

# Nakba History and the Origins of the Jewish State : the Role of the Balfour Declaration

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*The Balfour Declaration, issued on November 2, 1917, committed Britain to set up Palestine — then part of the Ottoman Empire — as a Jewish homeland; it was an extraordinary letter from the Government of Britain to a member of the banking house of Rothschild.*

*As Arthur Koestler noted, " One nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third" — a country that then belonged to a fourth country, namely Turkey!*

The reason for the creation of this document — the British obligation to perform such a service to Zionists — has not been well understood.

Robert John's booklet **"Behind the Balfour Declaration"** uses sources provided by the late US activist **Benjamin Freedman** to provide the fascinating background for this history.

Freedman's passionate 1961 address has the benefit of firsthand observations but some of his perspectives were not borne out by John's evidence. According to Freedman, Zionists approached Britain at a crucial point of World War I with the offer of badly needed financial help in exchange for a commitment to secure Palestine as a future Zionist state; the deal required the entry of the United States to give Britain the ability to deliver Palestine from the Ottoman Empire. Freedman claimed that Germany's post-WW I resentment against the Jewish community stemmed from what they regarded as the betrayal and complicity of German-Jewish financiers in their defeat.

The following excerpts of John's booklet attempt to make his information more accessible; the full document has been made available by the 2013 Institute for Historical Review at URL: [http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v06/v06p389\\_John.html](http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v06/v06p389_John.html) Footnotes embedded in the excerpts can be referenced in the original document.

The early Zionists who wanted to establish a Jewish homeland faced what looked like an impossible task at the turn of the 20th century. Most Jews were unsympathetic to the establishment of a "homeland", and the Zionist community itself was divided between those — like founder Theodore Hertzl — who believed that a pragmatic choice in Africa would be adequate and those determined to obtain Palestine. The Ottoman Empire refused to release Palestine to the Zionists and European leaders were — while often sympathetic- unhelpful. Hertzl claimed prophetically that they would obtain Palestine "not from the goodwill but from the jealousy of the Powers." [112]

The conflicts gripping Europe in 1916-1917 created the fertile ground for Zionist aims in Palestine.

The start of World War I saw the Allies of Britain, France, Italy and Czarist Russia facing off

against the Entente: Germany, Austria- Hungary and the Ottoman Empire of Turkey. The human losses were staggering, and by 1916 the Allies were running short of money and credit.

To quote excerpts of John's description of the situation and a key encounter:

1916 was a disastrous year for the Allies. "In the story of the war" wrote Lloyd George, "the end of 1916 found the fortunes of the Allies at their lowest ebb. In the offensives on the western front we had lost three men for every two of the Germans we had put out of action. ..."

As for paying for the war, the Allies at first had used the huge American debts in Europe to pay for war supplies, but by 1916 the resources of J.P. Morgan and Company, the Allies' financial and purchasing agents in the United States, were said to be nearly exhausted by increased Allied demands for American credit. [91] ...

[And, given the uncertainty of the outcome of this conflict, funding was not forthcoming.]

Into this gloomy winter of 1916 walked a [well-connected] new figure. He was James Malcolm, [S] an Oxford educated Armenian [T] who, at the beginning of 1916, with the sanction of the British and Russian Governments, had been appointed ... to take charge of Armenian interests during and after the war. .... He was passionately devoted to an Allied victory which he hoped would guarantee the national freedom of the Armenians then under Turkish and Russian rule.

Sir Mark Sykes, with whom he was on terms of family friendship, told him that the Cabinet was looking anxiously for United States intervention in the war on the side of the Allies, but when asked what progress was being made in that direction, Sykes shook his head glumly, "Precious little," he replied.

James Malcolm now suggested to Mark Sykes that the reason why previous overtures to American Jewry to support the Allies had received no attention was because the approach had been made to the wrong people. It was to the Zionist Jews that the British and French Governments should address their parleys.

