication of the Peel Commission's report, American Zionists focused their attention on Zurich, Switzerland, where the Twentieth Zionist Congress would consider the British proposal to partition Palestine. American delegates to the congress included Stephen Wise, Louis Lipsky, Abba Hillel Silver, and many of the Hadassah leaders. Robert Szold decided to attend the congress after his mentor, Louis Brandeis, urged him to aid Wise in the fight against partition. 80

The delegates who met in Zurich in August 1937 reflected the factionalized world of Jewish nationalism. Chaim Weizmann presented the case for partition, warning that if the Jews rejected the Peel scheme, the British would severely and permanently restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine. Jews would then remain a permanent minority in the Holy Land and the Zionist dream of sovereignty and a national home would die. A Jewish state in a divided Palestine was not an ideal situation, but it would guarantee Jewish autonomy and control of immigration into at least part of Palestine. Weizmann agreed with critics of partition that the size of the Jewish state suggested by the Peel Commission was unacceptably small, but he believed that Britain would agree to increase the size of the proposed Jewish nation. 81

Several American Zionists who had fought Weizmann immediately after World War I continued to suspect his motives. Julian Mack wrote Brandeis that "C. W. [Chaim Weizmann] I believe, is not at all a well man. To be king or president of a Jewish state would in his judgement, I fear, put him just one notch above Herzl and the temptation is too great." Robert Szold and Stephen Wise were among those who tried to counter Weizmann's pro-partition position at the Zurich congress. They argued that the Palestine Mandate was workable and that difficulties could be overcome. Szold predicted that a Jewish state would be unable to absorb the large number of Jews seeking to escape Poland and Germany, and he warned that this would break the morale of the Jewish pioneers in Palestine whose strength and courage were "based on their hope that they are assisting in the solution of the Jewish problem." If Britain divided Palestine, he continued, "the dreams of a historic Palestine as a Jewish State or Commonwealth will be gone." Szold concluded that "we have no moral right, because concerned with another temporary crisis,
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permanently and irrevocably to consent to and deal a moral [mortal] wound to Zionism."\(^{82}\)

As some American Zionists had nervously anticipated, David Ben-Gurion reversed his original opposition to the partition scheme and supported Chaim Weizmann at Zurich. According to Szold, Ben-Gurion was attracted to the idea of Jewish autonomy, believing that even the best British officials would sometimes "sabotage" the mandate's commitment to Zionism.\(^{83}\)

Weizmann's reelection as president of the World Zionist Organization reflected the anti-partitionists' lack of a majority at Zurich. Several factions made up the forces opposed to Palestine's division, even if a small Jewish state would be created by the process. The Mizrachi, a world-wide organization of ultra-religious Zionists, opposed Weizmann because they believed that God had given the Jewish people all of Palestine, and that no one had the right to surrender even a part of this treasure.\(^{84}\) Joining the Mizrachi in a strange alliance was the Hashomer Hatzair, an organization of radical socialist Zionists who believed that cooperation with the Arabs was possible and preferable to the partition of Palestine between the two peoples. Most of the Hadassah delegates at Zurich also opposed the partition scheme as did the representatives of the B group of General Zionists.\(^{85}\)

The delegates of the Zionist Organization of America, chosen by the 1937 convention that had strongly opposed partition, split over the issue at Zurich. Silver, Wise, Szold, and their supporters opposed Weizmann and the division of the Holy Land, while those delegates, including Louis Lipsky, who had supported Weizmann in the past continued to do so. Joining the pro-Weizmann ZOA group were the delegates of General Zionist faction A, which was Weizmann's power base. The Ben-Gurion–led Labor Zionists, who were particularly strong in Eastern Europe and Palestine, lent critical support to the partition plan. The representatives of the small, American labor Zionist groups (excluding the Hashomer Hatzair) cooperated with their European and Palestinian comrades. In an address delivered at the end of the congress, Hayim Greenberg, who had originally opposed partition, confessed that he still had grave doubts about whether the division of Palestine was practical. However, he was convinced that it should at least be attempted.\(^{86}\)

The Twentieth Zionist Congress passed a resolution that seemed to straddle the partition issue, but which actually handed a victory to Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, and the pro-partitionists. While labeling the Peel proposal unacceptable, the congress authorized the Zionist Executive to negotiate with the British in hopes of winning better boundaries for the proposed Jewish state. The resolution, however, prohibited the Executive from agreeing to any particular British proposal without first getting the approval of another World Zionist Congress.\(^{87}\)

