

Tom Segev's New Mandate

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Tom Segev has earned himself a place of honor in Israeli society. A talented columnist for the prestigious daily *Ha'aretz*, every week Segev explores Israeli culture from the perspective of an outsider peering in, rendering judgment with a harsh irony and a pointed disregard for local sensibilities; fittingly enough, his column is called "Foreign Correspondent." But Segev can boast of other accomplishments as well: A trained historian, he also writes popular books in which he applies the same "foreign correspondent" approach to rereading the history of the State of Israel and the Jewish settlement in Palestine (the *yishuv*) prior to statehood.

Segev's historical writing is characterized by independence of mind and an eagerness to unearth the darkest truths about Israel's past. He is convinced that past chroniclers of Zionist history did everything in their power—including lying—to whitewash the most sordid deeds committed by the Zionist leadership during the establishment of Israel and through the state's first decade, thereby weaving the shroud of myths which every Israeli was brought up believing. In *1949: The First Israelis*, a book he wrote in 1984, Segev retells the story of how Israel absorbed hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the first few years of statehood, portraying the nation's leaders not as the heroic, moral ideologues of the classic narrative, but as cynical, conniving, racist and at times even vicious men, who openly conducted policies that discriminated against immigrants from Islamic lands. Similarly, his 1991 bestseller, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, depicts the leaders of the *yishuv*, beginning with David

Ben-Gurion, paying lip service to the rescue of Europe's Jews during the Second World War while exploiting the catastrophe for their own state-building schemes.

His latest venture, the runaway bestseller *Days of the Anemones: Palestine During the Mandatory Period* (Keter, 1999; Hebrew), is a similar attempt at creative myth-smashing. Now, however, Segev turns his eye to the years when Palestine was under British rule following World War I (1918-1948). In this work we discover that the British came to rule Palestine without a clear idea of what they were looking for, and that, once they arrived, they encountered a well-organized Arab nationalist movement vigorously opposed to their rule. When, during the Arab revolt of 1936-1939, this opposition took a determined and violent form, the British came to the conclusion that they had no real interest in Palestine and ought to leave as quickly as possible, finally doing so in 1948. Meanwhile, the Jews—one can hardly help notice—are missing from the greater story-line, having had no real impact on the course of events.

All this, of course, flies in the face of the classic history of Zionism as taught in Israel and abroad for over half a century. According to the standard history, the British were a determined and dominant force, who endured the endless troubles they had in dealing with both Arabs and Jews in Palestine because they had clear interests of their own there. When finally they chose to withdraw from the country, it was only because the Jews had undertaken a string of devastating guerrilla operations—including the bombing of the King David Hotel and the disabling of Britain's entire railway system in Palestine—which had rendered the option of staying on intolerable.

If Segev's claims were based on compelling evidence, they would constitute an important challenge to long-held beliefs which have been adopted by the Israeli public and affirmed so many times by historians. This, however, is not the case. For as with his other books on the history of Israel, one comes away from *Days of the Anemones* with the impression that Segev knew, even before he approached the material, just what conclusions best suited his

iconoclastic proclivities, and that his research was no more than a search for confirmation of these conclusions. In part, this effect is created by his slipshod research methods, which at times border on wanton dereliction of his duties as a historian.

“**A**nemones” was the name given by members of the Jewish community in Palestine to the British Sixth Airborne Division during 1946 and 1947, when the division was brought in to serve as shock troops in the Mandatory government’s struggle against the Jewish resistance. At this stage, it will be recalled, the Zionists no longer saw the British as a partner in the construction of a Jewish national home, but rather as an enemy, a target of actual military operations—so much so, that the Jewish “separatists” (as the underground Etzel and Lehi organizations were called by the leadership of the *yishuv*) referred to the Mandatory government as the “Nazo-British conqueror.” The term “Anemone,” for the red berets worn by the British paratroopers, was thus no term of endearment.

