



**Alan Dowty.** *Arabs and Jews in Ottoman Palestine: Two Worlds Collide*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 312 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-03865-4.

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Alan Dowty's book seeks to examine the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to this end, he analyzes the history of the Yishuv in Palestine during the tail end of the Ottoman era and its relations with the Arab inhabitants of the country. Dowty's book joins the shelf of works examining this field, which has received heightened attention over the past fifteen years.[1]

Dowty's approach is essentially deterministic: with hindsight, he suggests, "it is hard to see how the conflict could have evolved much differently" (p. 273). The destructive nucleus of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was inherent in the aspiration of European Jews to establish a national entity in their ancestral homeland as they searched for a piece of land where they might be free from subjugation to others. Although most of the Jews who entered Palestine after 1882 left eastern Europe after suffering from persecution, they continued to identify with European civilization and had no desire to integrate in the Middle Eastern domain. On the rare occasions when they pondered the question of their relations with the Arabs, they assumed that these would be dominated by the great benefits the Arabs would derive from their contacts with the Jewish immigrants. Accordingly, Dowty claims that "the 'civilizational divide' runs through the entire history of Jewish Zionist activity in Ottoman Palestine" (p. 272).

The book comprises seven chapters, the first two of which serve by way of an introduction. The first chapter, "Palestine before Zionism," discusses the history of the three Ottoman provinces to which Palestine belonged during the late Ottoman period. Dowty examines the Western penetration of the Ottoman Empire and the extensive consular presence of the European powers in Jerusalem. This process also played a role in the growing importance of Jerusalem within the empire, culminating in 1873 in the establishment of a province of which Jerusalem served as the capital. The chapter focuses in particular on the Tanzimat reforms that later facilitated the emergence of the Zionist enterprise. The new Land Law of 1873, for example, allowed bourgeois urban Arabs to register in their name land they had acquired or purchased and to become its owner; this later enabled the usurping of the land of Arab peasants after the landowners sold their property to Zionist institutions or settlers.

The second chapter, "Russian Jews before Zionism," discusses the Jews of the Russian Empire over the course of the nineteenth century. The chapter shapes a narrative familiar from studies on European Jewry according to which the era of revolutions led to the emancipation of the Jews, while Napoleon's conquests "destroyed the ghetto gates and tore off the yellow badges that Jews had

been forced to wear, replacing them with revolutionary tricolor rosettes” (p. 43). Most central European Jews warmly embraced emancipation, and the Enlightenment movement that spread eastwards served as the precursor for the Hebrew revival movement. However, the Jews of Russia did not enjoy emancipation: “The emancipation that had opened doors in the West was hardly felt under Russian autocracy in the early nineteenth century” (p. 56). Modest improvements in the legal status of the Jews inspired hope in many circles, but these were shattered by the “Storms in the South” riots (1881–82). The riots led to a widespread sense that “for historical reasons Jews would always be aliens in Europe” (p. 69).[2]

The anti-Jewish riots played a key role in mass migration from the Russian Empire—primarily to the New World, though around 2 percent of the migrants headed for Palestine. The *Ḥibbat Zion* movement emerged, and tens of thousands of Russian and Romanian Jews sought to emigrate to Palestine. In this country, however, “there was a building resistance to the penetration of Europeans and European ideas [among] Turkish rulers and Arab citizens alike.” Faithful to his deterministic stance, Dowty concludes that “when these two realities met, collision was inevitable” (p. 83).

The third chapter, “The Two Worlds Collide,” describes the first decade of the First Aliya, in the 1880s. For many of the settlers, the first encounter with the Arab inhabitants of Palestine was far from simple. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda would later recall his feelings on encountering the Arabs: “I must admit that this first encounter with our Ishmaelite cousins was not happy for me. A depressing feeling of fear ... suddenly filled my heart” (p. 88). During this period, the first settlements (*moshavot*) were established, while the Ottoman authorities sought to restrict Jewish immigration and settlement. The settlers received assistance from the foreign consulates, thereby provoking the wrath both of the authorities and of the local residents. The fourth chapter, “Unneighborly Relations,” examines the

everyday life of the settlers in the 1880s, including an analysis of the disputes that developed between almost every settlement and its Arab neighbors over boundaries, pastureland, and natural resources. During such a confrontation in Gedera in 1888, the first apparent use of firearms occurred, although in this period no fatalities ensued, due in part to fear of igniting blood feuds.

