

REZENSION

Stephan E. C. Wendehorst: British Jewry, Zionism and the Jewish State 1936–1956

Stephan E. C. Wendehorst: British Jewry, Zionism and the Jewish State 1936–1956, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 422 p., ISBN 9780199265305, USD 110,00.

Reviewed by Colin Shindler.

This interesting book is an excellent repository of facts and analysis not only about British Jewry's relation to Zionism but also to the state of Israel during the period between the pre-war Great Arab Revolt and the post-war Suez campaign. It shows in great detail the conversion to Zionism of the Jewish community and the 'Zionisation' of private and public life.

British Jews were in a unique position compared to other Diaspora communities. It was Britain after all which held the Mandate for Palestine. Successive British governments both aided and hindered Jewish emigration. There were friends and foes of the Jews—but not necessarily of Zionism. Some saw emigration to Palestine as a means of decreasing their Jewish population. In the final analysis, what counted for British politicians was posed by the question 'what was in the national interest?' Any sympathy for the Jewish plight was often secondary during the fraught conditions of the war against Nazism. The Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917 because it primarily aided the British war effort and was gradually retracted subsequently because British national interests changed. As Stephan Wendehorst illustrates, acculturated British Jews and assimilated Jewish Britons were radicalised due to external factors, incipient home grown anti-Semitism and the possibility of a Nazi invasion in 1940 when Britain stood alone. It was, of course, the revelations of the Shoah in the spring of 1945 that finally convinced a majority of British Jews that they literally had to take matters into their own hands. Wendehorst goes into fascinating detail about different groups within British Jewry, the Jewish members of the Communist party, the ultra-orthodox members of *Agudat Israel* and the liberal assimilationists of the *Jewish Fellowship*.¹ While all opposed Zionism from different ideological perspectives, none remained unaffected by the post-war wave of support for Zionism. They were all influenced by the reality—the need to help the bedraggled survivors in displaced persons' camps. All searched for a solution—but for most in the mainstream community, the increasingly obvious answer was the establishment of a Hebrew republic in Palestine.

¹ See Miller, Rory: *Divided against Zion: anti-Zionist opposition in Britain to a Jewish state in Palestine, 1945–1948*, London 2000.

While British Jews regarded themselves as loyal patriots in the fight against Hitler, many were scarred by the conduct of Churchill's wartime coalition in barring shiploads of escaping Jews from seeking a haven in Palestine. If Churchill was so pro-Zionist, it was argued, why did he not abrogate the 1939 White Paper? Much to the Zionists' surprise, the 1944 Labour party conference advocated the transfer of Arabs out of Palestine. By the summer of 1945, the new Labour government indicated its volte-face by continuing to implement the White Paper and prevent Holocaust survivors from reaching Palestine's shores.

Wendehorst points out that in October 1940, the British cabinet actually approved a plan for a 10,000 strong military force including 3,000 to be recruited from Palestine. Hebrew would be the language of instruction and the Star of David would be emblazoned on the Union Jack. By August 1941, the government withdrew its offer when it realised that it would not suit its interests in the Arab world. Before 1939, British Jews had been deferential to those in power. Those who wished to participate in a more activist, public approach as a measure of their Jewishness often joined the Communist party. After 1945, the abandonment of the Jews persuaded many to transcend their reticence. Following the arrests of the Jewish Leaderships in Palestine in July 1946, 8,000 Jews marched from the East End, led by the war hero, Thomas Gould VC, to Trafalgar Square. There they sang both 'God save the King' and the Zionist anthem, *Hatikvah*, in public. The Jewish Representative Council in Glasgow accused the Atlee government of projecting 'a policy of procrastination and vacillation'.

In part, such outbursts arose because of the growing realisation that British Jews had been unable to save their brethren in mainland Europe. In the summer of 1944, there were German offers to barter Jewish lives for goods. Wendehorst quotes from a letter to Chaim Weizmann from his supporter, the industrialist, Lord Melchett, that any negotiations would lead nowhere. It was a wasted effort, a futile gesture. The mantra of British policy was predicated on the belief that only an allied victory could save the Jews of Europe. British Jews, however, increasingly began to ask the pained question 'what if there were no more Jews to save?' Such sentiments emerged strongly after 1945. More synagogues affiliated themselves to the Zionist Federation. Even the Jewish Communists of the party journal *Jewish Clarion* began to utter 'understanding' comments. When the refugee ship, the *Exodus*, was turned back from Palestine and eventually forced to return to Germany—its passengers interned in camps—even the conservative United Synagogue decided to act and declared a Palestine Sabbath in June 1947.

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the end of the Mandate, the relationship between British Jewry and other parts of the Diaspora was normalised. However, there was also an accommodation with other sections of British society. This did not happen overnight. There were, for example, riots and pillage of Jewish owned-premises in 1947 after the *Irgun* had hanged the two sergeants. The countries of the Diaspora sent 4,500 volunteers, Jewish and non-Jewish, to fight for the independence of Israel. Of these, some 800 came from

Britain. The rise of the state of Israel irrevocably changed the relationship and indeed the nature of the debate between Jew and non-Jew in Britain.

Stefan Wendehorst's book is an impressive, well-researched work, which will interest the serious reader and the future scholar alike.

Zitiervorschlag Colin Shindler: *Review: Stephan E. C. Wendehorst: British Jewry, Zionism and the Jewish State 1936–1956, in: MEDAON – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung, 8. Jg., 2014, Nr. 14, S. 1–3, online unter http://www.medaon.de/pdf/MEDAON_14_Shindler.pdf [dd.mm.yyyy].*

Author Colin Shindler is an Emeritus Professor at SOAS, University of London. His areas of interest include the origins of the Israeli Right as well as the approach of the European Left towards Israel. His new book *Israel and the World Powers: Diplomatic Alliances and International Relations Beyond the Middle East* will be published by I. B. Tauris in 2014.