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1

Perceptions of Jewry and Ethnicity in the Official Mind

At the outbreak of the Great War there was no single Government body in Whitehall that was allocated official responsibility for policy towards world Jewry. In August 1914 the Jewish Diaspora was of negligible interest, if any, to the foreign policy-making elite. As a transnational minority, Jewry was of little relevance to the traditional questions of international politics and the prosecution of war. But as the demands and character of the conflict evolved, the perceived power of Jewry, and its international nature, attracted the attention of a diverse collection of policy-makers. The politicians and civil servants who pushed for the Balfour Declaration as a means of winning over this influence thus came from across the foreign policy-making elite, which during the war experienced significant changes in its composition and *modus operandi*.

At the top of the elite's hierarchy were the ministers in the Cabinet, who had the final say on policy. When David Lloyd George replaced Herbert Asquith as Prime Minister at the end of 1916 he created a streamlined War Cabinet, which had only five ministers, most of whom did not have departmental responsibilities.¹ This official structure did not include the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Arthur J. Balfour. Nevertheless, he frequently attended the War Cabinet's meetings and had a significant role in its decision-making, particularly on matters in which he held a special interest, such as Zionism. It was Lloyd George, however, who dominated the War Cabinet, and he often had a critical influence on the direction of foreign policy.² Along with Balfour, and some of his War Cabinet colleagues, the Prime Minister played a crucial part in the events that led to the birth of the Anglo-Zionist alliance.³

Before the war, the civil servants of the Foreign Office were the main source of advice for ministers, and were supported by the information,

opinions and diplomacy of their representatives abroad. After the outbreak of hostilities the voice of the Foreign Office was joined by a flood of information and guidance from the services and a host of competing ministries.⁴ Undoubtedly, the influence of the Foreign Office declined during the war.⁵ Nonetheless, it continued to be a driving force in the making of policy, which was particularly apparent in the case of Zionism.

In addition to the services and the departments of state, the War Cabinet was supported by a secretariat established by Lloyd George, which had an administrative and a limited advisory function. Though the 'ideas branch' of the secretariat had a marginal position in the formal hierarchy of the elite,⁶ some of its members had a very significant impact on policy towards the Ottoman Empire and Zionism. This influence stemmed from their reputation as experts on the region, and the unrelenting stream of policy advice that they provided. As Prime Minister, Lloyd George also had his own influential private secretariat of advisers, known as the 'Garden Suburb' after its location in the garden of 10 Downing Street, whose remit included foreign affairs.⁷

Lying beyond Whitehall and the diplomatic service, the final level of the elite, broadly defined, included an increasing number of academics, journalists and interest groups, at home and abroad, who were listened to as the Government attempted to grapple with the manifold issues thrown up by the war. This included the British quality press, especially *The Times*, which had long held an important role as an originator and supporter of Government foreign policy.⁸

The members of the elite who made the most significant contribution to the making of the Balfour Declaration came from Downing Street, the War Cabinet, the Foreign Office and the War Cabinet secretariat. After the Declaration, the Government's Zionist policy was chiefly the concern of the Foreign Office. The propaganda machinery that was set up during the war played a crucial role in the execution of this policy. But the Department of Information, founded in February 1917, and its successor from February 1918, the Ministry of Information, did not direct policy towards Jewry, despite the latter's attempts to do so.⁹ In 1918, any new departures in Zionist policy had to be approved by the Cabinet's Middle East Committee, which in March became the Eastern Committee. Chaired by Lord Curzon, a member of the War Cabinet, it included representatives from the Cabinet, the Foreign Office, the India Office, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

The decision to issue the Balfour Declaration was underpinned by a series of assumptions that were shared by all of its principal advocates

in Whitehall. At the heart of their interest in Zionism was the belief that world Jewry constituted a nation that was driven by Zionist ideals. In part, this view stemmed from well-established anti-Semitic portrayals of the Jews as a clannish and perpetually foreign people. At the same time, the firm acceptance of Zionism as being the dream of the Jewish Diaspora was aided by the influence of the Bible in British culture. Fundamentally, though, the idea that Jewry was a cohesive nation that wished to return to Palestine derived from broader perceptions of ethnicity in the official mind. In particular, the policy-makers behind the Balfour Declaration were influenced by the racial nationalist thought that came to dominate British culture during the Great War.

