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Watts, M.

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Britain, Zionism and the Jewish Legion

Martin Watts

In the autumn of 1917, the British government committed itself to the “Formation of Battalions for the Reception of friendly Alien Jews”, an announcement that was followed just 7 weeks later, by the Balfour Declaration. In this article, which builds on the author’s previous research into the Jewish Legion, the link between Britain and Zionism, in the context of the First World War, is reconsidered. By taking into account further secondary works, some written since the publication of *The Jewish Legion and the First World War* in 2004, combined with a re-examination of archival sources, the roles of geopolitics, national interest and anti-Semitism are assessed for their relative importance. The influence of prominent personalities is also included, especially as personal relationships were exploited in the pursuit of policy, perhaps accounting for the ambiguities of the Balfour Declaration. Historians continue to debate the repercussions of the Declaration, whilst its consequences continue to influence contemporary events and international relations in the Middle East.

Jewish Legion

Zionism

Palestine

Anglo-Jewish identity

Balfour Declaration

Introduction

Unique in the history of the British Army, the Jewish Legion of 1917 - 1921 consisted of four battalions of Royal Fusiliers, (which typically recruited in the East End of London), two of which were raised in Britain, one in North America and one in Egypt and Palestine.

The uniqueness of these battalions is that they were designed to receive Jewish recruits, whereas no other unit in the British Army was officially established to recruit on purely religious denominational grounds. The battalions, especially in Britain and North America, were focused on the recruitment of Russian Jews, those in Britain having been classified as friendly aliens, which had previously exempted them from conscription in 1916. This contrasted with the fifty thousand British Jews who volunteered for the British Army in the war, and the divide between the two was reflected in the intra-communal argument between assimilationists, who saw their duty as serving the Crown as British citizens, and those Russian Jews who denigrated the idea of serving with an ally of Tsarist Russia after the pogroms of the 1880s. It was, after all, these very pogroms that had brought their fathers to Britain and the USA in the first place. Their arrival in large numbers in Britain had divided opinion amongst the established Anglo-Jewish community, which had been emancipated since 1858, and this division was to play an important role in both the creation of the Jewish Legion and the question of British support for Zionism¹. It is, perhaps, useful to note that the term “assimilationists” is used in the context of the arguments put forward by the Anglo-Jewish opponents to the Legion, especially Edwin Montagu. This will be examined later, but essentially their point of view was to regard themselves as British subjects who practised Judaism, not Jews who happened to be British subjects.

This article discusses the roles of the key personalities and movements that lay behind the British government’s involvement with Zionism during the First World War. In addition to the original research, undertaken nearly twenty years ago, some more recent works, and a small number of archival records, not previously seen by the author, have been used in further examination of this “special relationship”.

The Jewish Legion Idea and the Zion Mule Corps

The beginning of the link between the Legion and Zionism occurred in 1914-1915 when Vladimir Jabotinsky, a Russian Jewish journalist sent by his editor to report on the war, tried to persuade various European governments to set up Jewish fighting units on the side of the western allies. Jabotinsky was not the first person to conceive the idea of a Jewish force participating in the war on the allied side, with its reward being a national home in Palestine. This honour fell to the Russian revolutionary Pinhas Rutenberg and his and Jabotinsky's paths were to cross many times in the future. Unlike Rutenberg, Jabotinsky was no revolutionary socialist and his Zionist motives were, if not simple, both calculated and direct. Five years before the war, he had been based in Constantinople and observed the weakness of the Ottoman Empire. As a committed Zionist, Jabotinsky calculated that the breakup of this empire was necessary if Palestine were to become a national home for the Jewish people, and the entry of Turkey into the war in late 1914 enabled him to consider that defeat by the western allies would achieve this. The participation of Jews in victory with the western allies would, he hoped, secure the cooperation of the victorious powers in establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Whilst there were many obstacles in his way, not least in finding a proposal for a Jewish fighting force that would be acceptable to the western allies, Jabotinsky was also aware of a widely held Jewish view of the Turks as being part of the Semitic brotherhood. Indeed, as Michelle Campos has demonstrated, one of the effects of the 1908 revolution was that Arabs and Jews worked together to build institutions in Palestine, under the Ottoman imperial umbrella.² This co-operation was recognised before the war by Ben Gurion and Ben Zvi, both of whom sought a legal education in Constantinople, in the belief that the Ottoman government would grant Palestine some autonomy in its own affairs, whilst remaining in the empire. They clearly saw an opportunity to take part in the running of such an autonomous

province, thereby further increasing the influence of the Russian Jews who had established the *New Yishuv*, but the plan floundered as war approached and Turkey opted for an alliance with Germany. Jabotinsky had no truck with the approach of Ben Gurion and Ben Zvi (hereafter referred to as the Benim), who initially continued to hold a positive view of co-operation with Turkey, as he made very clear in conversation with Dr. Max Nordau, a prominent Zionist then living in exile in Madrid:

Doctor, I said, we cannot let idiots [Jews regarding Turks as their cousins] dictate our policy. Not only are the Turks no cousins of ours; even with the real Ishmael [i.e. Arabs] we have nothing in common. We belong to Europe, thank God; for two thousand years we helped to build European civilization. And here comes a quotation from one of your speeches: “We are going to Palestine to extend the moral boundaries of Europe as far as the Euphrates. Our worst enemy in this undertaking is the Turk. Now that the hour of his downfall has struck, we cannot possibly stand by and do nothing, can we?”³

Jabotinsky, later leader of the Revisionists, demonstrated here a distinct difference between his approach to the question of Zionism when compared to that of the Benim who subsequently went to the United States to seek support for a homeland. Their paths would cross again in 1918 when elements of the Jewish Legion were deployed in Allenby’s campaign through Palestine.

