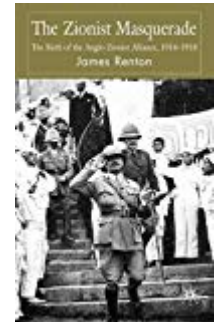


James Renton. *The Zionist Masquerade: The Birth of the Anglo-Zionist Alliance 1914-1918.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xi + 231 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-54718-6.



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The word “masquerade” is not one to be used lightly by historians. Obviously, James Renton is aware of this, and he strives to justify his choice of vocabulary by demonstrating that the Anglo-Zionist alliance was built on spurious foundations, with false pretences and hidden agendas present at all stages in its inception and early development. His supporting evidence comes from the usual repositories in Britain, notably the National Archives (ex-PRO) and the Imperial War Museum, but also from Israel (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem) and the United States (most prominently the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio). Renton uses *American Jewish Archives*, because it is one of the central premises of his undertaking that the initial moves on the part of the British governing elite were primarily designed to woo American Jewry.

Ironically, the author suggests, the Anglo-Zionist alliance was born of the deeply ingrained anti-Semitism of the British upper political establishment. David Lloyd George, prime minister from December 1916, believed like most of his

contemporaries that it was impossible to assimilate the Jews, simply because they did not want to be assimilated. As he put it in a speech of 1896, “the Jewish nation had clung to its traditions, language and religion through all the ages” (p. 15). This elite believed that it was impossible for a Jew ever to make a loyal subject: his innate allegiance was to his own “nation,” curiously identified as world Jewry. They were convinced that whatever loyalty a government could expect from a Jew had to be bought by making concessions to world Jewry. This fundamental distrust and rejection of the Jews on the part of the British promoters of the Anglo-Zionist alliance is the first element in the “masquerade.”

The second element is best made explicit by a quotation from the introduction: “The decision to issue the Balfour Declaration was not therefore driven by British strategic interests in the Ottoman Empire. The main concern for policy-makers in relation to Zionism was the conduct of the war in the USA and Europe, rather than the future of the Holy Land itself” (p. 5). From its fundamen-

tal belief in the indefectible solidarity of world Jewry, what Renton calls “the official mind” drew the conclusion that, in time of war, with the enormous importance of keeping and getting allies against Germany, it was imperative to placate Jewish opinion in Russia and the United States--again with the belief derived from this viscerally anti-Semitic mental framework that the Jews wielded tremendous power in these two countries, if only because of their number (p. 11). The Jews were seen as a double menace. Either as pro-German or as pacifists, they were in a position to weaken the Russian war effort and prevent the United States from joining Britain in the war (before their entry) or sapping the Americans’ will to fight (after their entry). That the menace was nonexistent is beside the point--what counts is the perception of it among the (foreign) policymaking elite, intent on buying continued support in Russia and consent to declaring war in the United States from the all-powerful Jews there.

Renton very convincingly points to the third misapprehension by arguing that there was no real demand for a “Jewish home” among world Jewry, if only because there was no such thing as world Jewry. The Jews, like the rest of mankind, were profoundly divided among themselves, and the Zionists were probably in a minority everywhere. But then the idea of a Jewish regrouping in the Holy Land perfectly fit in with the romantic Protestant cultivation of the narrative in the Old Testament, a Hebrew golden age, in combination with the anti-Semitic conviction that the degeneracy of the Jews was due to the diaspora and that a return to Palestine might (the Zionists naturally said *would*) bring regeneration. The seminal concept of the “invention of tradition,” so fruitful in other contexts, seems to be equally operative here: for Renton, the British elites literally invented a demand that was not there before (or only in virtual form, among the isolated Zionists)--attributing to the vast majority of Jews aspirations that only existed in their own romantic imagina-

tion (cf. *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger [1983]).

But then, Renton explains, the Zionists (who of course knew that their doctrine left most Jews indifferent, when not hostile) immediately perceived the opportunity thus opened to them. He usefully reminds us that it was Herbert Samuel, the Anglo-Jewish Liberal member of parliament and at the time president of the Local Government Board, who first submitted a memorandum to the cabinet on possible British support of Jewish settlement in Palestine in March 1915. He posed a new argument beside that of placating Jewish power: a British protectorate in Palestine would be eminently desirable for the control of Egypt and the Suez Canal (and, consequently, communications with India). It is not clear if the latter idea (extremely seductive of course for the military and for the imperialists of all parties) came from Chaim Weizmann, the leading British Zionist, but it received his unreserved backing. Still, at the time, only Lloyd George (not yet prime minister) showed interest.

Renton admirably unravels the complex interplay of military events, diplomatic necessities, and masterly Zionist exploitation of the moving situation that led to the progress of Samuel’s initial suggestion and its eventual adoption as the so-called Balfour Declaration (in fact, an open letter to Lord Rothschild, a prominent Anglo-Jewish figure, was sent by Arthur Balfour, the foreign secretary, on behalf of the British government) of November 2, 1917. Renton ascribes the merit of instigating the government’s evolution primarily to “four Jewish activists from the USA, England, Russia and Egypt, Horace Kallen, Lucien Wolf, Vladimir Jabotinsky and Edgar Suares,” the decisive element probably coming from Weizmann’s (mendacious) report of German agitation to win over Jewish opinion in the United States and Russia (p. 46).