Race, nationalism and identity

In Britain, as across Western Europe, the pseudo-scientific study of race, with the emergent disciplines of anthropology, ethnology and eugenics, had come to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The theory of immutable racial difference embodied in a fixed racial physiognomy and innate character was encapsulated in the idea of the racial type. Despite debates concerning the environmental or innate nature of racial difference, and the inherent flux and arbitrary nature of what constituted a racial type,¹¹ the principles of racial thought were increasingly accepted.

By the Edwardian period these racial ideas became conflated in Britain and Europe as a whole with the neo-Romantic concept of the nation.¹² From this perspective, the nation, and by extension an individual's identity, was seen in racial, primordial terms. The character of a nation was thought to be defined by biological inheritance, national culture, history and the landscape of the nation.¹³ According to this view, individual identity and behaviour were determined to a significant degree by a profound and inherent racial national consciousness. With the advent of the First World War, and even more so during the conflict itself, the belief in the powerful impulse of race nationalism, and the will to national self-determination, became all-pervasive.¹⁴ Crucially, this perception of identity was widely shared by those members of the Government who came to advocate a pro-Zionist policy during the war. They, after all, emerged from an establishment whose self-image was to a great extent defined by these ideas of race, nation and Empire.¹⁵

Lord Milner, the influential imperialist at the centre of *The Round Table* circle and Minister without portfolio in Lloyd George's War

Cabinet throughout 1917, is a pertinent example.¹⁶ In an introduction to his speeches published in 1913, he wrote:

Throughout the foregoing statement I have emphasised the importance of the racial bond. From my point of view this is fundamental ... [D]eeper, stronger, more primordial than ... material ties is the bond of common blood, a common language, common history and traditions.¹⁷

Milner profoundly believed in 'development along nationalist lines' and the mission of 'the British race'.¹⁸

In even more explicit fashion, his protégé from his days in South Africa, Leopold Amery M.P., who was made part of the War Cabinet secretariat in 1917,¹⁹ declared the following in an address on imperial unity:

The whole foundation of Nationalism lies in the realisation of the fact that there are no such things as the independent individuals whom the individualist ideal postulated. Men are what they are, do what they do, wish what they wish, just because they are born of a certain race into a certain society. Race-instinct or patriotism are as much natural emotions as hunger or self-interest.²⁰

It was of no small significance that in Amery's draft of what became the Balfour Declaration he replaced the term 'Jewish people' with 'Jewish race' and 'home' with 'national home'.²¹

This racial, nationalist perception of identity and ethnicity was also apparent in the thought of A.J. Balfour. As Jason Thomes has so ably demonstrated, Balfour's conceptions of race and nation played a central part in his *Weltanschauung*, and attracted him to the national ideology of Zionism.²² However, this did not simply constitute a meeting of ideologies. As we shall see, Balfour's imagining of Jewry within his wider vision of ethnic groups as singular races, bonded by a latent national consciousness, was a fundamental precept for his, and others', decision to pursue a pro-Zionist policy.

Although in the 1890s Balfour had been sceptical about the immutable nature of racial/national types, by 1908 he insisted that it was

quite impossible to believe that any attempt to provide widely different races with an identical environment, political, religious, educational, what you will, can ever make them alike. They have

been different and unequal since history began; different and unequal they are destined to remain through future periods of comparable duration.²³

In an address to the Welsh nationalist Society of Cymmrodorion in 1909, arranged by Lloyd George, Balfour simply declared, 'questions of race' are the 'most important of all'.²⁴ For Balfour, race lay at the very centre of being, and determined identity, culture and social relations. And not only did he see nations as races, but for him nationality constituted the basis of normative culture in the modern world.²⁵