In the meanwhile, the entry of Turkey into the war on the side of Germany posed a more direct threat to the Jews of Palestine, that of expulsion. By December 1914, the British authorities in Alexandria had established two refugee camps in Alexandria, where around 1,200 Jewish refugees sought shelter following their removal from Palestine. Elias Gilner,

himself a Legionnaire, estimated that about 75% of the refugees were Russian Ashkenazis, with the remainder consisting of Sephardim of local origin.⁴ Jabotinsky saw his opportunity and seized it by campaigning amongst the refugees for a Jewish Legion to join the British forces in Egypt, in readiness for a campaign against the Turks in Palestine. It is worth remembering that the British had already repulsed an attack by the Turks towards the Suez Canal, and had consolidated their defence thereof, but there were no plans at this stage to invade Palestine. One of the first matters Jabotinsky had to deal with before approaching the British authorities was the activities of the Russian Consul in Egypt, Count Petrov, who attempted, on the orders of his government at home, to recruit all Russian citizens in Egypt for service in the Tsar's army. Petrov, unsurprisingly, was unsuccessful; the Russians simply were not going to serve the regime that had conducted the earlier pogroms and driven them to the yishuv in the first place. Petrov did, however, render an invaluable service to Jabotinsky, by introducing him to Captain Joseph Trumpeldor, a decorated hero of the Russo- Japanese war of 1905, who, despite his Jewish identity, had served as an officer and was in receipt of an Imperial Army pension when he sought out his future in Palestine, before the war.

In the spring of 1915, further repressive actions were taken against the Jews remaining in Palestine despite, as we shall see later, official attempts by the Turko-German authorities to placate Jewish sentiment in Palestine. Nevertheless, the ill feeling towards the Turks that this engendered amongst the Jewish refugees in the camps around Alexandria was profound, and Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor seized their chance. On the 2 March 1915, at a meeting held with a committee of leading refugees, comprising Mordecai Margolis, an oil company manager, Dr. Weitz, a Jerusalem physician, Victor Gluskin, wine grower, Akiva Ettinger, agronomist and Z.D. Levontin, banker, it was resolved "To form a Jewish Legion and to propose to England to make use of it in Palestine."⁵ Unfortunately for Jabotinsky, the British were not enthusiastic about this idea, although General Maxwell, GOC Egypt, did

indicate that he was willing to employ Jewish refugees in auxiliary supply and transport units. When pushed, Maxwell refused to offer any guarantee or promise that any such unit would be deployed in Palestine as there was no planned offensive, but he indicated that employment might be available on “another Turkish front.”⁶ No doubt Maxwell was referring to the forthcoming expedition to the Dardanelles, which was still secret at the time, but Jabotinsky took this as a rebuff, and departed Egypt to take his idea to the capitals of the western allies. Trumpeldor, on the other hand, took up the offer of a transport unit, a decision that appeared to be based on his professional knowledge of how important logistics were. It seemed to be his reasoning that if the Jewish volunteers could make a name for themselves supporting the front line, ~~wherever~~, a more justifiable case for establishing a Jewish Legion proper within the British army, could be argued. General Maxwell subsequently announced the formation of the Assyrian Refugee Mule Corps, on 23 March 1915, the day on which the Grand Rabbi of Alexandria, Raphael della Pergola, supervised the taking of the obedience oath by about five hundred volunteers. Prior to the announcement, Maxwell had appointed the 47-year-old Lt. Col John Henry Patterson, late of the Essex Yeomanry, to command the mule corps, with Trumpeldor as his second-in- command. Patterson, who was later to take command of the first Jewish Legion battalion, was an engineer by trade who had earned his military spurs in the 2nd Boer War in South Africa, earning a DSO and three mentions in despatches, as well as promotion from Lieutenant to Lieutenant-Colonel in five months. It was in South Africa that he first made friends with the future General Allenby. Between the two wars, Patterson had made a reputation for himself as an engineer, big game hunter and guide in Africa, writing a book, *The Man Eaters of Tsavo* (Macmillan, 1907), recounting his experience in dealing with lions who attacked the men working on a railway bridge he was building in Kenya. This was a popular book amongst British army officers, including General Hamilton, the newly appointed commander of the Dardanelles expedition who took over the Mule Corps from

Maxwell, in readiness for the landings at Gallipoli. Hamilton's diary records seeing the Mule Corps for the first time, in Alexandria 7 April 1915:

On my way down to the harbour overhauled the Assyrian Jewish Refugee Mule Corps at the Wardian Camp. Their Commander, author of that thrilling 'The Man eaters of Tsavo' finds Assyrian and Mules rather a mouthful and is going to tabloid bipeds and quadrupeds in to the ZION CORPS. The mules look very fit so do the Assyrians and, although I did not notice that their cohorts were gleaming with purple or gold, they may help us to those habiliments. They may in fact serve as ground bait to entice the big Jew journalists and bankers towards our cause. The former will lend us the colour, the latter the coin. Anyway, so far as I can, I mean to give the chosen people a chance.⁷

General Hamilton, who had been a cavalry commander in South Africa and an official observer during the Russo-Japanese war, displayed in his own words, a condescension towards Jews, whilst recognising that their public support and financial assistance were important to the western allies. This attitude and thinking was directed, principally, to influential Jews in the United States, as a counter to German propaganda and as an encouragement for the USA to enter the war against the Central Powers. Patterson, on the other hand, had a more zealous approach to the Jews under his command. Coming from an Ulster Protestant background, he had sympathy for the Jewish people and supported Zionism as a quest for a land of their own. In addition, Patterson was also well connected in the United States, as he had befriended President Theodore Roosevelt whilst acting as his guide

on safari in East Africa, and this connection was to be used to gain American support for the Legion in 1917/18.

This is not the place to tell the story of the Zion Mule Corps, suffice to say that it served in Gallipoli where several of its members were decorated for bravery in face of the enemy. With a British army uniform and wearing a cap badge of the Shield of David, they eventually made their mark, although many of the men were bitterly disappointed to be serving in Gallipoli instead of Palestine. On their return to depot, following evacuation from the peninsula on the last day of December 1915, they were left to their own devices, the only offer of further service being related to the garrison in Ireland.⁸ Needless to say, this did not come about and, after some of the men began drifting away, the Zion Mule Corps was formally disbanded on 26 May 1916. Trumpeldor and around 120 other ranks then managed to find their way to Britain on a troopship, and were held at an army depot, where they made strenuous efforts to avoid being scattered throughout the British Army. Their existence later proved useful to Jabotinsky, as they made a ready formed cadre for the Jewish Legion he sought to create in Britain, following disappointment on his travels from Alexandria across Europe.