Lord Curzon (at the time leader of the House of Lords and chair of the War Cabinet’s policy

committee on the region) was the foremost opponent of the declaration in the cabinet, objecting that it would raise “false expectations which could never be realised” (p. 72). At first glance, he was wrong, since “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”—the passage in the declaration which is the only one that most people remember—is now accomplished fact (p. 70). But then, the declaration also contained a proviso: “it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine” (p. 70). And here it is clear that Lord Curzon’s prediction has so far been vindicated by events. One of the ironies of history, of course, is that he was instrumental as foreign secretary from 1919 to 1924, in charge of implementing the new Mandate over Palestine, in sustaining the hope that the “false expectations” were not “preparing the way for disappointment and failure,” as he again warned the cabinet at the time of the declaration (p. 72). A complex “masquerade” indeed since, Renton suggests, initially there was no intention to deliver to the Zionists: “For those policy-makers who had worked for the Balfour Declaration, it was propaganda that was their fundamental concern, rather than the actual development of the Zionist project in the Holy Land” (p. 81).

The subchapter entitled “The Historicisation of the Balfour Declaration” superbly deconstructs what Renton calls the “myth of British ‘proto-Zionism’, which has had such a longstanding influence on the historiography of the Balfour Declaration” (p. 85). Here we have to deal once again with another “invention of tradition,” going back to Oliver Cromwell, if not earlier, in the literature widely distributed by the Ministry of Information. Simultaneously, a parallel “invention of tradition” was taking place to counter the dominant position of the anti-Zionist Anglo-Jewish Association and Alliance israélite universelle, which clung to English and French as the language of instruction in their schools in Jerusalem. “One of the quintessential

elements of the Zionist project was the invention of Hebrew culture,” which was given a tremendous boost by British authorities after their conquest of Jerusalem in December 1917, “essentially a propaganda measure” (pp. 106, 91). The Ministry of Information staged a “theatrical” reception for the official Zionist Commission headed by Weizmann in order “to create specific messages for Jewry,” especially the Jews of America, as the Bolshevik Revolution had greatly reduced communication with Russian Jews (p. 112). Here again, therefore, a two-way make-believe process was at work, with the British government using the Zionists for its own agenda and the Zionists using the British government for theirs. But, of course, at such games, one player always turns out to be cleverer than the other, and Renton has no doubt which it was: “the Zionists were undoubtedly used by the Government. They were not, however, unwitting pawns, duped by the British. It was in fact the Zionists themselves who established the rationale for using Zionism as a propaganda weapon, and consistently showed the Government how and why this should be done” (p. 7).

One constant difficulty for the Zionists, however, was that many American Jews saw the United States as an “American Israel”—they had found the Promised Land in the New World and did not see why they should endorse the idea of a Jewish state that would open them again to the old accusation, “citizen in name and alien at heart,” with the “danger of a hyphenated citizenship” (pp. 136, 135, 142). Renton pointedly reminds us that “the Balfour Declaration failed to have much of an initial impact on American Jewry”—contrary, of course, to what the British government had been led to expect by Weizmann and the Zionists in London, wrongly as it now turned out (p. 138). Many American Jews were (rightly) wary of the British government’s real motives, and Renton quotes a Jewish daily newspaper in which “it was asserted that the Declaration was made only for the benefit of England, which was to be the real

boss in Palestine” (p. 139). Renton, therefore, concludes his superbly researched chapter on the impact of the Balfour Declaration in the United States on a note of great caution. Admittedly, at the end of the war, the Zionists seemed to have rallied most American Jewish organizations to their cause—giving it not active, but passive support, however. But, he very convincingly argues, “the vast majority of Jews [in the United States] had not undergone a radical change of heart in favour of Zionism,” and the ostensible support given in 1918-19 “did not survive into the inter-war period,” as “Zionism continued to be a minority pursuit among American Jews” (p. 148).

The greatest irony of it all—the grossest masquerade as Renton would put it—is that the modest achievements of the American Zionists in the late 1910s boosted their “claim to legitimacy and leadership,” which “could not have been further from the effect intended by the British Government” (p. 148). The Zionists had now outlived their usefulness as far as the British government was concerned: the perceived danger of world Jewry siding with the Germans had been warded off, and the British Empire was among the victors in 1918 and it duly received a Mandate of the new League of Nations over Palestine. As Lloyd George said to his private secretary on February 15, 1919, “If the Zionists claim that the Jews are to have domination of the Holy Land under a British Protectorate, then they are certainly putting their claims too high” (p. 153). Indeed Balfour himself made it explicit again to Lloyd George four days later that the “home” in his famous declaration did not mean exclusive power to the Jews, reiterating in another form the precondition that so many people tended to omit, “provided that home can be given to them without dispossessing or oppressing the present inhabitants” (p. 153).

But there was no way the Zionist movement could be curbed in its development, especially in Palestine, without British authorities reneging on the promises made in the Balfour Declaration and

betraying the hopes raised in subsequent publications of the Ministry of Information. As Renton puts it, “once the war was over, Britain’s Zionist propaganda came back to haunt the administration in Palestine. Not only were the Arabs stubborn in their suspicion of British intentions, but many Zionists came to see the Mandate as a grave disappointment, if not a betrayal of the promise of the Declaration” (p. 151). Deliberately mixing metaphors, the reader leaves the book with the conviction that the “masquerade” in question left successive British governments with the impossible task of squaring the circle. That the undertaking could only be doomed to failure is in no doubt for Renton: “The attempt to create different messages for different audiences regarding the future of the same place, as had been attempted since the fall of Jerusalem, was untenable” (p. 151).

The Zionist Masquerade extends the judgment formulated on the Balfour Declaration by Elizabeth Monroe in 1963, “one of the greatest mistakes in our imperial history” was to include the Anglo-Zionist alliance generally, at least in its initial stages in the last months of the war and the early postwar period (p. 149). Such a severe critique should not remain unanswered, because it is by the confrontation of sometimes irreconcilable points of view that our perception of past events makes progress. Let us simply hope that Renton’s future contradictors make the same talented use of an equally wide range of archival sources.

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