

The Jewish Agency's Case Before the UNSCOP: Image and Discourse¹

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“The problem with Israel,” Tony Judt wrote in a 2003 article in *The New York Review of Books*, is that it “arrived too late.” It has imported, he explains, “a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law.” Judt was linking political Zionism to the time and place of its founding – late-nineteenth-century Europe – when many of what he calls Europe’s “subject peoples” (Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Armenians, and others) aspired to some form of self-determination, the realization of which often took place at the expense of local minorities’ rights. “The very idea of . . . a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded,” Judt concludes, “is rooted in another time and place.”²

Of course, the Zionists differed from their fellow European subject peoples in seeking to realize their self-determination in a place where they did not yet live in significant numbers, and where another people did. Their immigration to and settlement of Palestine thus makes the Zionist project similar to another outmoded project: colonialism. While scholars continue to debate the nature of the match between Zionism and colonialism, many now concur with Gershon Shafir’s argument that Zionism was *both* “a variety of Eastern European nationalism” and “a late instance of European overseas expansion,”³ many of whose participants attempted to emulate European colonial models.⁴

Although colonialism was still a widespread practice when the state of Israel was founded in 1948, its legitimacy had begun to decline, including in metropolitan and elite circles. 1948 was before the United Nations’ official endorsement of self-determination,⁵ but after Wilson’s 14 points, and the creation of the League of Nations Mandate System that they

inspired. It was before most of the colonized states of Africa and Asia would gain their independence, but it was after it had become clear that the United States and the Soviet Union were interested in seeing the empires of Europe dismantled;⁶ it was after some significant attempts by colonized peoples to rise up against their colonizers; and it was after the start of debates in metropolitan countries about the morality and the value of imperial rule over certain if not all colonies.⁷

Given the similarities between Zionism and colonialism, and given colonialism's declining legitimacy, how did Zionist leaders represent the colonial nature of Zionist settlement in Palestine at this time? This essay answers this question by examining the Jewish Agency for Palestine leaders' testimony before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine – the last of several committees to attempt to propose a solution to the “problem” of Palestine prior to and during the period of the British Mandate – during the latter's tour of the country in the summer of 1947.

Specifically, I examine two texts through which the Jewish Agency for Palestine – the effective government of the Jews in Mandate Palestine, hereafter referred to as the Jewish Agency – presented its position to the members of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine – hereafter UNSCOP, the Special Committee or the Committee. The first text is the transcript of the oral presentations made by the leaders of the Jewish Agency to the Special Committee; it includes the leaders' answers to questions put to them by the members of the Special Committee. The second text is an album of photographs that the Jewish Agency presented to the Special Committee around the same time.⁸ My method, in analyzing these texts, is informed by rhetoric studies as a field and Critical Discourse Analysis as a cross-disciplinary research method.⁹ In particular, I heed the calls made by scholars associated with this field and method that those analyzing texts be attuned to, among other things, the roles played by context and medium in shaping the discourses therein.¹⁰

“Context” can shape discourse in many ways, in no small part because discourse is always situated within many contexts at a range of temporal and spatial scales. The present intervention considers how the status of colonialism in the late 1940s – widespread but waning – informed the Jewish Agency leaders' representations of the Zionist project at that time. In what follows, I reconstruct these presentations so as to bring the references and allusions to colonialism therein to the surface. As will become clear, the Jewish Agency leaders did not represent Zionism's relationship to colonialism in a straightforward manner; rather, they oscillated between presenting the Jews as colonizers – with the Palestinians in the role of the natives – and presenting the Jews as anti-colonial freedom fighters themselves – a construction that rested upon minimizing the Palestinians and their claims to the land. Part of this oscillation is, as we will see, due to the multiple ways in which colonialism is portrayed – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, sometimes transforming only land, sometimes transforming lives and social relations *in situ*.

Medium can also have an important effect on discourse. Scholars of both discourse and rhetoric, long cognizant of the effect that the medium of transmission can have on these, have become increasingly attuned to the expressive and persuasive function of images.¹¹ Scholars in these fields remind us that images and language cannot produce identical

discourses because of their differences as devices of communication and mediation. In what follows, I consider how the album of photographs given by the Jewish Agency to the Special Committee differs in what it connotes about the relationship between Zionism and colonialism from the leaders' oral testimony. Whereas the oral text shifts between presenting the Jews in Palestine as colonialism's agents and its victims, and presents colonialism in several different ways, the visual text presents the Jews as the agents of a colonialism whose impact – a positive one – is on the land exclusively. This text effects this representation by rendering the Palestinians invisible in a way that would be impossible in the oral text.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Colonialism

Before proceeding to these arguments, it is worth taking a moment to consider what makes multiple depictions of colonialism possible. To be sure, this can be partly explained by the fact that there have been many cases of it – all with their own particular histories and characteristics. A closely related but not identical factor, however, is the fact that colonialism and many of the words associated with it – colonization, for example – are unstable signifiers: what they denote is not constant but rather depends upon when and where the words are deployed, as well as, among other things, to and by whom. As Raymond Williams has argued, for some words, especially words that involve “ideas and values,” their genealogy reveals “a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer,” as well as changes “masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries . . . come in fact to express radically different . . . meanings and implications of meanings.”¹²

