

BRITISH PALESTINE, BRITISH COMMUNISTS, AND THE “IDEO-LOGICAL” SYSTEM OF LABOUR MONTHLY

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) offers an account of the Mandate of Palestine strikingly divergent from the rest of British society. Through their ideology, the CPGB constructed a narrative of Palestinian issues focused on British policy, which was identified as the imperial-capitalist activities of a scheming “British imperialism.” With this ideological center, a discussion emerged that orientalized the Arab nationalist as a progressive revolutionary, differentiated between reactionary Zionist and average Jewish settler, and opposed partition as imperialism. Running throughout these themes was an optimism for Arab-Jewish unity, a conclusion shared with official British government observers. The British Communist view on the Mandate is marked out as radically Communist and distinctly British.

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Arab recruits line up in a barracks square in the British Mandate of Palestine (1940)

Source: AP

“His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people... it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

Those were the words, set forth in the Balfour Declaration, which came to haunt many a British politician in the course of the British Mandate of Palestine. Balancing British obligations to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine and respecting the rights of Palestinian Arabs was simple for the British Zionist-idealist, difficult for the realistic Briton who recognized the ever-escalating violence between Zionist and Arab, and nearly impossible for the actual British officers working on the ground in Palestine. But regardless of their opinion on the matter, British politicians and officers were legally and ideologically restrained into an acceptance of this framework, and could only hope to make it work or get both Zionists and Arab nationalists to agree to change these terms and expectations. Yet some Britons did not feel bound to the Balfour Declaration or the strictures of the British government, instead approaching each with extreme hostility? One such interesting example

of an anti-British, British opinion on the issue of Palestine was that of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Formed in 1920, primarily as an affiliate of the USSR-led Comintern (Third International), the CPGB was the main Communist Party of Britain. Like the other Comintern parties, the CPGB was strongly influenced by the official opinion and ruling policies of the Soviet party, meaning that dramatic shifts in Soviet foreign policy found their expression in CPGB-related media outlets.¹ The British Communists offered a unique and interesting perspective on the conflicts and dilemmas of British Mandate Palestine primarily through the CPGB-linked journal *Labour Monthly*, the organization’s main media outlet. Whereas the typical British politicians, such as Winston Churchill and Ramsay MacDonald, opined on Palestine with the legal, moral, and political restraints of the Balfour Declaration and strong Zionist sympathies, the CPGB worked within the parameters set by official Soviet opinion, Soviet foreign policy, and Communist ideology. Given this constraint, *Labour Monthly’s* coverage of Palestine centered on the specter of “British imperialism” in regards to Palestinian and Zionist policies, essentially reifying it into the ideological center of gravity which structured the British Communist coverage of Palestine. Combined with a distinction between “Zionist” and “Jew,” this ideological basis produced the themes of a direct anti-racist Soviet fetish for the oriental peasant, a near-constant opposition to the idea of partition, and an ever-present optimism in the ability of Jew and Arab to unite in anti-imperialist struggle against capitalism and the British Empire. From the postulate of “British imperialism,” the CPGB developed a self-consistent “ideological” system. Though the CPGB was constrained by Soviet policies, the relative consistency of those policies over the course of the Mandate allowed British Communists to develop a coherent ideological critique of Zionism and British imperialism that incorporated the Marxist-Leninist interpretations of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, which nonetheless proved capable of being flexible enough to adjust to the Comintern policy of favoring the creation of Israel in 1947.



Map of Palestine (1924)

Source: British War Office, National Library Of Scotland

THE PROGRESSIVE FORCE IN PALESTINE

Before one can investigate the various opinions offered by the British Communists, it is important to consider relevant policy changes brought about in the Soviet Union and imposed on Soviet-supported parties through the institutions of the Comintern. The first and most relevant to the Palestinian case was the “Popular Front,” established in 1934 in reaction to the fascist victories in Italy and Germany, which supported political alliances with non-Communist political groups, such as the Labour Party and Liberal Party, for anti-fascist cooperation and action.² At first, that meant reconciling with social-democratic parties (like the Labour Party) once derided as “social fascists,” but the growing Nazi threat loosened the standards over time to allow the moderate left and basically any anti-Nazi factions (such as the Liberal Party). In the Palestinian case, that included working with liberal bi-nationalists like Hebrew University President Dr. Judah Magnes within the goal of countering Nazi influence in the Zionist and Arab camps.³ The Popular Front tactic also presaged the eventual shift of Communist expectations onto the Jews as the leading anti-imperialist force in Palestine, rather than the Arabs.