"You are going the wrong way about it," said Mr. Malcolm. "You can win the sympathy of certain politically-minded Jews everywhere, and especially in the United States, in one way only, and that is, by offering to try and secure Palestine for them." [96]

What really weighed most heavily now with Sykes were the terms of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement. [Not to mention Britain's 1915 promise to the Arabs!] He told Malcolm that to offer to secure Palestine for the Jews was impossible. "Malcolm insisted that there was no other way and urged a Cabinet discussion. ... Malcolm pointed out the influence of Judge Brandeis of the American Supreme Court, and his strong Zionist sympathies." [97]

In the United States, the President's adviser, Louis D. Brandeis, a leading advocate of Zionism, had been inducted as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court on 5 June 1916. That Wilson was vulnerable was evident, in that as early

as 1911, he had made known his profound interest in the Zionist idea and in Jewry. [98] ... Wilson had been blackmailed for \$40,000 for some hot love letters he had written to his neighbor's wife when he was President of Princeton. He did not have the money, and the go-between, Samuel Untermyer, of the law firm of Guggenheim, Untermyer & Marshall, said he would provide it if Wilson would appoint to the next vacancy on the Supreme Court a nominee selected by Mr. Untermyer. The money was paid, the letters returned, and Brandeis had been the nominee. [Wilson was also surrounded by the pro-Zionist Col. E. M. House, who he had made his effective Secretary of State, and Brandeis's nephew, Felix Frankfurter.]

In December 1916, Lloyd George, formerly counsel to the Zionists, was named Prime Minister of Britain, with Arthur Balfour his Foreign Minister. Lloyd George planned to pursue the war more aggressively than had the preceding Asquith government. Germany, so far the winner in the conflict, offered generous peace terms in January 1917, according to Freedman, which were "status quo ante," giving Germany no benefit for its lead in the conflict.

But Britain had other ideas at that point, and the situation in Russia, with the approaching success of the revolution in March of 1917, was a positive development. Lloyd George's memoirs noted that:

Russian Jews had been secretly active on behalf of the Central Powers from the first; they had become the chief agents of German pacifist propaganda in Russia; by 1917 they had done much in preparing for that general disintegration of Russian society, later recognised as the Revolution. It was believed that if Great Britain declared for the fulfilment of Zionist aspirations in Palestine under her own pledge, one effect would be to bring Russian Jewry to the cause of the Entente.

It was believed, also, that [an agreement to obtain Palestine for a Jewish homeland] would have a potent influence upon world Jewry outside Russia, and secure for the Entente the aid of Jewish financial interests. In America, their aid in this respect would have a special value when the Allies had almost exhausted the gold and marketable securities available for American purchases. Such were the chief considerations which, in 1917, impelled the British Government towards making a contract with Jewry. [189] ...

John noted that:

The reports reaching England of impending dissolution of the Russian state practically removed the need for Russian endorsement of Zionist aims, but made French and Italian acceptance even more urgent. This at any rate was the belief of Sykes, Balfour, Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, who, as claimed in their subsequent statements, were convinced that proclaimed Allied support for Zionist aims would especially influence the United States. Events in Russia made the cooperation of Jewish groups with the Allies much easier. ....

On 22 March 1917 Jacob H. Schiff of Kuhn, Loeb & Co., wrote to Mortimer Schiff, "... because of recent action of Germany (the declaration of unlimited U-boat warfare) and developments in Russia we shall no longer abstain from Allied Governments financing when opportunity offers." .... [emphasis added]

[Thus:] In London, the War Cabinet led by Lloyd George lost no time committing British forces first to the capture of Jerusalem, and then to the total expulsion of the Turks from Palestine. The attack on Egypt, launched on 26 March 1917, attempting to take Gaza, ended in failure. By the end of April a second attack on Gaza had been driven back and it had become clear that there was no prospect of a quick success on this Front. ...

In March of 1917 Wilson had unsuccessfully tried to get Congressional agreement to an undeclared naval war against Germany. On April 2, 1917 — within six months of James Malcolm's suggestion to Sykes — Wilson called a special session of Congress to declare war. John describes it:

He asked for a declaration of war with a mission: for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

That night crowds filled the streets, marching, shouting, singing "Dixie" or "The Star Spangled Banner." Wilson turned to his secretary, Tumulty: "Think what that means, the applause. My message tonight was a message of death, How strange to applaud that!" ...

In July of 1917, Woodrow Wilson sent a delegation to Turkey to examine the possibility of peace negotiations with the Allies; Wilson was concerned about the Armenian genocide which was then taking place. The mission, which consisted of Henry Morgenthau, Sr. and Justice Brandeis's nephew Felix Frankfurter, was intercepted by Chaim Weizmann and persuaded to return home [147] An Allied peace with Turkey would have spelled the end of Zionist intentions for Palestine.