Frederic Jameson offers an excellent example of such a transformation of meaning in his discussion of the term imperialism. Today, Jameson notes, people with even a little familiarity with the word imperialism “know that the term has something to do with the problems of Third World societies and with underdevelopment,” and “probably suspect anyone who uses [it] too frequently of being a Marxist.”¹³ The Marxist understanding of imperialism changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century, however. Jameson notes that prior to World War I, the term tended to designate “not the relationship of metropolis to colony, but rather the rivalry of the various imperial and metropolitan nation-states among themselves.”¹⁴ It was only during the interwar period that the “axis of otherness” suggested by the term shifted from being one that divided various imperial nations from one another, to one that divided what he calls a “generalized imperial subject” from “its various others or objects.”¹⁵ Importantly, Jameson suggests that in the earlier period, the “overriding (and perhaps ideological) consciousness of imperialism as being essentially a relationship between First World powers” displaced or blocked consciousness of the effects of imperialism on the Third World.

Similarly, the terms colonialism and colonization can be understood as having undergone – and as undergoing still – an evolution in meaning. Consider the following

two quotations about the term colonization. According to Robert Young, in early European usage colonization signified “not the rule over indigenous peoples, or the extraction of their wealth, but primarily the transfer of communities who sought to maintain their allegiance to their own original culture, while seeking a better life in economic, religious or political terms.”¹⁶ Writing in the 1980s, by contrast, Chandra Mohanty argued that the word “almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression – often violent – of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.”¹⁷ In Mohanty’s explanation, colonization is a negative or an unjust process, and one that affects people. In its early usage, no negative connotation adheres to the term, which describes a people’s relationship to a new place, but leaves beyond the frame the other people who might have been impacted by this relationship.

As Williams notes, however, changes in meaning are neither simple nor final: “Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested.”¹⁸ We see this clearly today. An interlocutor in the debate about whether Zionist settlement in Palestine was a form of colonialism, Ran Aaronsohn insists that Zionism was a case of colonization but not of colonialism. Like those who used the term early on, Aaronsohn insists that colonization is a “fundamentally geographic phenomenon,” the essence of which is “immigration and the establishment of immigrant settlements in a new land that are distinctive from older traditional settlements.” Colonialism, by contrast, is “a political and economic phenomenon, characterized by the forcible dominion and exploitation of a state over territory and population beyond its own borders.” Aaronsohn further insists that the concepts of colonization and colonialism “characterize two totally different and distinctive kinds of activities” and that there is “no identity or structural overlap” between them.¹⁹ The problem is not quite that Aaronsohn’s definition of colonization is wrong – he will find many dictionaries to back him up – but that he ignores the dynamism of words like these, and fails to see the legitimacy of their other, in this case newer, meanings. Importantly, variations in the meanings associated with words like these are not just matters of error, Williams writes, although many treat them as such.²⁰ As with imperialism, the absence of those impacted by colonization from the early meaning of the term was arguably not a function of the absence or irrelevance of those people but rather of geographical imaginaries that did not easily admit them into consciousness. “We think about the Third World in a different way today,” Jameson writes, speaking, we must imagine, on behalf of First World intellectuals, “because of decolonization and political independence and above all because these enormously varied cultures all now speak in their own distinctive voices.”²¹ Because of what these voices have had to say, many people think about imperialism, colonialism and colonization differently, too.

The Oral Text: Zionism as Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism

The Jewish Agency leaders’ formal presentations before the Special Committee took place in Jerusalem between the Committee’s eighth meeting, on 17 June 1947 and its twenty-

fourth meeting, on 9 July 1947.²² Seven members of the Jewish Agency spoke before the Special Committee, among them David Ben-Gurion, who would become the Israeli state's first Prime Minister, Chaim Weizmann,²³ who would become its first President, and Moshe Shertok, who would become the state's first Minister of Foreign Affairs and its second Prime Minister. Although there are differences of emphasis and style in the presentations, I treat them as a single text in my analysis.

Zionism as Colonialism

The Jewish Agency leaders both explicitly and implicitly compare the Jews in Palestine to colonizers and the Palestinians to natives. They do this when they were lauding colonialism as a progressive, beneficial force – in terms of both how it transforms a landscape and how it affects the lives of local populations. They also do it at moments when they are acknowledging the negative effects of colonialism on local populations. In the latter cases, the Zionist leaders emphasize the benevolence of their efforts relative to those of other colonizing peoples.