This trend of Communists shifting from a temporary alliance with Zionists to seeing Zionists as the key progressive force is most noticeable in the answers and opinions given on the question of Zionism. In 1937, Communist M.P. William Gallacher regarded Zionism as having “always been nothing but a harmful reactionary illusion;”⁴ as late as 1943, Rajani Palme

Dutt, one of the lead theoreticians of the party, noted “the reactionary character of Zionism” and that the CPGB’s task with Zionists was “one of very patient enlightenment and not primarily polemical propaganda.”⁵ Up until 1948, the source of progressive revolutionary potential had always been the Arab, with Jews cited as a misled minority and Zionists as a distinct group which manipulated the Jews. However, as Soviet support skewed towards supporting the Zionists and Jewish statehood through partition, as well as the logic of Zionist independence weakening the British Empire, the CPGB changed its attitude towards Zionism as reactionary. Whereas the 18th Party Congress rallied for Arab-Jewish unity to “end the Zionist policy of Jewish exclusiveness in industry and agriculture [and subject Jewish immigration to Arab-Jewish agreement],” the 19th Congress of 1947 dropped all reference to the term.⁶ Whereas Zionism was once a main target of the CPGB when it came to Palestine, blame now shifted to “British imperialism,” because with the end of World War II, Zionist national aspirations threatened Western integrity; now, anything that threatened Zionist aspirations would be reactionary. Thus, when the Arab states invaded Palestine against the Zionist militias (who were supplied by Soviet-backed Czechoslovakia), the Central Committee deemed it a “reactionary war conducted by the chieftains of the Arab League under British control [which] is entirely against the interests of the Arab masses.”⁷ When the winds from Moscow blew, they could be noticeably seen in the changed media coverage and political pronouncements of the CPGB.

If one ignores the case of Soviet foreign policy impacting this late period, very consistent themes can be detected in the period prior to 1948. One of the more interesting themes that ran through the CPGB coverage of the Palestinian Mandate that contrasted with all the other political opinions was a sort of “Soviet-oriental fetishism,” derived from its political roots in the semi-rural Russian Revolution, which combined with an equation of non-Zionist Jewish and Arab interest. According to the Comintern, the peasant was an agent of progressive socialist revolution, meaning that the British communists saw just as much progressive character in the *fellahin* as in the western European Jewish settler or Russian peasant. Thus, while the Arab Palestinian was still seen as a “non-modern peasant,” this endeared the Arab to the Soviet understanding of how actual socialist revolutions are made, i.e. that it was made in Russia with mostly peasants. Perhaps the most direct case of a Communist defense of “the Arab” can be found in a book review of Ernest Main’s *Palestine at the Crossroads* by former British colonial officer for the Palestine administration, Thomas Hodgkin (under the pseudonym “British Resident”). While complimenting Main for being openly imperialistic in his argument for British rule and a Jewish majority in Palestine, Hodgkin takes umbrage with Main’s serious racism towards the “backward” Arab:

Few Arabs, [Main] says, have any political consciousness. Yet it is curious that these politically unconscious Arabs should have carried on a six-months’ general

strike against the Government... it is unfair to say that 'the Arab, largely due to his antecedents, has little talent for constructive team-work' without mentioning the fact that under the British Mandate [the British have] effective control, both central and local... consequently no genuine opportunity has been given the Arabs for showing their 'talent for constructive team-work.'⁸

In this, Hodgkin countered the typical colonial logic that the observed depressed state of the colonial subject, rather than being some sort of natural state, was actually the result of the colonial process itself which vulgarized the colonial Other. Main's comments that the Arab was "venal" or that they did