Jabotinsky, Weizmann and Anglo – Jewry

Prior to his departure from Alexandria, Jabotinsky received a wire from Pinhas Rutenberg and the pair arranged to meet in Brindisi, in April 1915. They agreed that if the proposed Jewish Legion were to succeed, approaches to the western allies and to the United States would have to be made. The purpose of these approaches was to maximize recruitment and support for the Legion among Russian Jews living on both sides of the Atlantic. Seeking at first to enlist the help of the then neutral Italian government, they travelled to Rome where

their advances were rebuffed. Undeterred, Jabotinsky moved on to Paris, whilst Rutenberg left for the United States where he hoped to mobilize the large Jewish population in the city of New York. On arrival in Paris Jabotinsky was reacquainted with his pre-war Zionist colleague, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, who had positioned himself outside the official World Zionist Organisation, due to its decision, in May 1915, to adopt a policy of neutrality. Weizmann had aligned himself to Britain and had begun advising the British government in his professional capacity as a chemist, a situation that was to lead to an influential relationship with Lloyd George. Weizmann also possessed the type of political antennae that contrasted sharply with Jabotinsky's black-and-white idealism. Thus, Weizmann was fully aware that if there were to be a sponsor of Zionism in Palestine it would have to be Britain and not France, which laid claim to other territories in the Levant. Weizmann returned to London leaving Jabotinsky to speak to the French government, in an attempt to gain their support for the Legion, in return for participation in the war against Turkey and good future relations between France and the Jewish people in Palestine. Lacking Weizmann's sensitivity, it was no surprise that another rejection was forthcoming, as summarised by Jabotinsky himself, in a report he sent to London:

- (a) France is already aware that she will not be allowed to annex Palestine;
- (b) The [*French*] Government is not interested in Zionism.⁹

This episode demonstrates that Jabotinsky's failure to gain French support may well have been due to pre-existing French policy and not just his approach. Other historians, such as Renton, have also noted that Jabotinsky did possess diplomatic skills, although the evidence seen by this author did not explicitly reveal this trait. Jabotinsky's idealism was rooted in his anti-socialist Revisionism, a position which later threatened, combined with his attachment to

Britain, to undermine his relations with American and central European Zionists. Indeed, Jabotinsky's adherence to Revisionism may well have been a factor in his failure to arouse enthusiasm for recruitment amongst the Russian Jews in the United Kingdom, especially in the East End of London. Significantly, in this regard, Jabotinsky was not involved with later recruitment in the USA.¹⁰

After France, Jabotinsky joined Weizmann in London, where they shared a small house in Chelsea, and the pair agreed to pursue the Jewish Legion idea, hoping that this would prove to be a calculated risk that would secure the Jewish people a stake in the peace and the achievement of Zion. The obstacles they faced were many and various. For example, two of Weizmann's Zionist colleagues, Ahad Ha'am and Nathan Sokolow were opposed to the Legion and, as Jabotinsky found out on a visit to the Zionist Bureau in Copenhagen, in the summer of 1915, notable international Zionists such as Tschlenow, Victor Jacobson and Henke were only interested in abandoning the whole idea.¹¹ By November 1915 the only positive encouragement Jabotinsky received had been in a long letter from Patterson, commanding the Zion Mule corps in Gallipoli, in which he advised that he had discussed the Legion idea with General Birdwood, who viewed it with favour. Patterson added that he would like to help, subject to War Office approval, with the raising and training of the Legion, which he would be proud to command. Shortly afterward, in response to Jabotinsky's proposal to the War Office that the Zion Mule Corps be expanded into a Jewish Legion or Brigade, a Major Casgrain, of the General Staff, could only advise "...that you should apply to the Foreign Office for permission to raise a Foreign Legion to fight for the allies."¹²

If encountering opposition from leading international Zionists and the War Office was bad enough, these obstacles were as nothing as to the difficulties that Jabotinsky now faced with the Russian Jews of the East End of London, and a significant part of the Anglo-Jewish establishment, as mentioned in the Introduction above. In the case of enlistment for the

Russian Jews -- who were classed as friendly aliens -- in the British army, it was the case that in 1915, the army only had powers to accept them in a diluted fashion, and certainly not as a homogenous force or unit. Neither, as mentioned earlier, did the men themselves show any inclination to volunteer as had their assimilated co-religionists. In order to tackle this, Jabotinsky met Patterson in London, for the first time in December 1915 (Patterson had returned home immediately after withdrawal from Gallipoli), and was consequently introduced to Captain Leopold Amery, a Unionist MP, who had become friendly with Patterson in South Africa. Amery was sympathetic to Zionism, an opponent of Asquith and a proponent of conscription and the taking of more military action in the East as a means of breaking the stalemate on the Western Front. It was Amery's influence that opened doors in Whitehall to Jabotinsky and Patterson. Whilst Amery was opening doors for Jabotinsky, Weizmann was able to meet Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Herbert Samuel, also in the government and a Zionist himself. These meetings were arranged by C.P. Scott, the famed editor of the Manchester Guardian, who had established a friendship with Weizmann in 1914, when the latter was based at Manchester University. Also in December, Scott and Amery introduced Jabotinsky to Lord Robert Cecil of the Foreign Office where, after presenting the testimonials from General Birdwood and Lt. Col. Patterson, Jabotinsky once again outlined his scheme. This appeal foundered, as the Foreign Office decided that it was a matter for the War Office, thus reciprocating the earlier rebuff from Horse Guards. Three weeks after meeting Jabotinsky, Cecil received Patterson at the Foreign Office, after which he asked for a report on the Zion Mule Corps. Patterson duly obliged and also took the opportunity to mention to Cecil that correspondence in support of the Jewish Legion had been received from Jews and Gentiles alike, "The most important of the latter coming from President Roosevelt who was keenly interested in this move to counter Jewish sympathy for Germany -- which exists mainly owing to hatred of Russia."¹³

Meanwhile, the Anglo-Jewish community had also taken a hand in the question of Russian Jewish recruitment. Lord Derby, the Director General of Recruitment advised the *Jewish Chronicle*, on 19 November 1915, that he was “looking to arrange enlistment of foreign-born men who have been in Britain since infancy.”¹⁴ This was shortly followed by a War Office announcement that a Jewish Recruitment Committee had been established on 18 December 1915, thereby officially confirming that most Russian Jewish men, of military age were now eligible for service in the British army. The link between these two events was correspondence between Leopold Rothschild, representing the Board of Deputies, and Lord Derby, who was as good as his word in setting up this special recruiting committee. Seeking to protect the reputation of the Jewish people in Britain, the Board of Deputies were keen to see enlistment of their Russian co-religionists, but the voluntary nature of the recruitment scheme failed to attract any significant number of recruits. With the Tsar still in power and a living to earn at home, this is not surprising.