To begin, consider a straightforward example in which Zionism is presented as a case of colonialism. During his presentation before the Special Committee, Chaim Weizmann, like many of his peers, describes the original landscape of Palestine as desolate – “a country which has been neglected and derelict for centuries”²⁴ — before arguing that it is being successfully transformed by the Jews. Weizmann discusses the role played by the Jewish Agency in these transformations by comparing it to a charter company. He says:

In olden times, such backward countries were built up by charter companies. All of you will remember the East Indian Charter Company. But charter companies were hard to fashion in 1918, the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Wilsonian conception of the world certainly would not have allowed a charter company. Therefore, we had to [create] a substitute. This substitute was the Jewish Agency which had the function of a charter company, which had the function of a body which would conduct the colonization, immigration, improvement of the land, and do all the work which a government usually does, without really being a government.²⁵

By asserting the similarities between the Jewish Agency and the East India Charter Company, Weizmann is asserting the similarities between Zionism and colonialism. While acknowledging the reality of colonialism's current disrepute, Weizmann also gives his listeners a glimpse of his own relatively positive assessment of what colonialism can accomplish.

Another direct reference to colonialism comes during F. Bernstein's discussion of industry in Palestine. Bernstein, who also describes colonialism as a positive force, emphasizes its benefits to the existing population. Speaking of the Jews' efforts at industrializing Palestine, he states:

As a matter of course, industrial development in Palestine is not an isolated case. It is part of what might be called the migration of industry from the old industrial countries to colonial or semi-colonial territories. The case of Palestine, within this movement, is somewhat irregular in character, and certainly in intensity, but it is nevertheless part of this general movement. Its significance is not always fully understood, especially not by economically backward populations who will ultimately be its main beneficiaries.²⁶

While Bernstein does not, in this statement, refer directly to colonialism's ill-repute, he does admit that the natives do not like it. The suggestion that local peoples do not understand the significance of industrial development is presented to the Special Committee presumably as a way of understanding the Palestinians' hostility towards the industrial achievements of the Jews in Palestine.

Bernstein goes on, using rhetoric consistent with colonial and orientalist narratives that contrast the dynamism of European peoples with the somnolence of non-European peoples, to suggest that the Jews are uniquely able to bring these benefits of modernity to the Palestinians:

The introduction of modern industry into the Middle East by the Jews means in this respect a unique chance, since they are sufficiently equipped to perform the task and vitally interested in performing it. The same cannot be said with regard to any other factor inside the Middle East or outside it.²⁷

In addition to these examples in which colonialism is referenced more or less directly, the text abounds with references to the benefits that Jewish settlement would bring to the Palestinians that do not reference colonialism explicitly. The benefits of Jewish settlement to the Palestinians are often presented as inevitable effects of this settlement. Thus, for example, David Ben-Gurion insists that the Zionists' aims for themselves cannot be achieved without "great constructive work, agricultural, industrial, material and cultural," and that this would inevitably "raise the economic and social standards of all the inhabitants of the country." He goes on to say,

We cannot fully utilise the water resources of Palestine, which are now being wasted, without providing larger irrigation possibilities for the Arab fellah as well. We cannot introduce modern methods of cultivation without the Arabs learning from that example. We cannot organise Jewish labour and improve conditions of work without similarly organising the Arab worker and improving his conditions.²⁸

On the basis of this argument, Ben-Gurion then suggests that the benefits to Arabs would be even greater once Jewish work was no longer obstructed by a government intent on "holding the balance between Jews and Arabs."²⁹

In the examples cited above, colonialism is presented as a positive force. But the

Zionists also likened Jewish settlement in Palestine to colonialism even when they acknowledged colonialism's negative effects on local populations. Weizmann, for example, said:

Other peoples have colonized great countries, rich countries. They found when they entered there backward populations. And they did for the backward populations what they did. I am not a historian, and I am not sitting in judgment on the colonizing activity of the various great nations which have colonized backward regions. But I would like to say that, as compared with the result of the colonizing activities of other peoples, our impact on the Arabs has not produced very much worse results than what has been produced by others in other countries.³⁰

Similarly, Shertok claimed that:

We believe it will not be easy to find an instance in the history of colonization where a large scale settlement scheme has been conducted with so much respect for the interests of existing population, and, in particular, of the existing peasantry.³¹

To sum up, the Jewish Agency leaders suggest that the Jews are the colonizers of Palestine both when colonialism is presented as a positive force and when it is presented as a negative one. In the latter cases, the leaders of the Jewish Agency imply that theirs is a particularly benign or considerate form of colonialism. The implicit claim here – that Zionist colonialism should be considered acceptable because of its light touch – would have been consistent with metropolitan voices of this period that condemned what they saw as unjust colonial practices and that argued for the reform – but not the eradication – of colonial institutions and relations. It was precisely this notion – “that there are some good colonists some very wicked ones” – which Sartre would critique a few years later in his anti-colonial speech *cum* essay, “Colonialism is a System.”³²

Zionism as Anti-Colonialism

But while the Jewish Agency leaders admit that there is an existing population capable of being harmed by the Zionists' colonizing efforts, they also suggest that the Jews are engaged in a struggle against British colonialism. This is done by explicitly describing the conflict as primarily one between the British Empire and the Jews, by calling for self-determination in terms consistent with the anti-colonial rhetoric of the period, by presenting the Jews as quasi-natives of Palestine, and by minimizing the significance of the Palestinians and their claims to the land.