Communist Andrew Rothstein put it, there were two Jewish cultures: one of the proletariat, which was suppressed everywhere in which capitalism ruled, and one of the bourgeoisie, which is invested in "national culture" and uses it to set poor Jews against poor Arabs.¹² The common Jew was a misled proletariat, afflicted with "false consciousness," and falsely identifies with Zionism and his Zionist leaders. Or as Ivor Montagu more crudely stated in 1937, the "Jews who were not Jewish Nazis would know their only 'right' in Palestine is such that they can negotiate with liberated Arabs and share in equal and non-exclusive citizenship there with all inhabitants, not discriminating."¹³

“When the winds from Moscow blew, they could be noticeably seen in the changed media coverage and political pronouncements of the CPGB.”

not appreciate scientific agriculture were also countered by Hodgkin as being blind to the important factors of capitalism and Ottoman/British imperialism:

In so far as Arabs are venal, and many are not, that is to be explained by the fact that they have lived for four hundred years under Ottoman rule when to be corruptible had high survival value... Scientific agriculture is beyond the ken of the majority of Arab peasant farmers only because they are too heavily burdened by debt, land shortage, and high rents to be able to afford to introduce improved methods of farming.⁹

From the British Communist perspective, the colonial-orientalist denigration of the Arab as backward was rejected on the grounds that such orientalism ascribed that backwardness as something essential, when the truth was the backwardness of the impoverished Arab peasant was produced by imperialism and sustained by "British (capitalist) imperialism."

The construed progressive character of the Arab is especially notable in comparison to the mainstream referent of "progress," the Jew, and the relation between these two abstracted peoples. For example, the Zionist Labour PM Ramsay MacDonald envisaged the Jew as a cultivator of the land who increased the wealth of Palestine "a hundredfold."¹⁰ The Communist view on the matter was similar, but put the (political) progressive focus on Arabs. The Arab would fight for the "progressive struggle" and the Jew was progressive in its role as *partner and supporter* to this principally Arab struggle.¹¹ However, while McDonald meant Zionists when he said "Jews," the Communists differentiated the Zionist from the non-Zionist Palestinian Jew. The Zionist Jew was a violent reactionary, antithetical to the progressive Arab struggle, but the Zionists as a whole were not representative of the Yishuv, the Jewish population of Palestine. As British

Aided by this differentiation of Jew and Zionist and the denigration of those Zionists, the CPGB milieu was arguing that the proper orientation of the Yishuv was not in an alliance with "British imperialism." The progressive struggle was on the side of the Arab and imperialism only endangered the Yishuv. The Zionist alliance with Britain brought danger in that it made the Yishuv collaborators, and thus targets of the Arab revolution. The Arab hates the Jew, not because of their desire for a national home, but because they are under the auspices of an imperial power that institutes policy "without consulting the wishes or interests of the existing inhabitants."¹⁴ In the British Communist imagination, the national home project, as British-sanctioned, was a principal stumbling block to Jews realizing that their best situation was a revolutionary alliance with the Arab nationalist struggle.

The specific character and benefits of this proposed Arab-Jew alliance were also outlined. For instance, the Jew could further his/her own struggle against international anti-Semitism by taking part in a progressive Arab-Palestinian state: the Palestinian Jew's role was "as loyal members of an Arab state," through which they could win over allies for a campaign against Jewish persecution in Europe.¹⁵ Even as late as 1944, the CPGB argued for the Arab states to unite into a political federation, with Palestine and its significant Jewish minority as a vital component: "there can be no successful Federation without the collaboration of Palestine Jewry which can play a vitally important part in Arab progressive advance and development."¹⁶ Before the Soviet shift towards a pro-Israel position in 1947, the end goal of the British Communists was an egalitarian, multi-ethnic society in Palestine, linked to similar states in an Arab federation. The Jews would benefit the Arabs by being innovative carriers of capital and the Arabs would benefit the Jews by introducing them into an egalitarian, presumably non-capitalist Soviet society.