One might surmise from the title, then, that *Days of the Anemones: Palestine During the Mandatory Period* offers an account of Mandatory rule in Palestine and of the emergence of the Zionist movement as a force whose conflict with the regime ultimately brought the two into violent confrontation. Yet *Days of the Anemones* is something altogether different. Most of the book is devoted to a limited, colorful portrayal of British high society in Jerusalem during the Mandatory period—Englishmen, Arabs and Jews—and the musings, loves and tribulations of the men and women associated with this high society.

A relatively minor part of the book is devoted to describing the Mandatory regime and its generally close cooperation with the institutions of the Zionist movement prior to 1939—the year of the White Paper that heralded the adoption by the British of a policy overtly aimed at ending the growth of the *yishuv*. The Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 and the Zionist military operations after World War II changed everything, and from this point on Segev

tries to describe a cultural milieu far broader than that of the elites in Mandatory Jerusalem. Yet even here, where he does attempt to cast a broader net, his book nonetheless remains strangely limited: He fails to deal at all with rural Arab society, which accounted for the majority of the Palestinian Arab population. Nor does he offer a satisfying account of the rapid development of the *yishuv*—which grew from a small community of 50,000 in 1918, the year of the British conquest, to an autonomous and well-developed national framework of 600,000 in 1947.

Segev's main sources are diaries, letters, articles and books written by the local characters in this historical drama. Indeed, this is the book's main contribution: With the help of diaries and letters written by Britons, Arabs and Jews, sources that have not previously been mined by historians, the author offers a vivid portrayal of the social and political reality as it was seen by the participants. In this way, Segev brings out the feelings of the Jewish immigrants, who encountered the difficulties of absorption and earning a livelihood in an impoverished land, and conveys their sense of hardship in being cut off from their families in Europe, as well as their hopes and disappointments. The reader also learns of the life of Jerusalem's Arabs, who struggled to preserve the Arab character of their city and land and became enraged anew with every ship that brought Jewish immigrants to the country, as well as the inner thoughts of British government officials and military officers, who found themselves caught between the Jewish hammer and the Arab anvil. All these are accompanied by spirited descriptions and amusing anecdotes—bringing to life the Jerusalem socialites' agitations over a friend's decision to wear a dress not in accord with etiquette for an official reception, or of forbidden romances between married British officers and local women, or between the son of an Arab notable and a "young and muscular" boy.

But Segev is not content to paint a portrait of interwar social life in Jerusalem. His goals are more ambitious, as he seeks to impress the reader with a new reading of British policy in Palestine. He asks the bigger questions: Why did the British conquer Palestine? Why did they issue the 1917 Balfour Declaration committing Britain to the establishment of a Jewish national home?

Why did they remain in Palestine even after it became clear that the Arab population would not take the British rule lying down? And why, in the end, did they decide to leave Palestine?

It should go without saying that an analysis of British policy—as opposed to everyday life under the Mandate—requires a very different set of sources from those of which Segev chose to avail himself. An honest historian would first have to examine the interests motivating those who shaped that policy, the decisions they made, their method of arriving at these decisions, the orders that were issued to the High Commissioner who ruled over Palestine, and the manner in which these orders were carried out. He would familiarize himself with the extensive work that has already been done on this subject and, even more importantly, gather his own first-hand impressions from the archives of the British Colonial Office, Foreign Office, War Office, Cabinet and so on.

But Segev has done nothing of the kind. Instead, he simply employs the same local materials that serve him so well in his descriptions of social life under the Mandate. From these sources he culls chance comments and accounts concerning British policy by individuals who had no discernible impact on either this policy or its implementation, and upon these he bases his entire discussion of British policy. It should come as no surprise, then, that through the extensive use of these sources Segev comes to the conclusions he apparently wanted: That Britain came to Palestine by chance; that its rule was established by mistake; and that its government did not at any stage know what it really wanted to achieve in a land so far from home. Thus in Segev's retelling, as soon as the British encountered systematic resistance to their rule, during the first year of the Arab Revolt in 1936, they decided that they should pack up and leave. With this conclusion, Segev fulfills his duty as myth-slayer by portraying the Zionists as marginal, loathed by the British but without any serious impact on their policy; they certainly did not "drive the British out," as we have been told.