The fifth chapter, “Truth from the Land of Israel,” explores the reactions of Zionist individuals and institutions in the 1890s to the increasingly overt conflict. Dowty focuses on the famous article by Ahad Ha’am from 1891 that provided him with the title for the chapter. Ahad Ha’am was perhaps the first Zionist figure to recognize that the Arabs were not simply a passive object of manipulation by others, but “actors” with their own dreams and desires. He acknowledged the collective dimension of Arab identity, although he did not yet consider the “Arab problem” to be a political one, and was convinced that it would be resolved in the domestic Ottoman context. In this early stage, Ahad Ha’am drew a lesson from Jewish history that many others, then and now, have refused to heed: “how careful we must be not to arouse the anger of other people against ourselves by reprehensible conduct” (p. 163).

The sixth chapter, “The Arena Expands,” examines the exacerbation of the conflict around the beginning of the twentieth century against the background of the institutionalization of Zionist activity following the formation of the World Zionist Organization, headed by Theodor Herzl (1897). The affinity of the Jewish settlements to these formal Zionist activities enraged the Ottoman authorities: “the last thing that the sultan needed was another restive non-Muslim minority, like the Armenians” (p. 203), who were violently suppressed in the period 1894–96. Various Arab intellectuals also began to express reservations about Zionism and Jewish settlement. The Jerusalemite Yusuf Zia al-Khalidi, for example, corresponded with Herzl through the mediation of the chief rabbi of France,

implored him: “in the name of God, leave Palestine in peace” (p. 209).

The seventh chapter, “Battle Lines,” examines the decade preceding the First World War (1905–14)—the period when broad circles on both sides realized for the first time that they were facing a national conflict. This period “is best understood as a continuation, and intensification, of what began a little over two decades earlier” (p. 271). The hardcore of the Second Aliya immigrants arrived with a revolutionary mentality that had been galvanized following the failed revolution of 1905 in Russia. They were much less open to compromise than most of the earlier arrivals and founded the Hebrew Defense force. There were some exceptions to the aggressive attitude toward the Arabs. In his article “A Hidden Question” (1907), the teacher and intellectual Yitzhak Epstein urged his fellow Zionists to recognize that the conflict would only be resolved on the national level and could not be confined to the local dimension. In this respect, Epstein was decades ahead of the Zionist mainstream.

During the first few years following the revolution of the “Young Turks” (1908), the Ottoman authorities granted more permits than in the past for daily newspapers. This step facilitated the development of nationalist movements around the empire, including the Arab national movement, and a surge was seen in anti-Zionist publications. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, the end of the period covered by Dowty, “both parties are beginning to speak openly about the use of force” (p. 261), and this would, of course, become the predominant reality over the hundred years that followed.

Dowty’s book will serve as an accessible and important work in the field of the history of the Yishuv during the Ottoman period and the early stages of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It draws largely on relatively well-known primary sources, and its main contribution lies in making these sources easily accessible in English translation, to-

gether with a cohesive narrative. The book will serve as a foundation text for beginners and undergraduates interested in the field.

The first two chapters could serve in their own right as an introduction to the history of Ottoman Palestine and modern Jewish history, providing synthetic summaries of the research in these fields. Dowty returns to these introductions throughout the book, thereby weaving a *longue durée* history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is profoundly linked to the history of the Jewish diaspora during the period preceding the first Zionist *Aliyot*. It is only Dowty’s summary of the development and failure of emancipation that enables him to explain to the reader how important it was to the First Aliya settlers to find “the one place in the world where they were not obliged to adjust to others” (p. 121), and why the attacks on some of the settlements in Palestine reminded the settlers of “a *shtetl* after a pogrom” (p. 136).