The Jewish Agency leaders repeatedly characterize the conflict as one chiefly between the British and the Jews. Ben-Gurion, for example, describes it as a conflict between

“two unequal parties”: “On the one hand a great world power, possessing tremendous military, economic, territorial and political resources, linked in a community of interest and alliance with a great number of large and small peoples...” and “On the other hand, a stateless, homeless, defenceless, small people” relying among other things on “the justice of its case” and “its natural and historic right to its ancient homeland.”³³ Elsewhere, he referred to the problem as one between “a small, weak people and a powerful world empire.”³⁴ Ben-Gurion also connects the Jewish struggle against the British Empire at that moment with its struggles against other ancient and modern empires and peoples, presenting the Jews as anti-imperialists *avant la lettre*. Jewish history, he says, is “a history of continuous resistance to superior physical forces which tried to wipe out our Jewish image and to uproot our connections with our country and with the teachings of our prophets.” Even, he goes on, “when we were still living independently in our own country,” the Jews “clashed with the civilizations of great and powerful neighbours.”³⁵

The Jewish leaders also called for statehood in terms similar to anti-colonial calls for statehood. The Jews, Ben-Gurion states, claim their

rightful place under the sun as human beings and as a people, the same right as other human beings and peoples possess, the right to security freedom equality, statehood and membership in the United Nations.³⁶

He returns to this theme in a later presentation, saying:

Jewish people as a whole, in their own country, should have the same status as any free people in the world. If the world will abolish separate sovereignties, we will bless it ... but whatever regime there will be in the world for any other free nation, we claim for our people – not less and not more.³⁷

This rhetoric owes something to the ethnic nationalist aspect of Zionism, to be sure; the European subject peoples invoked by Judt wanted, after all, the same thing that colonized peoples wanted: self-determination. The timing of the Jewish Agency discourse matters, however. The language of statehood, freedom and equality would have, in 1947, sutured together the Jewish Agency leaders’ calls with those being issued from colonized countries. Moreover, the Jewish Agency leaders’ calls for statehood were made in decidedly modern terms, with references to the lofty concepts we associate with anti-colonial movements – freedom, equality – as well as to the new institution of the United Nations.

The suggestion that the Jews were struggling for freedom from British dominion and entitled to self-determination in Palestine rested upon two further elements: the elevation or sacralizing of the Jewish bond with Palestine, and the minimizing of the Palestinians’ claim to it. As Victor Kattan notes, in making claims to self-determination, “it is necessary to demonstrate a link between the people concerned and territory.”³⁸ The Zionist leaders do not claim indigenous status directly, but they insist nonetheless that Palestine is a land to which they are entitled. This argument is made via a series of claims (presented differently by the different actors): that the Jewish people have their spiritual roots in

Palestine; that they had sovereignty over Palestine at one time; that they were expelled from it illegitimately; that they have never ceased to yearn for it, and to return to it;³⁹ and that their bond with it is unique – this last invoked in particular when confronted with the fact of the Palestinians’ claim to the land.

Thus, for example, after telling the Special Committee that Palestine was the “birthplace of the Jewish people,” Shertok notes that it is a place to whose soil the Jews, in spite of all “expulsions and prohibitions,” have always clung, and to which they have always tried to return. The “present phase of Jewish resettlement in Palestine” is a link “in an almost uninterrupted chain of such attempts proceeding in every century, practically in every generation.”⁴⁰

Striking a more religious note, Rabbi Fishman referred to Palestine as “the home of the Prophets and the center of Jewish creativeness.” He notes that “pagan Rome ... robbed us of our country”⁴¹ but that a bond – an “unbreakable attachment” – was nonetheless maintained “between the People of Israel and the Holy Land ... throughout the ages and lands of our exile.”⁴² Moreover, “From the time of Joshua to the present day, for a period of 3,318 years ... Jews have lived in the Land of Israel in unbroken sequence.”⁴³ He concludes: “No power in the world can stop us from returning to this our land ...”⁴⁴ “As a nation we have been persecuted; and as a nation we demand the restoration of our homeland, the Land of Israel.”⁴⁵

Ben-Gurion makes this argument more explicitly, claiming that Palestine “is our country, has been our homeland for 3,500 years.” He went on:

We are here on the basis of the fact that it is the country of our people; we were dispossessed by force and we did not give it up. We are coming back to our home.⁴⁶

The importance of this strategy of emphasizing the historical relationship between the Jews and Palestine is made particularly clear when the chairman of the Special Committee asks Ben-Gurion why he and his colleagues are so keen to emphasize the long-standing nature of their claim to Palestine. Sandström asks: “You think the fact that a claim to a country has not been given up is so essential?” To this Ben-Gurion replies: “It is very. Of course, if we are invaders, then we have no right.”⁴⁷

Of course, the Jewish Agency leaders would have to face the challenge of the Palestinians’ even more compelling right to self-determination in Palestine – one based on centuries of residency there. One way that this right is countered in the Zionist discourse is by elevating the Jews’ relationship to Palestine to metaphysical proportions. In the following two quotations, Ben-Gurion summarizes the Palestinian claim to self-determination in Palestine and then negates it by reference to the historical uniqueness of the Jewish bond with Palestine:

I understand the Arab case and I fully realize it. It is very simple. They state they do not care what happened, and nobody ought to care what happened fifteen hundred or two thousand years ago. We are here. We are not here

from yesterday; we were here for centuries. We are the majority, and we have a right to self-determination. We will decide, just as the people in the United States or the people in Canada, whether to allow or not to allow immigrants. The fact that Jews were here some two-thousand years ago is the same as the Roman legions having been in England some two thousand years ago, or when Arabs were in Spain fourteen or so many centuries ago. That is their claim. It is simple.

