



Stephanie M. Chasin. *British Jews and Imperial Service. Nationalism, Pan-Islamism and Zionism in Mandate Palestine and Colonial India*. London: I.B. Tauris. 2023. 248 pp. ISBN 978-07-5560-318-3. £ 85,00.

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Due to its impact, the role of the British Empire in Asia has been covered by a wide range of studies in multiple historical disciplines. *British Jews and Imperial Service* connects the history of two key locations, India and Palestine, by analyzing the careers of three Jewish officials and the rise of Indian nationalism, Pan-Islamism, and Zionism in the early 20th century.

The author, Stephanie Chasin, is currently an independent scholar focusing on European and Jewish history. This is her second book, partially based on her 2008 PhD dissertation titled, *Citizens of Empire: Jews in the Service of the British Empire, 1906-1940*, earned at UCLA.

The book has a dual purpose. First, building on Maryanne A. Rhett's *The Global History of the Balfour Declaration: Declared Nation* (2016) and its analysis of the entanglement of the titular document with nationalist movements and imperialist ambitions in Europe, Asia, and Africa, it aims at connecting the debate over the future of the failing Ottoman Empire with the rise of nationalism in India and Palestine during and after World War I. The second main objective is to nuance the image of European Jews by shifting away from their representation as a powerless, marginalized mass and covering their role as servants of the British Empire. As case studies, Chasin proposes the lives of Edwin Montagu (1879-1924), Secretary of State for India between 1917 and 1922; Rufus Isaacs, also known as Lord Reading (1860-1935), Viceroy of India between 1921 and 1926; and Herbert Samuel (1870-1963), Commissioner for Palestine between 1920 and 1925.

The two topics are closely related. Despite stereotypes depicting Jews as disloyal "Oriental" citizens, these three men managed to rise to high-ranking positions and, during their careers, were to face the nationalist demands of Indians, Arabs, and Zionists while the fate of the Ottoman territories was under discussion. The fall of Constantinople's Empire is thus conceived as a driving force, both inspiring pan-Islamist movements in solidarity with the caliphate in India and providing space for nationalist claims in the Middle East, particularly in Palestine.

The book is divided into three main parts, along with an introduction and epilogue, arranged chronologically to cover the period between 1905 and 1922. This time-frame was chosen based on the biographies of Montagu, Reading, and Samuel, as it starts with their appointment as members of the British Parliament and ends with Montagu's resignation. This chronological structure, rather than a subdivision based on topics, underlines the entanglement of the local and global events with the political career of the three men.

The first part covers the pre-World War I period, from 1905 to 1914. Chapter 1 introduces Montagu, Reading, and Samuel, illustrating the beginnings of their political careers. The two following chapters are dedicated to Ottoman Palestine and India, respectively. While the Ottoman Empire was crumbling and the Zionists set their mind on Palestine as the unnegotiable land for a new Jewish State, India witnessed both the rise of violent anti-British feelings and the strengthening of communal identities among Hindus and Muslims. Among the latter, pan-Islamic ideas grew in popularity.

The second part, from 1914 to 1919, is dedicated to World War I and its immediate aftermath. Chapters 4 and 5 provide an interesting overview of the opinions Samuel, Montagu, and Reading had towards Zionism and the Balfour Declaration. Despite all three being British and Jewish servants of the Empire, their views strongly clashed. Samuel, who enthusiastically celebrated the Balfour Declaration, was staunchly pro-Zionist and believed that the creation of a Jewish land once the Ottoman Empire was defeated would have been beneficial for British imperial policies. In contrast, Reading rejected the idea of Jewishness as a racial or national concept, relegating it to a mere issue of religious identity; not only did he believe that Zionism was not the answer to antisemitism and persecution, but he also feared that the establishment of a Jewish State would cause the British Empire troubles with both the Arabs and the French. Montagu, who already had to deal with prejudices against his high-ranking position in India, vehemently opposed Zionism, as it would reinforce the stereotype of Jews being loyal to no nation and jeopardize all the efforts for political emancipation and participation he himself contributed to.