Despite the promise of the flurry of activity in the final two months of 1915, 1916 proved to be another year of frustration for Jabotinsky and his campaign, the details of which are fraught with intra-communal politics. Jabotinsky won sanction for yet another appeal to the Russian Jews of the East End, the Zionist connection being firmly announced in the title of this campaign – “Home and Heim.” Efforts to convince volunteers to enlist were continued throughout the year, attracting support from the Zionist and anti-Zionist members of the Anglo-Jewish establishment, but without success. These efforts, however, did succeed in provoking assimilationist and anti-Zionist discussion in the heart of government. The main protagonist was Edwin Montagu, a radical liberal, practising Jew and Minister for Munitions (later Secretary of State for India). Montagu, a cousin of the Zionist supporting Herbert Samuel, gave full vent to his feelings in a letter of 3 August 1916 to Sir Eric Drummond at the Foreign Office. Here is an extract:

It seems to me that Jews have got to consider whether they regard themselves as members of a religion or a race, world-wide in its habitat... ...For myself I have long made the choice. I saw with horror the aspiration of a national entity. Did I accept it, as a patriotic Englishman, I should resign my position on the Cabinet and declare myself neutral... ...For the moment the correspondence [with the Ambassador Buchanan in Russia] seems to me to show clearly two things; first that the Russian Jews have not, in Buchanan's opinion, played a very distinguished part in this war. (I hope that they have played a more distinguished part in England, but be it said in passing, could anything be more disastrous than for Jewish Englishmen and Jewish Americans to be bracketed with the Jewish Russians, sharing the same verdict for their part in the war?!)...¹⁵

Montagu continued to bombard his colleagues with his views on Zionism and fought the Jewish Legion and the later Balfour Declaration proposals until the bitter end. Despite the influence of Montagu, Jabotinsky sought further support from the Anglo-Jewish establishment. In one instance, he worked with Lucien Wolf, the secretary of the Conjoint Committee Foreign Branch who, whilst an ardent assimilationist, was keenly aware of the need to counter the pro-German propaganda that was influencing Jews in America. This Wolf made clear in a confidential memorandum to the Conjoint Committee:

- (1) Jews more sympathetic since Lusitania.
- (2) Majority are German Jews with two-thirds being second generation American -- but their fathers and grandfathers do not remember an (*sic*) united

Germany therefore tend to be liberal in outlook and anti-Prussian so only need a little push.

(3) The German immigrants are liberal but from the time of the German Empire are perhaps the most devout pro-German.

(4) Russian Jews – numerous and hostile to Russia thus resenting the triple Entente. But they know nothing of modern Germany and could be converted to allied cause. Zionism is the key although the author deprecates this as Jewishness is not a nationality.¹⁶

Wolf's summary of the situation in America, echoed the official British understanding of Jewish demography in the United States. Mark Levene has written about the fact that, in 1914, there were some three million Jews on the other side of the Atlantic, the majority of whom had links to Eastern Europe, and these had followed the German Jewish immigration mentioned by Wolf. Levene argued that it was this German community that predominated in finance, media and politics and, as acknowledged by Sir Cecil Spring—Rice, the British ambassador to Washington, they were seen as pro-German, hence the need for Britain to engage with counter propaganda in the USA.¹⁷ Levene's contribution to this debate is significant, as he consistently notes that anti-Semitism lay behind much of the British appreciation of the way to deal with world Jewry in general, and Zionism in particular. His argument is also supported by the activities of those who, whilst purporting to support Zionism, did so as means of removing Jews from Europe. The situation in the United States was further nuanced by the fact that Zionists in America had been able to prevent the Tsar's government from raising funds in Wall Street. James Barr has written about how, in late 1915, this drew the attention of Herbert Samuel, the leading British Jewish cabinet minister and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, to the notion that support for the Zionist cause

would be of assistance in the propaganda war. At the same time, the British and French governments were engaged in negotiations over the future of the Middle East, in what was to become the Sykes-Picot agreement, and Barr usefully points out that Samuel fully realised

...by supporting the creation of a Jewish colony immediately east of Suez, Britain could deny that territory to rival foreign powers who might then threaten its control of the Suez Canal.¹⁸

The obvious and most relevant rival power, France, whose intentions towards Syria were already known, had, as noted above, already declared to Jabotinsky that they had no interest in Zionism. Nevertheless, Samuel was looking ahead to a time after the war, when international relations would be subject to change, and it was tempting to secure Britain's position around Suez as early as possible. At the conclusion of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement in May 1916, Grey made fresh inquiries about French sentiment regarding Zionism, only to receive the same dismissive response as had Jabotinsky.¹⁹

From the evidence presented above, Samuel's and Grey's activities, combined with Wolf's reluctant acceptance of the key importance of Zionism to British interests, clearly indicate a growing British sympathy for Zionism. Further substantiation was provided by Patterson's testimonials, including the endorsement by President Theodore Roosevelt, and the earlier acknowledgement of General Hamilton of the importance to Britain of securing Jewish support for the war. It was already becoming clear that this support would have its price and that motives were not always pure, as indicated earlier. Anti-Semitism, of which the Anglo-Jewish establishment, with its policy of assimilation, was acutely aware, was a factor that simply could not be ignored. From Hamilton's language conveying a condescension that would not be acceptable in later years, to the activities of anti-Semites who backed Zionism

as a means of exiling European Jews, it is beyond doubt that racism remained an important element to be considered in the story of Britain and Zionism. An example of this was the relationship between Jabotinsky, Weizmann and the foreign editor of *The Times*, Henry Wickham Steed. In their memoirs, both Jabotinsky and Weizmann paid fulsome tribute to Steed, for writing supportive leaders, as exemplified in the following quote:

He [Steed] was not only glad to publish the Zionist statements but expressed downright annoyance with the heads of the Conjoint Committee. For a good hour or so we discussed the kind of leader which was likely to make the best appeal to the British public, and when it appeared...it caused something like consternation amongst the assimilationists. It was a magnificent presentation of the Zionist case.²⁰

Steed had spent much time as a correspondent in eastern Europe, based in Vienna, and had even become acquainted with Theodore Herzl, from 1896 until the latter's death in 1904. In Vienna, Steed had observed the influence of the Jews in the economy and lives of the countries they inhabited and, as indicated above, Zionism could be seen as one way of reducing this influence. Sharman Kadish has used this argument in contrasting the *Times* supportive leaders with the anti-Semitic nature of the copy filed by the paper's Petrograd correspondent during the early stages of the Russian revolution.²¹ Previously, Leonard Stein had gone further by describing Steed's position thus:

As illustrating the civilised type of anti-Semitism – to be distinguished from paranoiac judaophobia – characteristic of some Gentile pro-Zionists.²²

As far as the Legion was concerned, however, the early Gentile support of Amery, Scott and Patterson, was of a philo-Semitic nature. In Patterson's case, he attributed his empathy to the fact that "I had been a student of Jewish history and tradition and felt the deepest interest in the race..." This belief may well have been founded in a certain type of Protestant upbringing that emphasised the common roots of Christianity and Judaism.²³ Weizmann and Jabotinsky enjoyed the encouragement of the owner of the *Jewish Chronicle*, Joseph Cowen, Israel Zangwill (Cowen's brother-in-law) and Montague Eder, each of whom were involved in the British Zionist Federation. Yet another Gentile friend was to be found in the Information Department of the Foreign Office, Arnold Toynbee. Israel Friedman has described his involvement thus:

Toynbee's introduction to Zionism had taken place before the War (sic) at Oxford, where he befriended Leonard Stein... ...Like E.A. Gowers, its Director [Information Office], Charles Masterman, the latter's assistant, as well as Leopold Amery, Toynbee was impressed with Vladimir Jabotinsky's struggle to create Jewish battalions to fight for the liberation of Palestine. A few years later, he acknowledged that "the work of the Palestinian Zionist refugees in the Gallipoli campaign and later [of the Royal Fusiliers in the valley of Jordan] had been considerable in comparison with their means."²⁴

It can therefore be argued that the activities of Jabotinsky, Patterson, Weizmann and friends in promoting the idea of a Jewish Legion within the British army played a pivotal role in raising governmental and public awareness of Zionism in Britain. In support of this the *Jewish Chronicle* published a series of articles and commentaries promoting the idea of a

Jewish Legion, including an interview with Lord Derby in November 1915, where he confirmed that he was “looking to arrange enlistment of foreign-born men who have been in Britain since infancy”²⁵. In terms of Patterson’s role Alyson Pendlebury wrote:

As prospective commander of the proposed Jewish regiment, however, Patterson effectively became the British government’s Zionist missionary to the Jews, attempting to persuade the leaders of Anglo-Jewry and the English Zionist Federation that their interests were foremost in its plans.²⁶

These influential personal connections and networks, of philo-Semites and Zionists were to have a significant impact on the formation of the Jewish Legion, and the issuing of the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

1917 – the Pivotal Year

Lloyd George’s coming to the premiership in December 1916 gave fresh impetus to the Zionist cause as he actively pursued a more radical and vigorous prosecution of the war. This was exemplified by his early order to General Murray in Egypt to cross the Sinai and eject the last remaining Turkish soldiers from Egyptian soil, thereby putting to an end any Turkish threat to the Suez Canal. This operation was completed in January 1917. Germany, too, had to take into account Zionism and the effect of the war on its own Jewish population, a significant amount of which was serving in the German Army. The British government knew of this, as shown in a memorandum written in February 1918, entitled “on the Attitude

of Enemy Governments Towards Zionism.” Emanating from the Intelligence Bureau at the Department of Information, the memorandum gave a resume of events “From the Outbreak of War to the Spring of 1917.” This included the following passage which, whilst not mentioning the exile of some Jews to Egypt, did note the effect on Jews in Germany of Turkey’s entry into the war:

The Jewish colonists in Palestine began to suffer from the moment Turkey entered the war... and the dissatisfaction among the Jews in Germany at this state of affairs was already sufficiently great in the spring of 1915 to make it necessary for the Turkish Ambassador at Berlin to make a reassuring statement. From this time onward the question of Zionism was discussed in the German Press. The idea that the Central Powers should take action to secure Jewish sympathy was propagated... There was also an important article in the ‘Vossische Zeitung’ of August 8th 1917... in which it was prophesised that England would make a bid for Zionist support...²⁷

According to Thomas Weber, there were some 615,000 Jews in Germany in 1914, compared with around two hundred and forty thousand in Britain, which explains German concern about the behaviour of their Turkish allies, and their willingness to consider the Zionist question.²⁸ The roots of German sympathy for Zionism have also been addressed by Isaiah Friedman who has contended that German support for colonization in Palestine by European Jews, including Germans, provided both a platform for German influence and policy in the Middle East, and a means of removing Jews from Europe. Friedman summarised the advantages to Germany of influence with the Porte and support of colonization as follows;