Mr. and Mrs. David Ben Gurion of the Jewish Agency and Viscount Gort, the new Commissioner of Palestine (1917)
Source: War Office: Second World War Official Collection, Imperial War Museums

THE SPECTER OF BRITISH IMPERIALISM

One of the primary components appearing in Communist coverage of Palestine is the constant reference to “British imperialism” and its interests, goals, and tactics. It was “British imperialism,” through Zionism, which was at play in Palestine, and it was against “British imperialism” that Arabs revolted. When analyzing the CPGB’s use of the term “imperialism,” it is possible to interpret that such a conception is within the Leninist intellectual legacy. In Lenin’s essay, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, he posited that the profit-seeking of capitalism, driven to monopolize by the falling rate of profit, developed towards requiring political domination over colonies for cheap markets, resources, and labor. In his words:

Imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism... on the one hand, finance capital is the bank capital of a few very big monopolist banks, merged with the capital of the monopolist associations of industrialists; and, on the other hand, the division of the world is the transition from a colonial policy which has extended without hindrance to territories unseized by any capitalist power, to a colonial policy of monopolist possession of the territory of the world, which has been completely divided up.¹⁷

This analysis came from his experiences in World War I, “a war to decide whether the British or German group of financial plunderers is to receive the most booty.”¹⁸ Put in simple terms, for Lenin and those influenced by his thought, imperialism equaled capitalism by other means and capitalism/imperialism operated on a national basis.

The influence of Lenin’s intellectual legacy on the British Communists, in this respect of capitalist-colonial imperial-

ism, is apparent both in their assessment of the British motives in colonial dealings and in the idea that there are competing capitalist empires at play. Through nearly every report on Palestine in *Labour Monthly*, the lens of analysis used by the British Communists saw the Mandate of Palestine as beholden to British imperial need. In recommending partition, the Royal Commission meant “not only to prevent the people of Palestine from realizing national independence, but also to keep open and intensify the enmity and hatred between Arab and Jew that have been so sedulously fostered by British imperialism.”¹⁹ The main way the British built up and colonized Palestine was through Zionism, which “has always been nothing but a harmful reactionary illusion. In actual fact it has represented and carried through an invasion of Palestine, not in the interest of the Jews, but of British imperialism.”²⁰ Just as Lenin laid out in *Imperialism*, the Zionist-Palestinian project was a project of capitalist market-seeking:

The Government [by promoting the sale of Arab land to Zionist settlers] is in alliance with Zionism to deprive the Arab of his lands and to make them available for Jewish settlement; and at the same time to create a landless proletariat to be exploited by itself, and by Jewish, and (to a less extent) by British and Arab, capitalists... The British Government backs Zionist activities for the reasons of imperial strategy... and for business reasons. A Zionist industrialised Palestine makes a far better market for British goods and a far more profitable field for British investment than a purely Arab peasant Palestine could have made.²¹

The British empire, in their ruling policies throughout the Mandate period (Labour governments included), had been carrying out the capitalist expansion of British markets and economic forces and imperial needs, like the Baghdad-Hai-fa oil pipeline, to maintain this position against competing French interests in the region.²² Indeed, these expansions were in competition with the American and French capitalist empires as well. In terms of competition against the Americans, the British fought for control over their tool in Palestine, the Zionists, “for American imperialism has used Zionism in the past as a means of penetration in the Near East. The Labour Government by this policy tries to check this destruction of its monopoly of exploitation in these Near Eastern countries.”²³ Palestine was thus a small part of a much larger socio-economic system and great power dynamics, according to the Leninist British Communists.

“British imperialism,” however, was not construed as some sort of natural economic force or general trend, but practically seen as an agent with a significant ontological status. For the CPGB of *Labour Monthly*, “British imperialism” plotted, schemed, and planned, along with specific Zionists with whom it cooperated; it worked in the Mandate to stop national liberation by dividing people “along racial, religious, or cultural lines.”²⁴ This vague entity also desired and “was only concerned with fulfilling her pledges to the degree that they did not conflict with her Imperialist aims.”²⁵ In both the

phrasing and logic of their arguments, these British Communists attributed an almost material reality to the entity known as “British imperialism.” This was the main phrase, as a sort of center of gravity, around which the CPGB’s coverage revolved and through which the CPGB tarnished an enemy by association.