This outcome is foreshadowed from the beginning of the book, when Segev analyzes Britain's motives for conquering Palestine during World War I. "The conquest of the land..." Segev writes, "did not give them any

strategic advantage.” Indeed, Palestine’s place in British strategy “was not a function of its geopolitical situation,” but merely a consequence of the British “emotional experience” regarding the Holy Land—that is, its mythic, Christian affinities for the land of Israel.

On what does Segev base this outlandish claim? On records of cabinet meetings? On statements by government ministers or memoranda from senior officials? Segev has no patience for these. On the contrary, his book is filled with derisive comments about the “piles” of “memoranda and documents” that were constantly being manufactured by British statesmen and officials. Rather, the foundation of Segev’s new historical edifice is a comment Segev discovered in the diary of a relatively minor British official named Charles Robert Ashby, who ruminated about the defilement Europeans were bringing upon the pristine biblical land.

As anyone who has studied Britain’s policy in the Middle East prior to and during World War I knows, the conquest of Palestine was part of an articulated strategy, adopted by Britain’s military and political leadership, of trying to establish a land bridge between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Such a bridge would enable the rapid deployment of troops to the Gulf, which was the forward line of defense for British interests in India, as well as protecting against possible invasion from the north, primarily by Russia. This land bridge would also serve as an alternative to the Suez Canal in Egypt and as a line of defense for it. These facts are evident, for example, in the proceedings of the De Bunsen Committee, a panel of experts appointed for the express purpose of discussing Britain’s aims in the Middle East during World War I. But the De Bunsen Committee receives no mention in *Days of the Anemones*. Instead, we have only Segev’s unfounded ruminations about British sentimentalities, religious motivations, the influence of the Bible, and so on.

Segev does not even take advantage of the historical material that *helps* his case. It is well known, for example, that David Lloyd George, the British prime minister at the time of the invasion of Palestine, was one of the leading advocates of the British conquest. Mention of Lloyd George’s background

could have bolstered Segev's claim about the role of sentimental considerations in the British calculus: Lloyd George, after all, began his career as the leader of a Welsh religious movement which struggled for secession from the Anglican church and for the creation of an independent Welsh church more faithful to the literal meaning of the scriptural texts. It seems reasonable to draw a connection between Lloyd George's past and his interest in the Holy Land. But Segev mentions none of this (he even describes Lloyd George as "English," not Welsh), and leaves his claim on the level of vague, undocumented assertion.

Segev's neglect of the basic historical material is also evident in his treatment of the 1917 Balfour Declaration. Here, too, he asserts that the British government issued the declaration out of religious caprice rather than diplomatic reasoning:

They were guided neither by strategic considerations nor by an orderly system of decisionmaking.... It was not political or military interest that gave birth to it [the Balfour Declaration], but prejudices, emotional beliefs and self-delusion: They were Christians, Zionists, and many of them were also anti-Semites. They believed that the Jews ruled the world.

While such thinking may have had some impact on British policymaking, was that all there was to it? A significant body of research, based in large part on the work carried out by the historian Mayir Vereté, has clearly shown that Britain's motivations for issuing the Balfour Declaration were fundamentally strategic in nature—and not sentimental, nor religious, nor a show of gratitude to Chaim Weizmann for his scientific contribution to the British war effort. Britain's principal goal in supporting the Zionist cause in the Balfour Declaration was, according to this school of thought, to nullify the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement calling for the establishment of international rule in Palestine after its conquest from the Ottomans. The Balfour Declaration and the British commitment to Zionism, the British strategists believed, would justify exclusive British rule there.