In spite of this statement, Ben-Gurion says:

You cannot judge this country which has a special history and special conditions which cannot be found anywhere else, and the relations of the Jews of this country cannot be judged by a rule applied to other countries not having the same unique conditions.⁴⁸

Ben-Gurion uses the word “unique” several more times in making this argument. Of course, the very idea of national exceptionalism or uniqueness runs counter to the ethos of equality and parity that animated Ben-Gurion’s request, quoted above, that the Jews be granted “whatever regime there will be in the world for any other free nation ... not less and not more.”⁴⁹ This inconsistency aside, Ben-Gurion’s rhetoric would have been consistent with worldviews of the moment – anti-Semitic, for example, and eschatological – that consigned a special or unique role in world history to the Jews.

This type of discourse marginalizes the Palestinians’ claim to Palestine by marginalizing the Palestinians themselves – by presenting them as insignificant interlopers in the history of the land. We also see this process at work on the occasions when Ben-Gurion describes the broad contours of the conflict in ways that minimize the significance of the Palestinians, such as in the examples cited at the start of this section. On yet another occasion, Ben-Gurion states that the Palestine problem is a case that concerns “first, relations between Jews and Gentiles; second, relations between the Jewish national home and the Mandatory Power,” and only third, “relations between Jews and Arabs.”⁵⁰ As the chairman of the Special Committee observed to Ben-Gurion, he has “rather put the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs in the background.”⁵¹

Another way in which the Palestinian claim to Palestine is marginalized is via the suggestion that the Palestinians are not a distinct people with their own rights to self-determination but are, rather, Arabs, and thus able to enjoy the self-determination that has been granted to Arabs elsewhere.⁵² Weizmann, for example, comments on the reasons for the limits on Jewish immigration, saying, “Sometimes we were told that our exclusion from Palestine was necessary in order to do justice to a nation endowed with seven independent territories, covering a million square miles.”⁵³

Ben-Gurion further states that “The Arab political problem has been solved completely, and the Jewish people, not less than anybody else, congratulate the Arabs on achieving their full independence.”⁵⁴ He goes on to say that a Jewish state in Palestine will not harm the “independence or unity of the Arab race.”

The area of Western Palestine is less than 1% of the vast territory occupied by the Arab States in the Near East, excluding Egypt. The number of Arabs in this country is less than 3% of the number of Arabs who have gained their political independence. The Arabs in Palestine, even if they were a minority, would still be a part of that large Arab majority in the Middle East. The existence of Arab States to the north, east, and south of Palestine is an automatic guarantee, not only of the civil, religious and political rights of the Arabs in Palestine, but also of their national aspirations.⁵⁵

Although a Jewish state in Palestine would mean, he goes on, that “a certain number of individual Arabs would not enjoy the privilege of Arab statehood ... it would in no way diminish the independence and position of the free Arab race.”⁵⁶

The Visual Text: A Land Without People

The second text I consider is an album of photographs presented by the Jewish Agency to the United Nations Special Committee.⁵⁷ I do not know the origins of the photographs – who took them, were they commissioned or not, or whether they were specifically taken for inclusion in this particular album or not. Nor do I know who chose the images for inclusion or why. The album contains 30 images, all of which have titles. Other than these titles, the only writing in the album consists of several sentences of introduction that appear on the first page. These sentences state that the purpose of the album is to depict “phases of Jewish work in town and country.” In what follows, I consider in what ways the story told in this largely visual text dovetails with or departs from the narratives I have reconstructed from the oral text. While there are areas of overlap – most notably in the texts’ emphasis on the Jews’ transformation of a barren landscape – the texts differ in how they represent and address the Palestinians and their claims to Palestine. The visual text in fact does not depict Palestinians or Palestinian life at all. As such the visual text effectively presents Jewish colonialism in Palestine as a colonization that transforms the landscape but harms no persons or peoples.

The photographs can be sorted according to the dominant subjects depicted therein, although I will have cause in what follows to refer to backgrounds and non-dominant subjects as well. In 13 of the photographs, the central subjects are Jewish men and women who are either performing some type of labor, or who are identified by the caption as being laborers. Thus, for example, a photograph of a large group of people posing for the camera is captioned, “Three generations of Jewish Farmers.” Most of the work portrayed in the images is manual; the viewer sees, for example, people laying a water pipeline, packing oranges, loading oranges onto a boat, building a house, baling hay, and working in a foundry.⁵⁸ In a further 8 of the 30 photographs, the central subject is what we could call the fruits of Jewish labor. These are images that depict industrial, agricultural, or architectural achievements. The viewer sees, for example, a dam, an electric tower, the Jewish Agency building, a public space in Tel Aviv. In 3 of the 30 photographs, the plight



Fig. 1 - The Plain of Esdraelon, a swamp 25 years ago, with a Jewish settlement in the foreground. Source: United Nations Archive.