The Zurich resolution did not prevent the outbreak of an intense conflict over partition, which threatened to divide American Zionists. Shortly after returning from Zurich, Dr. David de Sola Pool, a respected rabbi and scholar, tried to ex-
plain his pro-partition vote at Zurich to the National Board of Hadassah. Dr. Pool said his vote was not for partition but to give the Zionist Executive authority to negotiate with Britain. The unwillingness of Great Britain to encourage Jewish immigration in the face of Arab opposition made it imperative for Zionists to enter into negotiations that might lead to the creation of a viable Jewish state in part of Palestine. Pool argued that if Zionists rejected the Peel Commission's recommendations, they would antagonize the British people and government, "the only country and the only people to show any real interest in the Jewish problems." Total rejection would also lead Great Britain to limit severely Jewish immigration into Palestine, thereby guaranteeing that the Jews would never achieve majority status in the Holy Land. Pool hoped that negotiations with Britain would result in "the establishment of a Jewish State which would meet the urgent and immediate needs of the Jewish people." 88

The continued debate over partition threatened to disrupt the autumn 1937 convention of Hadassah. The leadership of the women's Zionist organization found themselves in a quandary. Hadassah delegates had voted against the Weizmann position at Zurich, but Hadassah leaders felt duty-bound to maintain the group's traditional commitment to acting only in accordance with official policy as decided at Zionist congresses. The National Board resolved to prepare a compromise resolution that would express Hadassah's desire for the full implementation of the Mandate while also supporting ongoing negotiations between the Zionist Executive and Great Britain in accordance with the decision of the Twentieth Zionist Congress. Hadassah leaders hoped that the resolution, which would neither clearly support nor oppose partition, would preserve the internal unity of the organization and also "would attest to Hadassah's position as a disciplined group within the Zionist organization."

Hadassah's compromise strategy broke down at the organization's convention, when some Board members urged that an anti-partition resolution be presented to the delegates. The National Board then reversed its original decision and decided to allow Hadassah members to choose between a resolution that would support partition and one that would oppose the division of Palestine. Unfortunately, when the convention began to decide the issue, a partition supporter on the National Board introduced the original compromise resolution. After Henrietta Szold spoke in favor of the compromise, the chair found it impossible to rule the resolution out of order. Before the pro- and anti-partition resolutions could be introduced, nearly 60 percent of the Hadassah delegates voted to support the compromise resolution.

This unexpected development angered Zip Szold, an anti-partitionist and the wife of ZOA leader Robert Szold. She was determined to discover the true feelings of Hadassah's members. When Szold asked the delegates to indicate their approval or opposition to the Zurich decision, she was pleased to see 95 percent of the delegates express their opposition to Palestine's partition. Szold and the majority of anti-partitionists on the Board viewed the delegates' vote as a "mandate" to un-
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dertake anti-partition activity in the United States. They rationalized that “propa-
ganda conducted in a friendly and fair manner could not be construed as an ex-
pression of disloyalty to the [World Zionist] Executive.” Pro-partitionists were not 
as “good natured” as the Hadassah leaders and one high-ranking world Zionist 
leader even appealed to Stephen Wise for help in “taming” the women Zionists.

While Hadassah was wrestling with the partition issue, anti-partition forces within 
the ZOA were also marshalling their forces. Veterans of the anti-Weizmann/Lipsky 
fight within the ZOA were at the forefront of the anti-partition effort. Stephen Wise, 
a confirmed anti-partitionist, was president of the ZOA, but Louis Lipsky, a Weiz-
mann supporter, served as editor of the ZOA’s official journal, New Palestine, mak-
ing it difficult for opponents of partition to reach the organization’s large and dis-
persed membership. In order to solve this problem, Bernard Flexner and Robert 
Szold formed a committee dedicated to the production and dissemination of anti-
partition propaganda. Szold, Julian Mack, and the Palestine Economic Corpora-
tion, an organization heavily funded by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, 
provided the anti-partition committee with the capital necessary to carry out an 
extensive publicity campaign. Stephen Wise also supported the work of the com-
mittee, as did Felix Frankfurter, who condemned the Peel plan as “unworkable” 
and called all the talk of a Jewish state “romanticism chasing a mirage.”