“Thus it was seen that Turkey would benefit economically, Germany would gain a foothold in the Orient, and a solution of the Jewish problem beckoned.”²⁹ German support for Zionism, however, did not produce the results it craved; results predicated, as Friedman has established, upon a belief that such support would give Germany greater access to Jewish international capital. A visit to Palestine by the Kaiser in 1898 was not received well by the Sultan, who recognized the threat to Turkey of a substantial increase in Zionist support and, by 1914, the German colonies in Palestine accounted for fewer than 3,000 German Jews. Whilst this did not prevent Germany from bringing in Turkey as a wartime ally, an opportunity had been lost. Germany faced competition from the French, who had offered the Chief Rabbi protection for all Jews in the East, and from the United Kingdom as described below. German policy in the Middle East was also damaged by the Turkish expulsion of the Jews in 1914-1915 and the later announcement of the Balfour Declaration. The efforts of Britain, France and Germany make it difficult to argue with Friedman’s statement that “It was the competition of the belligerent powers to win the goodwill of world Jewry that put Zionism on the map.”³⁰

Turning back to the United Kingdom, as the race for Jewish support got underway, Lloyd George’s own sympathies took him in the direction of Zionism and the protection of the holy places in Jerusalem, especially when such a course would assist Britain’s ambitions for the war and after. However, whilst wishing to continue with an Eastern strategy focussed on the defeat of Turkey and securing Britain’s strategic objectives in the Middle East, Lloyd George had to wait until his arguments with the Chief of the Imperial Staff, Sir William Robertson and the Cin-C France, General Haig, were either resolved or managed so as to facilitate his Eastern ambitions. It surely was no coincidence that Leo Amery had become a member of the Prime Minister’s inner circle, or “kitchen cabinet” that proffered advice,

generally in opposition to the professional soldiers at the head of the army who saw the Western Front as the only decisive theatre of war.

Other events of the war were also responsible for a reassessment of policy, particularly with regard to the overthrow of the Tsar, and the perceived threat to the Russian army's continuation of war against Germany. The Eastern front was vital in tying down substantial German forces and thereby keeping the German army on the defensive in Flanders and France. The British government was extremely nervous of the consequences of a peace in the East which would release over a million German soldiers for the Western Front, transforming the situation in what remained the critical theatre of war. A telegram from the Foreign Office, dated 24 April 1917, copied to the British Ambassador in Russia and the High Commissioner in Egypt, illustrates the effect this situation was having on the Zionist question in Whitehall. The cable advises that "offering encouragement to Jewish nationalists in Palestine is one of the best ways of counteracting Jewish pacifists and socialist propaganda in Russia." Mark Sykes replied that "the only way of doing this was through the official Zionist Organisation – Weizmann and Sokolow -- and to beware the anti-Zionism of Lucien Wolf." This was somewhat contradicted by the response from Petrograd advising that this is best left alone because, since the Tsar's abdication, there is "no great appetite for Zionism."³¹ What is interesting about this exchange is the referral to the "official Zionist Organisation" that the government recognized in Britain, with Weizmann at its head, ignoring the World Zionist Organisation, which remained neutral in the war. It is, therefore, clear that there was alignment between the government and Weizmann, both using Zionism to further their war plans and ideas respectively. Also of note is the response from Petrograd, which does not recognise the urgency of the situation as envisaged in London. At the time, the Ambassador was proven to be accurate in his forecast, as Kerensky's government in Russia continued to fight until, following revolution and widespread withdrawal, a punitive peace was concluded

with Germany on 3 March 1918. It was then that the feared release of German troops for the Western Front took place and enabled the German army to mount one last, massive, attack that nearly succeeded in splitting the British and French armies.

As noted earlier, Jabotinsky, Patterson and Weizmann continued to face opposition from the assimilationist members of senior Anglo-Jewry, in their campaign for a Jewish force. This confrontation, involving intensive lobbying of the War Office by delegations from both sides, was fiercely conducted up to the very last minute, until the Legion was finally announced in Army Council Instruction 1415 on 12 September 1917. The Instruction was headed “Formation of Battalions for the Reception of Friendly Alien Jews” and, in a concession towards the assimilationists, it was confirmed that the battalions were to belong to the Royal Fusiliers and have no other name. The final decision to create the Jewish battalions was reached after compulsion, the previously missing factor, was introduced through the Military Service Convention of 16 July 1917. Like similar conventions with other allied nations, this MSC rendered Russian Jews of military age to be liable to conscription for service in the British army. The assimilationist lobby also secured a “sweetener” by persuading the government to offer enlisted Russian Jews, free British citizenship after three months in the Army. Those who chose not to comply were given the option of transportation to Russia for service in that Army, which was now under the control of the provisional government following the abdication of the Tsar in the spring.

Sharman Kadish has researched those that took this option, known as conventionists, and estimated that around three thousand men, about 10 per cent of the eligible cohort, sailed off to Russia. Many left families behind and, as the revolutions and civil war took hold, very few, if any, of these men were seen again in Britain, and the Board of Deputies and Guardians had to make provision for those left behind without support. Kadish’s research also established that the conventionists mainly consisted of those active in socialist politics in

the East End and the loss of these intellectuals damaged their movement. Working with the Foreign Jews Protection Committee, which was shut down after investigation by the Special Branch at the end of July 1917, they had publicly demonstrated and obstructed recruitment. With their departure to Russia, local resistance to Jabotinsky's scheme was weakened, although recruitment was to remain slow until 1918, with many recruits engaging with an extended appeal tribunal process.³²

Despite the introduction of compulsion and the actions of the conventionists, recruitment continued to be, as far as Jabotinsky and Patterson were concerned, frustratingly slow. Leo Amery was also involved in attempts to increase the rate of recruitment and, in a diary entry of 30 July 1917, that supports Kadish, he wrote:

Went over in the afternoon with Patterson and Sykes, with Jabotinsky in Reserve, to interview General Geddes (*Director of Recruiting*) about the Zionist business. Found Geddes very anxious to ship away as many of these Western Jews as he can in view of their extreme trickiness. They have an organised system of doping and can produce appearance of almost any deadly disease in a fashion which would defy the most skilled doctors. They are also past masters at tribunal work.³³

Later in 1917, the British military and political authorities had to consider the effect of Russian withdrawal from the war upon the liability of Russian Jews in Britain under the Military Service Convention. In correspondence with General Geddes, Amery maintained the line that, once enlisted, the Russians would be legally obliged to serve, hence it was necessary to push as many as possible through the tribunals, before the question of Russian collapse arose. He added that "it would be intolerable that these fellows should get the best

of us now... .. the effect upon our own people in the East End would be very bad.” Geddes responded by again mentioning the “elusiveness” of the would be recruits, and confirmed that “some prosecutions in hand as a deterrent.”³⁴

This ongoing situation was covered in greater detail in *The Jewish Legion and the First World War*³⁵ but in the meanwhile another development was in train that would influence recruitment in Britain, the United States and, later, Palestine. This was, of course, the Balfour Declaration issued by the Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, on behalf of the British government on 2 November, 1917. Addressed to Lord Rothschild, the wording of the Declaration, the final draft of which was written by Leo Amery, represented a clear commitment of British support for a Jewish national home in Palestine, whilst taking care to mention that the rights of non-Jewish people in that territory, and the rights of Jews living anywhere, were not to be prejudiced.