Fig. 2 - The beginning of Jewish Colonization in the Negev. Source: United Nations Archive.

of refugees and/or Holocaust survivors is the central subject. In an additional 3 photographs, viewers see Jewish people – including, in all three cases, children – engaged in leisure activities. In 2 of 30 photographs, high culture is on display. The viewer sees a maestro conducting an orchestra and a ballet being performed. Finally, one of the 30 photographs depicts a religious scene.

As this schematic sorting of the photographs suggests, the visual text devotes a significant amount of space to images of Jewish efforts to transform the landscape of Palestine and the imputed results of these efforts. In this, the visual text and the oral text echo one another. The Jewish Agency leaders mention swamps drained, and the album presents to its viewers a photograph of men draining a small body of water, as well as a photograph whose caption discloses that a swamp existed where the viewer now sees reclaimed land. This is the case with Figure 1, the very first image in the album, the title of which reads: “The Plain of Esdraelon, a swamp 25 years ago, with a Jewish settlement in the foreground.”

Relatedly, the visual text echoes the oral text’s suggestion that the Jews are developing what was a desolate, uninviting land. Here we must look at the landscapes

within which several of the photographs’ central subjects are located. Consider Figure 2, titled, “The beginning of Jewish Colonisation in the Negev.” The title suggests to the viewer that the subjects of the image are the collection of buildings in the distance, but the composition of the image and the camera’s focus on the rocky terrain in the foreground direct the viewer to center attention instead on the environmental conditions within which the colonization of the title is taking place. In other cases, it is the caption that encourages the viewer to notice the terrain and to understand it in a particular way. For example, Figure 3, a photograph of a ballet performance, is captioned, “Ballet at the Hebrew University’s Amphitheatre, overlooking the wilderness of Judea.” “Wilderness” – another unstable signifier to be sure – might have been an appropriate way to describe parts of the Judean Hills, but these hills also represented an important agricultural site.

Agricultural terraces even seem to be visible through the windows of the stage. In still other cases, a barren landscape operates as background without either photographic artistry or captioning to direct our attention to it. Consider the background of Figure 4, titled, “The first day of Maayan Baruch in Upper Galilee, Spring 1947.”

Importantly, the four examples just given, all of which suggest that the land of Palestine is desolate, come from four different parts of Palestine – the Negev in the south of the country (Figure 2), the Judean Hills in the center (Figure 3), the Plain of Esdraelon – also called the Jezreel Valley – in the north (Figure 1), and the Maayan Baruch settlement in the far north (Figure 4). The cumulative effect of these images, especially for viewers who might take the trouble to locate them on a map, is the impression that all of Palestine is composed of desolate and inhospitable terrain.

Every photograph that depicts a barren landscape also depicts an unpopulated landscape. This brings us to the chief difference between what is suggested by the oral text and what is connoted by the visual text. Whereas the Jewish Agency leaders describe, in their oral testimony before the Special Committee, the beneficial or at least the light touch of their colonialism’s impact on the Palestinians, and whereas they take pains to elevate their claim to self-determination in Palestine above that of the Palestinians, the album of photographs is mute on both of these counts. The album forecloses any questions about the effect of the Zionist project on Palestinian lives or on the Palestinian claim to self-determination by excluding from the images any evidence of Palestinians, or of Palestinian life, in Palestine.

Certainly Palestinian bodies are not present, but neither is any evidence of Palestinian work or life in Palestine. There are no Palestinian settlements or towns, no Palestinian homes or shops, no Palestinian fields or factories. This places the Jewish Agency’s album within a long tradition of photographing the land of Palestine without the Palestinians. As Issam Nassar notes, the absence of Palestinians from much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photography was the result of the absence of the Palestinians “from the mind and consciousness of the European.”⁵⁹ Europeans produced and purchased photographs of what they wanted to see: not a dynamic, living Palestine, but a Palestine that was still primarily the stage and site of the Bible. Such photographs, Nassar explains, allowed Europeans to see Palestine as belonging to them, rather than to its residents.

The Jewish Agency album does something similar. We have, on the one hand, an absence of Palestinians from these photographs, many of which depict wide and deep



Fig.3 - Ballet at the Hebrew University’s amphitheater, overlooking the wilderness of Judea. Source: United Nations Archive.



Fig.4 - The first day of Maayan Baruch in Upper Galilee, Spring 1947. Source: United Nations Archive.

swaths of space – giving the viewer the feeling of having looked around the area. On the other hand, we have photographs documenting the work that Jews have done to transform, settle and modernize the landscape. This visual construction of Palestine invites the viewer to see Palestine as a land that might have been waiting for the return of the Jews, and that has now been awakened by them. Certainly it presents the Jews as the only contenders for the land, and as a people willing to earn it through labor.