The drafting of the documents to enable the British obligations in Palestine took place in the summer of 1917. They were not drafted entirely in Britain. According to John:

Brandeis ... busied himself in particular with drafts of what later became the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate for Palestine, and in obtaining American approval for them. [149] A considerable number of drafts were made in London and transmitted to the United States, through War Office channels, for the use of the American Zionist Political Committee. Some were detailed, but the British Government did not want to commit itself to more than a general statement of principles.

Brandeis cabled Weizmann on September 23, 1917, that Wilson would be sympathetic to the Declaration [165] although how he had induced Wilson to change his mind was unclear [166].

The letter known as the Balfour Declaration was issued on November 2, 1917:

Foreign Office, November 2nd, 1917

**Dear Lord Rothschild,**

I have much pleasure in conveying to you on behalf of His Majesty's Government the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations, which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet:

“His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

I should be grateful if you would bring this Declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours sincerely, **Arthur James Balfour.** [1]

It was decided by Lord Allenby that the “Declaration” should not then be published in Palestine where his forces were still south of the Gaza-Beersheba. Although leaflets containing its message were reportedly dropped over Germany, Austria and “the Jewish belt from Poland to the Baltic “, the German government was not aware of the Balfour Declaration until 1920. (A German-Jewish society, the V.I.J.O.D. [HH] had approached Turkey in January of 1918 to get support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine but had to be satisfied with an Ottoman promise of legislation by means of which: “all justifiable wishes of the Jews in Palestine would be able to meet their fulfilment.”)

When Winston Churchill asked the House of Commons on July 4th 1922 to keep the British pledge of the Balfour Declaration, a member of Parliament noted that “The House has not yet had an opportunity of discussing it.” American Congressman Hamilton Fish, who had authored a 1922 resolution modelled on the Balfour Declaration, was horrified at where it led. He claimed: “As author of the first Zionist Resolution patterned n the Balfour Resolution, I denounce and repudiate the Ben Gurion statements as irreconcilable with my Resolution as adopted by Congress, and if they represent the Government of Israel and public opinion there, then I shall disavow publicly my support of my own Resolution, as I do not want to be associated with such un-American doctrines.” [180]

### **Why did Wilson involve the US in WW I?**

In examining Woodrow Wilson's motives for entering WW I, John noted that the 1937 study of Prof. Alex M. Arnett indicated that Wilson had decided to enter WW I on the side of the Allies “many months” before the March 1917 German resumption of U-boat warfare. [182] Given that Brandeis joined the Supreme Court in June 1916, and the British approaches to Zionist leaders would have taken place in the fall of 1916, Wilson's decision could have reflected those influences. Wilson's peace delegation to Turkey in July 1917, however, indicated that the cause of the Armenian genocide took precedence over Zionist ambitions in Palestine.

Some observations can be made from this study relating to responsibility for WW I and its

tragic consequences:

1. Germany, which was forced to accept responsibility for WW I as part of the Treaty of Versailles terms, was the one country that tried to obtain peace in January of 1917 and was recognized by the Allies as the source of “peace propaganda”. Also, as an ally of Turkey, Germany was not able to offer any part of the Ottoman Empire to attract support. [Turkey was dismissive of all proposals for a Jewish Palestine; the response to a German approach in 1918 was a promise of legislation through which: “all justifiable wishes of the Jews in Palestine would be able to meet their fulfilment.”]
2. While Jewish financial power and the Zionist agenda were attractive to WW I belligerents, the responsibility for those with the power to make use of them was not attributable to the Jewish community. Zionist leadership demonstrated callous disregard for the fate of the Armenians and Greeks being slaughtered by Turkey when they waylaid the American delegation sent to work for a peace with Turkey — an effort presumably designed to stop the ongoing Armenian genocide.
3. The overthrow of the Czar in March of 1917 and the Jewish contributions to the Russian Revolution were significant factors for the subsequent Jewish financial support of the Allies.
4. The involvement of Justice Brandeis in drafting the Balfour Declaration (as well as the British Mandate for Palestine) along with early Congressional support indicate an American responsibility for the resulting deprivation of Palestinian self-determination that is rarely acknowledged.
5. The various promises and assurances that Palestinian rights would be respected — from Chaim Weizmann [140], from the Balfour Declaration, from the UN General Assembly Resolution of 1947 recommending the partition of Palestine, and from dozens of “legally-binding” UN resolutions and conventions- have all proven to be worthless in protecting Palestinian human or civil rights.

To conclude with Robert John’s (and Benjamin Freedman’s) observations: “We should not allow ourselves to be made pawns in the games of others.”

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