Sir Mark Sykes, the most determined and consistent advocate of the Government's Zionist policy,²⁶ was equally the individual most influenced by neo-Romantic ideas of race and nationhood. During the course of the war Sykes became one of the most respected Government experts on the Near East, and by 1917 was a prominent member of the War Cabinet secretariat. Not only did he ardently push for a pro-Zionist policy, but he was also a vociferous supporter of the Government's pro-Arab nationalist endeavour, and personally developed a post-war vision of the Near East built upon the principles of Jewish, Arab and Armenian nationalism.²⁷ Profoundly influenced by racial thought and neo-Romanticism, Sykes commonly perceived ethnic groups to be homogeneous units that were defined and bound by a deep sense of race.²⁸ Crucially, though, in his mind, the only true manifestation of authentic racial identity was nationalism, the basis of the world order, which he viewed as a natural instinct that was rooted in the depths of history.²⁹ For this reason Sykes conceived that the key principle of a stable post-war Near East was 'Nationality', which was to replace the pre-war corruption of imperial aggrandisement that had been driven by finance, and the divisive competition between the Great Powers.³⁰

Though it was never the all-consuming passion that it was for Sykes, Lloyd George also saw ethnicity and identity, to a great extent, in terms of race and nationalism. As John Grigg has observed, Lloyd George was both 'a product and a prophet' of 'the revival of Welsh national feeling', and was proud of 'Wales's distinctness and cultural identity'.³¹ As part of this world-view, he was a firm believer in the importance of race, language and religion.³² He once declared, 'National feeling has nothing to do with geography; it is a state of mind.'³³ As such, he developed a 'distinct ethnic theory', from which he argued in 1896, 'The Jewish nation had clung to its traditions, language and religion through all the ages.'³⁴

Like Sykes, Balfour, Amery, Milner and others, Lloyd George conceived Jewry, in large part, through the lens of race nationalism. Ethnic groups, or races as they termed them, were seen as distinct, unified communities that were held together and driven by a deep and inherent national identity and culture. A nation's character was, according to the official mind, embodied and shaped by its national language, literature and land, and was underpinned by its historical mythologies and culture. This view of ethnicity was just as prevalent in the Foreign Office, as it was in the War Cabinet and Downing Street.³⁵

When, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 4, Jewish activists brought Zionism to the attention of members of the British Government during the war, it was readily accepted as representing the identities and yearnings of world Jewry. Primarily this was because Zionism fitted in with conceptions of ethnic identity and normative culture within the corridors of Whitehall. Zionist and official British views of ethnicity were both a product of the same vein of nationalist thought. As Balfour wrote to Lord Beaverbrook, the newspaper magnate and Minister of Information in 1918, '... Zionism is a purely nationalistic question, just as much as that of Poland, Esthonia [sic] or any other of the hundred and one nationalities who now demand our support to secure their self-determination'.³⁶ In a crucial private meeting with Zionist representatives in February 1917, Sykes is reported to have said, 'the idea of a Jewish Palestine had his full sympathy. He understood entirely what was meant by nationality and there was no confusion on that point'.³⁷ For Sykes it was natural that Jews aspired for a return to national life in Palestine and that it was rooted in 'the fundamental traditions[,] sentiment and hereditary longings of the Jewish people'.³⁸ Unlike the assimilated Jews of Western Europe, this innate sense of national consciousness was considered to drive the authentic, uncorrupted Jewish identity of the masses in Eastern Europe and the USA, in which there was 'an instinct to revive the Jewish nation once more in Palestine'.³⁹ William Ormsby-Gore, a member of the War Cabinet secretariat with Amery and Sykes from April 1917, wrote, 'Their [the Jewish people's] hopes, whatever they may say, are centred in their survival as a people and as a people founded upon the idea of an ultimate restoration of Hebrew civilization in the land that was once theirs'.⁴⁰

The qualification 'whatever they may say' revealed a mind-set in which the national essence of the Jewish people was an objective reality, simply waiting to be exposed and seen, one that positioned other Jewish voices as inauthentic and illusory. The Zionist conception of Jewishness was not, therefore, accepted because of its own merits

within Jewish politics or culture, but how it matched the pre-existing assumptions of British officials and politicians, who projected their own sense of culture and desires onto a mythical Jewry. This shared world-view meant that the vision of Jewish identity that was held by Zionists was easily acknowledged as an established fact and expounded as such by the Government expert. Hence, the following passage by Ormsby-Gore would sit just as comfortably in a popular Zionist pamphlet of the time as it did in his Government memorandum.