Although it was not the mandate of the curator of the Jewish Agency’s album of photographs to present those who would view it with visual documentation of all aspects of Palestinian life, we are still bound to explore what this album and the photographs therein connote, and the ideological content of these connotations. In this case, the collection of photographs aligns with the false, highly ideological, notion, already in circulation, that Palestine is “a land without a people for a people without a land.” This phrase is too patently false to have been uttered by any of the Jewish Agency leaders before the Special Committee. And, in fact, it is precisely the inherently incomplete nature of any collection of images (they cannot depict everything), along with the indeterminacy of the images themselves (or more specifically, of the meanings therein), that make them an ideal medium for the suggestion of things which cannot be stated explicitly in language, either because they are untrue and would not withstand challenge, or because they are in some other way socially inappropriate.

The depiction of Palestine as a land without people is also what allows the album to present the Jews in Palestine as colonizers in the most benign sense of the term. But while such a depiction brings to mind earlier understandings of the term colonization, within which non-settler populations did not figure, the Jewish Agency leaders’ oral discourse before the Special Committee renders it clear that there was no lack of awareness of the Palestinians on the part of the Zionist leadership. The nature of this album – and in particular the avoidance of Palestinians in its photographs – would thus seem to suggest

an awareness of the sea change then taking place in popular understandings of colonialism and colonization. In particular it would seem to suggest an awareness of the growing disrepute of colonial projects, all of which – we now understand – come at the expense of other people’s rights, livelihoods, and lives.

Conclusion: Historicizing Zionism

In this intervention, I have explored how the leadership of the Jewish Agency represented Zionism’s relationship to colonialism on the eve of Israeli statehood. Although still a force shaping the lives of millions, colonialism’s prevalence and reputation were both, by the late 1940s, on the decline. Some of the factors that were leading to this decline – the protests and critiques of the colonized – were also changing the way we would understand these words themselves, not only whether they should be understood positively or negatively, but also their scope, so that today we find wanting definitions of imperialism, colonialism or colonization that emphasize of the metropole or the colonizer, but not the colony or the colonized. Given how we think about these processes today, it is no wonder that the debate about Zionism’s status as a colonial project is a heated one. I would like to suggest, however, that there is a sense in which attempting to understand Zionism by looking at its commonalities with colonialism is not just an appropriate scholarly endeavor, but also an anti-racist – and more specifically an anti-anti-Semitic – one, and that this scholarship should be defended and pursued whatever the conclusions to which it leads.

Critics of Israel are regularly accused of singling out the Jewish state. It is often suggested, moreover, that this singling out of Israel is a kind of international version of group-to-group or person-to-person variants of anti-Semitism. Of course, critics of Israel argue that Israel merits the critiques it receives because its practices are exceptional – not in their injustice or their violence but in their colonial nature.⁶⁰ It would be anti-Semitic to treat Israel differently than we would treat any other twenty-first century state that engaged in the practices and policies associated with a system most now see as wrong.

Similarly, I would argue that attempting to understand Zionism by situating it within the time and place of its emergence, and by attempting to fully understand that time and place is excellent protection against both anti-Semitic accounts of history as well as accounts that, though seemingly laudatory of Israel, rest upon a dangerous sense of it and the Jews as exceptional.⁶¹ Zionism is a product of late-nineteenth-century Europe – it would be odd if it bore no traces of Eastern European separatist movements or Western European colonialism. This is especially true given what Perry Anderson has referred to as the Jews’ “paradoxical double determination”: the fact that Eastern European Jews were downtrodden and harassed, while in Western Europe at least some Jews knew political, professional and financial success, and the “top end” of that group “enjoyed an entrée to ruling circles of an imperialist Europe beyond the dreams of any other oppressed nationality of the time.”⁶² To argue that Zionism bears no resemblance, and owes nothing, to the social and historical context from which it emerged is to travel very closely alongside those who would argue that Jews are essentially, metaphysically,

different from others. By contrast, returning the Jews to history and trying to understand the particular conditions that lead to the emergence of Zionism can lead us to a historical critique but not to metaphysical exaltation, nor not to metaphysical denouncement.

