



Carly Beckerman. *Unexpected State: British Politics and the Creation of Israel.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. 224 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04641-3.

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Suggesting that the foundation for the eventual state of Israel was laid more on accident than on any concerted effort on the part of British policymakers, Carly Beckerman's 2020 *Unexpected State: British Politics and the Creation of Israel* takes a "politics-first" approach to exploring the decisions that led British policy vis-à-vis Palestine during the Mandate period (1922-48). The suggestion that the British "accidentally" or "unexpectedly" helped to create Israel is not wholly novel, although most analysis arguing such has centered more on the issuance of the Balfour Declaration and the time before the Mandate.[1] What Beckerman does in *Unexpected State* is to push back against the mythologized histories of the era that gloss over British policy decisions as a largely pro or anti-Zionist effort to strengthen a contemporary political agenda. Beckerman articulates an idea that British decisions made in the Colonial Office and Westminster were done more out of political necessity than any purely ideological or prejudiced sentiment.

Beckerman takes a political psychology approach to discovering the rationale and reasoning behind British political decisions for Palestine. From the outset it is important to understand that this work is not intended to give an on-the-ground account of Palestinian strife, as few local leaders' voices emerge over the course of the book. The

purpose here is to underscore how tied into global political concerns Westminster was in its views on and actions toward Palestine policy. This idea is not novel in looking at other moments of Palestine (and Israel-Palestine) history, especially in the voluminous examinations of the history of the Balfour Declaration, but for this period the coverage is far more scant. *Unexpected State* is a diplomatic, or more to the point, document history and as such relies heavily on British governmental sources, such as those found at the National Archives at Kew and the personal papers of political leaders like Winston Churchill, then secretary of state for the colonies, and Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. To this, Beckerman adds an extensive list of secondary material all woven together in an evaluation of the series of political choices made in the 1920s and 1930s that tend to appear antithetical and even hypocritical on first glance.

The period after the issuance of the Balfour Declaration (1917) and just before the establishment of the state of Israel (1948), the Mandate period swirled with white papers, commissions, and policy reversals. This era of political back-and-forth that one would expect to engender a great deal of discussion and dissection is, oddly, under-analyzed. While "man-on-the-spot" approaches[2] to understanding the region are plen-

tiful, why London appeared to spend the years in a political tug-of-war with itself over Palestine receives little notice. It is here that Beckerman offers new insights, a deeper understanding of what exactly was going on in the minds of policymakers. Delving into the political psychology of the policymakers, attempting to navigate away from the superficial and personal biases and prejudices to the actual reason decisions were made the way they were, Beckerman sheds light on this highly contentious moment in history.

Resituating the creation of the state of Israel not in terms of Great Men politics but the more humdrum fights over domestic and international policy, Beckerman's work takes a politics-first approach that assumes policymakers act first and foremost out of desire for political survival. Politics-first, she notes, offers a "much better understanding of policies that seem to have been irrational or counterproductive" (p. 3). This is particularly clear in chapter 3, "The Passfield Reversal, 1929-1935," (building on her 2016 article, "The Reversal of the Passfield White Paper, 1930-31: A Re-assessment," which appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary History*). Zionism as expressed in the Balfour Declaration was enshrined in policy in the charter for the Palestine Mandate and reinforced in the 1922 Churchill White Paper. Still-shifting political sands at home, in-fighting between the Foreign and Colonial Offices, and increasing frustration within Palestine, coupled with the Palin Report (1920), named for Major General Sit Philip Palin, and Haycraft Commission (1921), led by Sir Thomas Haycraft, then chief justice of the Supreme Court in Palestine, both demonstrating "grave problems inherent in the Balfour Declaration" (p. 42), all signaled lack of uniformity in how Britain should proceed in its governance of the region. Beckerman follows the threads of domestic and international political wrangling to highlight how and why seemingly pro-Zionist sentiment waned and resurged with the release of the Passfield White Paper (1929) and its reversal at the hands of Liberals and Conservatives alike.

Beckerman argues both political parties "use[d] Zionist arguments for their own political ends" (p. 91). Reversal of policy should not be seen so much as a victory of Zionists aims but of the political needs of British politicians.

Similarly, chapter 4, "The MacDonald Betrayal, 1939-1939," is another strength of the work. Re-centering Palestine issues in the larger geopolitical context of the day, Beckerman ties the political shifts in the House of Commons and the rise of Italian and German authoritarian regimes to the diplomatic choices made by England about Palestine (p. 102). Although Beckerman does not openly declare it to be the case, one wonders if the tendency to gloss over this era is not unique to the region. While interwar politics in places like Ireland and Spain have bubbled to the top of cultural consciousness, the politics of interwar decision-making globally remains woefully underevaluated. As Beckerman notes in her introductory chapters, in the case of Palestine the Mandate era is leveraged by the various sides to tell their particular mythical version of the history, thus highlighting and downplaying as needed these very decisions she is so keen to explore.

In chapter 4, Beckerman delves deep into the creation of the 1939 MacDonald White Paper, noting that subsequent to the conflicting outcomes of the Peel (1937) and Woodhead (1938) Commissions, British policy was left between a rock and a hard place, either accepting indefinite Arab resistance or having to surrender Zionist obligations (p. 105). It was diplomatic necessity, nestled inside the context of growing global tensions, that drove British policymakers to seek "Arab goodwill toward Britain" (p. 107). Weaving the narrative through the Colonial Office and Westminster, Beckerman asserts that British politicians at home were aware of how important the loss of Arab goodwill was with the growing tide of fascist machinations in Europe.

Unexpected State is structured in such a way as to explore how "four distinct periods of policy

making” brought the British Empire deep into the “small nationalist conflict in Palestine” (p. 185). What started, Beckerman argues, as “seemingly unshakeable commitment to Zionism crumble[d] under the weight of varying pressures that threatened the political survival of successive prime ministers and cabinets” (p. 185). As a brief work, only 204 pages (endnotes inclusive), *Unexpected State* is highly accessible. Students and scholars looking to develop their understanding of the Mandate era would do well to keep Beckerman’s work nearby as a highly succinct overview of the laundry list of papers and commissions that dominated the era. As we are continually reminded today, the political choices regarding domestic agendas often have global impacts, and in the case of the ongoing struggle between the Palestinians and Israelis, this remains vividly true. Policy choices in the interwar period in Great Britain as they concerned Palestine were as closely tied to domestic political expedience, as they remain today in the United States. We can no more expect to find a coherent long-term policy through the 1920s and 1930s for Palestine than we can in the 1970s and 1980s. Governmental shifts and domestic needs greatly tailor the outcomes of diplomatic agendas. While the British government struggled to present a picture of coherent policy toward Palestine, Beckerman’s analysis clearly shows that coherence was only a façade, if even that, but that the back-and-forth in policy was nevertheless logical when viewed through this politics-first approach.

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Notes

[1]. My own work, *The Global History of the Balfour Declaration: Declared Nation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) takes the view that what the Balfour Declaration became was not necessarily what its creators initially intended.

[2]. “Man-on-the-spotism” is a reference to John Galbraith’s arguments that events in the British Empire’s periphery led those *on the spot* to expand areas of control. The argument largely focuses on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century actions, particularly in India, but works well in discussing the disconnect between London and Palestine in the interwar period as well.

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