American Zionists working against the partition of Palestine found that they 
had some unusual allies. Wealthy non-Zionists, usually of German-Jewish descent, 
had helped finance the settlement of pioneers and refugees in Palestine even 
though they rejected the Zionist notion of Jewish nationality. The possible partition 
of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states disrupted the uneasy alliance between 
non-Zionists and Zionists. Several prominent American Jews, including Felix War-
burg, feared that the creation of a Jewish state would destabilize American Jewish 
life by allowing anti-Semites to question the primary loyalty of Jews in the United 
States. Stephen Wise and Louis Brandeis did not share Warburg’s concern about 
dual loyalty and looked forward to the eventual establishment of a Jewish state 
in all of Palestine, but they were willing to cooperate with him in order to maintain 
the physical unity of the Jewish homeland. Robert Szold counted on the non-
Zionists to publicize the anti-partition case and reported to Brandeis that the power-
ful, non-Zionist American Jewish Committee seemed to have budgeted some money 
for this purpose. Szold said that anti-partition Zionists had decided to keep in touch 
with the non-Zionists but not to consolidate their efforts. A formal alliance with 
opponents of Jewish nationalism, Szold explained, would lose the anti-partitionist 
leaders support and standing with their American Zionist constituents.

While the anti-partitionists within the ZOA organized, Louis Lipsky and his 
pro-partition supporters also mustered their strength. The battle within the ZOA 
was bitter, reflecting the belief of both factions that they were fighting to protect 
the Zionist experiment in Palestine. Opponents of partition were struggling to pre-
serve the birthright of the Jewish people. They were convinced that partition would not solve the Jewish problem because a divided Palestine would be unable to support a viable Jewish state. Pro-partition advocate Louis Lipsky also claimed to be fighting for the survival of the Jewish people. On the night of December 30, 1937, at a meeting of ZOA leaders, Lipsky warned that Great Britain would respond to a Zionist rejection of partition by repealing the Balfour Declaration and by completely abandoning the Jewish national project.94

The anti-partitionists found it difficult to respond to Lipsky's dire prediction. Brandeis, Szold, and Wise had successfully composed powerful arguments against the dismemberment of Palestine, but the task of formulating an alternative policy was significantly more troublesome. Shortly after the Zurich World Zionist Congress, Brandeis confidently proclaimed: "it ought to be possible to work out a modus vivendi-temporary [sic]—with the Arabs. . . . Reason and virtue will sometime again have their way. The British . . . will return from their erring way. It is imperative that nothing be done until then in the way of [the] ultimate disposition of the problems."95

Unfortunately, by December, the optimism of some anti-partitionists was beginning to crumble as Britain continued to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine and Arabs renewed their attacks on Jewish settlements. Stephen Wise wrote Brandeis: "I have felt firm in the faith that partition would not come. Many things that are happening tend to shake my faith."96 By the end of December, Brandeis and Szold were desperate to develop a peace agreement with the Arabs that would make partition unnecessary. They were even considering a plan under which the Zionists would voluntarily limit immigration to ensure that Jews would remain a minority in Palestine for a limited number of years. Brandeis recommended a five-to ten-year limitation on immigration, at the end of which time Jews would not exceed 40 to 45 percent of Palestine's population. Brandeis stipulated that Transjordan's Arab population was to be considered in these figures. Wise, however, was opposed to this scheme and agreed with the Zionist Executive that any temporary self-restriction on immigration would undermine the Jewish claim to Palestine and would condemn Jews to a permanent minority status in the country.97

Making the best of a difficult situation, Brandeis and Szold finally concluded that the opponents of partition did not have to develop alternatives to the British scheme because that would only admit that partition was a proper topic for the Mandatory Power to consider. While the present government seemed to be in favor of partition, Brandeis hoped that it might be replaced by a new cabinet with an opposing point of view. He and Szold reasoned that a strong, large Jewish community in Palestine was vital to British interests, and they hoped that "the common sense of the situation will become more and more apparent to responsible Britishers."98

While all Zionists anxiously awaited the conclusion of Weizmann's discussions
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with the British government, the partition debate continued to dominate the American Zionist community. Zip Szold of Hadassah questioned the validity of pro-partitionist claims that the plight of European Jewry required the immediate creation of a Jewish state, even if that state was smaller than most Zionists would prefer. The Hadassah leader, presenting her own variation of an argument often used by anti-Zionists, claimed that a partitioned Palestine would not have the absorptive capacity to satisfy the demand of European refugees for a new home. She remarked that the Jewish position “will be much sorrier when it is the Jewish state itself which has to deny admittance to persecuted Jews than when such admission is denied by the Mandatory power.” According to Szold, the pro-partitionists “complete disregard for future generations of Jews is entirely out of harmony with Jewish tradition and with the realistic emergencies which face Jewish survival at the present moment.”