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Endnotes

- 1 The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of the staff at the United Nations Archive especially Amanda Leinberger. Thanks also to Patrick Vitale for scanning the images, to Christy O'Donnell and Will Akins for research assistance, to Ashley Toenjes, Matt Himley, Issam Nassar, Salim Tamari and two anonymous reviewers for feedback on earlier drafts of the manuscript.
- 2 Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative," *New York Review of Books* 50, no. 16 (2003): 8-10, 8.
- 3 Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 8; Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel* (New York: Verso, 2008); Ilan Pappé, "Zionism as Colonialism: A Comparative View of Diluted Colonialism in Asia and Africa," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (2008): 611-33; Perry Anderson, "Scurrying Towards Bethlehem," *New Left Review* 10 (2001): 5-30.
- 4 Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 10.
- 5 See Elsa Stamatopoulou, "Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations: Human Rights as a Developing Dynamic," *Human Rights Quarterly* 16 (1994): 58-81; Edward T. Rowe, "The Emerging Anti-Colonial Consensus in the United Nations," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 8, no. 3 (1964): 209-30.
- 6 Including, in the case of the United States, by seeing to it that the colonies and territories of Germany and Turkey would become League of Nations Mandates rather than the colonies of World War I's victors. See John Springhall, *Decolonization since 1945: The Collapse of European Overseas Empires* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 23.
- 7 See Ronald W. Zweig, "The Palestine Problem in the Context of Colonial Policy on the Eve of the Second World War," in *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s*, ed. Michael J. Cohen and Martin Kolinsky (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 206-16; Reecia Orzeck, "Normative Geographies and the 1940 Land Transfer Regulations in Palestine," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39, no. 3 (2014): 345-59.
- 8 Both texts are to some extent multi-semiotic: the oral presentations were accompanied by diagrams and charts, and the album of photographs contained, in addition to the photographs, written language (several introductory paragraphs at the start of the album, the photograph titles, and the album title). For the sake of simplicity, however, I will refer to the oral presentations as the oral text and the album of photographs as the visual text.
- 9 See Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1992); Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London; New York: Longman, 1995).
- 10 Barbara Johnstone and Christopher Eisenhart, eds. *Rhetoric in Detail: Discourse Analyses of Rhetorical Talk and Text* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008).
- 11 Lawrence J. Prelli, "Rhetorics of Display: An Introduction," in *Rhetorics of Display*, ed. Lawrence J. Prelli (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 1-38.; Jiayu Wang, "Criticising Images: Critical Discourse Analysis of Visual Semiosis in Picture News," *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 264-86; Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 4.
- 12 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 17.
- 13 Frederic Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* ed. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward W. Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 46.
- 14 Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," 47.
- 15 Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," 48.
- 16 Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 20.
- 17 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," *boundary 2* 12/13, no. 3/1 (1984): 333-58, 333.

- 18 Williams, *Keywords*, 22.
- 19 Ran Aaronsohn, "Settlement in Eretz Israel – a Colonialist Enterprise? "Critical" Scholarship and Historical Geography," *Israel Studies* 1, no. 2 (1996): 214-29, 217.
- 20 Williams, *Keywords*, 24.
- 21 Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," 48.
- 22 Shertok also spoke at the 33rd Special Committee meeting (on July 16, 1947) and at the 35th meeting on (on July 17, 1947).
- 23 Weizmann was not formally part of the Jewish Agency at this time.
- 24 A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf. Note that most of the United Nations materials cited here are available digitally on the Unispal website. In all those cases, I provide the url address. Access date for all is September 24, 2015. In cases where material is from the archives themselves, I include the UNA folder reference number.
- 25 A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf. The document spells "crate" instead of "create."
- 26 A:AC.13:PV.17 of 6 July 1947_V.pdf
- 27 A:AC.13:PV.17 of 6 July 1947_V.pdf
- 28 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 29 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 30 He goes on, "In fact, it is admitted, even by the administration of Palestine ... that the Arabs have benefited by the work of the Jews." A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf
- 31 S-0611-0002-08, p. 5. Elsewhere, however, he notes that there are Arabs who have been made landless. A/AC.13/PV.24 of 9 July 1947.
- 32 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Colonialism Is a System," in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (New York: Routledge, 2001[1964]), 30-47, 30. The speech was delivered in 1956.
- 33 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf.
- 34 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 35 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 36 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 37 A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf
- 38 Victor Kattan, *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1891-1949* (New York: Pluto Press), 118.
- 39 For a detailed discussion of Zionists' transformation and instrumentalization of the Hebrew Bible, see Nur Masalha, *The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).
- 40 UNA, S-0611-0002-8, p. 6.
- 41 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 42 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 43 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 44 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 45 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 46 A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf
- 47 UNA, S-0611-0002-14, p. 33. Ben-Gurion also notes that they refused space in Africa because "we did not consider it our country." A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf. See Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism*, for a discussion of the ideological reasons behind Ben-Gurion's gradual interest in the bible.
- 48 A:AC.13:PV.19 of 7 July 1947_V.pdf. The original document says "sane" rather than "same."
- 49 UNA, S-0611-0002-15, p. 60.
- 50 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 51 A:AC.13:PV.19 of 7 July 1947_V.pdf
- 52 On this, see also Orzeck, "Normative Geographies."
- 53 A:AC.13:PV.21 of 9 July 1947_V.pdf
- 54 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 55 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 56 A:AC.13:PV.16 of 4 July 1947_V.pdf
- 57 UNA S-0612-0004. The album is held at the United Nations Archive as part of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine collection.
- 58 Included in these 13 images are an image of the Jewish Brigade and an image of a guard at a settlement.
- 59 Issam Nassar, "'Biblication' in the Service of Colonialism," *Third Text* 20, no. 3-4 (2006): 317-26, 322.
- 60 Or in their apartheid nature.
- 61 See Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samour, "Past Is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine," *Settler Colonialism Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 1-8; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile, History, and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return," *Journal of Levantine Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 37-70, p. 38-39.
- 62 Anderson, "Scurrying Towards Bethlehem," 6-7.