Other scholars, most notably A.J.P. Taylor, have emphasized Britain's desire, beginning in late 1916, to convince American Jewry to support America's entry into the war alongside Britain, France and Russia. American involvement in the war faced staunch domestic opposition, including that of the Jewish community, which was uninclined to support going to war on the side of the anti-Semitic regime of the Russian Czar. Britain's support for Jewish demands concerning Palestine, it was thought, would encourage American Jews to support their country's entry into the war, or at least to mitigate their opposition. Again, Segev makes no mention of the copious research that has been conducted on this subject.

As soon as the British established their rule in Palestine, Segev writes, they began to have second thoughts. Their continued presence became a matter of controversy, and the British quickly came to feel that the whole invasion of Palestine had been a mistake. It was then that they recognized that there was no good reason to remain in Palestine.

Such a debate did indeed develop in 1922 and 1923, and involved political leaders, journalists and military figures. Segev cites a number of the writers and public figures who took part, but he also leaves out the most important players. In order to settle the debate, the British prime minister, Andrew Bonar Law, appointed a special cabinet commission at the end of 1922. Leading experts and representatives of all administrative branches involved in British rule in Palestine appeared before the commission, which eventually submitted a report advocating continued British rule, and rejecting any concession to Arab demands. The report was adopted in the summer of 1923 by the British government under Bonar Law's successor, Stanley Baldwin, and it served as the basis for the continued British presence in the country. This is a highly inconvenient fact for Segev, since it is extremely difficult to reconcile with his thesis that by 1923 the British were no longer interested in continuing the Mandate. *Days of the Anemones* contains no mention of the commission's appointment, of its conclusions, or of the adoption of those conclusions by the government of Britain.

In this spirit, one can also understand Segev's errors in evaluating the importance of the views expressed by Sir John Shuckburgh, head of the Middle East Division in the Colonial Office. During the period under discussion, Shuckburgh did in fact express reservations about what Britain stood to gain in Palestine. But the relevance of these misgivings is substantially inflated when Segev, apparently by mistake, gives Shuckburgh the title of "Under Secretary of the Colonial Office," a position of considerable political weight. Shuckburgh was in fact a civil servant, albeit a senior one, who alongside his responsibility for Middle Eastern matters also held the title of *Assistant* Under Secretary of the Colonial Office: He was therefore not a political figure, and throughout his career he never held political office. One would be hard-pressed to defend the claim that his views were of significance in determining British policy.

If the British were already uneasy about staying in Palestine in 1923, as Segev insists, then once the Arab Revolt erupted in 1936, it follows that they must have wanted to leave as quickly as possible. The establishment of the Peel Commission investigating the revolt in autumn 1936 is one of Segev's central proofs of this claim: "The Royal Commission was of course not set up to 'investigate' anything," writes Segev. "It was established in order to help the government free itself of the administration of Palestine." The second proof he brings is a journal entry of Col. Bernard Law Montgomery in 1938, after the revolt had been mostly quashed: "Because the Jew kills the Arabs and the Arabs kill the Jew. This is the situation today. Almost certainly this will continue to be the case for another fifty years." From this, Segev concludes that the British "were trapped in a dead-end situation and they understood this," and that the Arab Revolt, despite having been defeated, nonetheless succeeded in convincing the British, once and for all, that there was no longer any point in staying in Palestine, leading to their eventual departure a decade later.

This claim, however, is totally false. During the second half of the 1930s, Britain's strategic interest in Palestine in particular and in the Middle East in general actually grew. It was then that Britain began to extract petroleum in

large quantities from the region. The only oil pipeline fully under British control was the one they laid from Kirkuk in Iraq via Transjordan to the Mediterranean Sea at Haifa. For this reason, the British Mandatory government built the port in Haifa, and the Iraq Petroleum Company, which was mostly British-owned, set up oil refineries just outside Haifa. This created an important British strategic interest, whose significance only increased as the winds of war began to stir in Europe, making the preservation of a stable flow of oil a vital British consideration.