ZOA members, who had extensively discussed Palestine’s partition the year before, resumed the debate at the next annual convention in July 1938. Robert Szold expected that Louis Lipsky would attempt to succeed Stephen Wise as president of the organization, thereby increasing the strength of pro-partitionists within the ZOA bureaucracy. He left for the 1938 convention determined “to protect the position of the anti-partitionists.”

Despite Szold’s belligerent stance, Stephen Wise seemed intent on not letting the partition issue tear his organization apart. In his convention address he singled out Louis Lipsky for praise, thanking him for his help, while acknowledging their differences on the partition question. Wise repeated the anti-partition argument, but was generally much more understanding of the opposition’s point of view than he had been a year earlier. He pointedly declared that he would willingly comply with the decision of the World Zionist Congress, although he also wanted world Zionist leaders to give American Zionists more power within the international organization. Wise tried to shift the attention of ZOA delegates away from the partition issue and focus it instead on the refugee crisis, which had been exacerbated by Hitler’s annexation of Austria in March 1938.

Louis Lipsky also tried to strike a moderate tone in his address to the convention, but he continued to present a cogent argument in favor of Palestine’s partition. He confessed that he and other Jewish nationalists, who had thought that the national home would be built slowly, had not foreseen the rise of Hitler. Lipsky argued that Zionists now had to realize that a change in strategy was necessary: “It was never dreamed that the burdens and problems of the Diaspora would be thrown upon Zion, that they would batter at the gates with claims, with appeal.” The Jewish refugee problem, Lipsky continued, could only be solved if a sovereign Jewish state existed that would control its own immigration policies. The partition of Palestine was the price Zionists had to pay for their state.

Most of the ZOA delegates seemed to be exhausted after a year of bitter debate.
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about Palestine's future. Abba Hillel Silver had passionately denounced partition in 1937, but after a year of uncertainty and anguish, he called on Great Britain to make up its mind about Palestine's fate. If partition and a Jewish state were to be London's formula, Silver for one was now willing to accept it, even though he continued to find the prospect of partition extremely distasteful.103

ZOA members at the Detroit convention, in an attempt to end the dangerous conflict within their own ranks, chose Solomon Goldman to succeed Stephen Wise as their president. Goldman, a Chicago rabbi, opposed partition, but like Abba Hillel Silver was prepared to accept the division of Palestine if the British forced the issue.104 The convention also passed a compromise partition resolution that gave both pro- and anti-partition forces within the ZOA the freedom to advocate their positions until a new World Zionist Congress finally decided on the issue.105

A REORDERING OF PRIORITIES

Even as American Zionists argued over the wisdom of Ben-Gurion and Weizmann's acceptance of the principle of partition, developments in the Middle East were making it extremely difficult for the British to act on the Peel Commission's proposals. Arab nationalists in Palestine adamantly refused to consider the division of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, and Arab regimes in the Middle East also condemned the British proposals. Palestinian Arab militants responded to the Peel Commission's report by launching a new campaign of anti-British and anti-Zionist violence. To the dismay of the British, the new Arab revolt was more intense and violent than the upheavals that had led to the creation of the Peel Commission.106

The British cabinet characteristically responded to the new crisis by appointing yet another royal commission, this one under the direction of Sir John Woodhead who had served the empire in India. The commission arrived in Palestine in April 1938 and began gathering testimony, a task that was seriously complicated by the stubborn refusal of Palestinian Arab nationalists to cooperate with the investigating committee. The Woodhead Commission finally submitted its findings to the cabinet in November 1938, reporting that the Peel Commission's partition proposal was impractical. The Woodhead group suggested several alternative plans, including one of partition that would have created an even smaller Jewish state than the one proposed by Lord Peel. According to this blueprint, the Arab and Jewish states would be economically united and neither state would have autonomy over economic matters.107