The hope of a return to Palestine has sustained every succeeding generation of Jews scattered in every quarter of the Globe. Palestine has always been regarded by the Jews, not merely as the Land of their ancestors and the place where all that goes to make up the Jewish religion, Jewish consciousness, and Jewish national history as its source, but also as the country of their future, where they will once again find a home and a fresh inspiration. The 'Diaspora' or the scattering of the Jews has always been regarded by them as 'Galuth' i.e. exile, and they have always cherished this hope of a 'return'.⁴¹

Underpinning Ormsby-Gore's belief that there existed an eternal Jewish national consciousness was his conviction that

the word 'Jew' neither connotes nor denotes solely or even mainly a religion or a sect ... To the vast majority of the Jews of Russia, Poland, Austria and even in Germany – though in the latter to a less extent – 'Jew' denotes and connotes something politically, socially and racially distinctive.⁴²

That the 'Jew' was perceived to be distinctive in a social, political and racial sense, and was driven by an instinctive yearning for national redemption, has to be seen within the wider context of racial and nationalist thought from which Zionism sprang and certain members of the British Government derived their own world-view. Ormsby-Gore did not just see the Jews as a people apart, but as a nation whose culture, memory and destiny were unceasingly focused on the desire to return to the land of the nation, Palestine. This leap of imagination, accepting the Zionist representation of Jewish identity as an unquestionable truth, could only have been possible if members of the British Government had the same vision of identity, one that was equally shaped by racial nationalist thought.

However, once we burrow beneath Ormsby-Gore's nationalist vision of Jewish identity and culture, we are left with the question of how and why Jews were believed to be distinct from the rest of society in the first place. The key founding block of the idea that the Jews were a nation was that they constituted a separate ethnic group or race, rather than individual advocates of a religious faith, who were all primarily citizens within the nation-state in which they lived. We must therefore acknowledge and explain Ormsby-Gore's belief that, 'Their consciousness is not our consciousness'.⁴³

'The Jew' as an outsider

The anti-Semitic belief that Jews were separate and alien from the rest of the population had deep roots within English culture, dating back to the medieval period.⁴⁴ And as a number of scholars have contended over the past two decades, anti-Semitic myths and prejudices concerning Jews survived into post-Enlightenment culture and society in England.⁴⁵ However, as David Feldman has argued, the inclusion or exclusion of Jews from the fabric of the English nation was dependent upon a wider, fluid context of national self-definition, which was defined by changing currents in social, political and cultural thought. When the racial, cultural and religious conception of the English nation predominated, Jews were categorised as alien and foreign. Alternatively, the liberal view of the nation was predicated upon the civic liberties of an individual in relation to the state, and necessarily included Jews.⁴⁶ Within the political sphere, the liberal conception of the nation held fast prior to the First World War.⁴⁷ However, as we have discussed, ideas of race and heredity were increasingly influential in Britain during this period. According to this frame of thought, Jews were not only seen as a perpetually separate entity, or a degenerate alien presence, driven by a racial consciousness dating from biblical times. They were also considered to have a peculiarly strong and tenacious racial self, above and beyond other racial types, which was marked by a perpetual clannishness and exclusivity.⁴⁸ Voicing such conceptions of the Jewish race, Balfour, for example, had by 1905 referred to Anglo-Jewry as 'a people apart'⁴⁹ and later spoke of 'the age-long miseries created for Western civilization by the presence in its midst of a Body which it too long regarded as alien and even hostile, but which it was equally unable to expel or absorb'.⁵⁰ This racial view of Jewry as being immutably different, with an inner identity that was primarily Jewish, was commonly held during the war.⁵¹