Moreover, even if Montgomery did recommend leaving Palestine in 1939, this proves nothing. He was not a top officer at the time, and his journal entries are in no way representative of British policy. Even in 1946, once Montgomery had become a celebrated field marshal and held the office of Chief of the Imperial General Staff of the victorious British forces, his impact on British policy was still quite limited. During the summer of that year, for example, following the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, Montgomery submitted a detailed memorandum to the British cabinet in which he recommended that the Mandatory government brutally suppress the Zionist uprising, just as it had done to the Arab Revolt in 1938 and 1939. The British Cabinet did not think as he did, and rejected his proposals.

Furthermore, the Peel Commission proves the opposite of what Segev claims it does. Among the commission's recommendations was that a Jewish state be established in a small portion (15 percent) of Palestine, in the Galilee and the northern and central coastal plains. The commission recommended leaving an even smaller part of the land (the corridor connecting Jerusalem to Jaffa) in British hands, and giving the rest of the territory to the Arabs. At first glance, Segev appears to be right: The Peel Commission supported taking the British out of at least 90 percent of the country. But Segev fails to mention that the territory to be given to the Arabs was not going to be handed over to an autonomous Palestinian Arab government, but was instead to be annexed by the emirate of Transjordan under the rule of Abdullah. At the time, and for ten years thereafter, Transjordan remained firmly under Mandatory rule, and in everything having to do with its security and foreign policy, the British were

in complete control. Giving the Arab part of Palestine to Abdullah did not mean ending British rule. It meant continuing it.

Similarly, the White Paper of May 1939, which was issued after the British had supposedly given up on ruling Palestine, did not signify what Segev thinks it did, and in fact contradicts his thesis. Segev writes: "In May 1939, after endless consultations and negotiations... the British declared that an independent, binational state would be established in the territory within ten years." What Segev neglects to inform his reader is that unlike the White Paper's infamous edicts restricting Jewish immigration or the purchase of land by Jews, the creation of an independent state was conditional upon an agreement being reached between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Without such agreement, British rule would continue. Did this recommendation reflect a desire to leave Palestine—as Segev insists—or was it a transparent exercise in order to *perpetuate* British rule? As everyone at the time knew full well, Jewish-Arab agreement on a "Palestine State" (this was the British term, not "binational" state) was not remotely in the offing, so long as the Zionist leadership clung to its vision of unfettered immigration of the Jewish people to its ancestral land.

D*ays of the Anemones* is better when dealing with the Arab side of the conflict, particularly in the context of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. Here Segev offers a convincing, solidly researched portrayal of Arab decisionmaking and the suppression of the rebellion by the British. And yet this too is marred by Segev's insistence on portraying Arab resistance as a well-developed movement that had been struggling for Palestinian national independence since the end of World War I—a claim which, if true, would be of no small historical importance. But as with his claims about British policy, Segev's research on Palestinian nationalism reveals itself to be highly selective and tendentious, ignoring or offering distorted readings of anything the Arabs did which does not square with his theory.

When, for example, Segev describes the "Arab rebellion in the desert," the uprising of the Arabs of Hejaz against Ottoman rule between 1916 and

1918, as well as their recruitment activities in Palestine and their advance into Transjordan, he compares the rebels to the Jewish Legion that operated within the framework of the British army during the war. Like the Jewish Legion, Segev argues, these Arabs insisted that they would serve only in Palestine, demanded their own national flag and struggled for Palestinian national independence.

But Segev does not directly quote the draft appeals written by this Arab army, nor does he refer to any contemporary Arab source to support these statements. And indeed, the truth was altogether different. First, the army of the Arab rebellion did not even reach the borders of Palestine, but advanced from Hejaz toward Damascus via Transjordan. Those Palestinian Arabs who volunteered to serve in its framework necessarily left Palestine's borders. The recruiting officers of Faisal, son of the Hashemite King Hussein and commander of the rebel army, worked to enlist volunteers from among the Palestinian Arabs for an army whose goal was overall Arab independence under the Hashemite crown. They were not concerned with Palestinian independence, but with overall Arab national independence in the Fertile Crescent and Hejaz regions. The flag they proposed was a pan-Arab national flag of four colors (black, red, green and white), which was adopted by the Palestinian nationalist movement only years later. The Palestinian Arab volunteers continued to serve in the rebel army even outside the borders of Palestine and went with it as far as Damascus.