Dowty’s study corresponds with the “Affective Turn” in general and in Jewish historiography, devoting considerable room to the emotions of its subjects (most of whom are Ashkenazi Jewish men). By way of example, Dowty describes the experience of Alter Druyanow, “a young law student,” following the “Storms in the South:” “When I saw ... [the pogroms] something in me snapped.... In one flash all my illusions were revealed, and all the beautiful pictures of the future, that I and my friends painted for ourselves, dissipated like smoke” (p. 66). A particular merit of Dowty’s study is that he presents the experience of numerous figures from the second rank of national activists, rather than confining himself to the central figures.

Historians are well aware of the enormous quantity of primary sources available from the beginning of the Second Aliya, and particularly following the revolution of 1908, by comparison to earlier periods. However, Dowty manages to present his discussion of the period 1905–14 in just one-fifth of his study and does not allow the large

corpus of material from this period to overshadow the earlier years. Indeed, he remarks that “I come away from this study feeling that the first *aliya* has been unjustly minimized, and even denigrated, in evaluations of its role in Arab-Jewish relations and in the rise of Zionism generally” (p. viii). His important emphasis on the period 1880–05 is consistent with the welcome trend in the literature to accentuate the historical function of the First Aliya.

The book is well written and readable; the quality of the fine Hebrew in the primary sources, which are quoted at length, is preserved almost entirely in the translation. The author artfully ties together the different chapters, and the short conclusion at the end of each chapter helps the reader to understand Dowty’s arguments and narrative. The book shows a clear preference for Hebrew sources over Arabic ones, as Dowty acknowledges in his preface (p. vii); this preference should be understood against the background of the relative paucity of Arabic sources from before 1908. As a result, the first six chapters of the book rely mainly on Jewish sources. This historiographic discrepancy might have been overcome by reducing the volume of quotes from the Jewish sources, thereby moderating the emphasis on the Jewish voice at the expense of the Arab side.

The book contains a few errors relating to the history of the Ottoman Empire and its Jewish population. For example, it is incorrect to state that “the only major blood libel accusation against Jews was the 1840 Damascus case” (p. 99).[3] By 1908, the Ottoman Jews had not been “subjects” (p. 249) for around fifty years, but were citizens. However, such errors do not mar the generally high standard of the book.

As for Dowty’s deterministic approach, I would like to quote an observation that Hillel Cohen makes toward the end of his book on the 1929 riots: “Were the killings of 1929 a necessary result of the Arab-Zionist encounter in Palestine? Determinists argue that everything that happened had to happen.... But there are other possibilities. There

are more nuanced theologies, national rivalries that develop into alliances, and more complex and nuanced views of national rights. The decisions made and deeds done by Jews and Arabs prior to and during the riots were those of human beings. At each decision point, at each occasion of spontaneous action, there are a range of possibilities.”[4]

In conclusion, Dowty’s book makes an extremely important contribution to the literature examining the history of the Yishuv and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The combination of attention to detail and a broad overview means that this work will be useful to scholars and students for years to come, and the author deserves every praise for this.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, see Itzhak Bezael, *You Were Born Zionists: The Sephardim in Eretz Israel in Zionism and the Hebrew Revival during the Ottoman Period* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi, 2007); Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine, 1865–1900* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013); and Amos Noy, *Experts or Witnesses: Jewish Intelligentsia from Jerusalem and the Levant in the Beginning of the 20th Century* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2017).

[2]. Recent historical studies argue that the emancipatory model should not be applied to the case of Russian Jewry, since it is irrelevant to the historical reality of corporative society in the Russian Empire. As Benjamin Nathans has shown, the imperial state sought to grant “selective integration,” rather than “emancipation,” to various corporations and minorities, including the Jews. Nathans continues: “What happened in Russia was thus not simply a failed attempt at a European-style emancipation. During the mid-nineteenth

century, Russia was still emerging—in part under state tutelage—as a hierarchy of culturally and juridically distinct estates, and it was precisely this hierarchy that various groups within the Jewish population were encouraged to enter.” See Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 79. Accordingly, the situation of the Russian Jews should be compared not to that of their coreligionists in western and central Europe, but rather to other minorities in the Russian Empire (*ibid.*, 376). These studies are not reflected in Dowty’s book.

[3]. See Jacob Barnai, “Blood Libels’ in the Ottoman Empire of the Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Antisemitism through the Ages*, ed. Shmuel Almog (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988), 189–94.

[4]. Hillel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1929*, trans. Haim Watzman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 260.

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