For most of the Mandate, the second main target of British Communist critique in Palestine was the Zionist movement, which was differentiated from the Jews of Palestine: “British Imperialism also has its agents and allies in Palestine... Britain has used the Zionist movement as a buffer against Arab aspirations: and this has driven the Arabs into armed revolt.”²⁶ The reactionary Zionist leadership were some of these “agents of British imperialism,” such as Chaim Weizmann, who was “attempting to make the Yishuv into a tool which may be used to prevent the Arab people from striking once again for their National freedom... Such a policy must be opposed by every progressive, for it spells disaster for the Yishuv.”²⁷ Through the construction of a reviled agent known as “British imperialism,” acting as a sort of “floating signifier,” the British Communists created an ideological enemy which could “float” to different referents. When the hated term was aligned with British policy’s cooperation with the Zionist leadership, it served to simultaneously portray Arab nationalism as inherently progressive and to distinguish the Yishuv from the plotting Zionists, who were lackeys of imperialism. And, just as flexibly in the late 1940s, those roles could be reversed to tar Arab leadership and portray all of Zionism as progressive in 1948, “floating” the vague signifier to besmirch the Arab states.

PARTITION OR SOLIDARITY?

Another key theme in the British Communist coverage of British Mandate Palestine was a strong criticism of the proposed policy of partition, which was seriously considered after the Arab revolt of 1936 and the subsequent unrest. Besides propounding the principle of self-determination, that any division of Palestine could only be justified by the (impossible) agreement of Arabs and Jews to agree to partition, Hodgkin also critiqued the dominant narrative of two peoples who are “incapable of living together as a single united people” as overly simplistic.²⁸ Such a narrative was akin to “speaking of it as though Arabs and Jews were two naughty children who had to be shut up in separate rooms by Britain in order to produce peace.”²⁹ Another dimension of the partition plan, specifically the “transference” of peoples into the different states, warranted special ridicule from Gallacher:

What a blessed word—‘transferred.’ Driven off the land they have owned and cultivated for generations, they will be “replanted” somewhere, maybe to starve and die. “Transferred” and “replanted.” How is it possible that such barbaric treatment of a great people (however simple their economy may be) can be contemplated?³⁰

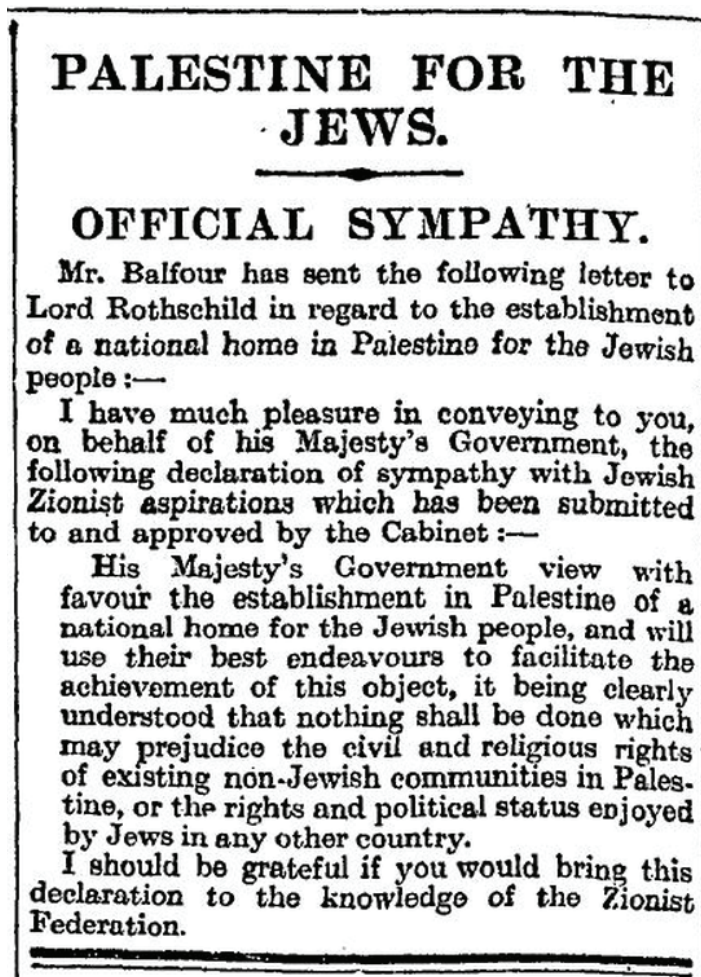
Between Hodgkin and Gallacher, partition of Palestine was not just a stupid or ineffective policy for the region, but it was