Both Arabs and Zionists opposed the Woodhead report, forcing the British to abandon partition as a compromise solution to the Arab-Jewish crisis in Palestine.
At the end of November 1938, the British government announced that it was no longer considering any plan for the division or partition of Palestine. Instead, the British cabinet invited the Zionists, Palestinian Arabs, and the Arab states to send representatives to London to negotiate a mutually agreeable solution to the Palestine problem. The cabinet also warned all parties that if they failed to reach a solution, Great Britain would be forced to impose its own policy, even if both Jews and Arabs objected.108

American Zionists who had opposed partition welcomed the British announcement that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine was no longer an immediate prospect. Louis Brandeis wrote, “It is a source of rejoicing for us (and should be of deep humiliation for the British) that the government has reversed itself on partition and recognized the Mandate as binding it.” While happy about the demise of the partition proposal, the Supreme Court Justice condemned the British proposal to negotiate with representatives of Arab countries, calling it “as stupid (and craven) as its past proposal of partition.” Brandeis urged other Zionist leaders not to propose alternative solutions to the Arab-Jewish dilemma, but rather to demand that London simply fulfill its duties under the League of Nations Mandate. He wrote to his loyal assistant Robert Szold: “My own conviction is, that if once the terrorists are beaten—soundly beaten—we can arrange to get along with the other Palestinian Arabs, but not until then. And that we must divorce Palestinians from all other Arab populations in the settlement of the Palestinian problem.” 109

Emanuel Neumann, the promising young leader of American Zionism, was also pleased with the abandonment of the partition proposal, but he did not share Brandeis’s optimism about the future. The best that could be hoped for from England, he gloomily reported, was another “more or less bad” compromise.110

The defeat of partition seemed to return Zionists to the situation that had existed before Lord Peel set foot into the land of Palestine. The Arabs stubbornly refused to accept the Zionist presence in the Middle East, and the British, faced with a growing fascist threat in Europe, were tempted to desert the Zionists in order to stabilize a critical part of the empire. However, while the partition controversy might not have radically altered the external political realities of the Middle East, it did profoundly affect the mind-set of American Zionists.

Before the Arab revolt of 1936 and the Peel Commission that followed, American Zionists had focused their attention on the plight of European Jewry. Wise, Silver, Szold, Brandeis, Rothenberg, and Lipsky all expected Palestine to be the destination of most Jewish refugees, and they understood that the Zionist movement in America would win new respect and support with every refugee that the Yishuv successfully absorbed into Palestine. Satisfied that events had proven Theodor Herzl correct, American Zionists set out to transform Palestine into a haven for refugees. However, the Arab riots of 1936 and the British reaction to them subtly changed the priorities of American Jewish nationalists.

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Arab violence and the fear that it would seriously undermine British support for the Zionist program led Jewish nationalists in the United States to turn their main attention away from the European refugees to the survival of the Zionist experiment in Palestine. Upset over the British failure to crush the Arab revolt and suspecting that partition would be recommended by the Peel Commission, Brandeis and other American Zionists concluded “to prevent Jewish development from becoming too powerful in the Near East.” Accordingly, discussions between Zionist leaders and American officials began to focus more on the Palestine situation than on the plight of German Jewry.

Of course, the threat to Palestine’s future was connected to the plight of European Jewry. If the British were to restrict Jewish immigration to the country, one of the few havens available to refugees would be lost. Appeasement of the Arabs would deprive many European refugees of a new life and future generations of a Jewish national home. American Zionists also understood that any decrease in the efficiency of refugee resettlement in Palestine would undermine the advances made by Zionists within the American Jewish community.

Zionist organizations did not ignore the worsening plight of European Jewry in this period. American Jewish nationalists collected and distributed money for relief and resettlement work, and protested against the persecution of European Jewry in the German Reich and Poland. Nonetheless, American Zionists increasingly concentrated on what the Diaspora could do for Palestine rather than what the Jewish homeland could do for the world’s Jews. In 1934, Abba Hillel Silver and other Zionists attacked the Haavara Agreement, claiming the the Yishuv had an obligation to the Jews of Germany and should not profit financially from their suffering. After the Arab riots, however, Stephen Wise and Louis Brandeis could sympathize with the fear of the Yishuv that “the Diaspora Jews . . . may fail to do their part” to support Zionist efforts in Palestine. Palestine, in the opinion of American Zionists, offered needy Jews “permanent reconstruction” while other resettlement efforts promised only “temporary relief.” If American Jewry was to save its European co-religionists, it would first have to defend Palestine. In Morris Rothenberg’s words: “Would it not be morally indefensible for the American Jewish community, living in security and comfort in this great and free land, to keep silent as they see their brothers in their tragic plight, . . . being threatened with the deprivation of their last cherished hope for a better future for themselves and their children?”