It is apparent, therefore, that the imagining of Jewry as a separate people was rooted within longstanding anti-Semitic perceptions of Jews in Britain. But it was also intrinsically tied to, and dependent upon, a wider frame of racial thought. It is equally clear that in going from the concept of Jewish racial distinctiveness to a Jewish nation, which was focused on restoration in Palestine, there is a substantive leap. It is true that Jews were sometimes represented as being defined by their attachment to the land of their Biblical past and their racial origins as an Oriental or Asiatic people.⁵² But, as Bryan Cheyette has argued, racial perceptions of Jews were not static. Rather, they were fluid, and it was precisely the difficulty of categorising the exact racial nature of Jews that troubled many writers in the Edwardian period, and for them, reflected the Jews' threat to the homogeneity and stability that was desired in English culture at the time.⁵³ Some writers discussed the Jewish race in reference to Zionism and nationalism, while others tried to control the pariah of 'the Jew' through the eyes of 'a civilizing liberalism, or an all-controlling Imperialism, or a rationalizing socialism'.⁵⁴ The fact that Jewry was perceived by members of the British Government during the war to be not just a unified racial group, but one that was defined by an innate national consciousness, must be understood in reference to their own wider nationalist perceptions of identity. Nevertheless, advocates of a pro-Zionist policy in the British Government did not accept Zionism as being the authentic representation of the deep yearnings of a nation, simply because it fitted in with their own modular form of identity and culture.

Mythologies of the Jewish nation in British culture

The central tenets of Zionist ideology were widely accepted and asserted within British society during the war,⁵⁵ as they were within Whitehall: the portrayal of Palestine as the Jewish national home and the site of its mythical Golden Age up until the fall of Exile in 70 C.E., the negation of the Diaspora as an era of unremitting persecution and degeneration, and the unceasing Jewish desire for Return.⁵⁶ To comprehend why Jewry was seen within parts of British society and the Government, more readily than Jewry itself, as being defined by Zionist views of history, culture, space and identity, the resonance of these mythologies in British culture must be explained.

In order to do so, it is necessary to point to the Bible's role in English and then British national identity since the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ Since the Protestant Reformation, the narratives, heroes and imagery of

the Old Testament had become a key part of the British cultural fabric. And, as Eitan Bar-Yosef has noted, 'the Protestant Biblical vocabulary – a Chosen people, a Promised Land – was crucial to the forging of British imperialism'.⁵⁸

The deep-felt cultural presence of the Old Testament continued during the nineteenth century above and beyond any literal religious function, as evinced by evangelical and nonconformist movements. It also superseded the decline of the religious authority of the Hebrew Bible in the established Church, with the growing influence of liberal Christian theology from the 1850s and 1860s.⁵⁹ The so-called rediscovery of Palestine as the Holy Land from the end of the eighteenth century was driven by, and re-enforced, the original nexus of the Bible and British identity.⁶⁰ With the materialisation of antiquarianism and archaeology, historical-geography, the challenge of Biblical criticism, photography and travel literature, the Holy Land was vividly brought to life and generally appropriated as a cultural possession in Britain.⁶¹ As such, the mythologies of the Golden Age and fall of Ancient Israel loomed large in the popular imagination, as did Palestine, which was exhibited as the landscape of this historical drama. The imagery and language of the Bible as a cultural code through which the world was provided with meaning and significance was still evident by the time of the First World War,⁶² as was the apparent magnetic hold of the Holy Land in this sense.⁶³ The result was that the degenerate Jews of the present, as they were widely viewed in Britain, were seen to have a glorious, heroic past in the mythical land of Palestine.⁶⁴ Moreover, the idea of the Jewish Restoration in Palestine was also present in British culture. It had been a significant aspect of British Protestant thought, particularly its evangelical component, since the Reformation.⁶⁵ Those who actively believed that Britain should support the Restoration of the Jews, so as to hasten the Second Coming, were marginal within British society and the established Church by the time of the First World War. Nevertheless, the concept of Return, beyond any eschatological meaning, was widely known, and held a familiar, almost romantic, resonance.⁶⁶

For those who saw the world through the eyes of race and nationalism, the widespread imagery of the Holy Land and the Bible provided a pre-existing vision of what Jewish national consciousness could mean and aspire to – an instinctive yearning for a Return to its national Golden Age in Palestine. This Biblically inspired view of the Jews was based upon a schema of Jewish history that corresponded with Zionist periodisation: the Golden Age of Ancient Israel, Exile, the decline of the Diaspora, and the future redemption of national restoration.⁶⁷

With this in mind, we can delineate how and why some members of the British Government could so easily accept that Jewry, as a distinct racial group, was driven by a hereditary impulse and traditional desire for Jewish restoration in Palestine.