antithetical to their moral of national determination, to their anti-imperialism which was truncated by the preservation of Arab-Jewish rivalry, and to the human decency which is appalled by the terror that is contained in softly spoken words like “transfer.” Partition was just “British imperialism” by another name and method, and thus was not to be tolerated by the British Communists.



Palestine claimed by the World Zionist Organization (1919)
Source: Oosthoek-Times Wereldatlas (1973/1977), map 87
(Lebanon, Israel, Nile delta)

There was, however, one last consistent theme in the British communist coverage of the Palestinian Mandate which marks them out, not as Communists, but as British: their overriding optimism in the possibility of Jew and Arab unification in a progressive national liberation movement. In an economic vein of social theory, Ramsay MacDonald had said of Palestine that Jewish workers could not defend their wages if Palestine is “to be divided into two working-class nations, one with a substantially lower standard of life than the other. So the Jewish worker is helping the Arab to raise his standard... economic contacts are bringing the races into



Balfour Declaration in *The Times* (1917)

Source: British war office, National Library Of Scotland

harmony.”³¹ In comparison, the more politically and revolutionarily oriented social analysis of the British Communists asserted and predicted Jew-Arab unity through their common political interests. Indeed, the CPGB kept writing as if the revolution was around the corner, with each new crisis being the spark to set off the process of unification. In the first instance, it was the partition proposal; partition revealed to the Jews that the Zionist leaders were mere tools of “British imperialism,” and showed Arabs another instance of imperial imposition.³² Once the threat of partition proved to be an unsuitable route for unity, the CPGB contended that anti-Semitism and the fascist threat would unite Arab and Jew:

The menace of Fascist penetration makes it imperative for the progressive forces among the Jews and Arabs in Palestine to come together for a unified struggle against the Fascist axis and its agents in the Arab and Jewish camps... Arab Jewish workers' unity would rally round itself all the progressive forces among Jews and Arabs in the spirit of world unity against Fascism and for a democratic Palestine with equal rights for all.³³

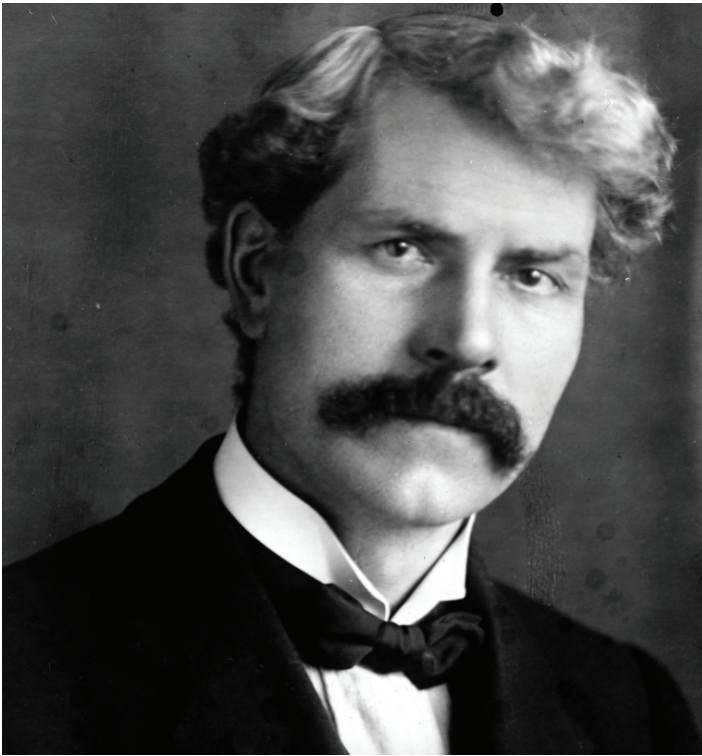
Historically, this too failed to prompt the creation of a progressive alliance among Arab and Jew to run out “reactionar-

ies” like Ben-Gurion and the Mufti, but it also failed at the more basic level. The spark of bi-national unity never caught flame.