As the struggle over Palestine’s future continued, Zionists began to use the refugee crisis as a means to defend their stake in the Holy Land. In debates with American critics of Zionism, publicists like Philip Bernstein argued that any attack on the Jewish claim to Palestine was also a blow against thousands of refugees who could find no other home. Both sides of the partition debate argued that the well-being of the refugees depended on their victory. Weizmann, Lipsky, and Ben-
Gurion explained that an autonomous Jewish state, even if it encompassed only part of Palestine, could offer sanctuary to Jews escaping German or Polish anti-Semitism. Robert Szold and other anti-partitionists claimed that a state in a divided Palestine would lack the resources necessary to absorb the massive number of needy Jews.

The Peel Commission's proposal to divide Palestine between the Arabs and Jews, and the restriction of Jewish immigration that began in November 1936 seriously undermined American Zionists' confidence in Great Britain. Opponents of partition feared that the Peel proposal was part of a cruel and brutal British plan to crush the Zionist movement. Those Zionists advocating Palestine's division also questioned Britain's loyalty to the Balfour pledge and advocated partition as a means of escaping the dictates and whims of colonial administrators and the London cabinet.  

Unfortunately, the Zionists' suspicions about Great Britain proved to be well founded. The growing likelihood of a new European conflict made it imperative for London to secure England's position in the Middle East. British strategists were afraid that, in the event of a war against Germany, continued Arab unrest in the region would drain army manpower away from the European battlefields. Accordingly, after inviting Arab and Zionist representatives to a London conference to be held in early 1939, Great Britain warned that if the negotiations failed, the British cabinet would impose its own settlement on the region.

For the Zionists, the London conference held in February 1939 proved to be a disaster. Arab delegates from Palestine and neighboring Middle Eastern states refused even to sit at the same table with representatives of the Zionist movement. The inability of Jews and Arabs to develop a compromise agreement gave British authorities the opportunity to impose their own will in Palestine. On May 17, 1939, Great Britain published yet another White Paper on Palestine. To the dismay of all Jewish nationalists, the 1939 MacDonald White Paper seemed to repudiate the Balfour Declaration by declaring that:

His Majesty's Government believe that the framers of the Mandate in which the Balfour Declaration was embodied could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish state against the will of the Arab population of the country. . . . His Majesty's Government therefore now declare unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State. They would indeed regard it as contrary to their obligations to the Arabs under the Mandate, as well as to the assurances which have been given to the Arab people in the past, that the Arab population of Palestine should be made the subjects of a Jewish State against their will.

The British proclaimed their intention to establish an independent state in Palestine in ten years, in which Jews and Arabs would share political power. The White
Paper recognized the fear of Arab Palestinians that indefinite Jewish immigration would endanger their well-being. In order to reassure the Arabs that a Jewish state would never emerge, London announced that it would allow only seventy-five thousand Jews to enter Palestine during the next five years. This would insure that the Jews would remain a minority in the Holy Land, outnumbered three to one by the Arabs. After five years, any further Jewish immigration would depend on the agreement of Palestine's Arab community, which was unlikely to ever give its consent. The 1939 White Paper, labeled a "death sentence" by Zionist leader Chaim Wiezmann, also imposed severe restrictions on Jewish land purchases in the Holy Land.¹¹⁷

Three and a half months before the outbreak of the Second World War, Zionists in Europe, Palestine, and America seemed to be faced with a gloomy and tragic future. If the British carried out their new policy, a Jewish majority would never be established in Palestine and the Zionist dream of creating a Jewish homeland would go unfulfilled. The German tanks that crossed Poland's borders on the morning of September 1, 1939, ignited a conflict that would result in the death of forty million people. For Zionists, the German attack seemed to offer one last opportunity to win their homeland.