The most prominent among these volunteers, including Subhi al-Hadra, Awni abd al-Hadi and Izzat Darwaza, continued to serve the cause of Arab independence in Damascus, as officials of the regime Faisal established there, until July 1920 when the French conquered Damascus and toppled his regime. Only then did these Palestinian activists return to Jerusalem, Nablus and Safed. The idea of independence for an Arab "Palestine" that would be separate from the overall Arab effort on behalf of a united state became a real issue only after the defeat of Faisal's government. As long as Faisal ruled in Damascus, Arab national activists in Palestine referred to their own country as "Southern Syria" (*suria el-janubia*) and not as "Palestine."

A second point that does not square with Segev's belief in a well-developed Palestinian nationalist movement is the cessation of the general strike by Palestine Arabs, which lasted for about six months in 1936. This strike concluded without any political gains, and it ended because the Arab public could not sustain it for economic reasons. By the end of the summer of 1936, the strike had begun to disintegrate. The Arab Higher Committee, which had led the general strike, sought an honorable way out, and it asked the rulers of the Arab states to issue a public call for the strike's end. The Palestinian Arabs would then accede to this call, while expressing their hope that the Arab rulers would work to advance their cause with the British.

The kings of Iraq and Saudi Arabia agreed, and even attempted to extract British concessions in exchange for ending the strike. But the British refused—and it was only at this point that the two kings, joined by the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, issued their call. This sequence of events can be seen clearly in sources such as the proceedings of the Arab Higher Committee (available at the state archive in Jerusalem) and the correspondence between the British representatives in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Transjordan and the British government. But this less-than-heroic ending is evidently not to Segev's taste. He prefers to repeat the now unsubstantiable claim (which had been widely accepted prior to the opening of the British and Israeli archives) that "the British invited several Arab kings to intervene in the crisis, and their intervention led to the conclusion of the strike."

The emphasis on a unique, developed and independent Palestinian movement, at the expense of the pan-Arab national movement, also finds expression in Segev's description of George Antonius' famous book, *The Arab Awakening*, published in 1938. Segev describes this as "the most important book written until that time on the history of the Arab national movement in Palestine." But here too, the truth is the opposite of what he claims: Antonius' book is a history of the Arab national awakening *throughout the Arab world*. The struggle of the Arab Palestinian national movement only appears in the final chapter of the book, as part of a wider description of Arab nationalist movements throughout the Fertile

Crescent. That all these efforts were part of an overarching movement for the independence of a single, unified Arab nation is a fundamental premise of Antonius' book. A small error on our author's part, perhaps—but with Segev, the little mistakes always seem to fall in the same direction.

Days of the Anemones makes for good reading, offering vivid accounts of life in Mandatory Jerusalem. Beyond this, however, one should not expect much. Segev's answers to the larger political questions—why the British chose to invade Palestine, why they continued to rule there and why they eventually left, what the Palestinian Arabs were struggling for during World War I and thereafter, why their strike failed in 1936 and how it ended—are well worth ignoring. Moreover, the book has nothing interesting to say about the Zionist movement in Palestine, which developed during the period under discussion into a distinct national entity with its own political institutions, economy and system of settlement. The *yishuv* was, for the most part, left out of the banquet society of Mandatory Jerusalem, and it is the latter that is apparently of greatest interest to Tom Segev—a peculiar focus that permits him to turn his back on the world of overflowing archives, rich diplomatic sources, and the inconvenient demands of intellectual honesty.

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