The reason for this failure is that the Communists were simply unable or unwilling to comprehend and communicate the possibility that Zionism was a popular idea, that the creation of a Jewish state was possible, or that Zionist leaders might have grander aspirations than Dominion status in the British Empire. In their Leninist worldview that focused on giant political entities, where the “American,” “British,” and “Nazi” capitalist empires were all that mattered, the creation of a small and relatively independent and self-determined colonial state like Israel was unthinkable: “The present Zionist policy, the Weizmann-Ben-Gurion policy, is bankrupt because these leaders tried to create something which is impossible (a Jewish majority and State in Palestine) relying wholly on a treacherous ally who assured them that this was possible.”³⁴ Because “British imperialism” was treacherous and would not actually abide an (impossible) Zionist state, this thus positioned the possibility of a progressive revolution in the Arab nationalist project. The overriding optimism of the British Communists paralleled that of the Zionist-Labourites like MacDonald; whereas MacDonald posited the natural economic unity of Arab and Jewish interests, Communists like Panner were assured Arab and Jew would have to come to the realization that their revolutionary-political interests aligned. Whereas MacDonald could not imagine the ability of Jews to close their economic prosperity to themselves, Panner could not appreciate the popularity of the Zionist project or its feasibility. This was the sense in which the British Communists were British: assuming some unrealistic ideological axioms, a utopic union of Arab and Jew was thought inevitable. Even in this extreme and niche perspective of the British Communists, Zionism was underestimated in favor of an optimism for a leftist political program that necessitated cross-ethnic unity and opposition to imperialism.

CONCLUSION

One would be hard-pressed to find a more niche group within Britain to comment on the issues of the Palestinian Mandate than the Soviet-backed Communist Party of Great Britain. Through their Soviet-communist ideological restrictions, which greatly differed from the ideological restrictions acting upon a more mainstream British political tendency, the CPGB constructed a political narrative and terminology that squarely focused the Palestinian issue on British policy. That policy, identified as the imperial-capitalist activities of a scheming, desiring agent called “British imperialism,” was the center of discussion and which logically placed the Arab nationalist as a progressive revolutionary and Zionist as reactionary agent of British imperialism. Such themes that grew out of this basic narrative were a strange Soviet-orientalism, which fetishized the Arab into communist revolutionaries, a differentiation between reactionary Zionist and average Palestinian Jewish settler, and an opposition to partition, be-



Ramsay MacDonald, first Labour Party Prime Minister

Source: *Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress*

cause partition was an imperialist tactic. Undergirding all of this, ultimately, was an overriding communist optimism in the ability of Arab and Jew to unite, a conclusion shared with other British observers, but reached through a much different ideological process.

However, the abrupt shift towards a pro-Israel position reveals the larger moral and historical lesson of the British Communists, which is that a political account, constructed on the shifting sands of pure ideological theory, can be made logical and consistent, but can also be easily directed towards other goals; “British imperialism” as a floating signifier with vague meaning could be re-assigned to a different referent to criticize different actors. When deconstructing the political opinions of a historical subject, one can discern this “ideo-logical” manner in which those subjects construed and viewed the world and the process by which such a subject could justify, to themselves, a seemingly radical shift to an opposite conclusion. The British Communists could abide a shift from anti- to pro-Zionism not because they simply “changed their minds,” but because the ideological framework they worked from was flexible enough to justify such a change, despite previous hopes in the ability of Jew and Arab to unite in common struggle. 🏛️

Endnotes

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- [3] Issie Panter, "The Position In Palestine and the Path to Peace," *Labour Monthly* No. 5. (May 1939), 305-313.
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- [24] Thomas Hodgkin, "The Palestine Report," *Labour Monthly* No. 8 (August 1937), 465-472.
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- [34] *Ibid.*