That is not to say, however, that the assimilationists lost through lack of effort. The road to the Declaration was, if anything, harder fought than the struggle over the creation of the Legion. Once again, Weizmann and Wolf, the latter on behalf of the Conjoint Committee, discussed and negotiated with the government, and this interaction has been more recently examined by Jonathan Scheer.³⁶ Early in 1917, Wolf was keen to impress Balfour with his case that the Conjoint Committee represented a much greater number of Jews living in Britain and the Empire than those who claimed to be Zionists, and he dismissed the Zionist case. As Scheer noted, however, Wolf was careful not to object to a slow development of a Jewish nation in Palestine, and he took issue with “Zionist subversion... .. of the twin principles of emancipation and assimilation elsewhere”, thus seeking to protect Jews across the diaspora.)³⁷ Wolf, who was already aware of the British government’s refusal, much to the Conjoint’s dissatisfaction, to raise the Jewish question at any future peace conference,

found that it appeared that Balfour had already made up his mind, and that he sympathised with the Zionists. According to Scheer:

He strongly objected to anti-Semitism, Balfour told Wolf, but Jews “were exceedingly clever people who in spite of their oppression achieved a certain success which excited the jealousy and envy of the peoples among whom they lived.”

By the late spring of 1917, open conflict had broken out between the Conjoint Committee and the Zionists, with opposing letters in the *Times*, which set off public discussion in newspapers across Britain. With Lord Walter Rothschild, a Zionist supporter of Weizmann, now at the head of the most powerful Jewish family in the United Kingdom and heavily engaged in this correspondence, the Conjoint Committee began to fall away. Its power had depended upon the support of the Anglo-Jewish Association and the Board of Deputies and, in June 1917, both of these organisations were taken to task by Zionist members. The effect of these intercessions was to neutralise the Anglo-Jewish Association and dismember the Board of Deputies, therefore nullifying the authority of the Conjoint Committee. Weizmann was now free to embark on his campaign in support of Jabotinsky and the Jewish Legion as described earlier.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the assimilationists simply withdrew from the fray. The actual wording of the Declaration was the result of an almost year long struggle between Weizmann, who had the ear of Lloyd George, and the assimilationists within the Anglo-Jewish establishment. Leo Amery’s diary provides an insight into the nature of the haggling over the declaration. For example, Amery recorded on 18 September 1917:

In the afternoon Weizmann came to see me in great distress about the fact that
The British declaration in favour of Zionism has got submitted to President Wilson
And hung up by him. However, Sykes was going to take him to see AJB [*Balfour*]
next day and he [W] was going to cable freely to his confederate in America.
He was very interesting in his scorn for Montagu and all that class of 'tame Jew'
Who doesn't want to be bothered with Zionism or national aspiration, and only
Regards the nuisance it may be to himself.³⁸

As late as 9 October 1917, Edwin Montagu, now Secretary of State for India, wrote a secret and impassioned note, in an effort to prevent the issuing of the Declaration. It is a long note, that opened with an apology for bothering the Cabinet with yet another paper, followed by information received from Gertrude Bell in Baghdad as to the current situation of Jews in Palestine. Montagu wrote:

Jewish immigration has been artificially fostered by doles and subventions
from millionaire co-religionists in Europe... ..The pious hope that an
independent Jewish state may be someday established in Palestine no doubt
exists, though it may be questioned whether among local Jews there is any
acute desire to see it realised, except as a means of escape from Turkish
oppression; it is perhaps more lively in the breasts of those who live far
from the rocky Palestinian hills...³⁹

Montagu attached to this unambiguous argument a list, forty-five strong, "of a few prominent anti-Zionists", writing that: "It will be noticed that it includes every Jew who is prominent in

public life, with the exception of the present Lord Rothschild, Mr. Herbert Samuel and a few others.”⁴⁰ This was followed by a plea to the Cabinet, in terms that described the essence of assimilationism:

I submit again that the Cabinet’s first duty is to Englishmen, to citizens of the British Empire of British traditions. I would submit with great respect that it is not their business to espouse the cause of Americans, Russians, Austrians and Germans, naturalised though they may be, in the teeth of the ardent wishes of those who have lived for generations in this country, and who feel themselves to be Englishmen. At this moment Jews are constantly being attacked for being outside the great national feelings which the war has engendered, and of being cosmopolitan in their sympathy and international in their aspirations. This is a gross libel on the Jewish Briton It is true of the Zionist...⁴¹

Montagu argued in vain. On 2 November 1917, just twenty-four days after he had sent this note to his Cabinet colleagues, the Balfour Declaration was made to Lord Walter Rothschild. Amery wasted no time in celebrating, as his diary entry twelve days later makes clear:

In the evening Mark Sykes, Bill Gore and myself dined at the Ritz as the Guests of Weizmann, Sokoloff (sic), Dr. Chlenoff, Mr. Cowan and Jimmy Rothschild to celebrate our efforts in securing the declaration in favour of Zionism... I think in the Zionist business the British government and we Juniors who have helped to push it have builded better than we know.⁴²

As in the victory in the fight to create the Jewish battalions within the British Army, Weizmann was, once again, triumphant, with the powerful support of not only the Prime

Minister, but also Herbert Samuel, Lord Rothschild and long-term campaigners, such as Cowen and Eder. It is, therefore, relatively straightforward to argue that there was a strong link between the founding of the Jewish Legion and the Balfour Declaration. To significant role players like Jabotinsky, they were very much part of a single project.