The third part, from 1919 to 1922, illustrates the post-war period and the effects of the conflict. Chapter 6 addresses various issues that emerged during this specific period, including the development of the Indian Pan-Islamist Khalifat Movement, which rejected the European partition of the former Ottoman Empire and felt part of a caliphate led by Constantinople. Nevertheless, Muslim groups also joined the Indian nationalist cause with the Hindus. One of the key events discussed in this chapter that fostered closer ties between the two communities is the Amritsar Massacre in Punjab, which took place on April 13, 1919, following protests about the issue of the Revolutionary and Anarchical Crimes Act. The following chapter, while describing the escalation of protests against British policies and violence in both India and Palestine, examines the surge of anti-Jewish suspicions sparked by the publication in 1920 of *The Jewish Peril*, an English translation of *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*. During the same period, the British had to harmonize the conflicting promises made in the Balfour Declaration, the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Meanwhile, Samuel arrived in Palestine as High Commissioner and had to maintain a balance between the natives and the newly arrived Zionists. Chapter 8 takes place during Reading's arrival in India, a time when the Khalifatists were allying with Gandhi's National Congress,

the main nationalist movement in India, and the non-cooperation campaign. This collaboration sparked significant criticism toward Montagu, who also failed to keep violence under control; ultimately, he was forced to resign in 1922. In the meantime, the Khalifat Movement sided with Turkey in its war against Greece and opposed the European mandates over Arab lands, including Palestine. Their aspirations were nevertheless frustrated by the Treaty of Lausanne, which established the Turkish Republic and abolished the caliphate at the hands of the National Assembly led by Mustafa Kemal. However, this disappointment concerned only a minority of Indian Muslims.

The epilogue reflects on Montagu's final years, the resurgence of inter-communal violence in India, and the end of Samuel's and Reading's mandates in 1925 and 1926, respectively.

The book succeeds in its objective of proving the fallacy of the depiction of European Jews as a uniform group homogeneously thinking, acting, and perceiving the country they lived in. The exploration of their diverse roles and identities is a much-welcomed novelty. Montagu, Samuel, and Reading are excellent case studies: they all ascended to high-ranking positions despite prejudices and were loyal to the British Empire. Nevertheless, their opinions and motivations occasionally clashed, as exemplified by their different reactions to the Balfour Declaration. According to what Chasin shows, their Jewishness was more a label imposed by others than an actual feeling guiding their actions. Rather than being British Jews, these three men were simply British men who happened to be Jews.

Furthermore, the adoption of a global approach, in opposition to dealing with each area separately, underlines the interconnections between the different parts of the Empire, from London to India. The focus on nationalist movements also allows space for the voices and aspirations of the natives, instead of narrating the history of the Empire relying solely on British policies.

Nevertheless, the book presents some problems that ought to be addressed. One of its strengths is the focus on the connections between multiple locations and subjects. However, due to the continuous alternating between India and Palestine, whose histories intersect with the political careers of the three men, the overall discourse occasionally appears disarticulated, and the transitions between different topics are not always smooth.

Additionally, the representation of the inhabitants of the two key locations is uneven. While the author provides an exhaustive description of the different movements developed in India, allowing the reader to understand the variety and complexity of the nationalist claims, the Palestinians receive a different amount of attention. They are often diluted into a more generic and like-minded Arab mass or obscured in favor of other actors, including the Turks, the Hashemites, and Ibn Saud.

Another problem of the book concerns the inclusion or exclusion of certain to-

pics. On several occasions, Chasin denounces the vilification of the Empire as nothing more than a violent and «oppressive force that crushed indigenous communities that once shared more ‘fluid categories’ of identity» (p. 168); she considers this depiction a simplification, as the colonizer-colonized relation cannot be reduced to a «simple binary opposition» (p. 7) and, during the period under scrutiny, the idea of a «shared homeland» (p. 168) existed only among a few native intellectuals, as the majority wanted a homogenous nation, especially after the war. While these arguments *per se* are not incorrect, they themselves, particularly the latter, are a simplification: the book excludes certain elements, eventually preventing the correct contextualization of events and actors, including the categories of identity and connections (Ho & Sheriff 2014) predating the establishment of the Empire, the development of Arab nationalism, the *Nahda*, and the previous anti-British agitations in India. With these details missing, the role of the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire and its caliphate as a driving force and *fil rouge* behind different Asian nationalisms appears overexaggerated. This issue is also related to the timeframe chosen for the book, which is so narrow that several topics are simply squeezed out. The seventeen-year span covered by the text allows the reader to focus on specific issues and short-term developments, but this comes at the expense of a *longue durée* (Braudel 1958) perspective. The overall result is the impression that nationalist movements outside Europe (the development of Zionism actually receives a decent contextualization) simply spawned in a vacuum in the early 20th century, as did the relationship between British colonial officials and other subjects of the Empire.

Despite these limitations, *British Jews and Imperial Service* remains an interesting research that contributes to the historical debate. It is highly recommended for readers already familiar with the topic of the British Empire and nationalist movements in India and Palestine who wish to deepen their knowledge further.

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