Lloyd George is perhaps the most obvious example of this point, though the cultural presence of the Bible in British society was such that its influence was not confined to those with a religious background such as his or Balfour's.⁶⁸ Lloyd George was raised within 'an intensely religious environment', in the small Baptist secessionist sect, the Disciples of Christ, which focused on the literal interpretation of the Scriptures as the sole basis of Christian belief.⁶⁹ Though rejecting these religious beliefs during his childhood,⁷⁰ his perceptions of Palestine and Jewry were manifestly filtered through the cultural code of the Old Testament, which continued to have a profound hold on his mind.⁷¹ Hence, in a meeting with the Imperial War Cabinet during the Palestine campaign of 1917, he remarked upon the army's entrance into Gaza, 'We have entered the land of the Philistines ... That is very interesting. I hope we shall conquer the Philistines.'⁷² As early as 1896, as we have mentioned, he was fixed in his conviction that Jewry was a nation from antiquity, bonded by its 'traditions, language and religion through all the ages'.⁷³

That the Bible influenced how Jewry was seen as a nation within Whitehall is also apparent from the fact that the Return, as a pre-existing concept, could be discussed as having a historical or transcendent appeal. Sir Edward Grey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, from 1905 to December 1916, was said to have remarked in November 1914, 'the idea had always had a sharp sentimental attraction to him. The historical appeal was very strong'.⁷⁴

In its most exaggerated form, the veneration of the Bible narrative allowed for Zionism to be seen as a beneficent ideal and regenerative force, which would return the stability and authenticity of the Ancient world. Sykes was probably the sole example of this line of thought, in which his Catholicism,⁷⁵ neo-Romanticism and nationalism were intertwined. Imbued with a sense of providence and transcendent mission, he wrote to Nahum Sokolow, the Zionist leader, in May 1918:

... Your cause has about it an enduring quality which mocks at time; if a generation is but a breath in the life of a nation, an epoch is but the space twixt a dawn and a sunrise in the history of Zionism.

When all the temporal things this world now holds are as dead forgotten as the curled and scented Kings of Babylon who dragged

your forefathers into captivity, there will still be Jews, and so long as there are Jews there must be Zionism.

We live in an age where mankind is reaping the whirl-wind of its wickedness and folly ... In Zionism lies your people's opportunity. In alliance with those other forces of regeneration and illumination which are centred on Jerusalem and which radiates through the world, it may be that you and your ancestors will play a part in establishing a moral order which will enable mankind to combine universal material progress with mutual subjection and charity.⁷⁶

It would be wrong to ignore the particular ways in which Jews were perceived by Sykes and others in the Government, if we are to comprehend why he believed Zionism to have a deep hold over the Jewish psyche. The influence of anti-Semitism must be acknowledged if we are to understand, for example, his assertion that national consciousness was required to improve the 'moral' of the anational Jew, 'which has been impaired by ages of wandering and aloofness'.⁷⁷ At the same time, the strong influence of the Bible on his world-view was critical for his unquestionable acceptance of the tenets of Zionist thought and his ever-growing embrace of Zionism as a vibrant national movement, which had emerged out of the deep tradition, sacred literature and mythologies of an ancient nation longing for restoration.

But, despite the particular cultural context of how Jewry was seen in Britain, the belief that the Jews were a Zionist nation was born out of a broader perception of identity and ethnicity. Without appreciating the determining influence of nationalist thought in how society was imagined by members of the Government, it is not possible to explain why other forms of Jewishness were instinctively seen as unrepresentative and inauthentic.

Indeed, the fact that ethnicity and ethnic groups in general, and not only Jews, were perceived through the lens of race nationalism is demonstrated by the British Government's policies towards other ethnic groups during the war, as will be seen in the following chapter. Ethnic groups were commonly considered to be racial entities, whose influence could be won through appeals to their national identities. A fundamental question, though, is why would the British Government be interested in winning the support of ethnic groups, Jewish or otherwise, in the midst of the Great War?

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