As mentioned earlier, the Declaration had little effect on the rate of recruitment to the Jewish battalions in the United Kingdom, but did accelerate recruitment in the United States, where the propaganda effect was most felt. With the USA having entered the war in April 1917, the British government negotiated military service dispensations for the Russian Jews, including American citizens, who volunteered for service in the Jewish battalions of the British Army.

Overall, therefore, the evidence suggests that the traditional interpretation, that the Balfour Declaration was made in furtherance of Britain's war and imperial objectives, appears to be sound. This was most recently supported by David Cronin, in his 2017 work, *Balfour's Shadow: A Century of British Support for Zionism and Israel*,⁴³ written to commemorate the century of the Declaration. On the other hand, Alyson Pendlebury noted that the Declaration, "portrayed as a gesture of support for the Jews, was also a reaction to the fear of collective 'Jewish Power', and the desire to restrict or control it."⁴⁴ As Mark Levene observed:

The origins of the Balfour Declaration are to be located less in the wartime Policies and strategies of Britain in the Middle East and more in the murky waters of modern anti-Semitism. At the bottom of the pool was the fear that a collective, potentially conspiratorial Jewry knew something that the rest of the world did not know, and could manipulate it accordingly for its own ends⁴⁵

There is no denying that Levene's interpretation is based on a reality that Balfour clearly recognized in his statement to Wolf, and this remains a powerful argument.

Conclusion

Historians such as Levene and Kadish recognized that anti-Semitism was a motivation for British support for Zionism. By implication, therefore, they have disputed the traditional interpretation that countering German propaganda and gaining the support of Jewry in Russia and the United States, coupled with a Middle East strategy designed to protect British interests based on the Suez Canal, were the prime movers behind British policy. Stein, for example, in addition to recognising the role of anti-Semitism, concluded that the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 was also predicated on these two prime movers. More recently, however, James Renton, in a re-examination of British policy with regard to Zionism, has acknowledged the anti-Semitic argument, and then posed the following question, "why did policy makers so readily and steadfastly believe that Zionism was the key to the Jewish imagination?"⁴⁶ Renton argued that it was not Zionism in isolation but a growing sense of nationalism around the world, of which the creation of another national state was just a part. Going beyond the nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th century, Friedman recalled the work of German and Jewish philosophers when he wrote that "Kant had earlier identified Judaism as a national religion and Moses Mendelssohn had appreciated that the price of emancipation would be the sacrifice of national identity."⁴⁷

In connection with the traditional strategic argument, Renton stated that the main motive behind the Balfour Declaration was the conduct of the war "in the US and Europe"

and not the future of the Holy Land. To this end, Renton contended that the Zionists were, in fact, used by the British government to give the greatest weight to its propaganda campaigns in Russia and the United States.⁴⁸. Such interpretations are useful in developing discourse and historiography, and it should be made clear that the author's original conclusions in *The Jewish Legion and the First World War* supported the traditional propaganda and strategic arguments, whilst acknowledging the contribution made by philo-Semites like Lloyd George, Amery and Patterson. Britain certainly played its part in the "competition of the belligerent powers" that made Zionism a feature of the modern world.

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¹ Watts, *The Jewish Legion* .

² Campos, *Ottoman Brother*.

³ Jabotinsky, *The Story of the Jewish Legion*, 32.

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- ⁴ Gilner, *War and Hope*, 35.
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- ⁶ Gilner, *War and Hope*, 41.
- ⁷ Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary* Vol 1. 24.
- ⁸ TNA WO 158 166
- ⁹ Jabotinsky, *The Story of the Jewish Legion*, 48.
- ¹⁰ Berkowitz, *Western Jewry*, 21-22.
- ¹¹ Jabotinsky, 1945, 57
- ¹² TNA FO 371 2835/18995
- ¹³ TNA FO 371 2835/18995
- ¹⁴ *Jewish Chronicle*, 19 November 1915.
- ¹⁵ TNA FO 800/99
- ¹⁶ LMA, BDBJ File ACC 3121 C11/3/1/2
- ¹⁷ Levene, *War, Jews and the New Europe*.
- ¹⁸ Barr, *A Line in the Sand*, 32-33.
- ¹⁹ Barr, *A Line in the Sand*, 32.
- ²⁰ Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, 255,
- ²¹ Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*.
- ²² Stein, *The Balfour Declaration*, 324.
- ²³ Watts, *The Jewish Legion*, 27. (A broader discussion of Philo-Semitism is to be found in the works of David S. Katz and William and Hilary Rubinstein).
- ²⁴ Friedman, *Germany, Turkey and Zionism*, 110.
- ²⁵ *Jewish Chronicle*, 19 November 1915.
- ²⁶ Pendlebury, *Portraying the Jew*, 125.
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- ³⁶ See Scheer, *The Balfour Declaration*.
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- ⁴³ Cronin, *Balfour's Shadow*.
- ⁴⁴ Pendlebury, *Portraying the Jew*, 30.
- ⁴⁵ Levene, *War, Jews and the New Europe*, 70, as quoted in Pendlebury *Portraying the Jew*, 30
- ⁴⁶ Renton, *The Zionist Masquerade*, 3.
- ⁴⁷ Friedman, *Germany, Turkey and Zionism*, 6 and 7.
- ⁴⁸ Renton, *The Zionist Masquerade*, 5.

Martin Watts joined the New Zealand Shipping Company in 1971 and enjoyed a career, afloat and ashore, in the Merchant Navy before studying history at the Open University and the Polytechnic of North London. Martin was awarded a PhD in 2003 and his thesis 'The Jewish Legion and the First World War', was published by Palgrave Macmillan the following year. Martin is currently Senior Lecturer and Principal Research fellow at Canterbury Christ Church University, and an Associate Lecturer with the Open University. His latest book, 'The Royal Marines and the War at Sea 1939-45' was published in 2018 by Amberley Publishing.

Address

Dr. Martin Watts,

School of Humanities,

Canterbury Christ Church University,

North Holmes Road,

Canterbury CT1 1QU